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Geographical representation and re-selection prospects in party-centred contexts

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ABSTRACT

Legislators often use parliamentary activities with a constituency focus to win personal votes or local selectorates' support. However, little is known about whether geographically-targeted activities are an effective strategy to secure a seat in party-centred contexts, i.e. with low electoral incentives and exclusive and centralized selectorates. This study explores how legislators' attention to local issues affects their re-selection chances and placement on party lists. I argue that the party leadership may consider geographical representation an asset or a liability depending on individual MPs' roles within parties and the types of parliamentary activities employed, reflecting an intra-party division of labour. Using data from three Italian elections (2006–2013) under closed-list PR and centralized candidate selection, the findings suggest that, in such contexts, party leaders may discourage MPs from representing their geographic constituencies.

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Introduction

In representative democracies, accountability requires that citizens are able to monitor political actors' behaviour and reward or punish them accordingly (Fearon 1999). While accountability is often interpreted as voters' ability to oust underperforming governments from power (e.g. Hellwig and Samuels 2008), previous work has also focused on individual MPs' responsiveness to their constituents, i.e. dyadic representation (Miller and Stokes 1963; Weissberg 1978). Electoral institutions deeply affect the scope of dyadic representation: when voters' choice consists in selecting a party and not a candidate, such as in closed-list proportional representation, the relationship between voters and MPs is necessarily mediated by parties. As a result, accountability strongly depends on how parties determine the composition and the ranking of their electoral lists. Indeed, a crucial function performed by parties is to

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select candidates for public office (Sartori 1976). While research has focused on the methods parties use to recruit new candidates (Hazan and Rahat 2010), relatively little attention has been devoted to the criteria they use to re-select incumbents.

Drawing on recent work highlighting how MPs' floor activities can promote their career in parliament (Fernandes, Won, and Martins 2020; Papp and Zorigt 2018; Yildirim, Kocapinar, and Ecevit 2019), I investigate whether parliamentary activities focusing on MPs' constituencies have a positive influence on their re-selection chances in party-centred contexts. Geographical representation is a typical example of dyadic representation, which is often considered to be in tension with the collective or partisan model of representation that identifies the core of political representation in the relationship between parties and voters (Thomassen and Andeweg 2004). Individual MPs' parliamentary activities reflect this possible tension well as they can both address constituency topics and broader policy issues. In the personal vote incentives literature (Carey and Shugart 1995), geographical representation is seen as a vote-seeking strategy to boost re-election prospects (Zittel, Nyhuis, and Baumann 2019). Alternatively, MPs' attention to local issues has been interpreted as a way to please decentralized or inclusive selectorates (Fernandes, Won, and Martins 2020). However, the consequences of geographical representation in party-centred contexts, where legislators seemingly lack the electoral and selectoral incentives to engage in this behaviour, remain unexamined.

In this paper, I argue that in such contexts the effects of geographical representation on re-selection chances vary across different groups of legislators, due to an intra-party division of labour. In particular, I posit that parties look at this issue from an efficiency perspective and delegate geographical representation in non-lawmaking activities to members who are most suited to deliver it. More concretely, backbenchers, MPs with previous local political experience, and members sitting in committees with the highest potential for distributive policies have respectively more time, more expertise, and more opportunities to represent their district through parliamentary questions. To create a scheme of incentives, parties should reward MPs who comply with the division of labour with better re-selection and re-election chances. By contrast, using bills as a tool for geographical representation may dilute the party policy platform, and parties discourage these groups of members from doing so by sanctioning them with worse re-selection prospects. Studying written questions and bills enables me to focus on individual and unconstrained activities where individual legislators' preferences can be observed, in contrast with other activities (such as roll call votes and speeches) reflecting strong party discipline rather than coordination.

The argument is based on the assumption that, in electoral environments with limited potential for personal votes, parties try to achieve a

moderate level of geographical representation. On the one hand, representing local constituents can benefit the party's brand and electoral performance (Geese and Martínez-Cantó 2022). As individual legislators are unlikely to garner direct benefits from this activity, the representation of constituencies has to be incentivised to prevent a potential collective action problem (Lancaster 1986). On the other hand, geographical representation entails opportunity costs since it may challenge party unity and divert legislators' limited resources from other activities, such as supporting campaigns, taking part in committee work and legislative debates, and contributing to the definition of policy proposals. In this light, the party leadership can use the internal division of labour to strike a balance between these opposite tendencies.

To test this argument, I study the effects of geographical representation in written parliamentary questions and bills on candidate selection in three elections in Italy (2006–2018). A closed list proportional system and centralized candidate selection methods were used (Marino, Martocchia Diodati, and Verzichelli 2021; Renwick, Hanretty, and Hine 2009) and a substantial proportion of MPs were not re-selected or re-elected (around 30% and 50%, respectively). The results provide only limited support for the theoretical expectations and show that, if anything, geographical representation has a negative impact on the party leaders' renomination decision. In particular, geographical representation in written questions does not affect re-selection chances, while geographically targeted bills, as expected, decrease the probability that backbenchers, local legislators and distributive committee members are re-selected. Once selection is done, however, the geographical focus of parliamentary activities does not matter for the allocation of candidates to promising list positions.

