

Electoral Incentives and Geographical Representation

Evidence from an Italian Electoral Reform

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Abstract

Candidate-centred electoral systems create incentives for MPs to cultivate a personal vote among their constituents, which in turn should strengthen geographical representation. However, existing research has missed the theoretical distinction between the selection and incentives effects of electoral systems. Electoral rules influence who successfully runs for office (selection) and MPs' behaviour once they have been elected (incentives). Focusing on the 2005 Italian electoral reform from a mixed to a proportional system, this paper assesses the effects of the electoral system change on re-elected MPs' attention to local issues in parliamentary questions and bills. The dual source of variation in electoral incentives (mixed system and reform) provides a unique opportunity to disentangle the impact of incentives and selection on MPs' behaviour. Contrary to expectations, the results indicate that MPs formerly elected in single-member districts (SMDs) did not significantly decrease their attention to local issues after the reform. This suggests that electoral incentives alone are not enough to modify significantly the behaviour of MPs experiencing the institutional change and that selection effects should be taken more into account when considering the impact of electoral systems. By differentiating two mechanisms through which electoral rules influence legislators' behaviour, this finding contributes new knowledge to the ongoing debate about the consequences of electoral institutions and reforms.

Introduction

A crucial dimension in representative democracy is how and whom legislators represent. Whether MPs act as agents or trustees, and whether they adopt a na-

tional or a district focus have deep consequences on their behaviour and on citizens' satisfaction with their representatives (Bøggild 2020; Vivyan and Wagner 2015). Perhaps nothing matters more to politicians than re-election: as in Mayhew's (1974) widely cited passage, legislators are often seen as single-minded seekers of re-election. Consistent with this view, an extensive body of literature has investigated the consequences of electoral institutions on political representation and MPs' behaviour. Research has shown that electoral systems drive a host of behaviours, from representational attitudes to campaign strategies, legislative behaviour, and constituency service (Crisp 2007; Heitshusen et al. 2005; Proksch and Slapin 2012; Schürmann and Stier 2022; Zittel and Gschwend 2008).

In particular, scholars argue that electoral systems generate different incentives to cultivate a personal vote, whereby voters support a candidate for office because of their activities for voters in the district, more so than partisan factors (Cain et al. 1984). Thus, a change of the electoral system should produce a corresponding change in members' behaviour. However, past work has not differentiated between the two distinct pathways through which such electoral system effects might work. First, a particular electoral system generates incentives for members to behave in a particular way. Second, the electoral system induces, through a selection effect, specific candidates to run for office, arguably those who are advantaged by the electoral rules. Moreover, the electoral environment also affects candidates' probability of success. In short, electoral rules change both the incentives of existing parliamentarians and steer different types of candidates selected for office.

Despite the rich literature on these topics, most existing work has failed to grasp the distinction between incentives and selection when trying to test empirically the causal link between re-election incentives and legislative behaviour. As a result, it is still not clear whether these potential effects are driven by the selection of politicians with characteristics that differ across electoral contexts or by the incentives that the institutional environment creates. In this article, I argue that integrating the study of an electoral reform with an analysis of mixed electoral systems can help to produce more compelling causal evidence on the effects of electoral rules.

To do so, I utilise the 2005 Italian electoral reform, which replaced a mixed-member majoritarian system with closed-list proportional representation. In particular, I track MPs who were initially elected in the mixed system and won re-election under the new PR system. By comparing MPs previously elected in single-member districts to MPs previously elected based on closed party lists, I can use a difference-in-differences design to understand the impact of this shift on parliamentary behaviour.

More specifically, I focus on one dimension of MPs' behaviour that is widely

considered a strategy to attract individual electoral support – representatives’ attention to local constituents. A content analysis of a corpus of more than 60,000 written questions and 14,000 bills presented in the Italian lower house between 2001 and 2013 is used to understand to what extent MPs’ choice to prioritise geographical representation is responsive to electoral incentives. The results show that while the combination of incentives and political selection produced a significant impact on MPs’ behaviour, a change in electoral incentives alone failed to generate similar effects. In the parliament elected with mixed rules, MPs’ mandate (proportional/majoritarian), capturing the effect of both electoral incentives and the selection of candidates with different characteristics in the two tiers, was a driver of their geographical focus in questions and bills. The change in electoral rules, instead, did not significantly reduce the difference between majoritarian and proportional MPs’ localism despite a reduction of electoral incentives for the former group. The analyses cover three parliamentary terms to account for the possibility that legislators’ strategies adapt slowly to shifts in the institutional setting. The results indicate that the impact of electoral incentives, although in the expected direction, is insignificant even three years after the reform. These findings question the ability of electoral reforms to change the behaviour of MPs experiencing the transition to a new electoral system, with implications for electoral system design and for our understanding of how electoral systems can be conducive to different forms of representation.

Electoral systems and geographical representation

Legislative scholars studying the determinants of legislators’ behaviour have often turned to electoral institutions to explain why MPs prioritise specific activities. Since legislators want to be re-elected (Arnold 1990; Mayhew 1974), their behaviour inside and outside parliament seeks to advance this goal. This does not imply that winning a seat is the only objective that legislators have, but it presupposes that re-election is a precondition for attaining other goals, such as policies or higher offices; in Mayhew’s (1974: 16) words, the pursuit of re-election “underlies everything else”. If politicians are strategic actors, re-election incentives are a good place to look for possible explanations of their behaviour.

Electoral rules thus play a crucial role as they shape the institutional constraints of the re-election game. The next question is who the relevant players in the game are. In their quest for a seat, candidates are expected to channel their effort into pleasing the actors that matter most for their re-election. In parliamentary systems, MPs’ re-election ultimately hinges on securing the support of two principals: the voters and their party (Carey 2007). The relative importance of these (possibly competing) principals depends to a large extent on electoral

institutions. This, in turn, determines the most important asset for candidates: the reputation and the performance of their party when election is in control of party leaders, their personal reputation if winning a seat rests on the ability to attract personal votes. Therefore, electoral institutions are thought to shape personal vote incentives (Cain et al. 1984).

