

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Term limits in parliament and electoral disconnection: the case of the Five Star Movement

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Abstract

This article examines the relationship between term limits in parliament and “electoral disconnection,” the notion that legislators constrained in their ability to run for office face diminished incentives to perform strategic activities to boost their chances of securing candidacy and re-election. We leverage the case of the Italian Five Star Movement’s party-imposed limit of two terms for affiliates seeking to gain or retain a parliamentary seat. We exploit an original dataset of parliamentary activities covering both chambers of the Italian Parliament between 2013 and 2022. We estimate a series of mixed-effect regression models to assess the performance of MPs who were elected in 2013 and re-elected in 2018. In line with our expectations, the evidence suggests that term-limited representatives serving their second mandate tend to become less productive when it comes to “electorally lucrative” activities and more prone to rebelling than their non-term-limited colleagues. These findings contribute to our understanding of the incentives that drive parliamentary behavior.

Keywords: Term limits; electoral disconnection; legislative behavior; rational choice; Five Star Movement

Introduction

The behavior of members of parliament (MPs) is one of the most studied topics in legislative studies. Within this body of literature, various scholars have postulated that the activities carried out by legislators should be viewed as strategic endeavors geared toward the achievement of specific career goals, particularly re-election. “Electoral connection,” that is, the strict relationship between the actions of representatives and re-election goals, is indeed an established and widely accepted assumption in the field of legislative studies (Fenno 1973; Mayhew 1974). In his 1996 book, John Carey hypothesized that the adoption of term limits (i.e., a legal ban on re-election past a pre-specified number of electoral mandates served by parliamentarians) would result in the opposite phenomenon: “electoral *disconnection*.” Rephrasing Mayhew (1974), when re-election is not possible, elected officials face diminished incentives to perform activities that are typically considered strategic for improving their chances of securing candidacy or winning constituents over. This is because term-limited MPs in their last term no longer need to please the “selectorate” (party leaders and voters) on which their tenure would depend if re-election were a possibility. Moreover, they become less responsive to the incentives and sanctions party leaders normally offer to prevent slacking and shirking (e.g., Müller 2000; Cox and McCubbins 2007).

Drawing upon Carey's notion of electoral disconnection, we delve into the link between the introduction of term limits for members of the legislative body and changes in parliamentary behavior. Our goal is to understand the effect of term limits on legislators' incentives to perform re-election-related activities. We leverage the case of the Five Star Movement (*Movimento 5 Stelle*, M5S) in Italy. According to its statutory rules, the party does not allow candidates who served up to two mandates at the regional, national, or European level to seek a third mandate. Thus, affiliates who held a parliamentary seat consecutively in the 2013–2018 and 2018–2022 electoral periods (regardless of whether they served in the lower or upper chamber) were unable to run for office under the banner of the Five Star Movement again in 2022. Concomitantly, no other party in the Italian Parliament introduced restrictions of this type.

We exploit an original dataset covering representatives in both chambers of the Italian Parliament (*Camera dei Deputati* and *Senato della Repubblica*) over two periods, the 17th (2013–2018) and the 18th (2018–2022) electoral terms. Our population of interest is members who were elected in 2013 and re-elected in 2018 (317 in total). We estimate a series of linear mixed-effect regression models to assess differences between Five Star Movement affiliates and other parties' MPs with respect to "electorally lucrative" activities after the transition from the 17th to the 18th period. In adherence with the framework of rational choice theory as it pertains to legislative behavior, we assume that representatives act as "single-minded re-election seekers" (Mayhew 1974) and that their actions in parliament are mainly the result of re-election aspirations (Strøm 1997). In line with the electoral disconnection hypothesis, our evidence suggests that term-limited parliamentarians serving their second mandate tend to become less productive (although this effect does not seem to apply to legislative proposals) and more prone to voting against the party line than their non-term-limited colleagues. Specifically, we find that after transitioning to the 18th period, term-limited legislators make – on average – approximately 69 fewer plenary speeches, submit 38 fewer parliamentary questions, and increase their proportion of rebel votes by almost 0.5 percentage points as compared to the change in their non-term-limited peers. We control for several socio-demographic characteristics (e.g., gender), political office (e.g., government membership), and election features (e.g., electoral system). The results are robust to additional tests and alternative statistical approaches. Our findings add to the research on the consequences of term limits for democratic representation and rational choice theory in the context of legislative behavior.

The remainder of the article is organized as follows. In the next section, we present a brief overview of legislative term limits across the world and discuss the notion of electoral disconnection as a consequence of term limits. Next, we provide some context on the case of the Five Star Movement in Italy and derive some testable hypotheses. In the following section, we introduce our data and research design. Finally, we present our results, consider their implications, run additional tests, and evaluate potential alternative explanations.

Legislative term limits and electoral disconnection

Questions or concerns about whether holding office would entice public officials into abusing their authority have afflicted many generations of thinkers. The earliest discussions on this subject date back to the Old Testament and ancient Greece. One solution to the power dilemma was identified in the imposition of legal restrictions preventing rulers from staying in office indefinitely (Petracca 1993). The debate around term limits was revived when Mexico's *Partido Nacional Revolucionario* amended the 1917 Constitution to introduce a ceiling for the election of legislators in the 1930s. Other countries subsequently adopted this institution, including Costa Rica (1949), Malaysia (1957), Ecuador (1979), and the Philippines (1987). The term limit debate has also been a distinctive feature of US politics for a long time. Grassroots movements championing the implementation of term limit reforms go back to the early 1980s. Since the initial

Table 1. Term limits in parliament

Country	Level	Limit	Legal source
Algeria	National	Two terms	2020 Constitution (Art. 127)
Bolivia	National/ Sub-national	Two consecutive terms	2009 Constitution (Art. 156)
Chile*	National	Three terms (Lower) Two terms (Upper)	1980 Constitution (Art. 51)
Costa Rica	National	No consecutive term	1949 Constitution (Art. 107)
Ecuador	National/ Sub-national	Two consecutive terms	2008 Constitution (Art. 114)
France	National	Three consecutive terms	Proposed
Italy	Party-based	Two terms (Five Star Movement)	
Libya	National	Three terms (Upper)	Proposed (2016 Constitution draft)
Malaysia	National	Two terms (Upper)	1957 Constitution (Art. 45)
Mexico	National	One term (Until 2014) Four consecutive terms (Lower) Two consecutive terms (Upper)	1917 Constitution (Art. 59)
Peru	National	No consecutive term	1993 Constitution (Art. 90-A)
Philippines	National/Sub-national	Three consecutive terms (Lower) Two consecutive terms (Upper/ Sub-national)	1987 Constitution (Art. 6)
Rwanda	National	Two terms (Upper)	2003 Constitution (Art. 81)
South Korea	Sub-national	Two consecutive terms	Local Autonomy Act
Switzerland	National/ Sub-national/ Party-based	Two terms (National) Varies by canton/ party (Upper/Sub-national)	Proposed in 2009 (National, rejected)
United States**	Sub-national	Varies by state	
Venezuela	National	Three terms (Until 2009)	1999 Constitution (Art. 192)

*The 2018 Constitution draft establishes a limit of three terms for both chambers (Art. 51). The 2022 Constitution draft establishes a limit of two consecutive terms for both chambers (Art. 262).