This paper explores the interplay between party preferences and legislative behaviour and tries to shed light on MPs' incentives in the "secret garden" of candidate selection (Gallagher and Marsh 1988). By studying the impact of district-centred activities, the article illustrates that candidate selection has important implications not only for the composition of legislatures (Buisseret et al. 2022), but also for the possible tension between voters and party leaders regarding what MPs should do once in office. Coupled with the experimental evidence showing that voters appreciate district-oriented representatives (Papp et al. 2024; Vivyan and Wagner 2016), the analyses reveal that geographical representation, often considered an anodyne activity (Kam 2009), can also be a conflictual strategy, highlighting the contrast between dyadic and collective representation. The results suggest that party-centred systems can undermine geographical representation, possibly sacrificing the vertical link between voters and MPs in favour of control by the party leadership.

Re-election and legislative behaviour

Legislators are often portrayed as agents accountable to two principals: party leaders and voters (Carey 2007). While in contemporary representative assemblies legislators are virtually always subject to the control of their parties, the influence of voters as an additional principal varies substantially depending on the institutional context. In particular, when electoral rules allow voters to have a significant impact on individual MPs' electoral prospects (such as in openlist systems), voters constitute another important principal (Carey and Shugart 1995). From an accountability perspective, this raises the question of how these two principals assess MPs' geographical efforts.

However, the existing research on this issue is asymmetric. While there is empirical evidence of what voters think about geographical representation, our understanding of party leaders' perspectives remains limited. This question is particularly relevant in party-centred contexts – that is, in environments where party leaders exercise strong control over a legislator's re-election, with limited influence from voters and local party members. Put differently, in such contexts voters cannot reward or punish individual representatives, and MPs' careers depend crucially on party leaders' choices; yet it is still unclear whether these choices are affected by legislators' geographical focus.

Notably, a growing body of research suggests that voters favour politicians who prioritize geographical representation. Surveys on citizens' representational preferences indicate that voters like legislators who focus on representing the constituency (Bengtsson and Wass 2010; Bøggild 2020; Pedersen 2020; Vivyan and Wagner 2016). This local focus also translates to electoral success, with geographically focused MPs receiving more personal votes (Chiru 2018; Martin 2010). By contrast, failing to address demands for geographical representation erodes voters' trust in politicians (Bøggild 2020) and satisfaction with democracy (Papp et al. 2024). While this strand of research illustrates that voters may reward MPs' geographical efforts, it leaves open the question of what effects such behaviour has when legislators cannot directly cash in voters' support.

In party-centred contexts, candidate selection methods and electoral institutions make re-election heavily contingent on parties' decisions. Candidate selection is typically centralized and exclusive (Gallagher and Marsh 1988; Hazan and Rahat 2010). This means that the selectorate (i.e. the body in charge of selecting candidates) operates at the national level and with limited involvement of local party branches and consists of the party leadership, rather than more inclusive bodies or voters at large. Electoral rules further reinforce this dynamic. Party-centred contexts are characterized by closed-ballot arrangements such as closed-list PR, which allow parties to rank candidates on the ballot and control their election chances (Strom 2012).

Party-centred settings are thus ideal for studying whether MPs' behaviour affects parties' choices on incumbents' re-selection prospects. Existing work suggests that MPs who are more active on the floor are more likely to be re-elected by the party leadership (Borghetto 2018; Louwerse and Van Vonn 2022), who might consider legislators' activism beneficial to the party's reputation and legislative agenda (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2010; Marangoni and Russo 2018). Yet in these environments party leaders' reactions to legislators' geographical activities have remained unexplored. This is surprising as geographical representation in party-centred contexts, where legislators seemingly lack the incentives to deliver it, is a "major puzzle in the fields of democratic representation and parliamentary behaviour" (Geese and Martínez-Cantó 2022, 918). To address this gap, I propose a theory that posits an intra-party division of labour where party leaders delegate geographical representation to specific groups of legislators and prescribe the use of particular parliamentary tools to deliver it.

Based on the assumption that parties consider individual parliamentary activities as ways to maximize the party's collective benefits (Cox and McCubbins 1993; Fernandes, Leston-Bandeira, and Schwemmer 2018), in party-centred contexts it is unclear whether parties should consider MPs' geographical representation as an asset or a liability. On the one hand, MPs who address local issues perform a service for their parties. By presenting themselves as caring and responsive representatives, legislators nurture the relationship with voters (Geese and Martínez-Cantó 2022).¹ Moreover, constituency service can give an incumbent a strong reputation in a district and deter potential challengers (Chiru 2018). On the other hand, the leadership could fear that locally oriented MPs prioritize the interests of their constituents over the interests of the party and deviate from the party line when unity is crucial, for example in votes on the floor (Kam 2009; Tavits 2009). Additionally, geographical representation might entail opportunity costs, especially when its electoral potential is limited (i.e. when personal vote incentives are low). Even when seen as a party service, it is just one specific aspect of MPs' contribution to their party: MPs are often assigned a policy portfolio and asked to act as party delegates or spokespersons on the floor, in committees or the media (Andeweg and Thomassen 2011; Strom 2012). Party leaders may be concerned that MPs who focus too much on their district will neglect their other responsibilities to the party.

Parties are thus exposed to the risk of inefficiencies produced by two opposite dynamics. First, individual MPs' lack of incentives to cultivate local support might determine the under-provision of geographical

¹This does not imply that citizens closely follow parliamentary proceedings, but that parties think that floor activities have an impact on voters, especially through the media. Politicians might well overestimate citizens' attention, as Soontjens (2021) shows.

representation. In this light, representing local constituents poses a collective action problem: while legislators do not benefit directly from engaging in this activity, it benefits the party's reputation and electoral performance (Lancaster 1986). Second, the high levels of geographical representation found in party-centred contexts signal the risk of over-provision (Geese and Martínez-Cantó 2022; Russo 2011). This might happen due to legislators' intrinsic motivation to represent local constituents (Giger, Lanz, and de Vries 2020) and low perceived costs of geographical activities, resulting in MPs dedicating a significant portion of their time and resources to local issues.