In a seminal article, Carey and Shugart (1995) provided a rank ordering of electoral systems based on personal vote incentives, arguing that, conditional on electoral rules, electoral prospects are to varying degrees enhanced by the personal standing of individual candidates. A crucial causal channel that may connect the features of the electoral system to MPs' incentives and, consequently, behaviour, is accountability (André et al. 2014): voters (acting as principals) observe legislators' behaviour and sanction or reward them (Carey 2008; Fearon 1999). The two electoral dimensions that research has linked to accountability are district magnitude and type of lists. District magnitude (the number of representatives elected in a district) affects the cognitive effort required from voters to keep track of their agents, that is, their representatives. The higher the number of MPs elected in a district, the more information is required to assess their behaviour, attribution of credit becomes complicated (Heitshusen et al. 2005), and citizens' monitoring ability and accountability will be reduced. Moreover, closed – as opposed to open – lists only allow voters to choose a party list, and without the possibility to vote for candidates, voters cannot target their sanction at or reward individual representatives. On these grounds, the conventional wisdom is that closed-list PR produces the lowest personal vote incentives, while most authors agree on classifying single-member plurality as more candidate-centred (Mitchell 2000; Nielson 2003; Wallack et al. 2003). A cross-national elite survey supports the hypothesis that legislators elected with single-member plurality display higher incentives to cultivate a personal vote than closed-list PR MPs (André et al. 2016).

Adopting this theoretical framework, a large body of research has tried to explain a wide set of parliamentary activities through the concept of personal vote incentives. These are expected to influence the behavioural repertoires that legislators adopt in an attempt to please their main principals. In particular, they should invest more resources in personalised behaviours that emphasises their personal standing before constituents. In the legislative arena, such behaviours include private members' bills (Crisp et al. 2004; Gagliarducci et al. 2011), budget amendments (Kerevel 2015), speeches on the floor (Proksch and Slapin 2015), parliamentary questions (Fernandes et al. 2018; Russo 2021b), membership in specific committees (Crisp 2007; Stratmann and Baur 2002), party switching (Klein 2018), and dissent in roll call votes (Carey 2007; Sieberer 2010; Sieberer and Ohmura 2021).

Electoral incentives do not only affect the probability that MPs use individualised activities but can also affect the way these tools are employed. If the goal is to build a reputation in a district, a geographical representational focus becomes particularly attractive to legislators. Broadly speaking, geographical representation occurs when the main focus of an MP's activity is their geographical constituency or electoral district (Eulau and Karps 1977). As I describe more extensively below, here I consider as geographically targeted every parliamentary activity where an MP mentions a place in the area where they have been elected. MPs use local orientation in parliamentary activities to signal that they care about the people they represent. In contexts of high electoral accountability, local representation can be more salient to voters and therefore more impactful on re-election prospects (Lancaster 1986). At the same time, smaller and less populated districts (as single-member districts tend to be) also give MPs an opportunity to develop stronger communication channels with their constituents and to be informed about their local issues (Dockendorff 2020). Moreover, small districts are closer to Rehfeld's (2005) idea of homogenous 'communities of interests', which can be more easily represented. While legislators might face competing demands from parties and local constituents (Carey 2007), this is not necessarily the case. Zittel et al. (2019) argue that targeting geographical districts might work as a supplementary, non-partisan form of representation that does not risk disrupting party unity. Similarly, party leaders may consider local representation through parliamentary questions and bills as an anodyne but vote-winning activity and actively encourage their members to deliver it (Kam 2009).

The empirical evidence is mainly based on the synchronic variation provided by mixed systems and comparative designs (cross-tier and cross-country). The picture is mixed: constituency focus appears to be a function of district magnitude in some cases but not in others (Crisp et al. 2004; Gagliarducci et al. 2011; Papp 2016; Russo 2021b; Zittel et al. 2019).

Hypothesis 1 *MPs' propensity to provide geographical representation is higher in single-member districts (SMDs) than in closed-list multi-member districts (MMDs).*

Complementing comparative and mixed systems studies, a relatively limited number of analyses employ the diachronic variation in electoral institutions by addressing the effects of electoral reforms on geographical representation. As a notable example, Høyland and Søyland (2019) document that re-elected Norwegian MPs decreased the constituency vis-à-vis party focus in their floor speeches after the 1919 electoral reform, which changed the system from two-round single member plurality to closed list PR. When an electoral reform decreases personal vote incentives, strategic MPs are expected to acknowledge the new electoral environment in which they are competing and recalibrate the resources they devote to geographical representation accordingly.

Hypothesis 2 *Switching from a single-member district to a closed-list multi-member district has a negative effect on MPs' geographical representation.*

Hypothesis 2 implicitly assumes that the institutional change immediately produces an effect on legislators' behaviour. If instead one considers legislative behaviour as a set of routines that tend to be persistent over time, the time dimension assumes a central role to evaluate the impact of electoral reforms. In this perspective, while a reform might fail to have a significant impact in the short-term, it becomes more likely to observe a change in line with the theoretical expectations in the medium/long-run. This argument posits that it takes some time for MPs to modify the way they interpret their role, aligning their behaviour to the new institutional setting.

Hypothesis 3 *The longer the time passed since an electoral reform, the smaller the effect of previous electoral incentives on MPs' geographical representation.*

Electoral incentives and MPs' behaviour

The arguments above suggest that electoral system changes generate different outcomes. Even if this is true, however, there is an observational equivalence problem at work, as this conflates two different mechanisms that drive this result: selection and incentives. On the one hand, different electoral systems may select different types of politicians due to self-selection and party selection (Galasso and Nannicini 2017; Myerson 1993). In the first case, candidates decide to run when they consider the electoral environment favourable to their chances of success. Put differently, candidates' entry is contingent on electoral rules. In the latter case, parties adjust their selection criteria based on strategic consideration related to the electoral competition. For instance, in contexts where candidates' visibility is high, parties may opt for high-profile candidates in order to maximise their seats. In addition, the chances of success of different types of candidates may depend on the electoral system in place.

On the other hand, a changing electoral system not only modifies the likelihood of a particular candidate running, but it also changes the incentives of existing candidates. Electoral institutions create incentives by changing the expected payoffs attached to different behavioural strategies. MPs should adapt their behaviour to the electoral scenario in which they are competing; this implies that high personal vote incentives should steer MPs to personalise their behaviour as a way to win re-election.

