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Using Parliamentary Questions to Measure Constituency Orientation: An Application to the Irish Case

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Individual legislators differ in the degree to which they work to cultivate personal votes. While conventional wisdom declares that the electoral system typically motivates the choice of legislative role, researchers have found difficulty assessing empirically the role-behaviour of legislators. This study suggests using the content analysis of parliamentary questions as a mechanism to measure variations in personal vote earning strategies. To demonstrate the usefulness of this approach, and the constituency-focus of Irish parliamentarians, 123,762 questions tabled by Dáil Deputies between 1997 and 2002 are analysed. While evidence of some orientation toward localism is apparent, the data suggests significant variations in role-orientation among legislators. Competing electoral system and non-electoral system explanations of intra-system variation in personal vote earning effort are hypothesised and tested. Characteristics such as district magnitude, intra-party competition, electoral vulnerability, geography, education, gender and career incentives only partially explain the variation. The results highlight the need to move beyond using electoral rules as a general proxy for role-orientation and behaviour.

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Introduction

Individual legislators differ in the degree to which they expend effort to cultivate personal votes. Some assign considerable time and resources to local affairs and parochial interests, thereby cultivating a personal reputation among constituents. Other legislators apparently focus more attention on national politics, as policymaker, scrutiniser of the executive or international statesperson. Conventionally, candidate-centred electoral systems motivate incumbents to cultivate and retain personal votes from constituents, while party-centred electoral systems provide less incentive for legislators to focus on personal vote gathering (Carey and Shugart, 1995).ⁱ The relationship appears imperfect, with indications that considerable variation in role-orientation and actual role-behaviour exists within the same electoral environment (Cain, Ferejohn, and Fiorina, 1987; Norton and Wood, 1993; Ashworth and Bueno de Mesquita, 2006). Despite the growing theoretical significance assigned to legislators' orientation, researchers have had difficulty measuring, empirically, the role-behaviour of individual legislators. Instead, increasing reliance accrues to the electoral system as a proxy for local versus party-centred interests (see, for example, Persson and Tabellini, 2003).

This study offers two important contributions to the literature on legislative role-behaviour. First, the content analysis of parliamentary questions, introduced as a novel method for measuring legislators' focus on personal vote earning and parochial interests at the expense of other legislative roles, provides distinct advantages over existing measures of role activity. The advantage arises from the fact that an analysis of parliamentary questions can provide a quantitative indicator of roles legislators perform free from many of the measurement problems associated with other methods of uncovering legislative behaviour.ⁱⁱ

A second contribution of this research is the assessment of the common assumption that Irish parliamentarians are constituency-focused. Analysis of each of the 123,762 content-analysed parliamentary questions tabled during the lifetime of the 28th Dáil (1997-2002) reveal the degree of parochial interest among parliamentarians. The evidence suggests slightly lower levels of constituency-orientation than conventionally believed, with significant variation in localism within the same parliament. To address the reasons motivating some Dáil Deputies to be more focused on personal vote earning strategies, regression analysis tests explanations of variation in role-behaviour at the individual level. The results call into question many assumptions in the comparative literature which posit an electoral and institutional origin to constituency-orientation.

The next section reviews existing research on constituency-centred behaviour in Ireland. Section Three explains how an analysis of parliamentary questions can provide a quantitative measure of constituency-centred behaviour. Section Four presents the descriptive data. Section Five presents a number of hypotheses and employs the original data to test theories of legislative motivation. The paper concludes with a discussion of the results and the usefulness of parliamentary questions as a tool for measuring role orientation.

Existing Measures of Constituency-centred Behaviour

Cultural and institutional variables emphasise that Irish parliamentarians ought to be focused on cultivating personal votes to the detriment of policy advocacy at the national level. A political culture that emphasises brokerage, the small size of Irish society and the administrative structure apparently contributes to a heavy constituent-oriented workload for Irish

parliamentarians (Gallagher and Komito, 2010). The Single Transferable Vote (STV) electoral system, where candidates from the same party compete against each other for votes, motivates incumbents to differentiate themselves from co-partisans (Sinnott, 2010) at least in part through the cultivation of personal votes (Swindle, 2002; Marsh, 2007). Besides these theoretical expectations, little is known about what Dáil Deputies actually do. Both the number and penetration of studies in terms of the sample size is surprisingly limited.