In party-centred contexts, I argue that parties aim at an optimal, moderate level of geographical representation. To do so, parliamentary party groups (PPGs) can rely on an internal division of labour. PPGs benefit from legislators' specialization in different policy areas or activities (Geese and Martínez-Cantó 2022; Martínez-Cantó, Breunig, and Chaqués-Bonafont 2023), as the division of labour is essential to distribute the workload efficiently among the members (Saalfeld and Strøm 2014). In an analogy to industrial organization, legislators are employees who are assigned different tasks by the management (the party leadership) (Shugart et al. 2021). For geographical representation, I identify two guiding criteria for the division of labour: who delivers it and how it is delivered. Relative to the first criterion, I contend that geographical representation is delegated to the MPs who can deliver it more efficiently, namely the legislators who have more time, more expertise, or more opportunities to represent their constituencies. First, backbenchers have more time to represent local constituents as they bear fewer formal duties and play a less prominent role in shaping their party's issue agenda compared to MPs who have leadership positions in the party or in parliament (Meyer and Wagner 2021).

Hypothesis 1a Geographical representation in written questions increases the probability of re-selection and safe candidacy for backbenchers.

Second, legislators with experience in sub-national politics are better suited to deliver geographical representation because they are more likely to have direct contact with local networks and to be informed about local constituents' issues (Binderkrantz et al. 2020; Geese and Martínez-Cantó 2022; Shugart, Valdini, and Suominen 2005; Walgrave and Soontjens 2023). In line with this argument, although with some exceptions (Borghetto, Santana-Pereira, and Freire 2020; Papp 2016), previous research has reported an effect of local experience on legislators' parliamentary behaviour (Fernandes, Leston-Bandeira, and Schwemmer 2018; Russo 2021; Tavits 2010; Zittel, Nyhuis, and Baumann 2019). Consequently, PPGs may coordinate based on MPs' local roots and expect legislators who possess them to engage with local constituents.

Hypothesis 1b Geographical representation in written questions increases the probability of re-selection and safe candidacy for MPs with local political experience.

Third, committee membership is another relevant dimension. Legislative committees reflect different policy areas and involve “policy areas for which the benefits can be disaggregated to specific geographic constituencies” (Shugart et al. 2021, 18) to varying extents, offering members of some committees a competitive advantage in delivering pork to their district (Stratmann and Baur 2002). Since parties control committee assignment (Cox and McCubbins 1993), membership in distributive committees implies that parties select some MPs to have more opportunities to produce geographically targeted policies. It has been shown that parties assign to distributive committees legislators with strong political and biographical ties to their district, suggesting that parties might select members to maximize their local vote-earning potential, rather than to reward loyal legislators and prevent pork barrel (Gschwend and Zittel 2018; Mickler 2018; Shugart et al. 2021). This could indicate that distributive committee members might be encouraged to deliver geographical representation by their PPG, which should then appreciate their local orientation in questions.

Hypothesis 1c Geographical representation in written questions increases the probability of re-selection and safe candidacy for MPs sitting in distributive committees.

Moreover, I argue that parties also have preferences regarding how geographical representation should be delivered to voters, which constitutes a second criterion for the division of labour. In particular, I draw a distinction between lawmaking (bills) and non-lawmaking activities (written questions), expecting that parties encourage the use of the former and hinder the use of the latter to address geographical issues. *Prima facie*, private members’ bills (PMBs) and written questions seem suitable for geographical representation. Given their limited chance of success, bills, like written questions, are largely symbolic activities. Even if they might be in contrast with the party line, their consequences are limited compared to rebel votes. However, bills are more time-consuming to draft, and through their policy content they can contribute to the party’s policy platform.² In other words, bills pose a more significant threat to the party line and entail more risks of “open challenges to [parties’] core policy positions” (Alemán and Micozzi 2022, 717). Assuming an equal effect on voters, parties should prefer geographical representation to be delivered through questions rather than bills and should deter members who are more likely to engage in geographical representation

²As a rough indicator of costs, bills are on average six times longer than questions in the data analysed.

from using bills to cater to local constituents.³ This implies that backbenchers, local MPs, and distributive committee members, who have more time, more expertise, and more opportunities to deliver geographical representation, should incur sanctions by their parties for sponsoring geographical bills.

Hypotheses 2a, 2b, 2c Geographical representation in bills decreases the probability of re-selection and safe candidacy for backbencher/locally experienced/distributive committee MPs.

Data and research design

The Italian case

Italy represents a suitable case for examining re-selection in party-based environments, where legislators' careers are heavily constrained by party organizations. As I argued above, these contexts allow me to analyze how the party leadership manages candidate re-selection when voters and local selectorates are not directly involved in the process.

In the elections in 2006, 2008, and 2013, a closed-list PR system was in place. Under these rules, introduced in 2005, voters could not vote for a specific candidate but only for a party list (Massetti 2006; Renwick, Hanretty, and Hine 2009). Consequently, individual candidates' election depended largely on their list rank, chosen by party selectors. Regarding candidate selection, in the period considered, Italian parties used exclusive candidate selection methods with limited involvement of parties' regional branches and strong control exerted by the national leadership (Calossi and Pizzimenti 2015; Marino, Martocchia Diodati, and Verzichelli 2021). Only one major party used open candidate selection methods in one election: in 2013, the main centreleft party (Democratic Party) selected around 70% of its candidates with primaries open to party members (Rombi and Seddone 2017).⁴ Therefore, this setting makes it possible to investigate the criteria informing party leaders' decision to renominate and to grant a safe list position to outgoing legislators.