Despite its theoretical importance, this equivalence problem has been largely neglected by the literature. While many studies claim to uncover the impact

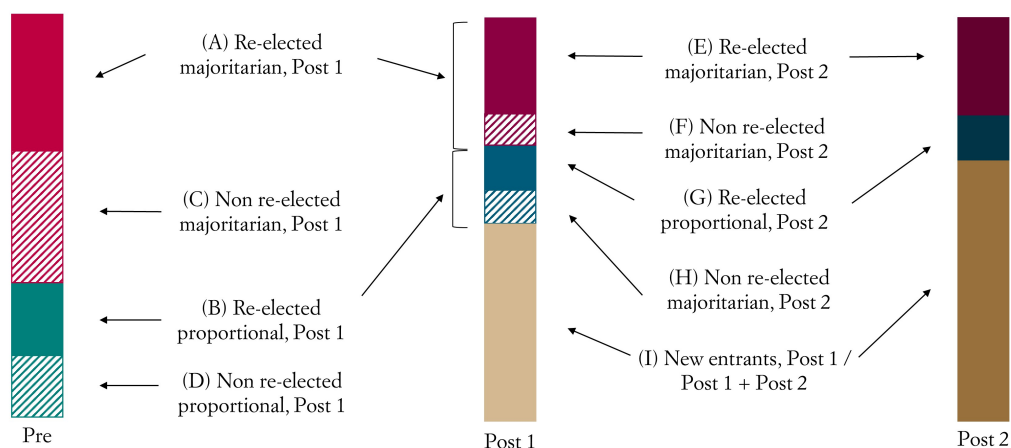
of electoral incentives, their ability to isolate the causal effect of incentives is dubious. In the next paragraphs, I explain why the two situations typically used to test the effects of electoral incentives – electoral reforms and mixed-member electoral systems – might fail to deliver what they promise.

Unsurprisingly, electoral reforms have attracted the attention of legislative scholars studying the institutional determinants of parliamentary behaviour. Coman (2012), for instance, analyses the consequences for party unity of the Romanian 2008 electoral reform, from closed-list proportional representation to single-member plurality. Yet, comparing parliamentarians elected before and after the electoral reform can be problematic. Possible systematic differences across the two groups could translate into a biased estimate of the causal effect of electoral incentives. This research design would capture the overall effect of an electoral reform, jointly determined by incentives and selection. One solution to this empirical challenge has been to restrict the attention to the group of MPs who survived the reform and managed to be elected across two different systems. This allows to look at the consequences of the electoral change on the same group of individuals, without compositional variation. Recent contributions have adopted this approach to go beyond simple before-after comparisons (Carson and Sievert 2015; Høyland and Søyland 2019).

However, pre-post event studies cannot account for unobserved time-varying confounder and therefore cannot rule out that the effect attributed to the electoral reform is actually driven by a time trend unrelated to the institutional change (Ishima 2020). To address this shortcoming, I argue that studying mixed systems that undergo electoral reform yields more credible causal evidence of the effects of electoral rules. As an alternative source of variation in electoral incentives, research on legislative behaviour has widely investigated mixed-member electoral systems, i.e., those characterised by two electoral tiers: one majoritarian, with single-member districts, and one proportional, usually with a closed-list arrangement (Sieberer 2010; Stratmann and Baur 2002). Mixed parliaments offer one main advantage: by creating variation in electoral rules within the same parliament, they make it possible to exploit electoral variation in the same context and during the same period, eliminating the risk of country-level confounders (affecting comparative designs) and time trend biases (plaguing before-after comparisons). Still, the same problem as in the case of electoral reforms recurs: a comparison between the groups of MPs elected under different rules merges the selection and incentive mechanisms.

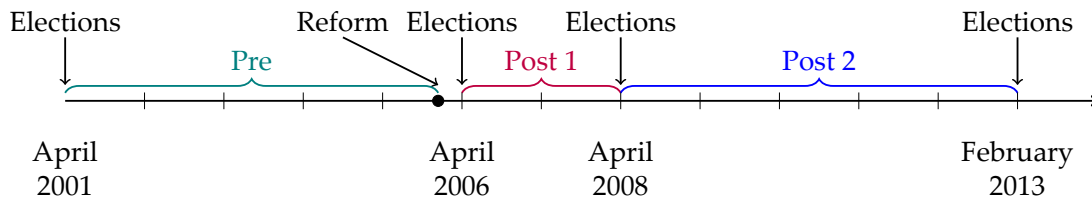
An electoral reform from a mixed to a different system allows me to leverage two sources of variation of electoral incentives: the mixed-system tier (synchronic) and the electoral reform (diachronic). The mixed system creates two groups of MPs with allegedly different incentives as some are elected

Figure 1. Groups of MPs by tier of election and re-election status



in single-member districts, and others compete in closed-list multi-member districts. Figure 1 illustrates this situation in a pre-treatment scenario (Pre). Consider now an electoral reform introducing a pure PR system and the group of re-elected members (i.e., those who run under both mixed and proportional rules). Some are former majoritarian-tier (or nominal) legislators (group A), some are former proportional (or list) MPs (group B). The impact of such an electoral reform should depend on the tier in which MPs were formerly elected: while majoritarian-tier legislators switch from a single-member to a multi-member district, proportional-tier representatives are elected in MMDs as before. In line with the arguments presented above, former majoritarian-tier MPs should decrease their attention to geographical representation, while, *ceteris paribus*, this should not be the case for former PR-tier members. An appropriate method in this setting is a difference-in-differences (DiD) design, which compares a treatment and control group over time. The treatment group consists of SMD-tier politicians re-elected in MMDs after the reform, while the control group comprises re-elected MMD-tier legislators who did not experience a change in type of district. This setting helps to isolate incentives from selection: the mixed system probably selects different types of politicians in the two tiers, but once the two groups have been selected, a change in the difference in behaviours between the groups (i.e., what the DiD captures)

Figure 2. Timeline of the events



would only be driven by incentives since the composition of the two groups is stable over time.

Case selection and research design

Consistent with the theoretical framework presented above, I use two features of the Italian case in the following analyses. First, a mixed-member majoritarian system was in place between 1993 and 2005. Second, at the end of 2005, just before the general elections held in April 2006, the mixed system was replaced with a closed-list proportional system. This makes Italy an ideal setting to test the hypothesis that changes in electoral incentives have an effect on geographical representation with a DiD design. Figure 2 shows the timeline of the events.

Moreover, other considerations make Italy a relevant case to study. Individual parliamentary activities, e.g., bills and written questions, are widely used and have relatively limited procedural constraints. More specifically, legislators can propose private members' bills with virtually no limits regarding content, which is not always the case in a comparative perspective (e.g., in the UK, private members' bills with financial implications require prior authorisation from the House). In addition, historically distributive policies – a typical example of geographical representation – have been pervasive and easy to accommodate in the Italian policy-making process (Cavaliere et al. 2018; Golden and Picci 2008).

