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Election Proximity and Representation Focus in Party-Constrained Environments

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Abstract

Do elected representatives have a time-constant representation focus or do they adapt their focus depending on election proximity? In this paper, we examine this overlooked theoretical and empirical puzzle by looking at how reelection-seeking actors adapt their legislative behavior according to the electoral cycle. In parliamentary democracies, representatives need to serve two competing principals: their party and their district. Our analysis hinges on how representatives make a strategic use of parliamentary written questions in a highly party constrained institutional context to heighten their reselection and reelection prospects. Using an original dataset of over 32000 parliamentary questions tabled by Portuguese representatives from 2005 to 2015, we examine how time interacts with two key explanatory elements: electoral vulnerability and party size. Results show that representation focus is not static over time and, in addition, that electoral vulnerability and party size shape strategic use of parliamentary questions.

Introduction

Do elected representatives have a time-constant representation focus or do they adapt their focus depending on election proximity? In this paper we address this overlooked theoretical and empirical puzzle by examining how representatives use parliamentary questions to serve their competing principals – their districts and their party – over time. The effect of election proximity has been extensively examined in US literature, particularly for roll-call voting (Amacher and Boyes, 1978) and bill sponsoring (Fenno, 1982; Kessler and Krehbiel, 1996). Using an original dataset with over 32.000 parliamentary questions in Portugal for a period of three legislatures (2005-2015), our main argument is that representatives in parliamentary democracies make a strategic use of their prerogative of tabling questions over the course of the electoral cycle.¹

Our original contribution hinges on the interaction of time with electoral vulnerability and party size. By analyzing how representatives with different electoral vulnerability and from parties of different sizes ask questions to the government, we disentangle the incentives to shirk and to free-ride on the parliamentary party group's collective effort to build a reputation (Cox and McCubbins, 2005). The latter is instrumental for reelection purposes, particularly in Portugal, where there is no individual representation of candidates in the ballot. Under those circumstances, representatives have to channel their individual prerogatives, such as parliamentary questions, towards building an attractive party label. This need is particularly

¹ In this paper, we use tabling and asking interchangeability.

heightened for electorally vulnerable representatives. As for party size, the bigger the party structure, the higher the incentives to shirk and free-ride, if for nothing else, because of the increasingly high costs for the leadership to monitor their members' behavior.

Results suggest that time plays an important role in explaining the focus of representation. Representatives adapt their behavior strategically, depending not only on their personal electoral circumstances (electoral vulnerability), the structure in which they are embedded (party size), but also the moment of the electoral cycle (election proximity).

Representatives and Parties in Parliamentary Democracies

Political parties are the most important organizational unit of political life in parliamentary democracies, through which the citizenry (the principals) select representatives (the agents) to act on their behalf and hold them accountable (Müller, 2000). In legislatures, parties help reduce transaction costs, facilitate the coordination of information acquisition and dissemination, and promote the division of labor (Aldrich, 1995). They play “an important role in selecting presiding officers, in allocating legislators to committees, and to leadership positions within committees, and in shaping the agenda for consideration of bills and other measures” (Rasch, 1999: 123).

Typically, the division of labor inside parliamentary party groups is intimately connected with committee organization. Two examples illustrate this. In Belgium, De Winter and Dumont say that parties “organize a *tour d’horizon* during their weekly parliamentary party group meeting, during which committee members orally present the main topics that will be discussed and decided by their respective committee” (2000: 114). In Sweden, “the internal division of labor corresponds to the Riksdag committee system. This means that committee assignments have an impact on who is responsible for specific subject areas within the party group” (Hagevi, 2000: 149). The party’s leadership is responsible for the allocation of members to committees, taking into consideration preferences, seniority, and position in the party

hierarchy (Fernandes, 2016). In return, parties expect members to specialize in policy areas and to deliver information to party's median legislator to curb uncertainty in policy outcomes (Gilligan and Krehbiel, 1987), acquiring and disseminating information at the intra-party level with minimum agency loss (Kiewit and McCubbins, 1991).

Representatives have three paramount goals: to be reelected, to have influence on the chamber, and to extract good public policy (Fenno, 1973). More recently, Kam reminds us that “politicians desire a combination of policy influence, office perks, and votes” and that re-election is a means to an end, which may be a “desire to serve their communities or to make a difference, but it may also involve securing a particular policy outcome” (2009: 21-22). Representatives devise strategies to help them “most successfully and efficiently act to maximize the likelihood of whatever outcomes they favour” (Strøm, 1997: 158). Those strategies are influenced by the institutional setting in which representatives operate.

In parliamentary democracies, political parties hold the monopoly of candidate selection (Sartori, 1976). Consequently, to be successful in reelection, representatives need, first, to succeed in being re-selected by the party selectorate (Strøm, 1997). Additionally, representatives need to have “access to the party label and its privileges in campaigning and the electoral process” (Sieberer, 2006: 154). The pivotal role of political parties for the reelection process, which is instrumental for the attainment of policy influence and sway in the chamber, makes them the leading principal for representatives. As Carey states “virtually all legislators are subject to influence by at least one principal: their legislative party leadership. Whether they are subject to pressure from other, competing principals depends on the institutional context in which they operate” (2007: 93).

