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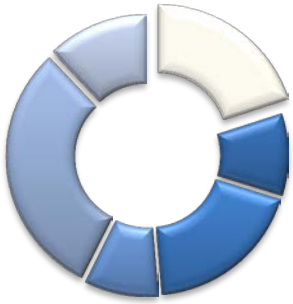

# Electoral Incentives, Parliamentary Careers and Constituency Focus in the British House of Commons, 2001-2015

*Thomas Saalfeld and Carsten Schwemmer* [1]

## Introduction

In 2016, the term 'Westminster Bubble' was added to the Oxford English Dictionary.[2] Although this expression is not new, its inclusion in this standard dictionary reflects a widespread claim that Members of Parliament were isolated from the lives of their constituents. The dictionary defines this term as 'the politicians, civil servants, and journalists working in and around the Westminster parliament, characterized as an insular community, out of touch with the experiences and concerns of the wider British public' (Oxford English Dictionary 2016).[3] Analogous references can be found for 'the Hill' in Washington DC (…), 'Raumschiff Berlin' for the political class in Germany's capital (Schäfer 2013) and similar expressions for political elites in the capitals of many other representative democracies. The observations underlying such claims point to a dilemma: on the one hand some normative theories of representative democracy define 'responsiveness' vis-à-vis voters and their desires as a criterion for the evaluation of the quality of democracy (…). On the other hand, as Manin points out, representative democracy historically owes much to aristocratic traditions and requires a certain amount of autonomy for the representatives (Manin 1997). This is encapsulated in the Burkean notion of representatives being accountable to voters retrospectively for their decisions as the latters' 'trustees' acting in the nation's interest (Eulau et al. 1959).

There is considerable evidence that party competition, one of the mechanisms designed to moderate such effects, does not correct for growing elite autonomy entirely. There have been a number of investigations showing a certain amount of elite autonomy in Westminster and elsewhere. Summing up his research on the 'rise of the career politician' in the UK (King 1981), for example, suggests that British Members of Parliament (MPs) maintained links with the public but – along with their special advisors and aides – 'constitute a distinct and distinctive "political class", one that is set apart from the rest of the population, even from the journalists who write about them and the civil servants who work for them when they are in luck and in

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[2] Aimee Meade: 'Oxford English Dictionary adds new words including yolo, moobs and Westminster bubble in updated edition.' *The Independent Online*, 12 September 2016, http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/oed-new-words-dictionary-added-yolo-moobs-westminster-bubble-latest-edition-a7238061.html (accessed 24 June 2017).

[3] *Oxford English Dictionary*, keyword 'Westminster', online edition, http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/227940, accessed 1 January 2017

office' (King 2015: 64). More generally, the extent of elite autonomy beyond partisanship has been discussed under the rubric of 'democratic elitism' (Best and Higley 2009; Borchert 2009), although the claim that political elites tend to have more liberal attitudes than the general public when it comes to civil liberties, social and political tolerance (e.g., McClosky and Brill 1983; Sniderman et al. 1991; Stouffer 1955) or immigration (e.g., Morales, Pilet, and Ruedin 2015) remains contested. A similarly controversial debate has ensued amongst students of political parties where some have argued that the leaderships of so-called 'cartel parties' living 'off politics' have increased their autonomy vis-à-vis civil society by accessing state funding for what might be called 'party in public office', especially the ministers and legislators leading the party (Katz and Mair 1995, 2009). Others have challenged this claim (Koole 1996). In short, there are still good reasons to conduct further empirical research in this area.

At a theoretical level, a modicum of mutual autonomy between representatives and the represented is part of most normative theories of representation (Pitkin 1967) and a fundamental assumption underpinning more positive theories of delegation, which are influential in this field. Democratic representation can be modelled as an agency relationship between representatives ('agents') and represented ('principals'). Both principals and agents are in a contractual relationship of delegation but tend retain their own desires, beliefs and preferences. Democratic delegation is fraught with transaction cost as contracts tend to be incomplete; they can be complex as one agent may serve several competing principals such as voters, party activists or interest groups they are associated with (Carey 2007). Principals typically seek to set the level of agency discretion based on the extent to which principals' and agents' preferences are well-aligned and, arising from that, the likely transaction and monitoring costs (Kiewiet and McCubbins 1991; Lupia 2006). This paper examines the extent to which British Members of Parliament (in their role as their voters' agents) develop looser ties with electoral districts as their careers progress (Bergman and Strøm 2011; Müller 2000; Strøm 2000). The empirical focus will be on the question whether they gradually shift their representational focus from their local electoral districts to national policies and, in particular politics, a move that could suck them into a 'bubble' eventually.