Two comparative studies employed interviews to measure the role-orientation of Irish parliamentarians. In one, Wood and Young (1997) interviewed 40 Irish junior deputies, revealing, on average, those interviewed spent 2.5 days per week in their constituencies and devoted just less than 50 hours per week to constituency affairs, which accounted for 58.9 percent of their working week. Wood and Young (1997) also found that 22.5 percent of those interviewed would prefer to do more constituency service as compared to 40 percent who would prefer to do less. Although only junior deputies were interviewees, the results provide a significant insight into the working life and role of an Irish legislator.

In the second comparative study, Heitshusen, Young and Wood (2005), interviewed 245 legislators from six legislative chambers, including 41 Irish parliamentarians between 1998 and 1999. The interviews attempted to uncover the relative significance of, and engagement with, constituency, party and policy activities. Of Dáil Deputies interviewed, 39 percent ranked constituency affairs as their sole primary focus; 19 percent ranked constituency as their primary focus along with another priority, and 42 percent of Dáil Deputies interviewed ranked constituency below some other priority. The result of both sets of interviews suggests the level of importance of constituency work in Irish parliamentary life.

Martin (2010) surveyed Irish legislators to discover role-orientation in the Oireachtas. The average proportion of the working week spent attending to constituency-related activities among those Dáil Deputies who responded to the survey was just over 60 percent. Of course, surveys, as with elite interviews, suffer from significant methodological problems endangering the validity and reliability of findings. To more independently verify the role-behaviour of legislators, the current research suggests a new method which has significant fewer disadvantages when compared to conventional methods.

PQs: A Measure of Constituency-Focus

Parliamentary questions are a feature of almost all national legislatures (Norton, 1993:1). Typically, a member tables a question to a minister of the government; this action requires the minister to provide an answer. While questions can take many forms, the public tends to be most familiar with oral questions posed to the head of government (Russo and Wiberg, 2010; Salmond, 2010). Yet, most queries and answers assume a written form. While some observers question the benefit of questions in terms of the general and vague nature of answers provided (MacCarthaigh, 2005), the propensity of parliamentarians to ask questions indicates that the interrogatories could be an important tool for measuring an individual legislator's job (Franklin and Norton, 1993; Wiberg, 1994).

This discussion suggests that a content analysis of parliamentary questions can uncover the role-orientation of individual legislators. The personal-vote earning strategy, if any, of a parliamentarian should be evident in the content of questions asked. Parliamentary questions offer a tool both for questions of policy and questions of a more parochial, constituency-oriented nature. How a legislator chooses to use the questioning tool provides a unique

insight into legislative behaviour and role-orientation. To illustrate variation in question types, a comparison of three questions, selected from the proceedings of the Dáil on a random date in the summer of 2009 is revealing:

[1] *Deputy Leo Varadkar asked the Minister for Finance his views on whether the Maastricht criteria for entry into the euro could be relaxed to allow one or more of the Baltic states or Iceland to come into the euro area in the event of a major devaluation or debt default; and if he will make a statement on the matter.*

[2] *Deputy Leo Varadkar asked the Minister for Education and Science the position regarding the provision of a sports hall and extension for a school (details supplied) in Dublin 15; and if he will make a statement on the matter.*

[3] *Deputy Edward O’Keefe asked the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food the position regarding farm grant payments in respect of a person (details supplied) in County Cork.*ⁱⁱⁱ

The first question clearly relates to a general policy issue, in this case the political economy of the euro-zone. In the second question the same Dáil Deputy asks about the provision of facilities for a school in his constituency. In the third question, an individual constituent is the question’s focus, regarding payment due to the constituent from a governmental department. The second and third questions are clear examples of a member using the institution of parliamentary questions to advance a constituency’s interest or the interest of an individual constituent. The written record of the chamber is replete with such types of questions, with matters ranging from spending projects for a member’s geographical constituency (especially schools and public hospitals) to government welfare and other subvention payments to individuals. Ultimately, these questions form part of a personal vote-earning strategy by the legislator. These locally-oriented questions stand in contrast to the many other written questions in which a legislator inquires about wider governmental policy. In such cases, the legislator could be said to be pursuing a party-vote earning strategy or at the very least, a non-personal vote-earning strategy.

An analysis of parliamentary questions to discover role-orientation provides a number of distinct advantages over existing mechanisms used to identify personal vote earning behaviour:

1. An allocation of scarce resources occurs when a member tables a parliamentary question. A member must research the question, format it appropriately, submit it, and await a reply. This is by no means a costless exercise in terms of time and opportunity costs. A legislator, or her staff, are effectively limited in the number of questions that can be asked. As such, the uses to which parliamentary questions are put provide an indication of the priorities of legislators. Although the staff assistance available differs greatly between legislatures, even the well-resourced US Senator must make hard choices about the allocation of staffing duties.