**As of this writing, 16 states have term limits for legislators (see Table A1 in the online Appendix). Term limits were introduced in Utah and Idaho in 1994 and subsequently repealed. In four states (Massachusetts; Oregon; Washington; Wyoming), term limits were introduced between 1992 and 1994 and subsequently deemed unconstitutional by the respective State Supreme Court.

referenda in Colorado, Oklahoma, and California in 1990, these movements have grown considerably. As of 2022, term limits for representatives are in force in 16 states (see Table A1 in the online Appendix).

After its diffusion in the Americas and Asia, the issue of restricting the possibility of re-election for MPs made its way to Africa and Europe. In some cases, these restrictions have been proposed for national assemblies (e.g., France and Libya), while in other cases, they are currently in place at the national (e.g., Algeria and Rwanda) or sub-national level (e.g., Switzerland). The table below (Table 1) presents an overview of the characteristics of term limit rules across the world (including proposed reforms as of 2022). We classify the restrictions based on (a) whether they apply to the national or sub-national level (or both), (b) the extent of the limit (e.g., two consecutive terms), and (c) whether they apply to one or both chambers. We also trace their legal sources. As for the level, we introduce a third category, “party-based” (or “party-imposed”) limits. These are constraints enforced by individual parties rather than existing as a codified constitutional rule. This category captures our case study, the Five Star Movement in Italy, and some aspects of the Swiss system.¹ As far as we are aware, the Five Star Movement is the only case of term limits for members of the national parliament currently in force in both chambers within the European continent.²

¹See Frech *et al.* (2021) for an analysis of the Swiss case.

²The Italian Democratic Party (PD) nominally introduced a limit of three *consecutive* terms for their affiliates. However, members who served three consecutive terms in the national legislature are not barred from running for the European Parliament in affiliation with the Democratic Party (Art. 28 of the official party rules, available on the party’s official website. Last accessed: 23 September 2024). In addition, these limits are de facto not enforced as exceptions are contemplated or granted on an ad-hoc basis by PD leaders. Within our population, almost 13% of PD parliamentarians served more than three terms.

The Five Star Movement first ran in the 2013 parliamentary election, obtaining 25.6% of votes. The party debuted as a “populist challenger” party in the Italian political scene with strong Euroskeptic sentiment and a crusade against the Euro (Giannetti *et al.* 2024). It ran again in 2018 (32.7% of votes), becoming the party with the highest number of seats in the legislature. From 2018 to 2022, the M5S saw a decline in support. Throughout this period, the party governed with the right-wing party Lega first (Conte I government, 2018–2019), then with the center-left party PD (Conte II government, 2019–2021), and finally joined a national-unity government led by former ECB President Mario Draghi (2021–2022). In 2019, during the second Conte administration, the M5S held more moderate stances, reneging, for instance, some of the Euroskeptic proposals made in the early stages of its life. This evolution indicates a gradual “party institutionalization” of the Five Star Movement within the political system (Musella and Vercesi 2019: p. 225).

Throughout the years, the Five Star Movement has been promoting term limits as one of its flagship internal policies, with one of its co-founders, Beppe Grillo, as the primary advocate. They are explicitly mentioned in the latest version of the party’s “Code of Ethics” (February 2023).³ Specifically, Art. 2 of the Code of Ethics states that no candidate can run under the banner of the Five Star Movement if they have “already served two terms” (p. 2) for any elective position as a public official. Therefore, the 2022 election in September (19th electoral period) was the first time Five Star Movement affiliates who had already served two mandates were unable to seek re-election. As a consequence, several prominent politicians linked to the party, such as former Justice Minister Alfonso Bonafede, Parliamentary Affairs Minister Riccardo Fraccaro, Infrastructure and Transport Minister Danilo Toninelli, and President of the Chamber of Deputies Roberto Fico, did not run for office, having already served as parliamentarians in the 17th and 18th electoral periods.

Grillo’s publicly stated rationale behind the adoption of term limits is that politics should be conceived as “civil service” and that measures must be taken to prevent citizens from becoming “professional” politicians working on behalf of the lobbies.⁴ MPs should be mere “employees” whose job is strictly to implement the party program and should get fired if they fail to do so (Casaleggio and Grillo 2011). Broadly, this is typical of challenger parties that often claim to be “untarnished by office” (Hobolt and Tilley 2016: p. 974). Overall, term limit proposals are a global phenomenon that, both in Italy and elsewhere, seems to find its roots in citizens’ distrust of traditional party politics and in parties’ desire to turn parliamentarians into party delegates. The reasons put forward by the Five Star Movement in support of legislative term limits largely reflect those put forward by advocates in other political contexts. In countries like Algeria (Khelfa and Zamani 2023), Chile (Heiss 2021), Costa Rica (Carey 1996), Peru (Alfaro 2021), and the Philippines (Labonne, Parsa and Querubin 2021), these restrictions were in fact introduced as an attempt to enhance the credibility of political elites perceived as corrupt or prevent the emergence of political dynasties.

The diffusion of term limits prompted political scientists to dig into the relationship between electoral incentives and the functioning of legislatures (for a literature review, see Mooney 2009). Of the several consequences of adopting these restrictions identified by the existing literature, the behavioral effect is among the most salient ones. When members of the legislative body are constrained by the presence of term limit rules, building a long-running parliamentary career can become a much harder – or even impossible – goal to attain. Hence, elected officials have fewer incentives to specialize and perform constituency-specific or particularistic activities (Klesner 2019). Our focus is on electoral disconnection. Carey’s (1996) work called attention to the fact that the incentives to allocate resources to strategic parliamentary activities and comply with party

³Available on the party’s official website. Last accessed: 24 June 2024. Changes to the Five Star Movement term limit rules were under discussion during the 18th electoral term. However, these changes have been opposed by party leaders in 2018 and 2022. As of this writing, term limit rules have not been majorly revised.