In this paper, we will use information extracted from over 650,000 parliamentary questions for written answer ('written questions') submitted to the government in the British House of Commons between June 2001 and May 2015 to examine variations in the extent to which such questions are used to signal concern for MPs' constituencies or constituents. The wider theoretical question behind this is to examine the conditions for MPs to shift their focus from their local constituents to questions of national policy or politics as their careers progress – and the extent to which partisan and electoral competition are a corrective for this development. Although this is part of a larger project using multiple indicators, written questions are one useful indicator we are exploring in this context. They have become 'multi-purpose tools' for MPs. Traditionally they were designed to reduce informational asymmetries between legislators and government ministers. As such they were predominantly a way for parliaments to hold governments accountable (Chester and Bowring 1962; Russo and Wiberg 2010; Saalfeld 2000; Sánchez de Dios and Wiberg 2011; Wiberg and Koura 1994). This is still an important function of written questions, especially for members of the opposition in parliamentary systems of government such as the UK's. However written questions have developed into a m ore versatile instrument fostering a bond between legislators and voters as well. They have become part of the accountability relationship between voters and representatives (Kellermann 2016) and allow representatives to influence their constituents' and peers' evaluations of their

'performance'. Due to these secondary functions, researchers can use them to assess variations in MPs' constituency focus. In our window of observation, some MPs never asked a single question referring to their electoral district. On the other end of the scale, some MPs asked far more than 100 constituency-related questions per year (…). Not only are we interested in cross-sectional differences in the content of questions (comparing MPs), but – particularly – whether there is systematic variation across MPs' careers, life-cycles and the three included parliaments' electoral cycles. Thus, in this study, we will begin to attempt to estimate age, cohort and period effects.

This is made possible through the various work packages of the PATHWAYS project (www.pathways.eu). Work Package 1 provides detailed information on the biographical and political backgrounds of MPs between 1990 and 2015, including information on their age and parliamentary careers. Work Package 2 includes, first and foremost, the content of written questions,[4] but also information on the timing of these questions, which is crucial for our research design. After a very brief review of the extant literature, we will begin by discussing some potential 'social mechanisms' that might have a potential to drive a growing distance between legislators and constituents. From this discussion, we will derive some first tentative and descriptive propositions to examine the extent to which, and under what conditions, legislators move their focus away from constituency matters to other issues.

## What we know so far

There is extensive and compelling evidence that British MPs have very little autonomy from their own party leaderships in Parliament when it comes to voting (Cowley 2002; Cowley and Norton 1999; Cox 1987; Kam 2009; Norton 1975). By contrast, they have considerable autonomy from their extra-parliamentary parties (Saalfeld 1999) and, more importantly in our context, autonomy to define the relationship with their constituents (Searing 1994). This seems surprising at first glance, given the single-member plurality electoral system. Yet, comparative research has shown that Britain has traditionally been a case with *low* incentives for MPs to cultivate a personal vote (Carey and Shugart 1995). In the 1950s, one authoritative academic observer stated that 'no candidate is worth 500 votes' (Butler 1955: 3). So dominant was party in terms of electoral accountability and so focused were the main parties on the minority of 'marginal seats' that personal vote-seeking strategies seemed to make little difference. However, as electoral volatility has increased and party competition has effectively become a complex multi-party contest especially in regions such as Scotland, even relatively large majorities in a district may no longer offer sufficient reassurance to sitting MPs, especially if they took up a political career early in life and have become economically dependent on their 'job' as an MPs (King 1981). Hence individual vote-seeking strategies may have grown in importance as a function of perceptions of increased electoral vulnerability (cf. André, Depauw, and Martin 2014; Zittel 2017). Another explanation for the seemingly paradox effort British MPs invest in constituency work (Norris 1997) may be their professionalization in recent decades (Norton 1994), which increased their personal dependence on their 'jobs' and the desire for 'job security' than in the past. This may have contributed to higher levels of 'service responsiveness' (Eulau and Karps 1977) in relation to constituents' demands. Or constituency representation may be a

[4] Within the PATHWAYS project, information on written questions was collected for the 2010-2015 Parliament only. The remainder of the data (2001-2010) was collected separately.

consequence of the traditionally high social recognition the role of 'good constituency member' enjoyed in the House (Searing 1985), which may provide a certain degree of job satisfaction to backbenchers in the House where opposition is relatively futile in terms of direct policy influence and where government backbenchers may also feel under-appreciated by their leaders in government.

So far, the literature has done little to disentangle these potential explanations. Progress in the study of representation has occurred in other areas. For example, studies of the policy responsiveness of governments and government parties to shifts in popular opinion have become increasingly sophisticated (e.g., Klüver and Sagarzazu 2016; Klüver and Spoon 2016; Spoon and Klüver 2014). Yet, despite significant levels of ('objective') policy responsiveness, citizens increasingly think of politicians as a self-serving class (Dalton 2004). Policy responsiveness is important but not everything. Huge strides have also been made to understand the institutional conditions enabling voters to hold governments and government parties accountable for the performance of the economy or, on the flip side, create a degree of autonomy for government parties to survive economic shocks (Duch and Stevenson 2008). This may have helped democratic systems to insulate themselves from severe crises such as the banking and sovereign debt crises since 2008/2009 (see, for example, Bermeo and Pontusson 2012). Yet, as in the literature on government responsiveness, authors have typically not drilled down to the level of individual MPs or citizens, whose perceptions and evaluations are crucial. Some studies have sought to find new (qualitative) ways of understanding voter disenchantment (e.g., Putnam, Pharr, and Dalton 2000) Especially qualitative studies of voter resentment of elites in the U.S. point to the fact that such sentiments have deep roots in local conditions (Cramer 2016; Hochschild 2016). Unlike for the U.S. Congress (Fenno 1978, 2003; Grimmer 2013), research on European parliamentary systems of government has rarely explored the possibilities of individual MPs to shape voter satisfaction (exceptions include Kellermann 2016; Martin 2011; Russo 2011). The relative neglect of individual MPs' efforts to connect to their constituencies (and the pre-occupation with governing and scrutinizing the government) is less and less justifiable given the growing willingness of MPs to assert a modicum of autonomy from leadership pressure in the House of Commons, especially when leaders fail to deliver tangible electoral benefits (Cowley 2001; Cowley and Norton 1999; Norton 1975).