Parliamentary questions and bills have been increasingly used to study individual MPs' behaviour (Bowler 2010; Martin 2011; Russo and Wiberg 2010; van Santen et al. 2015). First, despite the relatively limited allocation of time and resources required when presenting a question or a bill, still this is not “an entirely costless exercise in terms of time and opportunity cost [thus providing] an indication of the priorities of legislators” (Martin 2011: 263). Second, these tools represent a good opportunity for MPs to reach out to constituents. MPs can advertise their legislative activities directly through newsletters or meetings with constituents and, more importantly, try to get (local) media attention, as they do with press releases (Grimmer 2013). The empirical evidence indicates that legis-

lators are indeed successful in having their activities covered by media (Arnold 2004; Bowler 2010; van Santen et al. 2015). If MPs use both bills and questions to obtain visibility and send signal to constituents (rather than achieve policy outcomes), I would expect electoral incentives to produce stronger effects on questions as they can be more efficient (thanks to a lower cost to draft them, but a similar potential to get into the local news).

In the period considered here, two electoral systems were used in Italy. After a phase of political turmoil in the early 1990s characterised by corruption scandals, major changes in the party system, and a series of referendums on the electoral rules, a mixed electoral system was adopted and first used in the 1994 elections. The system adopted was mixed-member majoritarian with two (mostly) independent tiers, with 75% of the seats contested in SMDs and the remaining quarter in multi-member districts and closed-list PR rules (D'Alimonte 2005).¹ For the Chamber of Deputies, the PR tier operated nationally, employed the Hare quota with largest remainders, and envisaged a national-level threshold of 4%. Voters cast two ballots, one for a candidate and one for a list.

Negative vote transfers (*scorporo*) were introduced to favour the lists supporting unsuccessful SMD candidates. In practice, in the allocation of PR seats parties who won the SMD race had their number of PR votes subtracted by the number of votes (plus one) won by second-placed SMD candidates. This connection between the two electoral tiers does not threaten my identification strategy for two reasons. First, it has been documented that at the 2001 elections the two largest coalitions (who won all but one seat in the lower house) were able to circumvent the negative vote transfers by presenting their candidates under fake lists (*liste civetta*) (D'Alimonte 2005: 258). Second, there are no theoretical reasons to expect that this linkage could affect the behaviour of individual politicians, especially after the election. The mechanism only improved the electoral chances of candidates running in MMDs comprising many SMDs won by a wide margin by the rival coalition.

The mixed system was eventually replaced by a closed-list PR system with majority bonus a few months before the 2006 elections (September–December 2005).² The reform was sponsored by the governing parties, who tried to minimise the electoral defeat anticipated by polls and wanted to avoid long intra-coalition negotiations to select common candidates for single-member districts (Renwick et al. 2009). In the new system, voters voted for party lists in 27 MMDs.

1. Although the system was MMM, there were minor linkages between the two tiers: a mechanism of negative vote transfers (*scorporo*) and *repêchage*.

2. According to campaigning literature (Schwalbach 2022), the period immediately preceding the elections would be a good place to look for the effects of electoral incentives. However, the limited number of questions and bills presented during the last six months of the term does not allow to investigate this issue.

Under the new rules, district magnitude ranged from 2 to 44, with most legislators elected in districts with more than 15 members.

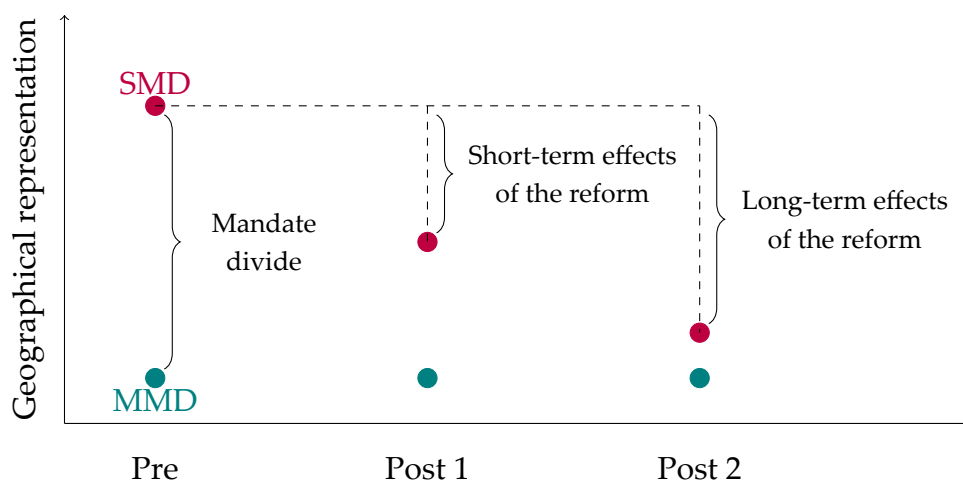
The reasons of the 2005 electoral reform are relevant here because they suggest that political actors' motivations were unrelated to the outcome of interest, namely geographical representation. In this sense, such an electoral reform can be considered an exogenous source of variation of electoral incentives. The political discussion of the reform did not revolve around political accountability and voter-representative linkages, unlike the 1994 reform. Similarly, scholarly contributions do not identify these issues as the driving force of the reform (Baldini 2011; Pasquino 2007; Renwick et al. 2009).

Figure 3 shows the expected effects of the reform on the behaviour of the two types of MPs (proportional and majoritarian) over time. For simplicity, it is assumed that there are no time trends, i.e. in the absence of a change in electoral incentives, the intensity of geographical representation would not have changed (but the DiD design allows for such time trends, as long as they are parallel across groups). In the mixed legislative term (Pre), H1 posits a behavioural discrepancy between SMD and MMD MPs, in line with the mandate divide hypothesis. This gap is expected to narrow in the next term (Post 1) as a consequence of the electoral reform and of the resulting decrease in electoral incentives for the SMD group of MPs (H2). Looking at Figure 1, this means that the difference between groups A and B shrinks due to the electoral reform. Moreover, according to H3, representational repertoires might be slow to adapt: the difference between the two groups should be smaller in the second parliament after the reform (Post 2). Since not all members present in the Post 1 parliament were re-elected in the subsequent term, the groups used to assess this hypothesis are E and G, i.e., legislators present in the parliament for three consecutive terms. Descriptive statistics on the number of MPs in each group are shown in the Appendix.