2. Unlike most other parliamentary activity, such as legislative voting behaviour and parliamentary speeches, the party leadership does not control parliamentary questions. Hence, these questions provide a more reliable perspective on the choice parliamentarians themselves make for focusing on parochial, national, or international issues.

3. Problems of bias inherent in observational, interview and survey-based research, where legislators must actively select into a study, are eliminated because the role-behaviour of all legislators can be examined through parliamentary questions.

4. Instead of relying on a legislator's recollection and self-analysis of role-orientation and behaviour, the analysis of parliamentary questions provides a direct and unedited measure of role-behaviour. Hence, any difference among a parliamentarian's normative, or indeed empirical, perception of role and what behaviour actually occurs, is eliminated.

5. The data is readily available. Parliamentary questions are on record and generally publicly available. In many cases the data is electronically readable, making the raw data easily accessible to computer-assisted textual analysis.

6. Unlike many other data collection methods in role-orientation and role-behaviour studies, replication is possible, thus enhancing the scientific process (King, Keohane and Verba, 1996). To aid replication, specific guidelines are used to determine whether or not questions have a national or local focus. Table One reports the criteria for identifying local questions used in this study, rendering the process of data collection open, easily replicable and transferable to other cases.

It is useful to differentiate between the role of oral questions/interpellations and written questions. Certainly, signalling remains an important motivation in written questions, along with information acquisition. Yet, these motivations typically assigned to parliamentary questions (see, for example, Wiberg, 1995) do not compete with a constituency versus policy dichotomy. Rather, they are likely to intersect. So, for example, a constituency-based question could be an attempt to extract information or to signal interests, but regardless it is a constituency-motivated question rather than a policy-motivated question.

<Table One around here>

Parliamentary questions have been assumed to be a mechanism to hold the executive branch accountable with little application to cultivating relationships with constituents. However, Rasch (2009) found support for an electoral connection in Norway, despite the party-centred nature of the electoral system. Only the total number of questions asked is considered, not the nature or content of the questions. Exploring questioning patterns in the French National Assembly, Lazardoux (2005) found no support for an electoral connection. Again, the independent variable is the total number of written questions submitted by each deputy. The total number of questions asked is, at best, a rough proxy for constituency-focused behaviour and personal vote earning strategy. Questions can take different forms in terms of the content and role orientation being pursued. The novelty of the suggested approach here is to extract the constituency-based and extra-constituency based questions by means of a relatively simple content analysis.

Parliamentary questions are just one of several tools that legislators can use to represent local interests. Legislators can write directly to a government minister; they can communicate directly with public service providers, and they can petition the public service Ombudsman to investigate a constituent's concern. Perhaps, different legislators choose different tools to cultivate personal votes. If so, looking at one single mechanism to undertake service to a constituency provides an incomplete picture of legislative behaviour. Yet, the content analysis of parliamentary questions indicates that questions are a standard tool for constituency representation and gathering personal votes. Collective needs within the constituency, as well as representation concerning constituents' individual cases, are frequently the subject of questions to government ministers. At the same time, parliamentary questions are also used to obtain information from, and make challenges to, the government on national-level policies. Analysis of parliamentary questions, then, is a novel method for gaining insight into variation in legislators' behaviour and personal vote earning strategies.

Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that no one method of uncovering legislators' roles is without limitations, a point returned to in the conclusion. To highlight the usefulness of content-analysing parliamentary questions to measure constituency-centred behaviour and to better understand the behaviour and vote-earning strategies of Dáil deputies, the next sections reports the descriptive results of the content analyses of Irish parliamentary questions.

Are Irish Parliamentarians Constituency-Focused?

This study analysed all written questions tabled by Dáil Deputies between the 1997 and 2002 general elections. Oral questions are excluded as these tend to be held in reserve for the party leadership and frontbench. The Ceann Comhairle (presiding officer) and Government Ministers do not traditionally table questions and are therefore excluded from the analysis. To facilitate the statistical analysis of variations in questioning patterns, the analysis also excludes Dáil Deputies who did not serve a full parliamentary term, due to factors such as resignation or death. Dáil Deputies elected at by-elections during the parliamentary session are also excluded.

A team of seven researchers hand-coded each written question, with each question coded separately by two researchers to ensure maximum validity and reliability. Where a dispute arose, the team and the lead researcher discussed the question to reach a final decision. Each question's coding included: (1) the member asking the question, (2) the Minister to whom the question was addressed, and (3) whether or not the question had a "local" focus. The coding criteria for this third element are listed in Table One. In total, 123,762 questions were coded.