Additionally, the phenomenon of geographical representation in parliamentary activities is empirically relevant in Italy (Russo 2021, Viganò 2024). In the three parliaments included in the analyses, up to 40% of written questions and 15% of PMBs had a regional focus.⁵ Both written questions and

³While some local bills might be encouraged by parties, I assume these represent a minority of geographical PMBs.

⁴The smaller Northern League employed decentralized methods. The Five Star Movement (SSM) used inclusive methods for the 2013 elections. However, the party did not run in the previous elections and is not included in the analyses. As robustness checks, models that exclude members of the Democratic Party and the Northern League (amounting to 18% of all MPs) are shown in Appendix C. The results are in line with the main models.

⁵While PMBs and written questions are often conceived as tools mainly used by the opposition, Appendix A shows that government parties also make a wide use of them, often with a geographical focus.

PMBs are formally unconstrained activities that each MP can ask or propose on any topic.⁶ Likewise, an elite survey conducted in 2013 shows that 15% of candidates indicated the constituency as their main representational focus, and 57% of candidates stated that in case of a conflict between party and constituency's views on an issue, an MP should prioritize the district (Di Virgilio et al. 2015).

Finally, the descriptive statistics presented below highlight that incumbents' renomination and re-election to the Italian parliament are far from certain. Around one-third of MPs do not run in the following elections, and half are not re-elected. The limited scope for personal voting in party-centred contexts is expected to make parties more willing to deselect incumbents (Matland and Studlar 2004). The high legislative turnover in Italy has also been explained with the rising prevalence of personalist parties (Salvati and Vercesi 2018), in which the leadership is able to "make unilateral decisions on nominations" (Kostadinova and Levitt 2014, 501). Still, this picture calls for a better understanding of the criteria that parties use to re-select and support the electoral prospects of their members.

Dependent variables

The empirical analyses aim to explain two related but distinct aspects of candidate selection. The first outcome is re-selection, which is a binary variable that looks at whether an incumbent MP is re-selected for the next elections. The data do not allow me to distinguish between voluntary decisions not to run again and involuntary de-selection by the party.⁷

The second outcome captures whether the list rank can be considered realistic or "winnable before the elections" (Hazan and Rahat 2010, 14). In line with Put et al. (2022), it is operationalized as a dummy variable that equals one when a candidate's position is within the first N ranks, where N indicates the number of seats their party won at the previous election.⁸ In a closed-list PR setting, this variable reflects the party's willingness to offer good chances of re-election to a candidate. The analysis of list position only includes members who were reselected. For both dependent variables, re-selection in either house of the bicameral Italian parliament is considered.⁹ As illustrated in Table 1, around one-third of MPs do not run in the following elections, and half are not re-elected.

⁶The cabinet, regional councils, and citizens (with a 50,000-signature quota) also have the power to initiate legislation.

⁷In line with Schlesinger's (1966) ambition theory, it is reasonable to assume that most renomination failures were due to de-selection by MPs' parties.

⁸Due to the change of electoral rules before the elections and the resulting lack of clear historical data, I drop the first parliament in the models using the second dependent variable.

⁹Italian bicameralism is symmetrical, i.e., the two chambers have equal powers (Lijphart 2012). Therefore, being elected in a different house is analogous to being re-elected in the same house.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics.

Variable	N	Mean	Sd	Min	Max
Re-selected	1651	0.69	0.46	0	1
Re-elected	1651	0.51	0.50	0	1
Realistic position	737	0.68	0.47	0	1
Regional PQs	1651	14.23	28.25	0	385
Total PQs	1651	35.23	139.31	0	4451
% of regional PQs	1651	0.42	0.32	0.00	1
Regional bills	1651	1.20	2.12	0	30
Total bills	1651	7.78	12.07	0	169
% of regional bills	1651	0.15	0.23	0.00	1
Backbencher	1651	0.77	0.42	0	1
Local MP	1651	0.19	0.39	0	1
Distributive committee	1651	0.29	0.45	0	1
Male	1651	0.83	0.38	0	1
Vulnerability	1651	1.03	0.71	0.05	7
Age	1651	55	9.32	30	84
Tenure	1651	1.11	1.41	0	10
Party switch	1651	0.15	0.36	0	1
Party seats	1651	139	81	6	260

The hypotheses posit similar effects for re-selection and realistic list position. Re-selection can be seen as the first, necessary step to secure a seat. At that stage, party selectors might decide to deselect underperforming MPs. However, often re-selection is not sufficient to stay in parliament as some list positions do not offer realistic chances to candidates.

Independent variables

The main independent variable measures geographical representation in parliamentary activities, specifically PMBs and written questions. Parliamentary questions and bills represent two of the main activities that MPs perform in parliament and have been increasingly used in studies of individual MPs' behaviour (Bowler 2010; Martin 2011). These activities are not "an entirely costless exercise in terms of time and opportunity cost [thus providing] an indication of the priorities of legislators" (Martin 2011, 263). While previous research has posited that bills and written questions are relatively free from party discipline in the Italian contexts (Gagliarducci, Nannicini, and Naticchioni 2011; Russo 2011), as argued above, the party leadership might have some preferences regarding content.