Survey-based work on the way legislators define their roles provide important insights (Herzog 1990; Searing 1994), as do studies of representational 'styles' (Fenno 1978, 2003). The classical work on legislative roles (Andeweg 1997; Eulau et al. 1959; Wahlke 1962) has never shown much promise in terms of explaining behaviour. Most of these studies are typically based on relatively small samples at specific points in time. The various candidate studies of recent years have also added considerable knowledge about the attitudes of MPs and candidates (Wüst et al. 2006; Zittel 2012) as well as some behavioural implications (Gschwend and Zittel 2015). Nevertheless, by their very nature they cannot – and do not purport to – cover political behaviour across time and space. They are fundamentally cross-sectional snapshots and do not offer sufficiently granulated insights into behavioural changes over time. From a different angle, important work in political sociology has been sensitive to the changing nature of the role of MP and its professionalization (Best and Cotta 2000; Herzog 1975; Rush and Giddings 2011), but they have often focused on longer-term change and rarely linked such changes empirically to behaviour beyond very general indicators (attempts include King 1981; Saalfeld 1997).

In addition to studies of attitudes and role orientations, there has been extensive research on constituency work and electoral independence in the UK and elsewhere (Cain, Ferejohn, and Fiorina 1987; Norton 1994; Soroka, Penner, and Blidook 2009). But, to our knowledge, none of this work has taken a longer-term perspective, which is needed to assess whether the 'rise of the career politician' (King 1981), parliamentary 'socialization' (Badura and Reese 1976; Rush and Giddings 2011) or changes in behavioural incentives across legislators' careers (Bailer and Ohmura 2018) are behaviourally consequential processes. In recent years, the opportunities to study legislative behaviour longitudinally have improved dramatically. The study of parliamentary and extra-parliamentary policy statements used by individual MPs has become more widespread, not least due to the digitalization of parliamentary records and more customized forms of quantitative content analysis. Authors have begun to investigate the conditions allowing MPs to gain autonomy from their various principals or, rather, how they seek to shape the relationship with their constituents (for the U.S. case see Grimmer 2013).

Given MPs' limited access to the floor of most chambers in parliamentary systems of government, the analysis of parliamentary questions for written answer has become a widely-used tool to examine the constituency focus of MPs. They are one of the least 'centralized' tools available to MPs in most parliaments (Keh 2015). One advantage of such questions is their comparability across different legislatures and time. Such questions have been used to investigate MPs' individual to some group interests outside the chamber (e.g., Bird 2005, 2010; Geese, Goldbach, and Saalfeld 2015; Saalfeld 2011; Saalfeld and Bischof 2013). There is evidence for some legislatures that electoral competition may be a factor encouraging closer constituency links (and discouraging autonomy). British, Canadian and Norwegian MPs have been shown to use written questions more extensively, if they are electorally vulnerable (Kellermann 2016; Rasch 2009; Soroka, Penner, and Blidook 2009). Studies of France and Ireland, by contrast, find no evidence of an electoral connection to question frequency in general (Lazardeux 2005), or to questions on constituency matters in particular (Martin 2011).

## Mechanisms: Why should MPs get more detached and collectively create a 'bubble'?

What would be mechanisms promoting growing 'autonomy' of legislators from their (competing) democratic principals, whoever they may be? The *first* mechanism that needs to be investigated is legislative *socialization*, which could be defined as 'the process by which newly elected members of a legislature become acquainted with the institution's rules and norms of behaviour. This process may, to a significant degree, shape their attitudes towards the legislature and their role and behaviour in it …' (Rush and Giddings 2011: 56). Research on the House of Commons has produced elaborate typologies of legislative roles, including the roles of constituency agent, policy advocate or 'parliament man' (Searing 1994). If these roles are acquired by socialization, this would involve 'learning the rules and procedures of the legislature' and consciously or unconsciously adapting their attitudes and behaviour to legislative norms and their roles as a member (ibid.). While there is a rich body of scholarship on legislative roles and the importance of political socialization as a mechanism (Andeweg 1997; Best and Vogel 2014; Blomgren and Rozenberg 2012; Eulau et al. 1959; Rush and Giddings 2011; Saalfeld and Müller 1997), longitudinal assessments of legislative socialization as a *process* have so far been exceptional. Survey-based longitudinal studies (usually based on two waves of interviews) such as the one by Badura and Reese (1976) or Rush and Giddings (2011) are

exceptional. One of the innovative aspects of this paper is the attempt to exploit modern techniques of quantitative text analysis to map the evolution of individual behaviour across time and using appropriate statistical techniques to model possible *processes* of adjustment (caused by socialization, if the presence of the mechanism is to be confirmed).