Table Two reports the main descriptive results by type of question and government ministry. While conventional measures associated with self-reporting by Dáil Deputies indicate comparatively high levels of constituency-orientation this study's findings do not fully support such conclusions. Almost 56 percent of written parliamentary questions are characteristically non-local in nature. While a significant proportion of questions relate to constituencies, Dáil Deputies do assign resources and time to asking questions of a non-parochial nature. These results are not heavily biased by opposition frontbench members asking policy-oriented questions of government, although these certainly do occur. Indeed, backbenchers in each party are just as likely to table written questions as frontbench opposition spokespersons.

<Table Two around here>

All members of the cabinet, including the Taoiseach, face questions of a local nature. However, certain trends are evident. The Department of Education and Science account for almost a quarter of all constituency-oriented questions. A frequent question to the Minister for Education refers to the Department of Education's School Building Programme or the need to provide extra staffing resources in a named school in a Dáil Deputy's constituency. After Education and Science, the Department of Health and Children is next most likely to be the target of constituency-oriented questions, with the issue of staff resources and medical facilities at a named hospital being most common. Questions on the non-payment or delay of payment for farm grants account for a significant proportion of questions to the Minister for Agriculture. Perhaps surprisingly, the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs accounts for only 3.2 percent of constituency-oriented questions asked by Dáil Deputies between 1997 and 2002. A priori, the expectation might be that representation by parliamentarians on behalf of individual constituents on issues relating to

welfare payments would account for a significant proportion of local questions. This study's results raise issues regarding the degree to which the more disadvantaged groups in society are unrepresented by the representative and political processes in Ireland. Interestingly, questions of grant payments to farmers outweigh questions of social welfare entitlements and payments.

One result masked in the summary statistics is the presence of significant variation in the constituency focus of questions within the chamber. Figure one uses a Kernel density plot and histogram to illustrate the spread of the percentage of local questions asked by Dáil Deputies. For three parliamentarians, local questions did not feature at all in their questioning. In contrast, at the other end of the scale, local questions accounted for all questions asked by two Dáil Deputies. The median rate of local questions to all questions was just over 42 percent, with a standard deviation of 21. To better understand such variation, the next section explores the likely causes of difference in behavior.

<Figure One around here>

Explaining Variation in Role-orientation: Is it the electoral system?

Although personal vote earning strategies are generally assumed to vary little within the same legislature, Irish data has uncovered significant intra-system variation in personal vote earning effort. To help explain this variation a number of testable hypotheses are presented and later empirically assessed. The first two predictions relate to the impact of the electoral system on role-behaviour. We then discuss the likely relationship between the electoral environment and non-electoral factors on role-behaviour. As such, the framework provides some opportunity to test whether electoral system or non-electoral systems factors better explain legislator behaviour.

Personal vote earning effort should be related to incentives to cultivate personal votes. According to the comparative literature, the incentive to cultivate personal votes is linked directly to the level of intra-party competition as shaped by the electoral system (Carey and Shugart, 1995). Variation in the district magnitude in the Irish case allows us test the assumption common in the electoral studies literature that district magnitude impacts incentive towards constituency-centred behaviour (H1).^{iv} A significant but understudied feature of the STV electoral system is that the level of intra-party competition varies from candidate to candidate. Larger parties often run multiple candidates in the same constituency while small parties do not. Given this and the varying electoral success for the larger parties, the number of co-partisan incumbents from the same geographical constituency differs. In circumstances where Dáil Deputies from the same party compete with each other for votes, the incentive to cultivate personal votes is greatest, given that party is no longer a label by which an incumbent provides differentiation from a party colleague. Greater incentives to cultivate personal votes, as determined by the level of co-partisan competition, should be associated with higher levels of personal vote earning effort (H2).

It is believed that the margin of victory at the previous election impacts legislator behaviour and in particular vote earning strategy (Gaines, 1998; Wood and Young, 1997). Legislators in relatively safe seats have less incentive to cultivate votes, all else equal. The expectation then is that more electorally marginal incumbents spend relatively more time cultivating personal votes in an effort to maximise the probability of re-election at the next general election. Narrower electoral victories at the last general election should be associated with more effort to earn personal votes (H3).

Typically, the assumption is that electoral incentives motivate personal vote-earning activities. Yet, re-election is not a proximate goal for all legislators – some incumbents typically retire at or ahead of a general election. Expending effort to cultivate personal votes ahead of retirement would challenge rational theories of legislative behaviour. All else equal, incumbents seeking re-election are expected to be more constituency-oriented in their parliamentary questions in comparison with incumbents who are not seeking re-election. (H4).