In line with previous research (Russo 2021; Zittel, Nyhuis, and Baumann 2019), a bill or a question is considered geographically targeted if it mentions a geographical unit located in the representative's region of election during the parliamentary term.¹⁰ More specifically, legislative texts are automatically

¹⁰The Italian territory is divided into 20 regions (NUTS 2), which map onto the 27 multimember districts, except for the largest regions, which are split into 2-3 districts. Regional, rather than district, dictionaries capture the many references to regions.

classified using geographical dictionaries that include municipalities, regions, national parks, motorways and highways, main rivers and seas. The references are then matched with the MPs' region of election. Appendix D presents the dictionaries and their validation.

Related to the operationalization of the main independent variable, previous research has used both the proportion (e.g. Russo 2011) and the raw number of targeted activities (e.g. Zittel, Nyhuis, and Baumann 2019). The argument presented above concerns legislators' use of scarce resources, such as time and effort, but also the specific contribution of geographical representation vis-à-vis the overall parliamentary effort. Thus, the variable used is the total number of regional questions/bills, with the number of total questions and bills included as a control for parliamentary effort (see below). Robustness tests (Appendix C) use the proportion of regional questions/bills and produce similar results to the main specification. On average, MPs present 14 regional questions per term, accounting for more than 40% of their total written questions (see Table 1). MPs mention their region of election in 15% of the bills they present (1.2 bills in absolute numbers).

One potential concern is whether the research design makes it possible to identify the impact of parliamentary activities vis-à-vis the broader set of geographical behaviours, including casework and constituency service. Attention to local issues in parliament probably correlates with local activities outside parliament, which are difficult to observe and measure (Crisp and Simoneau 2017), and possibly with re-selection as well; the analyses, therefore, would capture the effect of legislators' attention to local constituents rather than the impact of geographical parliamentary activities. Even in this case, the results would still provide knowledge on the puzzle of geographical representation (interpreted as a heterogeneous bundle of activities, of which parliamentary work is a subset) in party-centred contexts. Moreover, extra-parliamentary activities are less visible to the party leadership and should have a more limited effect on the renomination process. Finally, the different results for questions and bills reported below seem to indicate that the operationalization of geographical representation makes it possible to isolate specific aspects of MPs' work.

The interactive argument posits that parties structure the internal division of labour of representing local constituents according to MPs' costs and opportunities from engaging in this task. To capture this, three dummy variables are considered. First, *local MP* indicates whether an MP has previous political experience at the local level. In particular, I consider the twenty regional parliaments because they display a high level of professionalization compared to municipal councils and their geographical scope overlaps with the multi-member districts used in the national

electoral systems.^{11,12} Almost 20% of the MPs had previous local experience. Second, *backbencher* captures whether an MP does not hold legislative (committee chairs, secretaries) and party office (whip, vice whip). Backbenchers represent 77% of total legislators. Third, *distributive committee* is coded 1 for MPs who are assigned to committees that allow them to target local constituents. Consistent with previous work (Gschwend and Zittel 2018; Stratmann and Baur 2002), I consider three (out of fourteen) committees as district-focused: agriculture, transportation, and environment and public works. In the Italian parliament, standing committees enjoy extensive lawmaking powers, from amending bills to, in some cases, approving them without a vote on the floor (Giannetti, Pedrazzani, and Pinto 2019). Thus, sitting in one of these committees can enhance members' distributive opportunities. Approximately 29% of legislators are assigned to district committees during the term.

Controls

The models include a set of control variables. First, members who had a safe position on the list at the previous election are likely to enjoy strong support from their parties, which in turn influences legislators' probability of re-selection. To account for this, I control for a measure of how safe an MP's list position was at the last election. For this purpose, I adopt the measure proposed by André, Depauw, and Martin (2015), which computes *vulnerability* as the list position assigned to a candidate in a district divided by the number of seats their party won in that district in proportional systems and 1—the margin to the best competitor in majoritarian systems.¹³ While one of the dependent variables – realistic list position – considers whether the rank at t would have provided a seat based on the seats won by the party at $t-1$, vulnerability focuses entirely on the previous electoral process. As for biographical information, *male*, *age*, and *tenure* (counting the number of legislative terms an MP was in parliament) are included. Parliamentary experience might be related to re-selection and to geographical representation: it has been argued that MPs devote more time to their districts in the earlier stages of their political career as a way to cultivate electoral support and develop networks or because they find it intrinsically rewarding (Bailer and Ohmura 2018; Heitshusen, Young, and Wood 2005; Itzkovitch-Malka 2021).

¹¹This is true except for the five largest regions, which are split in two (4 regions) and three (1 region) multi-member districts in the national electoral system.

¹²Previous research has also considered MPs who hold lower-level political offices (e.g., mayor or municipal councillor) while being in parliament as local (Geese and Martínez-Cantó 2022; Put, Smulders, and Maddens 2019). Given that Italian MPs are prohibited from simultaneously holding mayoral positions in municipalities with a population of at least 20,000, I have only focused on previous experience at the regional level.

¹³For the first elections covered, prior vulnerability had to account for members elected with a mixed-member system.

In addition, a dummy variable for MPs who switched party during the parliamentary term is included (*party switch*). Party switching is a threat to a party's reputation, with a likely negative effect on the leadership's renomination decision. As mentioned above, *parliamentary effort* captures the total parliamentary effort exerted by an MP, counting the total number of written questions and bills.¹⁴ Finally, parties' ability to distribute the workload among members might be constrained by the *size* of their parliamentary delegations. Accordingly, I control for the number of seats held by the MP's party.