⁴“Il neorealismo e il MoVimento 5 Stelle,” *Il Blog delle Stelle*, 14 May 2011; “Un cuore da ragioniere,” *Il Blog di Beppe Grillo*, 23 July 2022. Last accessed: 24 June 2024.

discipline shrink when parliamentarians become aware that they cannot seek re-election in subsequent terms. In other words, legislators grow *electorally disconnected*, that is, more inclined to forgo electorally rewarding undertakings. For instance, Carey shows that, following the adoption of term limits, Costa Rican legislators became more independent when it came to complying with party directives in roll-call votes. More recently, Fourinaies and Hall (2022) suggested that term-limited state representatives in the US tend to decrease their productivity, although this effect does not necessarily apply to female representatives (Holman and Mahoney 2023).

Disconnection happens because term-limited legislators in their last term no longer need to please the “selectorate” on which their tenure would depend if re-election were a possibility. Constrained by term limit rules, individual MPs become less responsive to and detached from the demands and inputs of their selectorate, which translates into changes in parliamentary behavior and activities. Additionally, the mechanisms party leaders normally resort to in order to mitigate the agency problems (slacking and shirking) that inevitably arise in representative democracies (Strøm 2000) lose effectiveness because candidacy can no longer be used as an incentive. These mechanisms range from screening potential candidates to closely monitoring members’ performance in parliament (Müller 2000; Cox and McCubbins 2007).

The notion of electoral disconnection is coherent with rational choice theory surmising that parliamentarians’ behavior is primarily driven by the goal of re-election (Fenno 1973; Mayhew 1974) and shaped by institutions and formal rules (Strøm 1997), such as the electoral system and candidate selection procedures. Specifically, when the electoral procedure is candidate-centered (e.g., first-past-the-post systems or open-list PR), representatives have more incentives to cultivate “personal vote” strategies (Cain, Ferejohn and Fiorina 1987; Carey and Shugart 1995). Instead, when the electoral procedure is party-centered, i.e., the selection of candidates is heavily or solely influenced by party leaders (e.g., closed-list PR), the greatest incentive is to please the leaders (e.g., Müller 2000) and adhere to the party line in roll-call divisions and in performing legislative activities. Drawing upon this research, we likewise assume that MPs are “single-minded re-election seekers” (Mayhew 1974) and that their behavior is driven by the intent of maximizing votes (and thus their chances of re-election) and that parliamentary activities are exploited “strategically” as means to pursue these objectives (Strøm 1997).

There exists, of course, the perspective that parliamentarians also pursue policy and office aspirations transcending re-election concerns (e.g., Searing 1994). That said, in justifying our assumptions, we concur with Heitshusen, Young and Wood (2005). With respect to whether re-election should be taken as the main objective of all legislators, the authors suggest that we should consider the re-election goal as a constraint. Representatives may indeed run for office for reasons other than purely securing office (e.g., policy ambitions), but the necessity to *stay in office* to be able to go after any other goal they might have will impose itself as a critical and ineludible constraint. Only when confident about the odds of re-election can parliamentarians who are more policy- or constituency-oriented allocate all of their resources to these ends. However, since re-election in the next term is not 100% guaranteed for any member of the legislature, MPs will be forced to redirect at least some – if not most – of their resources toward re-election. Re-election, therefore, becomes the *conditio sine qua non* any other political aspiration can be pursued. This is especially true in the Italian case, as indicated by Chiaramonte et al. (2022). In the last decade, Italy has been characterized by high electoral volatility and instability in both political supply and demand, where parties that emerged as winners in one election often saw their electoral fortunes shrink significantly in the next round.⁵

With this in mind, to quantify potential changes in electoral incentives, we look at if and how levels of election-related activities change as a result of the term limit restrictions. There is no set list of parliamentary activities that are *always* strategic for re-election because the strategic nature of these activities depends on the existing institutions and formal rules. In the next section, we

⁵In the timeframe considered in this study in particular (2013–2022), parliamentary turnover exceeded 60%.

contextualize the environment in which the Five Star Movement operates, and we derive testable hypotheses related to strategic parliamentary activities in Italy.

The Five Star Movement and strategic parliamentary activities in Italy

We investigate the electoral disconnection hypothesis by studying if and how the term limits imposed by the Five Star Movement in Italy affected the incentives of legislators to allocate resources to strategic election-related activities. As we anticipated, the strategic nature of parliamentary activities depends on the existing institutions and formal rules, such as the electoral system and candidate selection procedures.

In the Italian case, in the 2013 election (17th electoral period), all seats were allocated based on a closed-list proportional (PR) system with a majority bonus (“*Legge Calderoli*,” “Calderoli” Electoral Law). For the 2018 and 2022 elections (18th and 19th electoral periods), Italy used a mixed system for both chambers (“*Legge Rosato*,” “Rosato” Electoral Law). In this case, the country was divided into single and multi-member districts (SMD/MMD), where 63% of seats were allocated based on proportional representation (closed-list for domestic constituencies), and the remaining 37% of seats were allocated in a majoritarian fashion. Majoritarian candidates would have to be endorsed by one or more political parties that formed a pre-electoral coalition. Voters would then jointly vote for an electoral list for PR seats and the candidates corresponding to that list for SMD seats, precluding the possibility of split-ticket voting.⁶

With respect to candidate selection procedures, the Five Star Movement is somewhat anomalous within the Italian party scene. In 2013, the lists of candidates for the upcoming election were in part the product of online primaries. Only individuals with no official party affiliation and who had not held public office between 2009 and 2013 would be able to feature on these lists. Moreover, voters in the online primaries were only able to choose from candidates residing in their own electoral district (i.e., no “parachuted” candidates). Importantly, these candidates still had to be *screened* and *pre-approved* by the party before they could run in these primaries. In 2018, the same method was used for assembling the PR lists. As for majoritarian elections, the candidates were *unilaterally* selected by Five Star Movement leaders, allowing for the possibility of parachuting candidates in single-member districts.⁷ The selection process was similar in 2022. Given the characteristics of the electoral systems discussed so far, in the periods covered in this study (2013–2022), candidacy for affiliates of the Five Star Movement was primarily determined by the party leaders but also by its electorate. To varying degrees, candidates aspiring to be elected had to secure the support of both.⁸ To test the extent to which the electoral disconnection hypothesis holds, we consider a series of parliamentary activities that can be used for signaling purposes vis-à-vis *both* party leaders and constituents.

The first activity we consider, namely, our first dependent variable, is the number of “rebel” votes, which are relevant to both selectorates. Rebel votes are the instances where representatives vote against the party line in a given roll-call division. The propensity of individual legislators to defect largely depends on the form of government. In a parliamentary system like Italy, executive survival is conditional on party unity because a legislative majority must support the executive at all times. The opposition likewise needs to build a unified coalition to obstruct and make credible removal threats. As a result, defection is relatively rare in the context of parliamentary government

⁶For illustrative purposes, we show the boundaries of the single and multi-member districts for the lower chamber in the 2018 election in Figure A1 in the online Appendix.