In Irish politics it is not uncommon for a family member to succeed a retiring parliamentarian. A brother, sister, son, daughter or spouse will often seek to fill the seat of a Dáil Deputy vacated on retirement. The ‘family name’ label can be protected and enhanced by the incumbent working on constituency affairs. Where a retiring Dáil Deputy is hoping to retain a ‘family seat,’ we would expect the incumbent to maintain the same level of constituency-centred behaviour as non-retiring Dáil Deputies (H5).

Being a Dáil Deputy from a government party may have an important impact on the pattern of parliamentary questions. Government deputies may be required to spend more time on committee work, for example. In the Irish case, the government retain majorities on most parliamentary committees, resulting in government backbenchers having a larger number of committee assignments than their opposition counterparts. Committee work may then pull government backbenchers away from constituency interests, all else equal (H6).

The direction of causality in the relationship between legislative seniority, defined in terms of years served in parliament, and constituency-centred behaviour is not simple. Constituency-centred behaviour possibly explains continued electoral success. Alternatively, more junior legislators may need to invest greater constituency effort in the absence of a long-developed strong personal base in their constituency. Longer-serving legislators can rely on past reputation for constituency-centred behaviour and may have less incentive towards contemporary constituency-centred behaviour. Therefore, a negative relationship is hypothesised between years served as a Dáil Deputy and personal vote earning effort (H7).

An incumbent’s gender may impact their general orientation towards constituency over policy and this would be expected to impact the degree to which behaviour in the legislative arena is focused on policy over constituency interests. For example, because women form a small proportion of the chamber, women Dáil Deputies may be more focused on policy of concern to women. Bird (2005), looking only at the substantive topic of parliamentary questions in the British House of Commons found that Women MPs were more likely than male MPs to refer to ‘women’ and ‘gender’ in questions. We control for the gender of the questioner, expecting women parliamentarians to be more policy focused (H8).

A parliamentarian’s level of education has been found in some countries to impact the preference for constituency service. Generally the assumption is that legislators with higher levels of formal education are more policy-driven, in effect spending less time on constituency service (H9).

The geographical location of a physical constituency from the centre of political power is said to shape the demand for constituency service. Comparative research has found greater constituency-orientation among legislators further removed from the location of the seat of government (see, for example, Heitshusen, Young and Woods, 2005). Centre-periphery cleavages in the political system mean that Dáil Deputies representing more peripheral geographical constituencies are expected to face greater demand for constituency-centred behaviour, all else equal (H10).

Explaining Variation in Role Behaviour: Data

To test these hypotheses we employ multivariate regression analysis. The full list of variables included in the analysis, as well as the data source for each variable is outlined below. The variables are matched to each of the ten hypotheses outlined above, providing an opportunity both to explain variation in the degree of localism in questions tabled by Dáil Deputies but more generally to test the comparative theories explaining the origin of constituency orientation.

The variable *PercentLocal* is the number of local questions tabled by a member for written reply calculated and expressed as a percentage of the total number of questions tabled by that member. As discussed earlier, the data is based on a hand-coding of written parliamentary questions for the period 1997-2002. See Table One for coding criteria. Unless otherwise stated the data source for the remaining variables is Nealon (1997).

District Magnitude is the number of Dáil Deputies returned in the given constituency. *PercentLocal* and *District Magnitude* are expected to correlate positively. *Co-Partisan* is a dummy variable equal to one where the Dáil Deputy was elected alongside a party colleague in the same constituency and equal to zero otherwise. As with *District Magnitude*, *Co-Partisan* is expected to enhance the incentive towards constituency-oriented behaviour, and a positive correlation is thus expected between *PercentLocal* and *Co-Partisan*.