Electoral rules help explain the centrality of political parties for representatives' strategies. They determine the incentives to cultivate a personal vote, defined as “that part of the legislator's vote that is based on his or her individual characteristics or record” (Shugart et

al., 2005: 437). In some electoral contexts, for example STV systems, representatives have not only to compete at the inter-party level, but also the intra-party level (Katz, 1986). In the latter, representatives have to cater their constituency to earn voters' support at the expense of their fellow party members (Carey and Shugart, 1995). Thus, being re-selected by the party is a necessary, but not a sufficient condition for re-election, which has implications for parliamentary strategies. For example, the Irish STV electoral system, heightens the likelihood for representatives to table parliamentary questions related to their constituency to signal to voters that they are looking after their interests (Martin, 2011).

Conversely, in closed-list proportional systems, where the party holds the monopoly for selecting and ranking candidates, being re-selected might be a sufficient condition. In this case, the party leadership becomes the leading principal to which representatives have to work for. Because in these contexts electoral competition is reduced to an inter-party dimension, there is a decrease in the incentives for representatives to deliver constituency-focused benefits (Carey and Shugart, 1995).

The competition between party and district for representatives' focus is further mitigated by district magnitude and electoral vulnerability. The former affects the likelihood that representatives will shirk and free-ride on their fellow candidates' efforts. The higher the district magnitude, the less costly for a candidate to focus on her own goals while other party candidates are working to deliver public goods, particularly in non-preferential systems (Bowler and Farrell, 1993). Moreover, electoral vulnerability will also play a role in the extent to which representatives are willing to serve their party or their constituents (Cain et al., 1987). According to André et al., "legislators in safe seats will be the first to shirk and free ride. Legislators in marginal seats, by contrast, will be most motivated to overcome any shirking or free-riding, even if the gains from their constituency effort are limited by the electoral institutions" (2015: 468).

Parliamentary Questions as Indicators of Representatives' Foci

For a long time overlooked, parliamentary questions have recently received more attention from the legislative scholars' community. Labelled foremost as a scrutiny tool, they are in fact a cornerstone of non-legislative activities in legislatures and their uses are manifold. Representatives use them for a wide range of purposes: to request information from the executive, to gain publicity, to surf a wave of anti-governmental popular sentiment, to foster their reputation on a particular policy field, as well as for strategic electoral signals to the selectorate and the electorate (Wiberg, 1995; Russo and Wiberg, 2010; Bailer, 2011; Proksch and Slapin, 2011). Additionally, parliamentary questions are an inexpensive tool for what Saalfeld (2000a) dubs of fire-alarm oversight. Although not always focusing on the big stories, parliamentary questions constitute an effective vehicle for opposition parties to collate detailed information and thereby build a wealth of material on a wide range of issues (Sánchez de Dios and Wiberg, 2011). Further, recent work has emphasized their importance to influence the public agenda (Green-Pedersen, 2010). Parliamentary questions can also be used effectively by representatives to signal dissent from the official party line in a variety of institutional contexts (Leston-Bandeira, 2009). In short, as Rozenberg and Martin state, "what is striking is the diversity of uses of parliamentary questions explaining why they have great "heuristic potential" (2011: 394), as they can be a very good insight into legislators' behavior.

The variety of ways in which parliamentary questions are used reflects their versatility as a legislative tool. As Sánchez and Wiberg demonstrate, there are almost as many types and combinations of parliamentary questions as legislative institutional arrangements (2010: 218-

221). Although the UK Prime Minister's Question Time (PMQs) is the most well-known type of parliamentary questions, they are but typical of this scrutiny tool. PMQs are the prime of what oral questions in the plenary can offer in terms of visibility, theatre and political scoring. But in reality the vast majority of parliamentary questions are written questions, unknown to most people. As Green-Pedersen states, "(w)ritten questions, the vast majority in most countries, rarely receive much direct attention" (2010: 350). Whilst oral questions may have some visibility, written questions tend to have barely any and to focus on specific policy issues, according to government departments, often verging on the highly technical.

Typically, extant literature on parliamentary questions hinges on the assumption that these are inherently individual-level legislative tools (Wiberg, 1995). For example, Rozenberg and Martin claim that "parliamentary questions are amongst the most sincere measures of what interests legislators, free from party control" (2011: 398). In highly constrained institutional environments, such as the Portuguese one as we shall see below, these constitute therefore unique tools whereby parties offer legislators leeway not only to select topics, but also to choose when to use them.

Literature on the internal organization of parliamentary party groups, however, disputes the assumption that parliamentary questions are inherently individual tools, unconstrained from party control. In Germany, for example, "questions, which have not been tabled as a result of an explicit decision of the parliamentary party group's caucus are expected to be cleared with the relevant party working groups, executive committees and whips' offices" (Saalfeld, 2000b: 27). Similarly, in the Netherlands, "parliamentary parties also require their members to seek permission before making use of individual parliamentary rights, such as putting a written question to a minister" (Andeweg, 2000: 99, *italic in the original*).