Data and model estimation

To test the hypotheses, I use data on the members of the Italian lower house (*Camera dei deputati*) in three parliamentary terms (2001–2006, 2006–2008, 2008–2013) and on candidates in three corresponding elections. Parliamentary data are collected from the website of the Italian lower house, and data on candidates are from the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Pansardi and Pedrazzani (2022). The legislators' data include 1,651 observations (and 1,168 unique MPs), while parliamentary activities' data make use of a corpus of more than 60,000 written questions and 14,000 PMBs. Table 1 introduces descriptive statistics for the variables considered.

The unit of analysis is the individual MP in a parliamentary term. The following are excluded: MPs who were not in office at the end of the legislative term, as they are highly unlikely to be re-selected; parliamentarians who stayed in office for less than half of the term, since the opportunity to engage in parliamentary activities is constrained by the time in office; MPs elected in overseas constituencies¹⁵; speakers of the house and members of the cabinet as they are typically less active (as individual MPs), and their re-selection likely follows different patterns from the other MPs. In total 180 observations are excluded.

Since both the dependent variables are binary, logistic models are fitted to test the hypotheses. As in some cases the same individual is observed multiple times, standard errors are clustered at the MP level. Party and legislative term fixed effects are omitted from the regression tables below.

Results

Table 2 reports the results of the binary logistic regressions for re-selection.¹⁶ According to Hypothesis 1a, backbencher MPs, who do not have specific

¹⁴Loyalty to the party in roll-call votes, consistent with previous research on Italy (Marino and Martocchia Diodati 2017), does not affect re-election prospects. Therefore, I do not include it in the analyses.

¹⁵The 2005 electoral system established overseas districts for citizens living abroad (e.g., Europe) (Østergaard-Nielsen and Camatarri 2022). As the dictionary only includes Italian geographical markers, it would not capture geographical representation for these MPs.

¹⁶Results do not change when all interactive terms are included in the same model.

Table 2. Determinants of re-selection, logistic regression.

	Dependent variable			
	Re-selection			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Regional PQs	0.001 (0.003)	−0.003 (0.005)	−0.001 (0.004)	−0.00000 (0.004)
Regional bills	−0.076 (0.040)	0.038 (0.078)	−0.056 (0.041)	−0.052 (0.045)
Backbencher	−0.221 (0.156)	−0.098 (0.185)	−0.225 (0.157)	−0.225 (0.156)
Local MP	0.351* (0.178)	0.351* (0.179)	0.359 (0.225)	0.357* (0.178)
Distributive committee	0.062 (0.144)	0.057 (0.145)	0.071 (0.144)	0.100 (0.176)
Total PQs	−0.002 (0.001)	−0.002 (0.001)	−0.002 (0.001)	−0.002 (0.001)
Total bills	−0.002 (0.007)	−0.001 (0.007)	−0.002 (0.007)	−0.001 (0.007)
Party switch	−1.316*** (0.199)	−1.292*** (0.200)	−1.310*** (0.199)	−1.315*** (0.199)
Vulnerability	−0.273 (0.143)	−0.262 (0.144)	−0.280 (0.144)	−0.278 (0.143)
Tenure	−0.154** (0.058)	−0.156** (0.058)	−0.158** (0.058)	−0.156** (0.058)
Age	−0.071*** (0.009)	−0.071*** (0.009)	−0.071*** (0.009)	−0.071*** (0.009)
Male	−0.312 (0.174)	−0.313 (0.175)	−0.321 (0.175)	−0.321 (0.175)
Party seats	0.021 (0.013)	0.021 (0.013)	0.020 (0.013)	0.021 (0.013)
Regional PQs * backbencher		0.006 (0.005)		
Regional bills * backbencher		−0.156 (0.082)		
Regional PQs * local			0.011 (0.007)	
Regional bills * local			−0.161 (0.095)	
Regional PQs * distr. comm.				0.005 (0.005)
Regional bills * distr. comm.				−0.092 (0.067)
Observations	1,651	1,651	1,651	1,651
Log Likelihood	−799.958	−798.101	−798.300	−799.114
Akaike Inf. Crit.	1,667.915	1,668.202	1,668.601	1,670.228

Note: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

responsibilities assigned in the legislative arena, are expected to be rewarded by party selectors for their attention to geographical issues in written questions. The results displayed in Model 2 show that this is not the case. Although the coefficients have the expected sign, tabling more written questions is not associated with a higher or lower likelihood of re-selection for backbenchers ($-0.003 + 0.006 = 0.003$, $p = 0.3$).

Analogous results emerge from models 3 and 4, testing the hypotheses that legislators with previous local political experience (H1b) and MPs

working in distributive committees (H1c) exhibit a positive association between geographical representation in parliamentary questions and re-selection prospects. The empirical evidence does not support these hypotheses as the coefficients for local experience and distributive committees and the combined coefficients with regional questions are insignificant. To ease the interpretation of the interactive models, the conditional marginal effect plots in the left-hand side of Figure 1 (1a, 1c, and 1e) show that the effect of regional questions on re-selection probability is indistinguishable from zero independently of MPs' backbencher status, local experience, and committee membership. The coefficients are in the expected direction, as the