Text analysis and geographical representation

In line with previous research (Russo 2021a; Zittel et al. 2019), I define *geographical representation* as the representative's behaviour directly targeted at a geographical unit in the MP's region of election. Since the hypotheses investigate the effects of electoral incentives, geographical representation needs to be characterised as an electoral relationship. For an electoral relationship between an MP and constituents to exist, the geographical area that the MP tries to support

Figure 3. Expected effect of the reform



should be the same as the district in which they were elected.³ To be precise, I consider as geographical questions those that mention a geographical unit located in the representative’s region of election, which is a larger area than the electoral district. This choice is motivated by the need to compare similar geographical units under different electoral tiers (the majoritarian and proportional tiers of the mixed system) and electoral systems (the mixed and the proportional systems). The attention devoted to the region in which an MP has been elected can be interpreted as a proxy for the attention to local constituents.

Legislative scholars have often used geographical dictionaries to study geographical representation since automated text analysis allows them to detect geographical markers in legislative (or social media) texts. Several papers rely on this approach to examine legislators’ behaviour (Papp 2021; Russo 2021a; Schürmann and Stier 2022; Zittel et al. 2019). Here I adopt a dictionary that includes the names of all Italian municipalities, regions, national parks, motorways and highways (*autostrade* and *strade statali*), main rivers and seas.⁴ Geographical references are matched with the MP’s region of election.

Given this definition, geographical representation can be operationalised in at least two ways. The first possibility is to use the number of questions that contain a geographical reference matching the proposer’s region of election (Papp 2020). The advantage of this strategy is that it enables to account for the overall level of geographical representation in the parliament, but this is not the main goal here. The proportion of questions/bills with a matched geographical refer-

3. This excludes instances of surrogate representation, i.e., representation by a member without an electoral linkage with constituents (Mansbridge 2003)

4. See Appendix B for examples and validation.

ence seems better able to capture the strategic decision that MPs have to make regarding whether to table a question or propose a bill: when legislators decide to undertake a parliamentary activity, the proportion of local questions measures the probability that they address an issue related to their geographical constituency. In a sense, the share of regional questions measures the attention devoted to local issues keeping legislative effort constant.⁵

Data and empirical strategy

In the following analyses, I focus on two types of parliamentary activities: parliamentary questions and bills. In particular, in the Italian lower house (*Camera dei Deputati*), written questions can be discussed either on the floor (*interrogazioni a risposta scritta*) or in a committee (*interrogazioni a risposta in commissione*). Both types of questions are included as they are procedurally similar and display an almost identical proportion of regional questions. As previous contributions have demonstrated, Italian MPs often use written questions to address local concerns. For instance, Russo (2011) shows that more than one-third of all written questions asked between 2006 and 2008 had a regional focus. As mentioned above, no formal provisions (in the constitution or in the house rules) limit MPs' right to propose a bill.⁶ While the share of regional bills is unsurprisingly lower than in the case of questions, a significant proportion of total bills, ranging between 7.5% and 10%, mentioned the region of election of the MP who initiated the bill in the period between 1996 and 2008 (Marangoni and Tronconi 2011). Both bills and written questions are considered relatively unconstrained activities, as party whips usually do not enforce a strict party discipline. Still, drafting a bill is usually more demanding than tabling a question (even assuming that the task is undertaken by MPs' staff).⁷ The inclusion of both bills and questions allows me to see whether different patterns characterise parliamentary activities with different costs.

The DiD is implemented by estimating the following OLS model:

$$Y_{it} = \alpha + \gamma Treat_i + \lambda Post_i + \delta(Treat_i * Post_i) + \mathbf{X}'_{it}\beta + \epsilon_{it}$$

where Y_{it} is the proportion of written questions or bills where the legislator explicitly mentions a geographical reference in the region of their district, $Treat_i$ is a

5. As robustness tests, I present count models in the Appendix; this modelling strategy does not affect the main results.

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

7. As a rough indication of the different levels of effort required, between 2001 and 2006 a question contained on average 290 words, while the mean length of a bill was 1850 words.

dummy variable equal to 1 for MPs (formerly) elected in the majoritarian tier of the mixed system, and X'_{it} is a vector of controls. $Post_i$ identifies whether an MP is elected before or after the electoral reform. In one specification of the model, I consider the parliamentary terms before and immediately after the electoral reform (2001-2006 and 2006-2008).⁸ In the other specification, which assesses the long-term effects of the reform, the post-treatment period is the second term after the electoral reform (Post 2 in Figure 2). As shown in Figure 2 the electoral reform was approved six months before the elections and the beginning of the second term. As this transition period could contaminate the results for the first term, these months are excluded from the analyses.⁹ In both cases, δ represents the coefficient for the DiD estimator. Following a standard advice in difference-in-differences designs (Huntington-Klein 2021), I only include time-varying variables and I show the results along with the basic specification without controls.

The controls include a variable capturing government office, coded as 1 for MPs who were ministers, junior ministers or undersecretaries during the parliamentary term; a dummy variable coded as 1 for MPs holding a legislative office (chairman, vice-chairman, quaestor or secretary of the house, chairman, vice-chairman or secretary of a legislative committee, chairman or vice-chairman of a parliamentary group); and a dummy variable coded as 1 for local MPs, defined as members elected in their region of birth.¹⁰ Previous research has shown that local MPs can be more inclined to be district focused in their parliamentary activities (Marangoni and Tronconi 2011; Russo 2011; Tavits 2009). Conversely, holding a position in the cabinet should decrease the probability of investing time in individual enterprises in parliament. Moreover, cabinet members are typically able to cater to local constituents in different ways (Martin 2014). Therefore, the expected effect of the cabinet variable on geographical representation is negative. On the other hand, I have no clear expectation for legislative offices such as committee chairs.

Data on legislative activities and MPs' biographical information were retrieved from the open data of the Italian Chamber of Deputies.¹¹ The information on legislative office-holders is drawn from Russo (2021b).

Before moving to the regression analyses, descriptive statistics for the control variables are presented in Table 1. MPs are split in two groups according to the tier of the mixed system in which they were elected in the 2001 term (the Pre

8. The term starting in 2006 was shorter due to snap elections.

9. Although the discussion on the electoral reform started before the summer, it was unclear in which direction the reform could go (and whether a reform would have been approved at all). For this reason, it is unlikely that MPs changed their behaviour at that point.