In this article, we build on the assumption that parliamentary questions are an individual instrument that representatives use in coordination with the party leadership aiming at

maximizing collective benefits to the party (Cox and McCubbins, 1993). Such assumption hinges on the idea that “the parliamentary and extra-parliamentary party leadership will expect the member’s loyalty and diligent service in a variety of arenas” (Strøm, 1997: 162). Party reputation is of particular importance in non-preferential electoral systems in which voters cast a ballot for a party label. According to Cox and McCubbins, “the more favorable is the [...] party’s record of legislative accomplishment, the better its reputation or brand name will be” (Cox and McCubbins, 2005: 7). Representatives’ individual parliamentary questions will help cement the party’s reputation, to acquire and disseminate information to the median legislator, and to balance information asymmetry between the government and the opposition, particularly as elections approach and opposition parties strive for information for the electoral campaign. Ultimately, “the better [...] the party’s brand name, the better will be the prospects for (re)election” (Cox and McCubbins, 2005: 7).

Competing Principals in the Portuguese Parliament

The Portuguese parliament, the Assembleia da República, is a party based legislature. Representatives are first and foremost expected to be delegates of their party, whereby the link between elected officials and voters is done via the party (Converse and Pierce, 1986; Pequito Teixeira, 2009). The legislature is composed of 230 representatives, who are elected through a proportional representation closed list system, according to the d’Hondt highest average method. Portuguese representatives are therefore elected through lists determined by their parties. When a voter goes to the ballot box, they see a list of party symbols – no specific name of deputies is indicated. People explicitly vote for the party. The country is divided into 22 separate districts. Division by districts, however, merely exists for administrative reasons.

Similar to France (Costa et al., 2012), the Portuguese representative mandate is a national one. Constituencies as such have no meaning in the Portuguese political ethos. Not

only does the word and associated meaning do not exist in Portuguese, but also the Constitution specifically states that deputies represent the whole country rather than their specific districts (Art. 152). Accordingly, deputies elected through, for instance, Lisbon or Porto, should have the same mandate. Besides this, the constitution also specifically forbids regionally based parties (Art. 51) and simultaneously confers to the party the monopoly on representation in the legislature. Additionally, resources and parliamentary rights are allocated to parliamentary groups (the party's facet in the legislature), rather than legislators. Consequently, parliamentary activity provides a privileged channel to communicate to voters, as well as to explain party policy preferences.

The highly constrained party environment notwithstanding, there is a twofold incentive for representatives to focus on their district. First, legislators often also have local representative mandates – again a similarity with French *cumul de mandats* (Blais, 2006), whereby national representatives accumulate this role with positions in the local government structure. Second, thanks to a well embedded system of substitutions which involves temporary mandate suspensions, well-known local representatives, including Mayors, are able take on their mandate in the legislature, where they have incentives to table questions for their districts.

Crucially, Portuguese representatives can put forward as many written questions to the government as they wish. This is one of the few parliamentary rights ascribed to legislators individually and not constrained by a party quota. Whereas oral questions to the government are ascribed to parliamentary groups according to their size – giving groups full control of who asks what - written questions are submitted by representatives individually. Whilst parliamentary groups have overall supervision of the type of areas that require detailed questioning, deputies are also able to submit their own questions.

Parliamentarians use different types of questions to suit different circumstances and purposes. In particular, written questions assist representatives in asking far more precise and

well backed-up questions than oral questions would enable them to. Written questions are therefore dually important: they give a new vehicle for parties to present their policy preferences to voters and they introduce a more flexible tool whereby deputies have flexibility of action regardless of their parties. As Rozenberg and colleagues have shown, questions to the government can give a valuable insight into representatives' behavior, unveiling policy and foci preferences (Rozenberg et al., 2011). This is particularly important in the context of the top-down, party-focused, type of structure that permeates the organization of Portuguese parliamentary groups.

Representatives part of the group's directorate – president of the group, vice-presidents, policy coordinators – constitute what would often be referred to as frontbenchers.² These constitute the well-known faces of each parliamentary group, those the public would recognize from press conferences, speaking on television, in short the faces personifying their parties. In small parliamentary groups, such as the Left Bloc (BE), the Portuguese Communist Party (PCP-PEV) or the Christian Democratic Party (CDS-PP), they represent most of the group. But in the larger parties, such as the Socialist Party (PS) or the right-liberal Social Democrat Party (PSD), they can only constitute at the most a third of the parliamentary group. The other two thirds are representatives with considerably reduced visibility and level of responsibility. Taking into account that “constituency work” as such does not really punctuate the activity of a Portuguese representative, it soon becomes clear that there is here a job-gap to be filled in; which is neither the frontline action, nor pursuing local constituents' issues. This is where written questions can become a useful tool for parliamentary activity, but also to help us understand the subtleties of the pressures exercised by competing principals such as party and local districts.