⁷Between 2009 and 2022, the Five Star Movement changed its leadership several times. In 2016, upon the death of co-founder Gianroberto Casaleggio, Davide Casaleggio (Gianroberto’s son) became founding partner until 2021 when he left as a form of protest. As for the party’s *political* leaders, the first leader was Luigi Di Maio (2017–2020), followed by Vito Crimi (2020–2021), and Giuseppe Conte (2021–). For additional information on the organization of the Five Star Movement, see Mosca (2014), Bordignon and Ceccarini (2015), and Tronconi (2015).

⁸On candidate selection procedures, see Mosca, Vaccari and Valeriani (2015), Vittori (2021), and Donelli (2023).

(Sieberer 2006). To ensure unity party leaders may employ various carrot-and-stick tools, such as floor time privileges or committee appointments (see Andeweg and Thomassen 2011). Among these, candidacy is the most important one. Hence, ambitious party affiliates who wish to run for office will be discouraged from voting against the party line because of the negative signal “rebellious” sends to the leaders responsible for candidate selection.

The propensity of individual legislators to defect also depends on the degree to which the electoral system provides incentives for assembly members to pursue personal vote strategies. As discussed above, Italy is a mostly party-centered case in that the selection of candidates for national elections – both in the case of PR and SMD elections – is heavily influenced or entirely determined by party elites (e.g., D’Alimonte 2003). Furthermore, the literature has demonstrated that, in general, Italian parliamentarians who vote against the party directives more frequently are *less likely* to be re-elected (Galasso and Nannicini 2017).⁹ In the specific context of the Five Star Movement, this relationship could be in part moderated by the presence of online primaries. Albeit marginally, these primaries allow the public to influence the selection of candidates. Because of the active involvement of voters in the process of candidate selection, primaries might create *at least some* incentives for legislators elected through PR lists to cultivate personal vote and disregard the official party position regarding a particular division in parliament. In other words, primaries might make it rational for some representatives to “break the whip” (Willumsen and Öhberg 2017; Rehmer 2020). However, scholars have shown that this was not the case for Five Star Movement affiliates during the 17th electoral period (Rombi and Seddone 2017). Moreover, the Five Star Movement was also the parliamentary group with the highest number of expulsions of its own members from the party. Oftentimes, these expulsions were the result of individual legislators criticizing party leaders, which might have reduced potential incentives to deviate springing from the direct involvement of the public in the selection of candidates (Tronconi 2018; Vittori 2023). To summarize, even in the case of Five Star Movement candidates running in the online primaries, candidacy still had to undergo a screening process by the party, and candidacy for majoritarian elections was exclusively determined by the party. Finally, the act of rebelling might have been punished with measures as drastic as expulsion. It follows that rebel votes would have been an unwise move for Five Star Movement parliamentarians hoping to be re-elected. When MPs are constrained in their ability to be re-elected by the presence of term limits, though, the traditional mechanisms that foster party discipline lose effectiveness and the incentives for legislators to vote cohesively to please the party elites dwindle. Therefore, term-limited representatives in their second term might increase reliance on rebel votes to further personal policy (position-taking behavior) and career ambitions. Indeed, one possible explanation for this phenomenon, as suggested by Carey (1996), is that candidates who plan on pursuing a career outside of parliament could exploit legislative votes to send a message or appeal to certain interest groups or lobbies. It could also be that term limits induce a “Burkean shift,” as hypothesized by Carey et al. (2006), that is, a shift from a party delegate to a more “trustee” style of representation.

Defining rebel votes as a legislator’s percentage ratio of votes that deviate from the official position of their party in a given roll-call division to the total votes cast by the legislator, we hypothesize that:

Five Star Movement members serving their second mandate will exhibit a higher percentage ratio of rebel votes in the 18th electoral period compared to other parties (H1).

The second parliamentary activity we focus on (our second dependent variable) is the number of plenary speeches made by individual representatives. In party-centered electoral systems in particular, the possibility of speaking in plenary meetings is typically controlled by party leaders (Proksch and Slapin 2012) and constrained by institutional rules (Giannetti and Pedrazzani 2016).

⁹Our evidence also shows that this is indeed the case, see Table A2 in the online Appendix.

The number of speeches made by an MP is affected by different factors, such as the ideological distance between a legislator and the party elites, the level of expertise of parliamentarians with respect to a specific topic, or the level of experience as a member of a relevant parliamentary committee (Yildirim *et al.* 2019; Louwerse and Van Vonna 2022). Speeches are an important channel for candidates to reaffirm their allegiance to the party (Bauman *et al.* 2017). They are also especially important for candidates running in primary elections because parliamentary speeches offer a good opportunity for politicians to send a message to voters, given that these speeches are generally picked up by the media and circulated on social networks. In fact, Marcinkiewicz and Stegmaier (2019) show a positive relationship between the number of speeches in parliament and the number of preferential votes obtained by a candidate. In the Italian case, the control exercised by parties on the possibility of speaking in a plenary meeting is dictated by the specific procedure in use (e.g., decree-laws), and it is not exceptionally tight. Proksch and Slapin (2015) find Italy to be a *median* case in the “party leadership control over floor access” (p. 83), with parliamentarians generally free to speak in plenary sessions. In fact, Italy is classified as a “party list favored, individual access” type, halfway between the two extremes “individual access, no party list” and “party list, no individual access.”¹⁰ Considering the benefits legislators can derive from parliamentary speeches highlighted by the literature reviewed so far, for Five Star Movement representatives (both those going through primaries and those selected by party leaders for majoritarian races), speeches might be considered a strategic activity for re-election. Consequently, legislators who cannot seek re-election due to term limits will have fewer incentives to speak. Term-limited members might choose to disengage because the ban on re-election results in lower utility that can be extracted from performing this activity.

Defining parliamentary speeches as the number of plenary speeches made by an individual assembly member, we hypothesize that:

Five Star Movement members serving their second mandate will make fewer parliamentary speeches in the 18th electoral period compared to other parties (H2).

In addition to rebel votes and plenary speeches, we look at two variables more strictly pertaining to legislative activity and less procedurally constrained (compared to speeches): legislative proposals (private members’ bills) and written parliamentary questions, which Italian parliamentarians can submit freely. Both of these activities have been used by scholars to measure the productivity of MPs (Akirav 2019). Introducing many bills might boost the odds of being selected when seeking re-election because presenting proposals can be perceived as partisan “service” by the party leaders in charge of selecting candidates (Hermansen 2018; Put *et al.* 2024). Furthermore, looking at the case of New Zealand, Williams and Indridason (2018) explicitly argue that legislative proposals introduced by members of the legislature serve as an electoral connection.