10. The variables are coded for each of the three parliamentary terms and may vary across terms for the same MP.

11. <https://dati.camera.it/it/>

Table 1. Summary statistics, control variables

	Proportional			Majoritarian			Test
	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	
Age	83	53.34	8.74	225	53.37	8.46	F= 0.001
Male	83	0.83	0.38	225	0.88	0.33	F= 1.242
Government office	83	0.14	0.35	225	0.13	0.34	F= 0.129
Legislative office	83	0.14	0.35	225	0.17	0.38	F= 0.262
Local	83	0.57	0.50	225	0.75	0.44	F= 9.593***
Local experience	80	0.59	0.50	213	0.68	0.47	F= 2.241

* $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$

period in Figure 2). Overall, 308 MPs were elected in two consecutive terms (2001 and 2006). Of these, 83 were elected in the proportional tier, and 225 in the majoritarian tier of the mixed system, which is in line with the relative size of the two tiers (75% for the majoritarian and 25% for the proportional, while the proportion of nominal and list MPs in the re-elected group is, respectively, 73% and 27%). If the third term (2008–2013) is included, the number of MPs present in these three consecutive parliaments drops to 182.

One thing worth noticing in Table 1 is that, while there are no significant differences between majoritarian and proportional MPs in terms of biographical characteristics such as age and gender, or in the likelihood of holding executive or legislative office, nominal representatives are more likely to be local, i.e., to be elected in the region where they were born (the difference between the two groups is statistically significant at the 0.01 level). While majoritarian MPs are somewhat more likely to have been elected at the municipal or regional level before entering the parliament (68% compared to 59%), the difference is not statistically significant. Overall, this descriptive evidence suggests that some selection issues are produced by the mixed system, with different types of politicians being elected in the different tiers. Since selection on unobservable and observable characteristics not included in the analysis is possible, a research design able to rule out that the results are produced by a selection effect is needed in order to test the impact of electoral incentives.

Table 2 shows summary statistics for the dependent variable, the share of written questions and bills where the MP talks about a geographical unit in the region of her district. The pattern for the questions seems to support the hypothesis about the effects of switching from a single-member to a multi-member district: while the proportion of regional questions is stable across terms for the

Table 2. Summary statistics, share of regional written questions

		Proportional			Majoritarian		
		N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD
Questions	Pre	83	0.31	0.31	225	0.42	0.31
	Post 1	83	0.29	0.33	225	0.35	0.35
	Post 2	42	0.30	0.32	140	0.34	0.32
Bills	Pre	83	0.12	0.21	225	0.17	0.26
	Post 1	83	0.14	0.24	225	0.15	0.22
	Post 2	42	0.08	0.13	140	0.09	0.14

Table 3. Summary statistics, share of regional written questions by re-election outcome (2001-2006)

		Non re-elected			Re-elected			
		N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	Test
Questions	Majoritarian	260	0.45	0.31	225	0.42	0.31	F= 1.566
	Proportional	77	0.37	0.33	83	0.31	0.31	F= 1.739
Bills	Majoritarian	260	0.20	0.27	225	0.17	0.26	F= 0.948
	Proportional	77	0.14	0.23	83	0.12	0.21	F= 0.297

MPs that were elected in the proportional component in the first term, before the electoral reform, their colleagues who served with a nominal mandate display a reduction in attention to local issues after the electoral reform. While 42% of total questions were addressing local concerns when the mixed system was in place, the figure declines to 35% in the first fully proportional term and to 34% in the following parliament. Thinking in terms of DiD terms, the gap between the two groups of MPs (11 percentage points when the mixed system was used) falls to 5 and 4 percentage points in the following terms. As for bills, the proportion of geographically targeted texts is generally lower but still sizeable (around 15% on average). Also in this case, the 5 percentage point gap in the Pre period shrinks to one point after the electoral reform.

A possible concern related to a research design that focuses on re-elected MPs only is that the composition of the group of politicians surviving the electoral reform could be driven by the reform itself. For instance, the anticipated effects of the electoral reform on the value of personal reputations could have led the most local SMD MPs not to run again at the elections with the closed-list PR system. This would imply that the MPs included in the analyses are the

least likely to exhibit behavioural differences due to changes in electoral incentives. However, this does not seem to be the case for two reasons. First, as I reported above, the probability of being re-elected is nearly the same for proportional and majoritarian MPs, contradicting the hypothesis that majoritarian legislators strategically exit from a challenging electoral competition. Second, further reassurance comes from Table 3, which presents descriptive statistics on the dependent variable for re-elected and non-re-elected MPs. Re-elected SMD parliamentarians presented a similar proportion of regional questions and bills as the other majoritarian members who left parliament. Moreover, the pattern of a slightly lower share of local questions and bills for re-elected MPs also exists for proportional MPs, indicating that SMD MPs were not strategically retiring.

Finally, the validity of the DiD approach rests on the parallel trend assumption that without the electoral reform, the difference between majoritarian (treatment) and proportional (control) MPs would have been constant. Graphical evidence of the parallel trends is shown in the Appendix.

Results

Turning to the regression models, Table 4 uses the proportion of regional questions as dependent variable. In Table 4, all re-elected MPs are included (308 legislators observed twice). Model 1 only contains the DiD estimator, while model 2 adds party and individual controls (government and legislative offices and localness). Standard errors are clustered at the MP level to account for the repeated observation of the same individuals. Results show that the DiD estimator is not significant, suggesting that despite a negative coefficient in line with the theoretical expectations, the electoral reform did not cause a robustly significant difference between the two groups. Still, the wide standard errors do not allow me to rule out that an effect is as high as 12 percentage points (equivalence tests). The coefficient for the majoritarian tier is positive and significant in both specifications, indicating an effect of the tier of election for the mixed parliament. This result is consistent with Hypothesis 1: being elected in the SMD tier of the mixed system has a positive effect on the share of regional questions. The coefficient for the majoritarian tier is almost twice as large as the DiD estimator, suggesting that the behavioural discrepancy was at least in part produced by selection. As for the control variables, being a local MP (i.e. being born in the region of the district of election) appears to be a strong predictor of geographical representation, in accordance with previous research. The strongest effect is produced by government office: MPs who are in the cabinet are significantly less likely to engage in district-oriented activities.