² The formal distinction between frontbenchers and backbenchers does not have formal existence in Portugal.

Hypotheses

The theoretical framework outlined above leads to several empirically testable hypotheses. First, we start by looking at the effect of electoral vulnerability on legislators' incentives to focus primarily on the district or on their party in their parliamentary questioning activities. Following André et al. (2015), our expectation is that those representatives who have been elected in safe seats will table fewer parliamentary questions with a district focus. Such expectation is based on the idea that representatives who have a higher certainty in their reelection will have more incentives to free-ride and to contribute less for the party's collective good (Olson, 1965), i.e., the grassroots work at the district level. Those legislators will privilege to serve the party as their main principal, to ensure that their privileged position in the electoral list remains untouched. Conversely, legislators who have previously been placed by the party leadership in a relatively unsafe position, will focus on serving the district to heighten the party's aggregate electoral prospects and, in turn, help their own reelection. This is particularly important for closed-list proportional representation systems, like Portugal, where party labels are the sole electoral heuristics for voters.

H1: The lower their electoral vulnerability, the more likely representatives will table party focused parliamentary questions.

Second, we look at the effect of the size of the parliamentary party group on the incentives for legislators to focus on serving their district or their party in parliamentary questions. Panebianco (1988) observed that size impacts party organizational structures and bureaucratization, reflected in labor division within parliamentary party groups (Heidar and Koole, 2000). The size of the organization is important to understand the transaction costs associated with decision-making (Nooteboom, 1993). Inherently, small parties do not have

enough scale for specialization because there are simply not enough members to deal with the institutional workload. In those parties the hierarchical dividing line between frontbenchers and backbenchers is much more blurred than in larger parliamentary party groups. Our expectation is for the size of parliamentary party groups to have a positive effect on the likelihood of representatives to focus on district service. Two reasons explain this. First, larger groups promote shirking and free-riding, decreasing the incentives of its members to help the formation of collective goods through information acquisition and dissemination to the median legislator. Rather, under these circumstances, representatives will have more incentives to focus on their district. Second, an increase in the group's size will increase the costs for the parliamentary leadership to keep tabs on individual behavior, which, in turn, further facilitates free-riding.

H2: The larger the size of the parliamentary party group, the more incentives for representatives to table a district focused parliamentary question.

Third, we introduce a time-dynamic approach to parliamentary questions. Extant literature shows that election proximity changes legislators' behavior by making them more focused on the principal holding the key to their reelection (Elling, 1982; Thomas, 1985; Lindstadt et al., 2011). For example, Fenno shows that, in the US, "the roll-call or other policy-related behavior of senator changes in the direction of policy sentiments of their electorate as their reelection approaches" (Fenno, 1982: 36). We build on this literature to understand the effect of election proximity in written questions. Our overall expectation is that representatives will adapt their behavior over time by making a strategic use of parliamentary questions. This should work as a moderating effect of electoral vulnerability and party size.

First, we expect election proximity to encourage legislators with high vulnerability to make more district-focused questions. To be sure, those legislators will have more incentives to work for the party label as a collective good and to signal at the district level that they are concerned with the electorate (Cox and McCubbins, 2005). In a different vein, legislators with low electoral vulnerability will face no risk of not getting reelected. Thus, they will have lower incentives to work for their district. In fact, low electoral vulnerability positions are reserved to frontbenchers, who, as election day approaches, will be responsible, for example, to use the legislative arena to build the party's national profile and retrieve information from the government and the bureaucracy for electoral purposes.

Second, electoral proximity has a different impact depending on the size of the parliamentary party group. In all parties, as election day approaches, the parliamentary leadership needs to prepare for the elections, getting involved in coordination activities, supporting party leadership drafting the manifesto, and so forth. As Farrell and Webb underline "changes in campaign personnel reflect a general shift in the internal power relations within parties, with the parliamentary face – and especially that part of it intimately associated with the party leadership – emerging as the main power house" (2000: 121). Thus, there is an increase in opportunity costs as election day approaches, in that the parliamentary leadership must decide whether to devote its human resources and time to monitor backbenchers or to invest in campaign activities (Shepsle et al., 2009). We assume that the leadership chooses to focus on campaign activities. Consequently, its institutional capacity to keep tabs on backbenchers will be weakened as election day approaches, paving the way for the latter to shirk and free-ride more easily. Inherently, in small parties the labor division between front- and backbenchers will be blurred because they are short on personnel. By and large, in big parties there is a clear-cut division between the parliamentary leadership and the backbenchers. As election day approaches, the former will be increasingly more involved in campaign

activities and less in everyday business in parliament. The latter will not only free themselves from leadership control, but also will have a job-gap to fill in, with the decreasing importance of parliamentary activities as elections approach.

H3a: The fewer the days to the next general election, the more likely that representatives with low electoral vulnerability will table question focusing on their party.

H3b: The fewer the days to the next general election, the higher the incentives for representatives of big parties to shirk and free-ride by tabling a question focusing on their district.