The *second* mechanism is based on the notion of a division of labour between legislators who *specialize* in a particular policy area and produce cues for fellow legislators who become experts in other areas (Saalfeld and Strøm 2014). Some authors have claimed that, historically, the professionalization of legislative recruitment has led to 'the establishment of a fairly autonomous field of political action with specific (although mostly informal) rules for access and reward' (Cotta and Best 2007: 14). Some authors have claimed that professional career politicians start with their political careers at an earlier age, often shortly after acquiring a university degree and a relatively short period as policy advisors to leading politicians (King 1981; Saalfeld 1997a). These younger career politicians should lose their interest in the constituency dimension of representation soon as they are less likely to maintain close local ties. As part of their specialization they should turn to national policy relatively quickly. After a frontbench career their constituency focus may increase again. Professionalization is usually coupled with legislative specialization: Prior to decision-making, information tends to flow from technocratic experts in governments, bureaucracies, agencies and interest groups to governments and specialist legislators in the first instance. Policy is agreed in these networks. Non-specialist legislators will rely on the cues produced by their specialist colleagues. This mechanism is derived from the literature on advocacy coalitions (Feller et al. 1979; Sabatier and Whiteman 1985: 397; Webber 1984: 112). Observable implications would include a tendency for more experienced MPs to obtain specialized leadership positions in their parliamentary party groups and shift their focus from their own local district to matters of policy in general. Because they are more influential in formulating party policy, they will also be less likely to question party policy in the House.-

A *third* type of mechanism may define an MPs' ability to gain autonomy from voters, interest groups and their parties' extra-parliamentary organizations through institutional incentives. Some authors agree that legislative roles – such as the role of constituency representative – exist but are strategic responses of vote-seeking or office-seeking actors to incentives (Strøm 2012). Building on classical texts (e.g., Cain, Ferejohn, and Fiorina 1987; Carey and Shugart 1995), there is a sophisticated discussion on the measurement of electoral competitiveness arising from different electoral systems, including Westminster systems (e.g., Blais and Lago 2009; Kayser and Lindstädt 2015; Stoffel 2014). Some authors, for example, have argued that institutions such as electoral systems may interact with variables such as electoral volatility to increase the potential costs and risks for legislators to behave autonomously (André, Depauw, and Martin 2014). Thus, 'when MPs believe that they are electorally vulnerable, they will adopt more of a constituency orientation if they believe that constituency service will help them to win re-election. Regardless of their preferred role in the legislature, members must ensure that they are re-selected by their party and re-elected by their constituents in order to pursue their preferred role in the legislature' (Kellermann 2016: 94). Hence, increased electoral vulnerability in a candidate-based electoral system can be expected to lead to an increase of legislative activities that help to signal the legislator's individual effort and a stronger focus on the relevant electoral constituency, be it the legislator's extra-parliamentary party (often responsible for re-selection as a candidate) or voters.

This leads us to formulate the following propositions:

$P_1$: *Electoral vulnerability*. Legislators increase the share of questions with constituency focus, if they are electorally vulnerable. This includes newly-elected MPs, returning MPs returned with relatively small majorities over their nearest rival and those MPs returned repeatedly who suffered above-average electoral losses compared to the previous election. Vulnerability should induce particularly strong incentives to signal activity to the constituency in run-up to a general election ("period effect").

$P_2$: *Parliamentary experience*. The percentage of parliamentary questions with an explicit constituency focus will decline as the parliamentary experience of a legislator increases. Incumbency effects range from improved chances to get re-selected for a safe seat, to get re-elected and to influence party policy. The legislator may get socialized into the representative role of trustee, which maximizes the legislator's leeway; he or she may increasingly feel responsible for national policy and politics rather than 'parochial' constituency matters. The length of parliamentary service is used as a proxy for socialization ('cohort effect' in an ACP model). This effect should be moderated by electoral vulnerability.

$P_3$: *Specialization*. Legislators with specialist parliamentary leadership roles should table fewer questions with an explicit constituency focus than backbenchers. The argument is similar to the one advanced in $P_2$, except that there will be a stronger emphasis on MPs' functional roles within the legislature and within their parliamentary party groups. The cohort effect of parliamentary experience and first election under particular political circumstances (such as the Labour landslide victory of 1997) is complemented by a life-cycle effect based on the MPs' age. If MPs get elected to Parliament at a relatively early age without a prior career outside politics, they are more dependent on electoral success and support of their parliamentary party leadership. As a result they will foster close ties with the local party (for re-selection) and seek to impress the parliamentary leadership. As a result, younger recruits (especially in the major parties) should get absorbed into the division of labour within the parliamentary party more quickly and be more likely to lose their focus on the local constituency than someone looking back on a longer extra-parliamentary career, say, in local government. Younger MPs could be expected to get absorbed into national-level politics more quickly. The same goes for MPs from smaller parties as such parties cannot sustain close and wide-ranging local networks. Thus, properties of the parliamentary party groups (such as sheer size and turnover) should also influence the scope for specialization and should also have an effect. Again, this effect should be moderated by electoral vulnerability.