Table 4. DiD with the share of regional questions, OLS. 2001-2013

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>			
	Proportion of regional questions			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Post 1	0.0001 (0.036)	-0.056 (0.036)		
Post 2			0.029 (0.054)	-0.004 (0.049)
Majoritarian	0.120*** (0.040)	0.103*** (0.035)	0.108* (0.056)	0.067 (0.048)
Government office		-0.301*** (0.033)		-0.279*** (0.046)
Legislative office		0.037 (0.032)		0.013 (0.044)
Local		0.169*** (0.031)		0.202*** (0.037)
Post 1 * Majoritarian	-0.067 (0.043)	-0.051 (0.045)		
Post 2 * Majoritarian			-0.071 (0.062)	-0.064 (0.057)
Party controls	No	Yes	No	Yes
Observations	616	616	364	364
R ²	0.02	0.19	0.01	0.20
<i>Note:</i>	*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01			

As I argued above, the DiD estimator should isolate the effects of the reduction in electoral incentives determined by the electoral reform, which introduced a purely proportional system. By contrast, it is less straightforward to isolate the effect of selection in this framework. To an extent, the effect of the majoritarian tier of the mixed system *after* the mixed system has been replaced by PR rules, i.e., when electoral incentives cease to be present, is close to the impact of selection. In other words, if former majoritarian MPs continue to display a behavioural pattern different from PR members even when the difference in incentives has disappeared, this would support the idea that these two groups of politicians are different types (i.e., selection playing an important role). However, another possibility points to the persistence of MPs' roles, if interpreted as

“a coherent set of ‘norms’ of behaviour which are thought by those involved in the interactions being viewed, to apply to all persons who occupy the position of legislator” (Wahlke et al. 1962). In this sense, roles could be influenced by MPs’ career trajectory, and MPs once elected in the SMD tier could develop different norms from their MMD colleagues. In Table 4, the majoritarian tier coefficient captures the impact of the mode of election in the mixed system. As discussed above in more detail, this effect is jointly produced by incentives and selection/roles. Looking at the significance of the coefficients, it seems that neither incentives nor selection/roles alone are producing a significant impact on MPs’ geographical focus. On the one hand, the DiD estimator is insignificant; on the other hand, the mandate divide attenuates in the second and third terms, and the gap between the two groups becomes not significant.¹² In the mixed parliament, instead, the majoritarian tier produces significant results when both these forces are at work.

One may wonder whether the insignificant results are produced by MPs that continue to represent their pre-reform district independently of electoral incentives, e.g. for biographical reasons (Carozzi and Repetto 2016). This dynamic could indicate the presence of a specific type of selection, namely of legislators strongly connected to a particular territory. To account for this possibility, mixed-system district dictionaries are used in both the pre and post reform periods to code district questions (results are shown in Appendix F). The resulting models indicate that majoritarian MPs were less likely to mention their pre-reform districts after the electoral reform, suggesting that the majoritarian tier did not select legislators more attached to a specific territory compared to proportional MPs. Still, this evidence does not exclude other possible selection effects, for instance regarding representatives’ style or focus (e.g. MPs predisposed to represent their geographical constituency).

As discussed in the theory section (Hypothesis 3), it is possible that institutional changes do not immediately translate into behavioural changes given the persistence of routines and norms attached to representative roles. To account for this possibility, models 3 and 4 in Table 4 extend the analysis to the second term after the 2005 electoral reform (2008–2013, Post 2 in Figure 1). The number of observations drops to 364 as the number of MPs present in the 2001 and 2008 parliament is 182. Although the coefficient sizes of the DiD estimator slightly increase compared to models 1 and 2, the results are still insignificant.¹³ The same picture emerges from Figure 4, which plots the predicted values of the propor-

12. The effect of the mixed-system tier of election in subsequent terms is not significant (regression outputs not reported here).

13. Since the groups used in the short and long-term analyses are different, the coefficients are not comparable across the models. However, using the reduced group of MPs for the short-term model produces similar results.

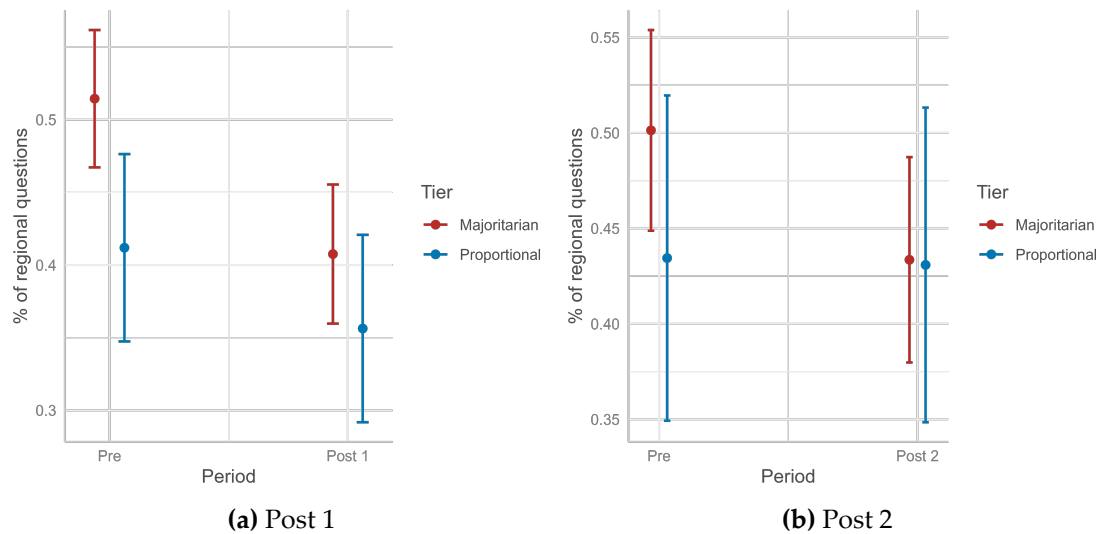


Figure 4. Predictive values of the proportion of regional questions, 2001–2013

tion of regional questions for the two groups of MPs in the three terms. While the visual evidence seems to suggest that the behavioural discrepancy (the distance between the red and the blue dots) observed during the mixed system (Pre) becomes smaller or even disappears in the second proportional term starting three years after the reform (Post 2), the change in the difference between the groups is not significant. In conclusion, there is no support for Hypothesis 3: the change in electoral incentives is not consequential for geographical representation even when the time frame is expanded. Additional specifications, including count models, are presented in the online appendix.