Data and Methods

These hypotheses are tested using all parliamentary written questions over three legislative periods in Portugal – 2005-09, 2009-11, and 2011-15. Our original dataset includes a total of 32,011 parliamentary questions. Data has been retrieved from official records available online in the Portuguese legislature's website. Our time period allows us to account not only for the potential effects of the 2007 parliament reform, but also for changes in the ideological nature of the executive and the majority size. There were multiple power constellations of government over these three legislative periods. In 2005, the Socialists held an absolute majority, followed by a plurality majority in 2009. Subsequently, in 2011, the rightist Social Democrats and Christian Democrats coalesced to form a post-electoral minimum winning coalition.

Our unit of analysis is the parliamentary question. The dependent variable Parliamentary Question Focus is specified as a nominal unordered variable with three categories: trustee (0), district (1), and political party (2). Each parliamentary question is attributed a value depending on whether the deputy tabled a question focused on her interests

as a trustee (0); a question focusing on the district in which she has been elected (1); or a question focusing in delivering benefits to the political party (2).

The empirical measure of focus of representation of each parliamentary question has been conducted as follows. To be coded as district focused (1), a parliamentary question has to make an explicit and direct reference to a geographic unit in the deputy's district. By geographic unit we mean either a reference to the district as a whole (e.g. Lisbon) or a direct reference to a city or parish in the district (e.g. Sintra or São Domingos de Rana). We have used an automated process to match the parliamentary questions with information from the National Statistics Office (Instituto Nacional de Estatística), as an official source for districts, municipalities, and parishes.³

Our dependent variable takes the value of 2 if the deputy tables a question to the ministry shadowed by the committee in which she sits.⁴ We build on previous findings on the strong connection between labor division within the parliamentary party group and committee assignment (Hagevi, 2000). Parties assign members to committees and, in return, the latter will be considered experts and have particular duties in that respective policy. In the Portuguese legislature, representatives have to specify the departmental ministry to which they want to submit their written question. Thus, if a representative tables a question to the 'Health Ministry' and, at the same time, sits on the Health Committee there is a matching constellation.

A question takes the value of 0 when deemed as a trustee issue. For analytical purposes, we have chosen this as the baseline category of our dependent variable. Trustees works as a neutral category against which the other two categories – district and party – are compared. In the Portuguese system, there is not only a low level of legislative professionalization, but also

³ We used a Python script to match parliamentary questions with representative's district of origin. Out of 32011 questions, about 2000 returned a matching result of more than one district. For example, automated matching returned two hits for 'Vila Real' and 'Vila Real de Santo António'. The former is a city and district in Northern Portugal, while the latter is a municipality in Southern Portugal. Manual coding was used to account for those cases.

⁴ Committee work is a key part of MPs' parliamentary activity in the Portuguese legislature. All MPs are committee members (Leston-Bandeira 2004: 48-53). See also official records at <https://www.parlamento.pt/sites/COM/Paginas/defaultPesquisa.aspx>

a high turnover. Consequently, many legislators keep private activities whilst in office and must nurture those interests to help them in their post-parliamentary career. The trustee category encapsulates all questions not related to party nor district. For example, a legislator with strong private environmental interests might table several questions on this topic, albeit not working directly to serve her party on those matters, or the constituency. Whilst this tells us little about the representative's specific interests, it does signal those instances when representatives act according to their own individual interests and judgements, rather than that of competing principals between district and party audiences.

We include three independent variables of interest. First, we measure Electoral Vulnerability, whose main purpose is to account for the representative's relative position in the electoral list and the safety of that position.⁵ We expect this variable to shape representatives' behavioral incentives to focus on party or district. Those representatives with lower electoral vulnerability will have more incentives to focus on the party because their chances of being re-elected and re-elected are higher (Sieberer, 2006). To be sure, in a closed-list proportional representation system, representatives with high electoral vulnerability will have incentives to work for their district by heightening the party's record as a vehicle for constituents' interests.⁶ This variable is measured using a formula presented in André and colleagues (2015), dividing the seat order of the candidate by the party's seat total in the district. The original scale ranges from 0 to 1.⁷ For example, a candidate elected as top of the list (number 1) in a district where

⁵ The measure presented in André et al. (2015) is ideal for our purposes for two reasons. First, it uses seats as unit of analysis (and not votes), which is useful to facilitate cross-district comparison and to control for the effect of district magnitude. This is particularly important in Portugal where magnitude varies from 2 (in Portalegre) to 50 (in Lisbon). Second, this measure is inherently focused on intra-party relative vulnerability. In a highly party-constrained partisan environment, we are interested in comparing differences within parties and not across parties.

⁶ In Portugal, the capacity to move up the list is limited due to the centralized selection methods of most parties. Consequently, legislators have little incentive to nurture the interests of the party leadership. Instead, they focus on activities at their disposal, i.e., fostering the electoral connection using parliamentary questions, which can maximize the party's aggregate electoral result and, additionally, have a marginal effect in the number of candidates the party elects that can make a difference between being reelected or failing that goal.