## Research design and methods

For the purposes of this paper, we propose to use parliamentary questions for written answer as a source to extract information on our dependent variable, namely the number of parliamentary questions with an explicit focus on the MP's constituency per MP in a six-month interval. The

total number of such written questions captured for the three Parliaments 2001-2005, 2005-2010 and 2010-2015 is over 650,000. With the exception of Ministers and members of the Official Opposition's frontbench, the Speaker, the Deputy Speaker and members returned for Sinn Féin (who do not take up their seats), nearly all MPs asked questions. MPs with absolutely no questions at all will be excluded from the analysis as we are interested in the choice of question focus rather than institutional or other constraints on asking a question in the first place. The extraction was carried out by an automated string-matching procedure that we used to identify explicit mentions of the name of the constituency (or part of the name if the name is a composite of several localities). Thus, in essence we used these strings to create a dictionary. One difficulty arose from parliamentary conventions as MPs frequently refer to themselves or to another MP as "the Right Hon. Member for […]". We used an automated procedure to exclude such questions, unless they explicitly included further references to "my constituency", "my constituent(s)", usually followed by the name of specific persons residing in the constituency who contacted the MP with an issue.

We validated the accuracy of the method by reading and hand-coding a random sample of questions and a sample of constituencies a number of country experts were particularly familiar with. We found that the vast majority of questions explicitly relating to a constituency explicitly named it in the question. Hence, we do not expect bias due to too many "false negatives", although we will supplement our procedure with an automated procedure for classification in the near future.

At the end of this procedure, we used this dictionary to determine for each question whether or not it contained a direct reference to the MP's own constituency or constituents. We aggregated this information for each MP by counting the number of written questions submitted to the government in general and the percentage of parliamentary questions with an explicit constituency focus for six-month time intervals. This aggregation was largely driven by the fact that the general elections of 2001, 2005, 2010 and 2015 were held in the middle of the year, namely in May or June. In other words, our data structure for the dependent variable is one record for each MP in six-month interval between 7 June 2001 and 7 May 2015. There were a total of 28 six-month intervals in this period (2001-2005: 8; 2005-2010: 10; 2010-2015: 10). In other words, MPs in our sample had a minimum of one observation (one half-yearly interval with at least one written question regardless of their content) and a maximum of 28 observations, if they were (re-)elected to the Commons in 2001, 2005 and 2010 and asked at least one question. The median number of observations per MP is 14 (Table A.1 in the Appendix).

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

> "Written parliamentary questions are formal parliamentary acts that appear on the public record and force the government to respond to inquiries by MPs. Questions can

> lead to additional publicity for members … Members can encourage media attention formally, through a press release drawing attention to the question and the answer, or informally, by encouraging members of the press to report on the issue. At the margin, this coverage helps members to build name recognition and cultivate an image as an active, effective legislator" (Kellermann 2016: 93).

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

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

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

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

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

*Legislative specialization* was measured both at the level of the relevant parliamentary party group and for each MP. The opportunities for longer-term specialization in a particular policy area or for a particular role are a function of the sheer size of the parliamentary party group. Larger parliamentary parties are able to develop a far more complex internal division of labour, e.g., in policy-specific working groups. Hence, one of our contextual indicators is the size of the parliamentary party group.[5] The second contextual variable affecting specialization is turnover in the parliamentary party, e.g., from one legislative term (Parliament) to another. If there is a large turnover, the parliamentary party group includes a lot of newly elected MPs who are less experienced and will only begin to specialize. Hence we use the percentage of 'rookies' in each parliamentary party group as an indicator for turnover. While these variables shape the context for specialization, individuals will vary within each parliamentary party group. We sought to capture specialization (a) by measuring whether an MP was member of at least one permanent committee (typically a select committee) and (b) whether he or she had any leadership role either in the chamber or in the parliamentary party group. We also account for the fact that MPs may have specialist functions as policy experts within their extra-parliamentary organizations, using a dummy variable registering '1', if the MP held a leadership position at the national level during the relevant Parliament.

Finally, we sought to capture *electoral vulnerability* in a number of alternative ways: Following practice in other studies (Kellermann 2016), we primarily focused on the margin of an MP's victory over his or her nearest competitor in the general election preceding the legislative term in question. We also measured whether this margin had increased or decreased since the election to the preceding parliament. Assuming that incumbents, in particular, would be sensitive to a strong decrease in the margin of victory, we measured (a) whether an MP defended his or her seat and was re-elected as an incumbent and interacted this measure with the change in the margin of victory between the election at time $t_0$ (the election to the relevant Parliament) and the election at time $t_{-1}$ (the election to the previous Parliament, if the MP was re-elected). We also sought to capture period effects by examining the number of constituency-related questions in the 12 months prior to the general election.

In addition we *controlled* for a number of relevant effects that are not central to our models but may affect the result. We created dummy variables for each of the three parliamentary terms and used the 2005-2010 parliament as the reference category. We created a dummy variable for opposition MPs as parliamentary questions are often considered to be an instrument of the opposition against a government controlling the legislative agenda on the floor. Also, we are controlling for partisan peculiarities. Since the Conservative and Labour parties were by far the most dominant parties during our window of observation, we created a dummy variable for the Conservatives against all the others. In addition, we are controlling for regional parties such as

[5] Since we only included MPs that asked questions, we excluded ministers, opposition front benchers, the Speaker and Deputy Speaker. The size of the parliamentary party groups was based on the number of MPs included in the analysis.

the Scottish National Party, Plaid Cymru and the parties of Northern Ireland, which we found to ask fewer questions on constituency matters but more questions on the relevant regions. Finally we accounted for the fact that a number of MPs retain very strong local ties, using a dummy variable registering '1', if the MP held a leadership position in a local party organization during the relevant Parliament, as Russo (2011) found for Italy.