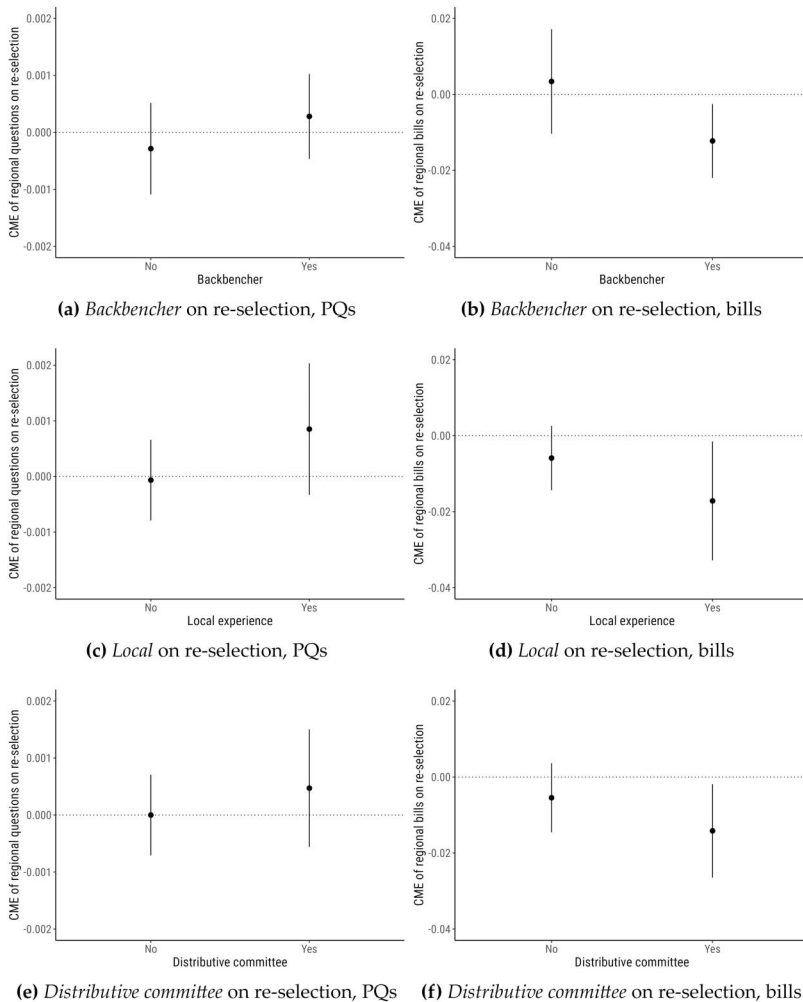


Figure 1. Conditional marginal effects of geographical representation on the probability of re-selection (95% confidence intervals).

point estimates for the effect of regional questions are positive for backbencher, local, and distributive committee MPs but do not reach statistical significance.

As argued above, the party leadership should prefer that members use written questions rather than bills to cater to their constituents. Bills are less efficient than parliamentary questions for local purposes and too many local bills can dilute the party's policy platform. Therefore, PPGs are expected to discourage legislators who have more time, more expertise, and more opportunities from delivering geographical representation through bills. In particular, H2a, H2b, and H2c suggest that proposing bills with a local focus has a detrimental effect on backbencher, local and distributive committee members' re-selection. Models 2, 3, and 4 in [Table 2](#) support these hypotheses. Again, marginal effect plots are necessary to interpret the results substantively. For backbenchers, a higher number of proposed regional bills is significantly associated with a lower probability of re-selection, as shown in [Figure 1b](#). For MPs with higher office, sponsoring regional bills is not significantly associated with re-selection. A similar pattern is found for previous local political experience and membership in distributive committees. [Figure 1d](#) and [1f](#) display a (marginally) significant relationship between local bills and worse re-selection prospects for local and distributive committee MPs, while no association is detected for legislators without local experience and affiliation to distributive committees. In short, regional bills seem to decrease backbencher, local, and distributive committee MPs' re-selection chances.

As for the control variables, party switching significantly decreases MPs' probability of re-selection. The negative association between age and tenure and re-selection could be partly explained by older and more experienced legislators' voluntary exits. Finally, MPs who were previously elected as regional legislators are more likely to be re-selected, consistent with the experimental evidence that party elites are more inclined to support candidates with local political experience (Rehmert 2022).

Models in [Table 3](#) investigate whether geographical representation is also associated with securing a realistic position on the closed-list ballot.¹⁷ The results suggest, contrary to expectations, that geographical representation, in both questions and bills, is not related to obtaining a realistic rank. The variables that could inform the geographical division of labour in PPGs (backbencher status, local expertise, and committee membership) do not affect how the party leadership evaluates geographical representation when compiling the list. Conditional effect plots in Appendix B show that the impact of geographical representation is robustly insignificant across all the groups of

¹⁷Following the existing literature (Borghetto and Lisi 2018; Schmuck and Hohendorf 2022; Yildirim, Kocapinar, and Ecevit 2019), models in [Table 3](#) only include re-selected members in a sequential logit fashion (Casas, Denny, and Wilkerson 2020).

Table 3. Determinants of realistic list positions, logisticregression.