Moving to the analyses of the proportion of regional bills, results in Table 5 are largely consistent with the evidence emerging from written questions: contrary to Hypothesis 2, the DiD interactive term is always insignificant (although with an expected sign), while the independent effect of the majoritarian tier is significant or marginally insignificant. In the case of bills, the effect of electoral incentives does not even seem to increase over time, as the coefficient size of the interaction with the second after-reform period is smaller.¹⁴ The impact of the tier is significant in just one of the specifications (as localness), while holding a position in the cabinet is the most robust driver of the geographical focus of a bill. Overall, a comparison between the results for questions and bills seems to suggest that the first type of activity is more suitable for geographical representation and more responsive to electoral incentives.

14. Models where the MPs who did not sponsor any bill during the term are excluded and where questions and bills are pooled produce similar results.

Table 5. DiD with the share of regional bills, OLS. 2001-2013

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>			
	Proportion of regional bills			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Post 1	0.024 (0.028)	0.027 (0.034)		
Post 2			-0.043 (0.037)	-0.041 (0.037)
Majoritarian	0.058** (0.029)	0.048 (0.031)	0.048 (0.040)	0.034 (0.042)
Government office		-0.094*** (0.024)		-0.083*** (0.023)
Legislative office		0.021 (0.023)		-0.030 (0.023)
Local		0.040* (0.023)		0.11 (0.026)
Post 1 * Majoritarian	-0.053 (0.034)	-0.050 (0.038)		
Post 2 * Majoritarian			-0.030 (0.043)	-0.032 (0.043)
Party controls	No	Yes	No	Yes
Observations	616	616	364	364
R ²	0.007	0.041	0.034	0.095

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Conclusion

Re-election incentives have been extensively identified as one of the main drivers of legislators' behaviour. In this article, I have argued that the typical settings employed to test this link – mixed systems and electoral reforms – may fall short of isolating the effects of electoral incentives, and that this goal can be achieved by exploiting both sources of variation. According to the personal vote literature, legislators elected in SMDs should be more prone to cater to local constituents in order to win re-election. However, empirical evidence of the pure effect of electoral incentives is scant. The results do not support the theoretical expectations: a content analysis of the written questions and bills presented in the Italian lower

house between 2001 and 2013 suggests that the extent to which re-elected legislators engage in localism is not a function of the change in electoral incentives produced by an electoral reform. The behavioural difference between the majoritarian and proportional MPs decreased with the introduction of the closed-list PR system, in line with the expectations. However, the difference in the differences between the two groups does not reach conventional levels of statistical significance. The results therefore suggest that, despite a change in behaviour as a consequence of a change in incentives, electoral incentives were not able to produce an effect comparable to the composite effect of selection and incentives, which has a significant impact on legislators' behaviour.

The present analysis explores the effects of a reduction of electoral incentives. A relevant question is whether a similar identification strategy (i.e., making use of the dual source of variation produced by an electoral reform and a mixed system) could be used in the case of an increase in incentives. This case did indeed happen: the Italian (eventful) electoral trajectory features another electoral reform in the run-up to the 2018 elections, this time re-introducing a mixed-member majoritarian system to replace the closed-list PR rules adopted in 2005. However, studying the parliaments elected before and after the 2018 electoral reform would be problematic due to potential selection effects. In the post-reform scenario, MPs' election in one of the two tiers would not be random, hence making it difficult to disentangle selection from incentives. For instance, the characteristics that made MPs more likely to be re-elected in the majoritarian tier (e.g. attachment to their district) might be related to their propensity to deliver geographic representation. For similar reasons, New Zealand is not a suitable case for extending this research strategy: after the 1993 electoral reform (from a single-member district plurality to a mixed-member proportional system), candidates and parties' decisions on the tier created the potential for a sort of selection into the treatment. An ideal setting for a test of an increase in electoral incentives would be a reform replacing a mixed system with a majoritarian system, but to my knowledge, this case has never occurred.

These null findings can be explained in at least three ways. First, behavioural routines in the parliament might be more persistent than an account based on electoral incentives alone would assume. Legislators socialised in a specific context, partly defined by electoral institutions, internalise norms that define their role in parliament. In this light, MPs would develop habits and ways to do their job that do not completely disappear when the electoral environment changes. Former SMD MPs do not lose their local focus when elected in MMDs because the re-election strategies they have developed are now part of their role. While data on MPs' attitudes would be needed to test this hypothesis, the results presented above are consistent with such an argument. However, exploratory

analyses (Appendix E) indicate that, among SMD members, first-term legislators asked a higher share of local questions than more experienced legislators. In contrast, the level of geographical representation was similar for both experienced and inexperienced proportional MPs. This would imply that experience was working in the same direction as the reduction in electoral incentives, limiting – and not increasing – the scope for geographical representation for SMD MPs. Second, the analyses above showed that biographical ties to the district (being born in the region) influence MPs' localism in parliamentary activities, hinting that legislators may have intrinsic motivations to provide geographical representation. However, former majoritarian MPs decreased the references to their old SMDs after the electoral reform, indicating that their geographical focus was not only due to attachment to a particular area. Third, a division of labour between the members of a parliamentary group can be deemed beneficial by party leaders. The effects initially created by the electoral institutions would then last because legislators with different foci are functional to develop a clear policy platform as well as strong roots in the district. Finally, the way I operationalise the dependent variable (a standard choice in the literature) might be too crude, as it cannot capture implicit geographical representation (i.e., with no explicit geographical references). Previous research has shown that local representation can be issue oriented, with the salience of an issue in a district driving parliamentary activities (Borghetto et al. 2020; Däubler 2020). Further studies might address this shortcoming by integrating explicit and implicit geographical representation.

Regarding mixed-member electoral systems, the results presented here support the 'best of both worlds' hypothesis, according to which the presence of legislators elected in single-member and multi-member districts would strike a balance between MPs who are accountable to their constituents and cohesive and nationally focused parties (Shugart and Wattenberg 2001). The analyses show that in the Italian mixed parliament, MPs elected in single-member districts were significantly more likely to address local issues in their questions and bills. While this evidence does not allow me to test the claim that contamination effects between the tiers prevent legislators elected in the majoritarian component to behave as legislators elected in pure single-member plurality systems (Ferrara et al. 2005; Gschwend and Zittel 2016; Manow 2013; Moser and Scheiner 2005), at least it demonstrates that such potential contamination spillovers do not completely offset mandate effects.

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