In the Italian context, parliamentary questions are instead primarily used to promote territorial interests (Russo 2013), as well as a tool to scrutinize and hold the government accountable. Written questions can help representatives as a means for them to “make themselves known” to their constituents and potentially gain votes in primary elections. This is because parliamentary questions can be used to bring local issues to the attention of the national government and demand its intervention. Moreover, due to the succinct nature of these questions, they are easy to publicize in the local media such that voters can be made aware that their MP is “fighting” to solve problems that affect them on a daily basis (Russo 2012).

While we remain *a priori* agnostic when it comes to testing the electoral disconnection hypothesis by looking at both bills and written questions, we note earlier studies have found no evidence that proposals can help candidates be re-elected in Italy (see also Table A2 in the online

¹⁰In the online Appendix, we review the rules of procedures pertaining to speeches in both chambers of the Italian Parliament, which confirm this proposition.

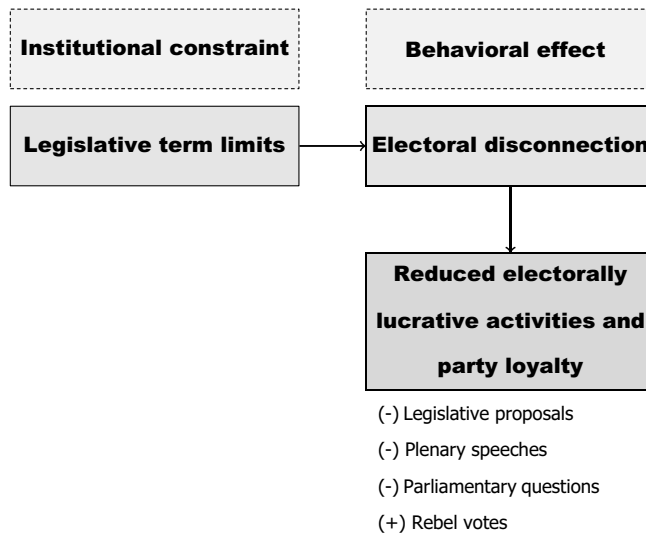


Figure 1. Term limits and electoral disconnection.

Appendix). Conversely, parliamentary questions have been found to be a strategic tool for re-election, but mostly for incumbents in the Southern regions, which have a stronger tradition of preferential voting (Marangoni and Russo 2018). Following the same logic as plenary speeches, bills and questions can be beneficial for members trying to secure the support of the public and party leaders, but they are costly undertakings. Parliamentarians constrained by term limits will not be able to extract the same utility as their non-term-limited colleagues from performing these activities.

Defining legislative proposals and parliamentary questions as the number of, respectively, private members' bills and written parliamentary questions submitted by an individual MP, we hypothesize that:

Five Star Movement affiliates serving their second mandate will submit fewer legislative proposals and written parliamentary questions in the 18th electoral period compared to other parties (H3).

Figure 1 summarizes our hypotheses and expectations.

The identified variables (rebel votes; speeches; proposals; questions) are deemed crucial when it comes to candidate selection and re-election by research cutting across different political systems. While our discussion mainly revolved around the electorally lucrative uses of these parliamentary activities, we acknowledge that these activities can serve multiple purposes. For example, in addition to electoral incentives, plenary speeches and bills can be exploited to signal policy priorities or to show off one's capabilities with respect to holding a legislative office. Strictly speaking, we cannot necessarily directly observe or measure the underlying incentives (certainly not in the case of aggregate data). However, under the assumption that rational legislators will allocate resources to those activities that maximize the chances of re-election before anything else and that the activities we consider are paramount to this end, we can look at the extent to which the presence of term limits and thus electoral disconnection causes shifts in the way these activities are performed. In other words, in an aggregate sense, we think of speeches, proposals, questions, and (rebel) votes as "strategies" or, as put by Strøm (2012), "endogenous prescriptions as to how

actors (here: parliamentarians) may most successfully and efficiently act to maximize the likelihood of whatever outcomes they favor” (p. 87).

Given that our focus is strictly on the Italian case, we corroborate the validity of our variable selection empirically by estimating a logistic model of the re-election of candidates in the 17th-18th and 18th-19th electoral periods. Similar to previous studies (Marino and Martocchia Diodati 2017; Marangoni and Russo 2018), the results confirm that all the aforementioned parliamentary activities exhibit a significant impact on the probability of re-election, except for legislative proposals (see Table A2 in the online Appendix). Specifically, parliamentarians who made a higher number of plenary speeches or submitted more written questions were more likely to be re-elected in the next term. Conversely, those with higher rates of rebel votes were less likely to be re-elected. In the next section, we discuss our data and research design.

Data and research design

To test the electoral disconnection hypothesis, we investigate whether representatives affiliated with the Five Star Movement advancing from their first to their second mandate exhibit any differences in the levels of electorally lucrative parliamentary activities (speeches, bills, and written questions) and rebel votes, compared to other members in the legislature whose ability to run for office is not restricted by party-imposed term limits. Given the impossibility of running for election, we expect term-limited legislators serving their second mandate to be more likely to disregard parliamentary activities that are strategically performed by parliamentarians to increase the odds of securing candidacy and re-election and be more likely to rebel as the incentives to vote along the party lines fade. As we mentioned earlier, the Five Star Movement first gained seats in the Italian legislature in the 2013 election. Therefore, our study incorporates the last two electoral terms, the 17th (2013–2018) and 18th (2018–2022) period. We adopt a quasi-difference-in-differences approach to conduct an empirical analysis of the relationship between term limits and electoral disconnection. The basic model we estimate is the following:

$$y_{it} = \alpha + \mathbf{x}_{it}\beta$$

where y_{it} is the dependent variable, namely, measures of parliamentary activities (speeches, questions, etc.), α is a constant, and $\mathbf{x}_{it}$ is a vector of predictors with coefficients β . We allow the intercepts to vary by legislator and region to capture unit-specific differences in the outcome. We include an interaction between a dummy variable identifying the MPs affiliated with the Five Star Movement and a dummy variable identifying the 18th electoral period. The coefficient of this interaction term is our main effect of interest, denoting the change in behavior of Five Star Movement deputies between the two electoral periods covered in our study compared to the change in behavior of their colleagues who are not constrained by term limits.

We include the following controls: candidate vulnerability, electoral system (PR or SMD), legislative office, government membership, party switch, election chamber (House or Senate), experience in parliament (tenure), age, and gender. The model features an interaction term between candidate vulnerability and the electoral system variable to differentiate the vulnerability of legislators elected in majoritarian elections from that of legislators elected through PR lists. In what follows, we describe these variables in greater detail.