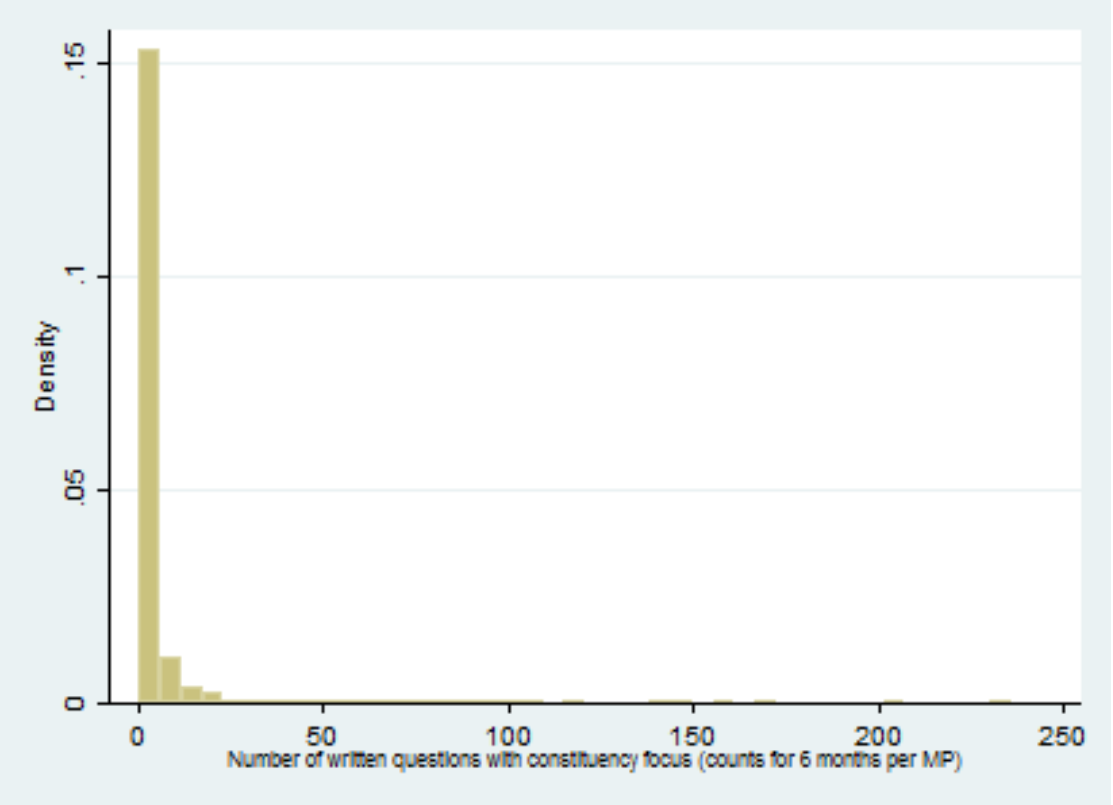
Since we are interested in changes over time and our data have a panel structure, panel regression is the most suitable way of estimating the effect of our independent variables on the number of questions with a constituency focus per six-month interval, controlling for a number of background factors (see above). Given the skewed nature of the distribution (Figure 1) and the over-dispersion of our dependent variable, a negative binomial regression model was the most appropriate choice. The fixed-effects estimator is the most suitable model to estimate any variations within cases (MPs) over time. This is particularly important for our time-varying variable parliamentary experience. A Hausman test suggests that, overall, the random-effects model can be used. Both estimators produce very similar results, however.

**Table 1: Descriptive summary statistics for the variables used in the analysis**

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

Source: Own data

**Figure 1: Written questions with a constituency focus in the British House of Commons, June 2001 to May 2015 (counts for six-month intervals): A badly skewed and over-dispersed dependent variable**




## Results

Overall, approximately 6 per cent of all written questions submitted between June 2001 and May 2015 included references to the MP's constituency (Appendix, Table A.2). The average MP submitted nearly three constituency-related questions per six-month interval (Table 1). There is a considerable variation between MPs. The majority of MPs did not submit a single written question referring to their constituency in most of the 28 six-month intervals covered in our window of observations. Some MPs, however, submitted up to 236 such questions per six-month interval. What drives this variation in constituency focus?