Election1997 is the number of first preference votes received by the candidate at the 1997 General election expressed as a percentage of the quota of votes needed to get elected. In STV, the quota is a key measure of electoral success and safety. A negative correlation is expected between *PercentLocal* and *Election1997*. *Run2002* is a dummy variable equal to one if the incumbent sought re-election at the 2002 General Election and zero otherwise. The data for this variable is from Kennedy (2002). In a separate model we include *FamilyRun2002*, a dummy variable equal to one if the incumbent or a close family member sought re-election at the 2002 General Election or zero otherwise. The data for this variable is from Kennedy (2002) with confirming sources drawn from newspaper election coverage (*Irish Times* and *Irish Independent*). For both measures, we expect a positive correlation with *PercentLocal*. The variable *Government* is a dummy variable equal to one if the Dáil Deputy was a member of one of the government parties and zero otherwise. *Years* is a continuous variable representing the number of years served as a Dáil Deputy. The variable should negatively correlate with *PercentLocal*. The variable *Education* measures the level of formal education attained by each Dáil Deputy and is coded as follows: School only = zero; Post-Leaving Certificate/non-University third level=one; University = two. A negative correlation is expected. Finally, to measure the impact of geography on localism, we include two measures. The variable *Dublin* is a dummy variable equal to one if the Dáil Deputy represented a Dublin constituency and zero otherwise. To better empirically capture any centre-periphery variation, the variable *Periphery* is employed to measure the contiguous distance of each constituency from Dublin. Constituencies outside but contiguous to Dublin score one; constituencies contiguous to these score two, and so forth until the most peripheral constituencies are coded. A positive correlation is expected.

Multivariate Results

Members of the government ask relatively more local questions on average as compared to members of the opposition. Holding all else equal, the

percentage of local questions asked by members of the government party (or parties) is eight points higher than the percentage of local questions asked by members of the opposition. This finding is robust across the four models estimated and reported in table three. Models one and two estimate the effect of *Run2002*. Models three and four estimate the effect of *FamilyRun2002*. Due to the way *FamilyRun2002* is coded these two variables are not included in the same model. Models one and three estimate the effect of *Dublin*. Models two and four estimate the effect of *Periphery*. As Dublin is the base category for the variable *Periphery*, the two variables cannot be included in the same model and therefore are estimated separately. Across all of these model specifications, the estimated coefficient on *Government* is positively signed and statistically significant. This demonstrates the Dáil Deputies from the government benches focus relatively more of their attention on local questions, contrary to our expectations.

<Table Three around here>

Dáil Deputies from areas outside of Dublin ask relatively more local questions on average than Dáil Deputies from Dublin. Holding all else equal, the percentage of local questions asked by Dublin Dáil Deputies is more than 14 percent lower than the percentage of local questions asked by non-Dublin Dáil Deputies. This finding is robust to alternative model specifications. For example, the estimated negative coefficient on *Dublin* is statistically significant in both Model 1, which includes *Run2002*, and Model 3, where *FamilyRun2002* is substituted for *Run2002*. Furthermore, an alternative measure of the same concept produces similar results. Recall that *Periphery* is a categorical variable coded in such a way as to measure the contiguous distance of each constituency from Dublin. The results from this variable are reported in models 2 and 4. These results suggest that Dáil Deputies outside of Dublin ask relatively more local questions than Dáil Deputies from Dublin. In fact, distance from Dublin has a positive substantive effect on the percentage of local questions. Dáil Deputies from category 3 ask relatively more local questions than Dáil Deputies from category 2 who in turn ask relatively more local questions than Dáil Deputies from category 1 who in turn ask relatively more local questions than TD from Dublin. Dáil Deputies from category 3 ask the most local questions, holding all else equal. A percent of local questions asked by a TD from category 3 is 23 percentage points higher on average than the percent local for a Dublin TD. Although the estimated coefficients for categories 5 and 6 are positively correlated, they do not reach conventional levels of statistical significance. This may be due, in part, to the small numbers of observations in these categories, particularly category 6, which contains only 4 observations. In general, however, we can conclude that Dáil Deputies from outside of Dublin ask relatively more local-oriented questions on average than Dáil Deputies from Dublin.

Beyond government party membership and geography, we find no other robust predictors of local orientation. The number of first preference votes received in the 2007 general election is not a robust predictor of *PercentLocal*. Neither is *DistrictMagintude*. Although the coefficient is negatively signed, the standard errors are so large that the coefficient may not be significantly different from zero. In other words, district magnitude appears to have no robust effect on the local orientation of Dáil Deputies. Similarly, *CoPartisan* has no robust effect on *PercentLocal*. The sign and magnitude of the estimated coefficient is sensitive to the model specification. This may be because there is a relationship between distance from Dublin and/or rural constituencies and the number of co-partisans. Standard tests however, show acceptable levels of multicollinearity.^v Like *CoPartisan*, the estimated

coefficients of *Run2002* and *FamilyRun2002* are sensitive to the model specification. However, neither of these two variables reach conventional levels of statistical significance in any of the estimated models. Likewise, *Years*, *Gender* and *Education* have no robust effect on *PercentLocal*. In general then, few of the well-established theoretical expectations find empirical support in the Irish case.