⁷ In the Portuguese case, however, the scale can theoretically overcome threshold 1 because of a system of substitutions used routinely. This system of substitutions allows representatives whose list position is below the party's number of elected representatives to take office, thanks to deputies being able to suspend their mandate for a period of time, during which the next candidate on the party list takes their seat. For example, in 2011, the Left Bloc elected 3 representatives in the Lisbon district, but through a series of substitutions managed to promote Mariana Mortágua, one of the party's rising stars, to a position where she could take office, despite originally being fourteenth in the electoral list.

the party elected 4 representatives, has an electoral vulnerability of 0.25, whilst a candidate elected in fourth yields 1.

Second, we include Party Size, a measure in percentage of the number of seats that the parliamentary party group controls in the plenary. Our third independent variable of interest is Election Proximity, a continuous measuring capturing the elapsing time from the day the parliamentary question has been tabled until the official day of the next scheduled general election.⁸

Our models further include three control variables. First, we measure Seniority by counting the number of mandates that representatives have served in the legislature. Previous research has suggested that the more mandates representatives have served, the more encapsulated they will be from de-selection and electoral defeat, with decreasing levels of district service (Fenno, 1978). Second, we introduce a Government dummy, which takes a value of 0 if the party is in the opposition and a value of 1 if the party is in government. Our expectation is that representatives in opposition parties will have environmental incentives to adapt their behavior and to focus more on serving their party. They have to do it because the party has fewer human and money resources, as compared to executive parties. Parliamentary questions are particularly important to curb information asymmetries and to signal to voters the policy agenda of the party (Rasch, 2011). Third, we include a Local Government dummy, that takes a value of 1 for legislators with local roles and 0 otherwise.

Results

Our empirical foray into the foci of representation of representatives in the Portuguese legislatures fits a multinomial logit with three specifications (see Table 1). Model 1 includes

⁸ There are, of course, cases, for example the 2009 legislature, in which the legislative term is curtailed. However, representatives do not have such information when tabling the question. Therefore, our measurement replicates the information level by incorporating uncertainty that representatives have at the moment they table the question.

all covariates, except for the interaction terms. We start by examining H1, to understand the effect of electoral vulnerability on the likelihood for representatives to table questions focused on their party. Recall that our expectation is that low electoral vulnerability will increase the likelihood that representatives focus on their party by making a question to the ministry shadowed by the committee in which they sit. Empirical results support H1. The negative coefficient (-0.80, $p < 0.001$) points out that an increase in electoral vulnerability will make representatives less likely to focus on tabling question with a party focus, compared with the reference category of trustee. True, the coefficient is equally negative for district (the other competing principal). However, not only it is smaller, but it also fails to reach conventional levels of statistical significance.

Turning to H2, according to which we expect party size to have an effect in the likelihood of representatives to table a district focused question, empirical evidence suggests support for this hypothesis. An increase in party size heightens the likelihood for representatives to focus on their district, in that they have incentives to free-ride on their colleague's work, but also because it becomes too costly for the party leadership to monitor their behavior. Consequently, in the Portuguese case, representatives from the Socialist and Social Democrat Party, whose size typically averages 40 per cent of the plenary floor, have more incentives to focus on their district than their counterparts from small parties. Representatives from the Communist, the Left Bloc, and the Christian Democratic party groups, averaging 10 per cent of the floor, will be more likely to focus on their party. Interestingly, the covariate for party size for the Party specification in Model 1 yields a higher coefficient, and equally statistically significant, which is a puzzling result. We turn to this in our subsequent hypotheses.

Table 1 about here

In H3a-H3b we posited that the effect of electoral vulnerability and party size would both be moderated by election proximity. Representatives adapt their strategies to help their re-election, which becomes a more pressing goal towards the end of the legislative term. Let us enquire first the interaction effect between electoral vulnerability and election proximity, as fitted in Model 2. Figure 1 helps us to understand the results for the full range of values in the election proximity covariate (Brambor et al., 2006). The left-hand pane in Figure 1 shows the likelihood for tabling district focused parliamentary questions across the legislative term for representatives in three different levels of electoral vulnerability. Overall, results suggest that there are no major changes in the propensity to table a district focused question for the three benchmarks of electoral vulnerability displayed here. In other words, representatives with 0.5, 1, and 1.5 electoral vulnerability levels have relatively constant levels of scoring this question, which means that time has a limited, if any, impact in this particular. Looking at the right-hand pane, we witness a different story. Evidence suggests that election proximity does have an impact in the likelihood that representatives table a party focused question. The less electorally vulnerable representatives (.5, solid line) have a 10-point increase, from .21 to .31 in the likelihood of serving their party in their parliamentary questions. The more electorally vulnerable representatives (1.5, dotted line) have an opposite effect, i.e., election proximity makes them to focus less on their party in their parliamentary questions. This evidence supports H3a.