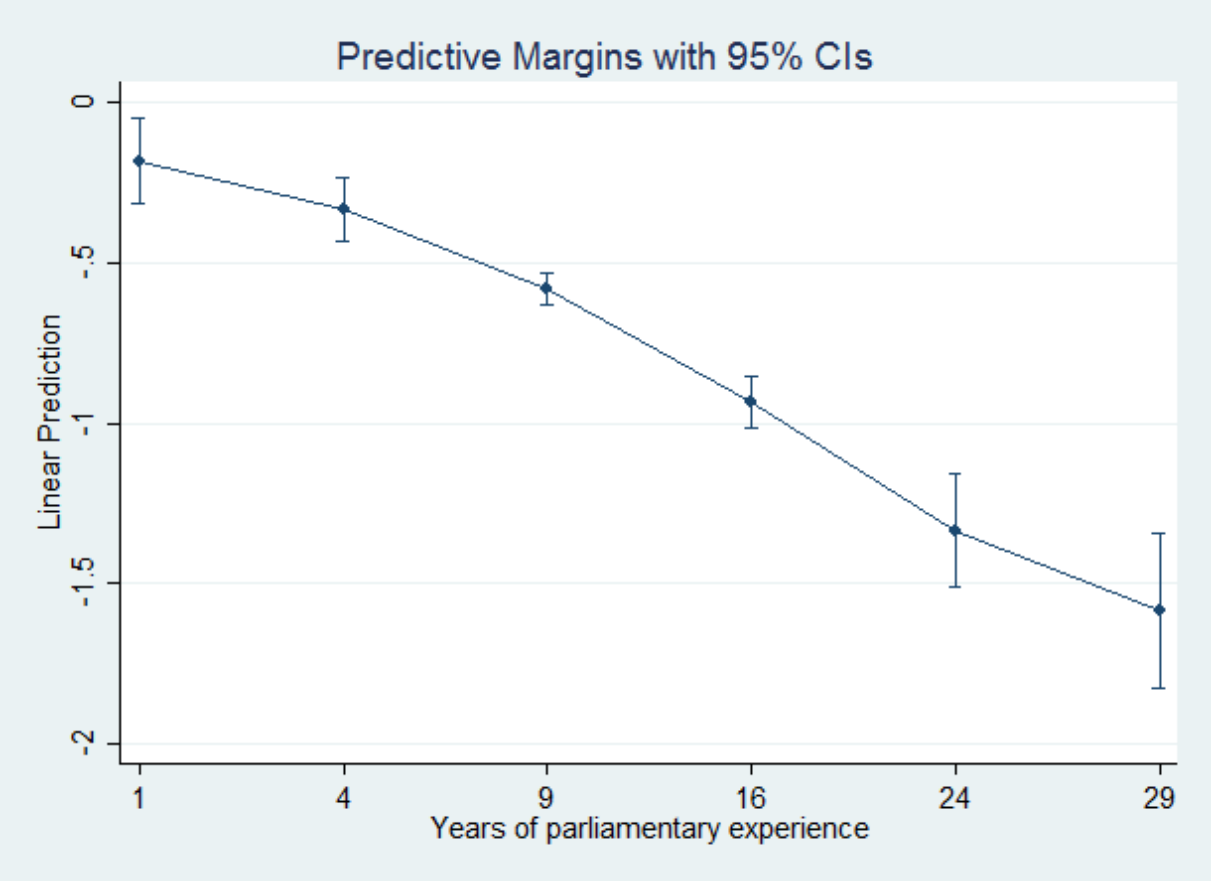
**Table 2: Fixed-effects and Random-effects negative binomial panel regressions for the number of written questions with a constituency focus, House of Commons June 2001 to May 2015**

| Dependent variable: N of constituency-related written questions within 6-month intervals | Fixed-effects (within) estimator | | Random-effects estimator | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Covariates | IRR | Std. Err. | IRR | Std. Err. |
| *Parliamentary experience* | | | | |
| Parliamentary experience (years) | 0.9982 | 0.0104 | 0.9946 | 0.0097 |
| Parliamentary experience (years) squared | 1.0004 * | 0.0002 | 1.0004 * | 0.0002 |
| Parliamentary experience * margin of victory in district | 1.0004 ** | 0.0002 | 1.0004 ** | 0.0002 |
| *Specialization* | | | | |
| Size of parliamentary party | 1.0004 | 0.0004 | 1.0005 | 0.0004 |
| Share of 'rookies' by party | 1.0047 ** | 0.0018 | 1.0041 ** | 0.0017 |
| MP's age | 1.0407 * | 0.0219 | 1.0298 | 0.0196 |
| MP's age squared | 0.9995 ** | 0.0002 | 0.9996 ** | 0.0002 |
| Committee role | 0.9083 | 0.0645 | 0.9389 | 0.0640 |
| Parliamentary leadership role | 0.9648 | 0.0672 | 0.9482 | 0.0623 |
| Extra-parliamentary party leadership role (national level) | 0.9504 | 0.0807 | 1.0455 | 0.0818 |
| Committee role * margin of victory in district | 1.0110 *** | 0.0032 | 1.0097 *** | 0.0030 |
| Parliamentary leadership role * margin of victory in district | 1.0011 | 0.0029 | 1.0003 | 0.0028 |
| *Electoral vulnerability* | | | | |
| Margin of victory in district | 0.9757 *** | 0.0040 | 0.9785 *** | 0.0038 |
| Margin of victory in district t0 - margin of victory t-1 | 1.0137 *** | 0.0039 | 1.0103 *** | 0.0036 |
| Re-elected as incumbent * difference in margin of victory | 0.9876 *** | 0.0043 | 0.9897 *** | 0.0039 |
| Re-elected as incumbent | 0.6909 *** | 0.0411 | 0.7091 *** | 0.0407 |
| Number six-month of time interval (1-10) | 0.9660 * | 0.0200 | 0.9685 | 0.0200 |
| Number of six-month time interval squared | 0.9983 | 0.0018 | 0.9985 | 0.0018 |
| Number of six-month time interval * margin of victory in district | 1.0009 ** | 0.0004 | 1.0009 ** | 0.0004 |