Conclusion

Scholars are increasingly moving beyond studies of elections and campaigns to focus on what legislators actually do once elected. At the heart of this renewed research on legislative roles is the classic debate concerning the underlying motivation of legislators, and in particular whether or not legislators are motivated to build personal reputations with constituents or work towards building a party and a national reputation. Such motivations are important as scholars have theorised links between legislative motivation and policy outcomes.

Determining which, if any, of these competing strategies is most typical without being able to empirically measure parliamentary roles is difficult. This study proposes a novel method for capturing the constituency-focused behaviour of individual legislators. By analysing the content of parliamentary questions, a quantitative measure of role behaviour can be extracted. The method is non-intrusive; the data reflects actual behaviour as distinct from self-reported behaviour, and problems associated with sample bias and response rates are eliminated. Unlike other legislative texts, the content of parliamentary questions remains relatively independent, with little or no party control exercised. Moreover, this method allows the possibility of collecting and directly comparing data, over time within the same political system, and among different legislatures.

An analysis of parliamentary questions asked by Dáil Deputies between 1997 and 2002 indicate that Irish parliamentarians are somewhat constituency-focused. The immediate implication is that Dáil Deputies may slightly misstate their constituency-roles in studies based on self-assessment. The validity of research instruments in legislative studies that rely on a legislator's self-perception and self-reporting of activities and role-orientation is questioned. That constituency-centred behaviour is possibly overstated in interviews and surveys have consequences for scholars using these traditional tools to measure competing legislative strategies.

The statistical analysis seeking to explain variation in the use of parliamentary questions as a personal vote-earning strategy produced a number of non-trivial findings. The geographical location of the constituency relative to the political centre has long been considered an important factor in shaping legislators' behaviour and evidence here confirms this. Despite the regularity of this empirical result in most countries, the actual reasons why centre-periphery geography impacts the level of localism among legislators have largely remained speculative. Further research should seek to explain why this is the case. Other theoretical expectations are not confirmed in the Irish case – indicating the need for further research to understand the origins of personal vote earning strategies.

Although the content analysis of parliamentary questions provides a unique prospect from which to measure role-orientation, the general use of local questions as a proxy for localism has some limitations. Parliamentary questions are just one of several tools that legislators can use to represent local interests. Perhaps, different legislators choose different tools to cultivate personal votes. If so, looking at one single mechanism to undertake service to a constituency provides an incomplete picture of legislative

behaviour. Yet, as an unobtrusive measure not dependent on self-reporting, parliamentary questions do offer unique advantages in making inferences about the preferences, priorities and roles of individual legislators. Ultimately, a mixed method approach, combining elements of observational studies, self-reporting through interview or survey and the analysis of recorded behaviour such as parliamentary questions, provide the best opportunity to paint the most reliable possible picture of the life of a legislator. At the very least, the empirical work presented here should further motivate and encourage scholars to move beyond using electoral systems as a general proxy for legislator role-orientation.

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Table 1: How to Code Parliamentary Questions

To be coded *local*, a parliamentary question should have one or more of the following characteristics:

1. Did the member mention her/his constituency, for example, by saying “in my constituency....” or by identifying the name of her/his constituency?
 2. Did the member mention a geographical location that the coder can confirm to be located in the geographical constituency of the member? So, for example “What is the minister going to do about unemployment in Mullingar?” would be coded as a local question in the Irish case (assuming the Dáil Deputy represented the constituency in which Mullingar was located). “What is the minister going to do about unemployment in Baghdad?” would not be coded a local question by a researcher of Irish questions.
 3. Did the member mention a constituent or particular case surrounding an individual who can reasonably be assumed to be a constituent?
 4. Did the member mention a particular building or facility that the coder can confirm to be located in the geographical constituency of the member?
 5. Did the member mention a particular organization or business that the coder can confirm to be located in the geographical constituency of the member, unless the organisation or business is country-wide and the question is not specifically related to the part of the organisation or business in the member’s constituency?
 6. Did the member mention an event specifically taking place in the geographical constituency of the member, such as, for example, a local festival?
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Table 2: Destination Portfolio, and Type of Question Asked