Candidate vulnerability, electoral system: Winning a parliamentary seat by a narrow margin in a majoritarian system or a proportional representation system makes an incumbent concerned about re-election chances. To increase their odds of securing a seat, MPs could try to increase their productivity (Akirav 2020), especially those furthering particularistic interests in the case of SMD candidates. The electoral system for the 2013 general election was a closed-list PR. In 2018, Italy switched to a mixed system (SMD and PR). To calculate electoral vulnerability, we followed Ferrara (2004)’s analysis of the “Mattarella” electoral law in Italy (the mixed electoral system in force from 1993 to 2005). For candidates elected based on proportional representation, we

considered the number of candidates elected from a party list in each constituency and the position of the elected candidates on the list, i.e., whether an MP was first, second, third, etc., on a given list. For those elected in single-member districts, we calculated the gap between the top two candidates. The resulting indicator, thus, measures electoral volatility as the ratio between a candidate's position on the list and the total number of candidates elected from that list for PR legislators and the gap between two candidates for SMD legislators.¹¹ We then transformed the variable such that the vulnerability for SMD and PR candidates would be on the same scale and that a one-unit increment would represent an increase in vulnerability in both cases.

Government membership, legislative office, party switch, election chamber: The intensity and quality of parliamentary activities for cabinet members and parliamentarians are fundamentally different, even among co-partisans. For instance, cabinet members do not submit written questions as questions are directed toward them. As such, we control for government membership. In the same vein, as demonstrated by Sorace (2018), when activities are procedurally constrained or highly visible, such as plenary speeches, MPs holding a legislative office (whips, committee chairs, etc.) are more likely to engage in these activities due to expertise, status, or other political considerations. Therefore, we include a dummy for legislative office.¹² We also add a control for representatives who switched parties during the electoral term, as their incentives might differ from those who did not switch. Some Five Star Movement MPs serving their second mandate might not have altered the intensity of parliamentary activities in the prospect of changing party affiliation to stay in office. Finally, we include a dummy recording the parliamentary chamber in which politicians served their mandate to account for potential variation in behavior that might be due to differences between the two chambers (e.g., Pinto 2023).

Tenure, age, gender: Experience in parliament (tenure), age at the time of election (age), and gender were also included as control variables. Higher parliamentary experience can make MPs more independent and capable of carrying out parliamentary tasks more efficiently (Kousser 2005). Additionally, higher tenure normally implies higher chances of being re-elected (Marino and Martocchia Diodati 2017). Women may also be more productive in the legislature to “meet the expectations” behind their election (Holman and Mahoney 2023), even if they may be barred from speaking in plenary meetings by their male counterparts (Fernandes, Lopes da Fonseca and Won 2021). At the same time, the older a deputy is, the more likely they will not seek re-election. For each representative, we collected data related to the aforementioned socio-demographic characteristics (tenure, age, gender), election features (constituency, electoral system, position on the list, percentage of votes obtained by the candidate), and legislative behavior (number of plenary speeches, number of bills introduced, number of written questions submitted, proportion of rebel votes). We did this for both periods and both chambers of the Italian Parliament. In total, the dataset covers over 2000 assembly members. The population we consider for our study is those elected to either chamber in 2013 who started a second mandate in 2018.¹³ This allows us to compare how each legislator's behavior in parliament changed over time and whether this change is statistically different for MPs with term limit constraints and those without. The final product is

¹¹For example, if SMD candidate A and candidate B received, respectively, 70% and 30% of votes, the winner's (candidate A) degree of vulnerability would be $70-30=40$. Higher values imply a larger gap between two candidates and, therefore, lower vulnerability. Instead, if a party won four seats in a PR election in a given district, the position of the four elected candidates on the list determines their vulnerability, where the vulnerability of the first candidate on the list is $1/4=0.25$ and the vulnerability of the last candidate on the list is $4/4=1$. In this case, higher values imply higher volatility.

¹²We assigned a value of 1 to the variable “Legislative Office” for those who held a party office or legislative office. We considered as party office the MPs who, during their term, were presidents, acting presidents, group leaders, vice-presidents of a parliamentary group, or mixed group representatives in the Chamber or Senate during the 17th or 18th legislature. We considered as legislative office the MPs who, during their term, were presidents, vice presidents, or acting representatives of a permanent committee in the Chamber or Senate in the 17th or 18th legislature.

¹³We cannot extend the test to the electoral period that started in 2022 (19th electoral term) because it is ongoing as of this writing.

Table 2. Summary statistics

	Mean	SD	Median	Min	Max	Skew	Kurtosis
<i>Dependent Variables</i>							
Re-election	0.31	0.46	0	0	1	0.82	-1.33
Leg. Proposals	6.22	8.82	4	0	96	4.21	30.61
Parl. Speeches	43.76	55.75	26	0	604	3.43	18.85
Parl. Questions	24.17	43.39	9	0	514	4.74	32.39
Rebel Votes	0.91	1.93	0.30	0	24.53	5.83	46.01
<i>Main Effects of Interest</i>							
Five Star Movement	0.25	0.43	0	0	1	1.14	-0.71
18 th Electoral Period	0.50	0.50	0	0	1	0.01	-2
<i>Controls</i>							
Candidate Vulnerability	0.32	0.24	0.27	0	1	1.30	0.87
SMD Election	0.19	0.39	0	0	1	1.59	0.53
Legislative Office	0.59	0.49	1	0	1	-0.37	-1.86
Gov. Membership	0.09	0.28	0	0	1	2.91	6.45
Party Switch	0.33	0.47	0	0	1	0.73	-1.47
Tenure	1.77	1.31	1	1	10	2.33	6.60
Age	48.17	10.80	47.94	25.07	89.54	0.14	-0.41
Gender	0.33	0.47	0	0	1	0.72	-1.49

a longitudinal parliamentarian-electoral period structure. In total, we have 317 legislators monitored over two terms ($N = 634$). Throughout this time, six governments in total held office: Letta (2013–2014), Renzi (2014–2016), and Gentiloni (2016–2018) in the 17th period, Conte I (2018–2019), Conte II (2019–2021), and Draghi (2021–2022) in the 18th period.

We obtained the data on the socio-demographic characteristics of elected officials and their legislative behavior via a SPARQL endpoint query of the official Linked Open Data repositories of the Italian Chamber of Deputies and Senate.¹⁴ We collected the election data from Eligendo, the official data repository of the Italian Interior Ministry.¹⁵ Finally, data on rebel votes were kindly supplied by the Openpolis foundation.¹⁶ Table 2 presents some summary statistics of the variables included in our model. In the next section, we present our results and discuss their implications.