| Dependent variable: N of constituency-related written questions within 6-month intervals | Fixed-effects (within) estimator | | Random-effects estimator | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Covariates | IRR | Std. Err. | IRR | Std. Err. |
| *Controls* | | | | |
| Opposition MP | 1.2582 *** | 0.0552 | 1.3087 *** | 0.0554 |
| Conservative MP | 1.0625 | 0.0668 | 0.9984 | 0.0572 |
| MP representing regional party | 0.6596 *** | 0.0957 | 0.7143 ** | 0.0935 |
| Extra-parliamentary leadership role (local level) | 1.0794 | 0.0508 | 1.1013 ** | 0.0470 |
| Parliament 2001-2005 | 0.9977 | 0.0384 | 0.9515 | 0.0356 |
| Parliament 2010-2015 | 0.6305 *** | 0.0334 | 0.6624 *** | 0.0336 |
| Constant | 0.3713 * | 0.2007 | 0.5085 | 0.2507 |
| | | | | |
| N of observations | 12,348 | | 13,129 | |
| N of groups | 875 | | 981 | |
| Log likelihood | -17461.667 | | -21612.676 | |
| Wald chi2 | 337.19 *** | | 386.28 *** | |
| | | | | |
| /ln_r | | | 0.108 | 0.049 |
| /ln_s | | | 0.567 | 0.064 |
| r | | | 1.114 | 0.055 |
| s | | | 1.763 | 0.113 |
| LR test vs. pooled: chibar2 | | | 3768.36 *** | |

Source: Own calculations

**Figure 2: Effect of parliamentary experience on the number of written questions with a constituency focus in the House of Commons, June 2001 to May 2015**




Ranging from a minimum of zero years for newly-elected MPs to a maximum of 49 years (Table 1), parliamentary experience has the expected effect derived from the socialization model (in both models shown). The number of parliamentary questions with a constituency focus declines as the MP's experience increases, although there is a slight curvilinear element to this function as the squared term demonstrates. However, the interaction effect shows that this is likely to be true for MPs with relatively low margins of victory and the opposite for MPs with relatively large winning margins in their districts.

Parliamentary specialization does not seem to add much to our understanding of the variation in written questions with a constituency focus, although the signs for the individual parameter estimates do largely point into the expected direction. In parliamentary party groups with a high share of newly-elected MPs (and, hence, low scope for specialization), the number of questions with a constituency focus tends to be higher. The number of questions with a constituency focus declines with age, although this effect is only significant at conventional levels for the fixed-effects estimator. There is little evidence of a curvilinear function with regard to age. An MP's committee role (a typical sign of specialization), by contrast seems to reduce his or her propensity to submit constituency-related questions. Parliamentary leadership roles seem to have the same effect, although these estimates do not reach statistical significance at conventional levels. Electoral vulnerability has a mediating effect with regard to an MP's committee role, but the causal direction differs from expectations.

The estimates for the variables capturing electoral vulnerability overwhelmingly show the expected causal patterns. This finding is at odds with Kellermann's (2016) estimates (who had a null finding), although he used a different statistical model. The larger the margin of victory, the lower the electoral vulnerability and the lower the number of constituency-related questions. This is particularly true for incumbents. The interaction between the status as a re-elected incumbent and the winning margin demonstrates (especially in the fixed-effects model for within variation) that – all else being equal – MPs tend to reduce the number of constituency-related questions as their winning margin increases and *vice versa*.

## Instead of conclusions: Next steps

The paper seeks to investigate the extent to which a parliamentary career contributes legislative behaviour that demonstrates a certain amount of autonomy from constituents – and to clarify whether electoral incentives (conceptualized as electoral vulnerability) moderate this process. The panel design is intended to identify the effect of parliamentary experience, which is central to this paper. Cross-sectional analyses conflate age effects, cohort effects and period effects. In other words, they do not allow us to identify separately the effect of growing parliamentary experience, individual age and period-specific influences of the electoral cycle. Cross-sectional estimations would be biased by potential changes in the House of Commons through the arrival of new cohorts of MPs or particular period effects such as a particular stage in the electoral cycle or particular events in a given year. We find a small but statistically significant and robust negative effect of an MP's parliamentary experience on the number of questions with an explicit focus on his or her constituency. The more experienced an MP, the lower the number of constituency-related questions. This seems to be compatible with sociological interpretations of political careers as a process involving socialization.

We also find a significant effect of electoral vulnerability: The more vulnerable an MP is, the larger the number of questions with an explicit constituency focus. This is in line with previous research on legislative behaviour in the United Kingdom and elsewhere (André, Depauw, and Martin 2014; Kellermann 2016). Our findings suggest that parliamentary experience and electoral vulnerability interact in their effect on the number of constituency-focused questions. Legislative specialization, by contrast, does not seem to reduce responsiveness to constituency concerns.

However, these findings are still very preliminary. We will need to carry out further validation of the results of our strategy of identifying constituency-related questions. Moreover, the regression models need further diagnostics and robustness checks.

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Appendix

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

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

Source: Own calculations from our dataset

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

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

Source: data extracted automatically from www.theyworkforyou.com