Figure 1 about here

Finally, we investigate the interaction effect between party size and election proximity, testing for H3b. Figure 2 displays the marginal effects for the likelihood of representatives of

parties of two sizes to table a parliamentary question focusing on their district (left-pane) or in their party (right-pane).⁹ On the left-pane, evidence suggests that representatives in large parties (40 per cent of the plenary seats) have a decreasing activity in terms of the number of questions tabled focusing on their district. There is a 4-points decrease, from .12 to .08, in the likelihood of focusing on their district from the beginning of the legislative term until the end. Small parties' representatives (10 per cent of the plenary seats) have a more stable behavior, with only a small change in their likelihood to focus on their district in their questions. Turning to the right-hand pane, we see that representatives in both small and large parties have a similar pattern: there is an increase in the likelihood of tabling a question focusing on the party as election day is near. The slope, however, is steeper for large parties, with a .09-points increase, from .69 to .78. For small parties the change accounts only to about .03-points increase, from .21 to .24. Overall, evidence does not support H3b. On the contrary, large parties' representatives focus less on their district as election day approaches.

Figure 2 about here

Our models are robust to the inclusion of control covariates. Seniority has a negative effect for the likelihood of tabling parliamentary questions for both district and party, which seems to point out that, in line with Fenno's (1978) argument, representatives become more trustee-style the more senior they are. In line with Rasch's (2011) findings for Norway, our results also show that being in government decreases the likelihood of representatives to table a party focused parliamentary question. In substantive terms, this means that opposition representatives need to make use of their committee expertise and to ask more questions to the

⁹ We plot only the effects for parties with 10 and 40 per cent of the seats, which corresponds to the median in the distribution of size. In the Portuguese legislature, political parties can be divided into two groups. The Socialists (PS) and the Social Democrats (PSD), which historically have around 35-45 per cent of the seats. The Communists (PCP-PEV), the Left Bloc (BE), and the Christian Democrats (CDS-PP) represent traditionally between 8-12 per cent.

corresponding ministry on the topic mainly to curb information asymmetry between the executive and the opposition. Finally, our results show that *cumul des mandats* has a positive effect across the board. Representatives with local government positions have a higher likelihood of tabling questions for both their party and their district. This is a puzzling result, which deserve further research.

Conclusion

In this article, we have explored how parliamentary questions might be used to unveil the focus of representation of representatives in Portugal. We were motivated by a theoretical and empirical puzzle: is there leeway for representatives to focus on a principal other than their party in a highly institutionally constrained environment? Additionally, we wanted to address a question that has been overlooked in the extant literature on parliamentary questions: do representatives have a time-constant representation focus or do they adapt their focus depending on election proximity? Using an original dataset covering the 2005-2015 legislatures in Portugal, this paper makes a contribution to the literature by highlighting the importance of including time into our models of parliamentary questioning.

Our main overall contribution for the literature is that representation focus is not static over time. Rather, evidence suggests that representatives are strategic and adapt their behavior accordingly as election day approximates. The effect of time differs, however, depending on electoral vulnerability and party size.

First, our empirical evidence suggests that representatives with low electoral vulnerability will be more focused in serving their party towards the end of the legislative term. In substantive terms, this means that frontbenchers of the party (with low electoral vulnerability) will be working towards retrieving as much information as possible to use during the electoral campaign. Conversely, representatives with high electoral vulnerability are more likely to focus

on their district. Considering Portuguese institutional setting, with a closed-list proportional representation, those representatives have these incentives because they are the most important to heighten the party's collective label and to boost the aggregate result of the party's list, which will ultimately be decisive for their (re)election due to the uncertainty of the outcome.

Second, the size of the party has an impact in the labor division, which, in turn, makes representatives adapt their behavior during the legislative term. Evidence points out that in large parties (with roughly 40 per cent of seats), representatives have decreasing incentives to table questions focusing on their district. This suggests that the numerous backbenchers in large parties are less likely to shirk and free-ride at the end of the legislative term than at the beginning. Such result bodes well with our previous finding on electoral vulnerability, in that backbenchers are more likely to be electorally vulnerable. In contrast, representatives of small parties, where the inherently small number of members makes for a more blurred distinction between frontbenchers and backbenchers, tend to have a more stable behavior over the legislative term.

Our results present some limitations and remaining puzzles requiring further research. Specifically, more work should be put into understanding how party size and organization impacts individual incentives in parliamentary questions. Also, comparative work should help us shed light on the impact of electoral systems for questioning activity.