<i>Portfolio</i>	<i>Total PQs</i>	<i>Percent of All PQs</i>	<i>Total National</i>	<i>Total Local</i>	<i>Percent Local</i>
Taoiseach	1839	1.5	1633	206	11.2
Agriculture, Food and Rural Development	13,617	11.0	5574	8043	59.1
Arts, Heritage, Gaeltacht and the Islands	5571	4.5	2216	3355	60.2
Defense	4986	4.0	3932	1054	21.1
Education and Science	20,901	16.9	7875	13,026	62.3
Enterprise, Trade and Employment	5611	4.5	4567	1044	18.6
Environment and Local Government	10,139	8.2	6156	3983	39.3
Finance	7311	5.9	5215	2096	28.7
Foreign Affairs	4216	3.4	3852	364	8.6
Health and Children	19,983	16.1	10,504	9479	47.4
Justice, Equality and Law Reform	11,468	9.3	6412	5056	44.1
Marine and Natural Resources	4933	4.0	2578	2355	47.8
Public Enterprise	4464	3.6	2824	1640	36.7
Social, Community and Family Affairs	5577	4.5	3836	1741	31.2
Tourism, Sport and Recreation	3146	2.5	1982	1164	37.0
	12,376		69,156	54,606	
All	62	100.0	6	06	44.1

Notes: Written questions only. Figures excludes questions asked by Government Ministers, the Ceann Comhairle (presiding officer) and Dáil Deputies who did not serve the full period 1997-2002. See text for coding of *National* and *Local*. The title of some Government Departments change slightly during the term of the 28th Dáil.

Table 3: Breakdown of Local Questions Asked, by Portfolio

<i>Portfolio</i>	<i>Percent of Total Local Questions</i>
Taoiseach	0.3
Foreign Affairs	0.5
Enterprise, Trade and Employment	1.9
Defense	1.9
Tourism, Sport and Recreation	2.1
Public Enterprise	2.8
Social, Community and Family Affairs	3.2
Marine and Natural Resources	3.6
Finance	3.9
Arts, Heritage, Gaeltacht and the Islands	5.8
Environment and Local Government	7.1
Justice, Equality and Law Reform	8.8
Agriculture, Food and Rural Development	15.3
Health and Children	18.4
Education and Science	23.8
Total	99.6

Note: Total does not equal 100 due to rounding.

Table 4: Explaining Variation in Role-orientation

	Model 1 <i>PercentLocal</i>	Model 2 <i>PercentLocal</i>
Election1997	-0.0405 (0.049)	-0.0368 (0.049)
CoPartisan	-2.198 (3.90)	-3.794 (4.04)
Run2002	3.439 (6.83)	5.011 (6.55)
Government	-8.921** (4.07)	-9.450** (4.13)
Years	-0.00580 (0.27)	-0.00219 (0.26)
Gender	3.113 (5.01)	5.338 (5.39)
Dublin	15.28*** (4.09)	
Periphery = 1		6.789 (5.72)
Periphery = 2		16.25*** (5.16)
Periphery = 3		25.27*** (6.68)
Periphery = 4		17.68*** (5.96)
Periphery = 5		10.01 (6.91)
Periphery = 6		13.83 (9.97)
Constant	43.09*** (12.2)	41.92*** (11.9)
Observations	126	126
R-squared	0.15	0.20

Notes: Robust standard errors in parentheses. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

i. Subfields of political science use different terminology to describe what are effectively closely related phenomenon. Legislative scholars tend to speak of *constituency-centred behaviour*, *constituency service* and *parochialism*, while electoral studies scholars and political economists tend to talk of

the *personal vote*, *candidate-centred systems* and *localism*. The latter literature differentiate personal vote earning from *party-centred* or *strong-party* regimes, while legislative scholars tend to differentiate constituency-centred behaviour from leadership and policy roles. In this study, the terms *constituency-centred behaviour*, *constituency-service*, *candidate-centred*, *personal vote*, *localism* and *parochialism* are used interchangeably.

ii. Other methods to uncover behaviour include observational studies (see, for example, Fenno, 1986), elite interviews (see, for example, Searing, 1994; Müller et al., 2001), surveys (see, for example, Katz, 1997; Farrell and Scully, 2007; Scully and Farrell, 2003) and computer-assisted quantitative analysis of parliamentary debates (see, for example, Laver and Benoit, 2003; Quinn et al., 2006; Proksch and Slapin, 2008; Monroe and Schrod, 2009). Even an analysis of travel records and expenses can help uncover patterns of role behaviour (see, for example, Ingall and Crisp, 2001; Johnston and Pattie 2009).

iii. *Dáil Debates*, Vol. 688 No. 1, Thursday, 9 July 2009.

iv. At the 1997 general election 14 constituencies had a district magnitude of five, 15 constituencies had a district magnitude of four while 12 constituencies had a district magnitude of three.

v. The variance inflation factor (VIF) is less than four for all variables included in the estimated models.