Results and discussion

Table 3 displays the linear mixed-effects regression model estimates retrieved via maximum likelihood. In terms of the parliamentary speeches, parliamentary questions, and legislative proposals variables, the coefficients represent the raw number of plenary speeches made by a legislator, parliamentary questions submitted, and legislative proposals introduced, respectively. Rebel votes range from 0 to 100, representing the percentage ratio of roll-call votes that deviate from the party line for each MP.¹⁷

Our main effect of interest is the change in behavior vis-à-vis activities related to electoral disconnection between the 17th and 18th electoral period for Five Star Movement deputies, compared to the change in the behavior of legislators who are not constrained by the two-mandate limit rule. We quantify this effect by estimating the coefficient of an interaction term between a dummy variable identifying Five Star Movement MPs and a dummy variable identifying the second electoral period covered in our study, i.e., the period when the possibility of re-election under the banner of the Five Star Movement decays as a result of the party-imposed term limits.

¹⁴<https://dati.camera.it/it/>; <https://dati.senato.it/sito/home>. Last accessed: 24 June 2024.

¹⁵<https://elezioni.interno.gov.it/>. Last accessed: 18 October 2024.

¹⁶<https://www.openpolis.it/openpolis-foundation/>. Last accessed: 18 October 2024.

¹⁷For example, if a parliamentarian participated in 100 divisions and defected once, the defection rate would be 1.

Table 3. Linear mixed-effect models of electoral disconnection

	Leg. Proposals	Parl. Speeches	Parl. Questions	Rebel Votes
Intercept	8.00*** (3.10)	47.07*** (17.71)	49.12*** (12.60)	0.58 (0.38)
Five Star Movement (Ref. Other Parties)	-2.80* (1.44)	49.67*** (9.14)	30.14*** (6.14)	-0.59*** (0.20)
18 th Electoral Period (Ref. 17 th Electoral Period)	0.02 (0.74)	-6.02 (6.25)	-7.36** (3.64)	-0.95*** (0.14)
Five Star Movement×18 th	0.13 (1.06)	-69.25*** (10.55)	-38.15*** (5.75)	0.48** (0.23)
Candidate Vulnerability	2.09 (3.12)	12.48 (26.04)	46.31*** (15.84)	1.34** (0.57)
SMD Election (Ref. PR Election)	0.76 (2.77)	-9.97 (24.21)	-25.85* (14.35)	-0.32 (0.52)
Vulnerability×SMD	-0.70 (4.72)	4.92 (40.49)	-6.95 (24.31)	-0.46 (0.88)
Legislative Office (Ref. No Office)	1.01 (0.63)	7.05 (5.32)	4.32(3.21)	0.20* (0.12)
Gov. Membership (Ref. No Membership)	-2.39*** (0.87)	-23.40*** (7.54)	-14.89*** (4.49)	-0.28 (0.19)
Party Switch (Ref. No Party Switch)	0.77 (0.79)	6.25 (6.08)	4.77 (3.85)	0.24* (0.13)
Chamber (Ref. Lower House)	0.02 (0.87)	-15.51** (6.38)	4.29 (4.13)	0.27** (0.14)
Tenure	0.85* (0.46)	4.52* (2.47)	4.52** (1.80)	0.31*** (0.05)
Age	-0.08 (0.06)	-0.06 (0.36)	-0.90*** (0.26)	-0.01 (0.01)
Gender (Ref. Male)	2.42** (1.17)	-12.83** (6.17)	-5.72 (4.56)	-0.05 (0.13)
Legislator RE	✓	✓	✓	✓
Region RE	✓	✓	✓	✓
Observations	634	634	634	601
AIC	4531.20	7006.24	6438.19	2118.66
Log-likelihood	-2248.60	-3486.12	-3202.09	-1042.33

Note: Standard errors in parentheses; *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.10$.

Our expectations are widely confirmed, except for legislative proposals.¹⁸ In terms of the direction, in line with our hypotheses, we find that Five Star Movement legislators who advance from the 17th to the 18th electoral period, losing the ability to run for office in affiliation with the Five Star Movement, tend to make fewer plenary speeches, submit fewer written questions, present fewer legislative proposals, and vote in such a way that deviates from the official party position to a greater extent, compared to the members who are not subject to the same term limit restrictions. As for the magnitude, substantively, we find that, on average, Five Star Movement affiliates in the 18th electoral period make approximately 69 fewer plenary speeches, submit 38 fewer parliamentary questions, and increase their percentage ratio of rebel votes by 0.48 percentage points compared to the previous period. This increase is quite large, considering that the sample mean of rebel votes is 0.91% (see Table 2). Figure 2 shows the predictions for the interaction term included in our model.

The x-axis indicates the transition from the 17th to the 18th electoral period. The y-axis displays the linear predictions from the models presented in Table 3. The black lines indicate Five Star Movement legislators, while the gray lines indicate those affiliated with the other parties in the assembly. We can see that, in the first period, the Five Star Movement exhibited higher average levels of parliamentary speeches and questions (but not legislative proposals) and a lower average defection rate as compared to their non-co-partisans.

Overall, speeches, questions, and rebel votes are trending downward for all groups after the transition to the second electoral period covered in our study. This is potentially reflecting the general reduction in parliamentary activities due to the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., Bar-SimanTov 2020). Moreover, consistent with the fact that we observe an overall decrease in rebel votes, executive influence increased during the pandemic, with a growing percentage of government proposals introduced as decrees and/or confidence votes (Bromo et al. 2023), which might have

¹⁸We note that there is a tendency in the Italian Parliament to re-introduce (or “recycle”) old private members’ bills in subsequent electoral periods. Specifically, Five Star Movement MPs could have not recycled any proposal in the 17th legislature, as it was the first time the party sat in parliament. However, they could have recycled proposals after transitioning to the 18th period. This might contribute to explaining why we see no statistically significant differences in this variable.

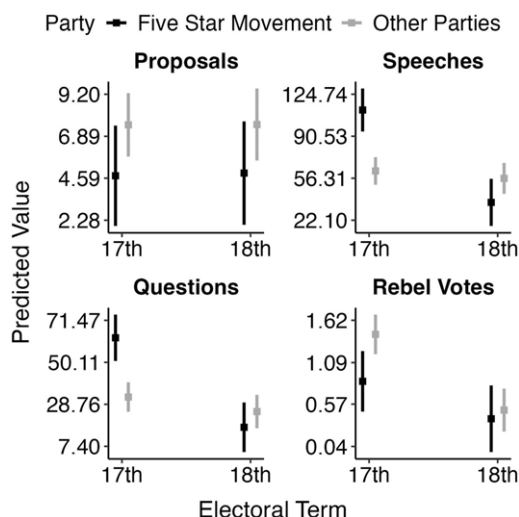


Figure 2. Interaction effects of Five Star Movement and 18th electoral period (95% CIs).

forced party unity. However, the fact that we still see significant differences, even though all MPs were equally exposed to the COVID challenges, gives further support to the electoral disconnection hypothesis. In other words, both the term-limited and non-term-limited groups of politicians reduced the overall intensity of their activities after transitioning to the 18th term. Yet, this reduction is significantly greater in the group of Five Star Movement affiliates with respect to speeches, questions, and (to a lesser extent) proposals and not as great with respect to rebel votes. This evidence supports the idea that, all else equal, the observed changes might be driven by the electoral disconnection experienced by Five Star Movement officials as a result of term limit rules.