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Table 1: Determinants of Parliamentary Question Focus in the Portuguese Legislature

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	District	Party	District	Party	District	Party
Electoral Vulnerability	-0.02 (0.25)	-0.80*** (0.58)	-0.12* (0.04)	-1.15*** (-0.10)	-0.02 (0.03)	-0.80*** (-0.06)
Party Size	0.04*** (0.01)	0.12*** (0.01)	0.02*** (0.01)	0.05*** (0.03)	0.03*** (0.01)	0.13*** (0.01)
Election Proximity	0.01 (2.00)	0.01*** (0.01)	0.01*** (2.98)	0.01*** (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.01** (0.01)
Electoral Vulnerability*Election Proximity			-0.01*** (0.01)	-0.01*** (-0.01)		
Party Size*Election Proximity					-4.55* (2.33)	6.72** (2.53)
Seniority	-0.10*** (0.01)	-0.09*** (-0.01)	-0.10*** (0.01)	-0.08*** (0.01)	-0.10*** (0.01)	-0.09*** (-0.01)
Government	0.01 (0.11)	-1.41*** (0.14)	0.01 (0.11)	-1.36*** (0.13)	0.01 (0.12)	-1.40*** (-0.14)
Local Government	0.38*** (0.03)	0.42*** (0.03)	.39*** (0.33)	0.45*** (0.35)	0.38*** (0.32)	0.42*** (0.03)
Intercept	-2.09*** (0.28)	-4.24*** (0.30)	-1.99*** (0.29)	-0.45*** (0.35)	-1.98*** (-0.29)	-4.33*** (0.30)
N	32011		32011		32011	
BIC	-2753.85		-2779.78		-2749.67	

Coefficient entries estimated with multinomial logit regression. *p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001 (two-tailed).
A control variable for party fixed-effects is included in the model but not displayed.

Figure 1: Marginal Effects of Electoral Vulnerability moderated by Election Proximity

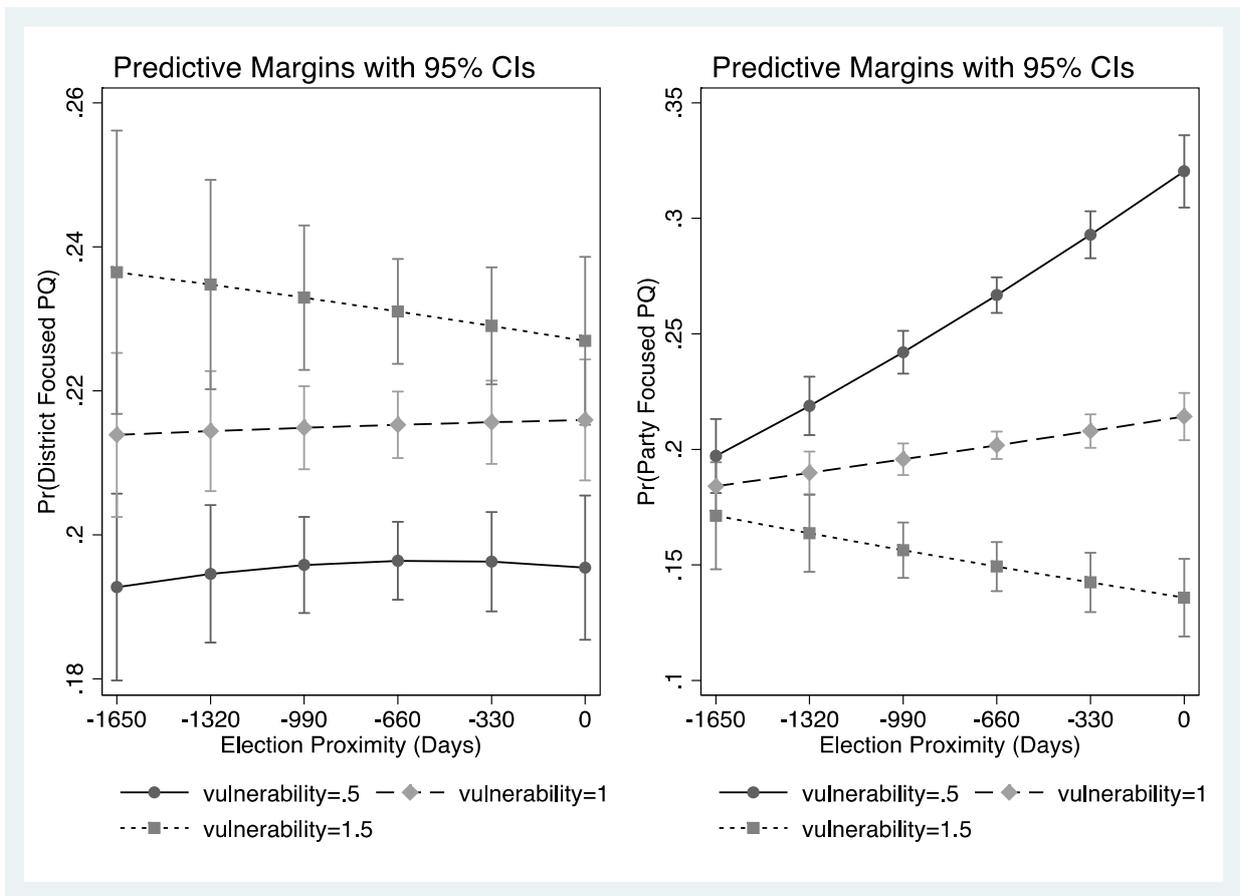


Figure 2: Marginal Effects of Party Size moderated by Election Proximity