	Dependent variable			
	Realistic position			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Regional PQs	0.004 (0.008)	0.009 (0.014)	0.005 (0.008)	0.008 (0.009)
Regional bills	0.064 (0.075)	0.075 (0.106)	0.099 (0.083)	0.068 (0.082)
Backbencher	0.098 (0.234)	0.201 (0.292)	0.088 (0.235)	0.110 (0.234)
Local MP	−0.505* (0.222)	−0.514* (0.222)	−0.331 (0.272)	−0.530* (0.223)
Distributive committee	−0.112 (0.204)	−0.106 (0.205)	−0.119 (0.206)	−0.004 (0.247)
Total PQs	−0.006 (0.004)	−0.006 (0.005)	−0.006 (0.004)	−0.006 (0.005)
Total bills	−0.013 (0.013)	−0.012 (0.014)	−0.013 (0.014)	−0.014 (0.013)
Party switch	−1.315*** (0.377)	−1.313*** (0.377)	−1.320*** (0.377)	−1.323*** (0.378)
Vulnerability	−1.212*** (0.228)	−1.211*** (0.230)	−1.198*** (0.229)	−1.227*** (0.230)
Tenure	0.041 (0.085)	0.041 (0.085)	0.039 (0.085)	0.039 (0.085)
Age	−0.031** (0.012)	−0.031** (0.012)	−0.031** (0.012)	−0.031** (0.012)
Male	0.298 (0.236)	0.294 (0.236)	0.297 (0.237)	0.312 (0.237)
Party seats	−0.021 (0.039)	−0.021 (0.039)	−0.019 (0.039)	−0.021 (0.039)
Regional PQs * backbencher		−0.006 (0.011)		
Regional bills * backbencher		−0.024 (0.124)		
Regional PQs * local			−0.001 (0.010)	
Regional bills * local			−0.190 (0.156)	
Regional PQs * distr. comm.				−0.008 (0.009)
Regional bills * distr. comm.				0.005 (0.131)
Observations	737	737	737	737
Log Likelihood	−370.162	−369.977	−369.187	−369.729
Akaike Inf. Crit.	798.325	801.953	800.373	801.458

Note: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

MPs. What seems to matter more for seat safety is past vulnerability, indicating that MPs who were shielded from electoral insecurities in the past tend to enjoy their party's support over time, and party switching, as members who changed party affiliation during the term are less likely to be offered a safe candidacy by their new parties.

Several robustness tests are shown in Appendix C. As mentioned above, two parties had less centralized (*Northern League*) or more inclusive (*Democratic Party*) candidate selection methods in the elections covered. To

examine whether this influenced the findings, I show that excluding members of these parties from the models does not alter the results. Additional support for the main findings emerges from models where the proportion (instead of the raw number) of regional questions and bills is employed to capture MPs' local orientation. While the significance of the interactive coefficients varies slightly (see Table C1), the pattern of the marginal effects is consistent with the main models. Furthermore, the results do not change when legislators' previous local experience is operationalized as years served in regional parliaments. Moreover, the benefits that a party reaps from a legislator's local efforts could depend on the size of the party delegation elected in the same area (Geese and Martínez-Cantó 2022). Parties may require less geographical activism from an MP representing an area where several other legislators of the same party are elected. Still, the results do not change when one controls for the number of party MPs elected in the region. In addition, the negative and significant effect of age on re-selection indicates that some MPs may retire voluntarily. To rule out the possibility that this mechanism is driving the results, I replicate the main results when MPs above 65 years old are excluded. Finally, models employing two alternative operationalisations of seat safety – a continuous variable and a dichotomous variable measuring whether a candidate's vulnerability increased across elections – support the null results reported in Table 3.

Conclusion

Legislative scholars often depict legislators as accountable to two principals: parties and voters (Carey 2007). How do these principals view MPs' efforts to represent local constituents in parliament? An increasing body of literature has investigated voters' representational preferences and showed that they like and reward constituency-focused representatives. Yet little is known about whether parties hold a favourable view of MPs' local focus in parliament. Understanding this question is particularly relevant in party-centred contexts, where the institutional features do not allow voters to reward or punish individual representatives.

By focusing on the Italian closed-list system and central party leadership's strong control of candidacies, this paper has tested whether delivering geographical representation in party-centred contexts is rewarded by the party leadership with renomination and a realistic position on the list. The results indicate that, contrary to expectations, geographical representation in written questions is inconsequential for both re-selection and list position irrespective of MPs' backbencher status, committee membership, and local experience. The hypotheses are only supported in that geographical bills negatively affect re-selection chances, consistent with the idea that parties' re-selection decisions reflect an internal division of labour when they

evaluate incumbents' records. More specifically, the party leadership seems to consider the levels of geographical representation in bills to decide which backbencher, local, and distributive committee members to re-select. However, geographical representation seems to matter only for re-selection, while the hypothesis that it plays a role in how parties rank candidates on the list is not supported.

The results therefore highlight the heterogeneous consequences of using different parliamentary tools to represent local constituents, illustrating that the division of labour in PPGs also applies to the choice of parliamentary activities. In particular, written questions and bills seem to complement rather than substitute each other. Moreover, the findings indicate that closed-list PR systems with centralized selection can deter geographical representation, producing a tension with voters' representational preferences.

Still, sponsoring geographical bills affects the probability of re-selection only limitedly, and has no significant effect on the ballot rank. It is likely that other dimensions, such as personal networks, membership in intra-party factions, and proximity to the party leader (which is only partly captured by vulnerability at the previous election), play a more substantial role in this decision. In contrast, the null results for parliamentary questions can be explained in two ways. First, it could be the case that parties do not consider geographical representation an asset in party-centred contexts, which makes them either indifferent or averse to it. Second, the findings might suggest that parties value other forms of geographical representation. These could include activities that take place outside parliament, such as casework and constituency service. Further research is needed to explore how party leaders perceive legislators' local focus and whether extra-parliamentary district activities can advance legislators' careers in a party-centred context.

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