The fact that we observe an increase in rebel votes and a decrease in speeches and written questions in M5S affiliates who cannot run for office again weakens the image of parliamentarians as mere employees whose job is strictly to implement the party program proposed by the party founders. Grillo envisioned members of the Five Star Movement as being “anthropologically different” from professional politicians. Yet, our results paint a different picture. M5S parliamentarians appear to be swayed by electoral incentives in a way that is coherent with what is assumed of all rational legislators and they are not indifferent to the loss of these incentives. Five Star Movement representatives indeed come across as single-minded re-election seekers who grow electorally disconnected when re-election is no longer a possibility. More generally, from a comparative perspective, the empirical evidence shows that term limits usually do not produce the desired effects. For example, term limit restrictions failed to reduce the prominence of political dynasties in the Philippines (Labonne *et al.* 2021) and did not curb the influence of local party bosses in Ecuador (Pachano 2006). Our analysis shows that the Five Star Movement does not seem to be an outlier in this regard.

The controls also provide some useful insights. It is important to interpret these by considering the fact that our population is different from the total number of legislators in either electoral period. We selected only those who were elected in 2013 and started a second mandate in 2018. This means that most novice MPs are not included in our sample. The presence of neophytes usually results in higher yields and discipline (reputation building) (e.g., Shomer 2009). Indeed, we do see this in the Five Star Movement dummy coefficient, indicating that Five Star Movement representatives between 2013 and 2018 (all neophytes) exhibit lower average levels of defection. The absence of novices might explain why we observe a positive and significant vulnerability

coefficient with respect to rebel votes of legislators elected on the basis of proportional representation, given that, according to our data, novices are, on average, more vulnerable. Moreover, vulnerable PR candidates can rely on questions to portray themselves as “constituency servant” to increase their chances of staying in office (Marangoni and Russo 2018). Perhaps, this explains why we see a positive and significant vulnerability coefficient in the parliamentary questions model. We do not detect any statistically significant relationship between an increase in the vulnerability of SMD candidates and changes in our outcomes of interest.¹⁹

In the case of legislative office, we observe a positive correlation between our holding an office of this kind and performing the parliamentary activities we consider. This relationship, however, fails to reach statistical significance at the conventional levels in all cases other than rebel votes, suggesting that the status of these MPs might trump partisanship in voting decisions. The government membership variable is in the expected direction in all four models. Moving onto the party switching control, we find a positive and significant relationship between changing party affiliation and defection. This is consistent with the argument that legislators who switch parties rebel to position themselves closer to the party they intend to join in the future (Nokken 2000; Meneghetti et al. 2023). Importantly, however, we note that this effect does not apply to Five Star Movement MPs, as we show in the next section. The tenure and age variables are also as expected. Finally, we point out that the negative and significant gender coefficient for parliamentary speeches confirms Fernandes, Lopes da Fonseca and Won’s (2021) evidence that women are often at a disadvantage regarding speaking in a plenary meeting. We now turn to robustness checks and additional tests related to potential alternative explanations.

Additional tests and alternative explanations

In this section, we run some additional tests and present additional evidence to substantiate the mechanisms we propose and discount some potential alternative explanations. In the previous section, we presented the product of the estimation of a series of linear mixed-effect models with the inclusion of random intercepts for legislators and regions. To corroborate the robustness of our estimates, we also estimated negative binomial (count) models for proposals, speeches, and questions and a quasi-binomial (fractional logit) model for rebel votes as an alternative. These results are available in the online Appendix (Table B1 and Table B2) and are consistent with those shown in Table 3.

As an additional robustness check, we replicated our models by restricting the sample to each chamber individually. The results are available in Table B3 in the online Appendix and show no substantial differences when considering only deputies (lower house) or senators (upper house). The only exception we detect is that our main effect of interest is no longer significant in the case of rebel votes in the Senate.

We performed another robustness check. One possibility is that the changes we observe might be driven by the majority vs. opposition status, which the aggregate nature of the data in our main models does not allow us to deal with dynamically. For legislative proposals, parliamentary speeches, and parliamentary questions, we were able to disaggregate the data by cabinet.²⁰ We thus compiled a new dataset where, for each member of our population, we recorded the levels of a given parliamentary activity by government (six governments in total). This allows us to explicitly take into account the majority and opposition status and party affiliation of each parliamentarian

¹⁹The coefficient for the SMD Election constituent term is negative and significant for parliamentary questions. This is to be interpreted as the effect of being elected in majoritarian elections for candidates whose vulnerability equals 0. These are typically the parachuted candidates who generally have no ties to the district in which they are elected (see D’Alimonte 2003).

²⁰We excluded rebel votes, for which the necessary data was not available.

Table 4. Average differences between Five Star Movement legislators serving first vs. second mandate in the 18th electoral period

Strategic Activity	Mean of First Mandate	Mean of Second Mandate	p-value Difference
Legislative Proposals	3.85	5.67	0.01***
Parliamentary Speeches	26.13	20.41	0.08*
Parliamentary Questions	17.28	10.05	0.00***
Rebel Votes	0.25	0.28	0.58

Note: Welch Two Sample t-tests; ****p* < 0.01, ***p* < 0.05, **p* < 0.10.

for each governmental period. We replicated the models presented in Table 3 with the inclusion of a dummy for majority status and cabinet random effects. The estimates are available in Table B4 in the online Appendix and are consistent with our main results.

As discussed above, one concern is that the significant changes in behavior we observe is the fact that the Five Star Movement transitioned from being an opposition party in the 17th electoral period to joining the governing coalition in the 18th period as well as the fact that the results might be driven by differences between the Five Star Movement and the other parties. To further rule out these possibilities, we compare the levels of parliamentary activity of Five Star Movement MPs serving their second mandate and those serving their first mandate in the 18th electoral period, namely, after the party joined the government coalition. If it is true that changes in behavior were driven by the transition from opposition to majority status and electoral disconnection did not affect the incentives of term-limited legislators, we should not observe any meaningful differences between the group of Five Star Movement affiliates who can run for a second mandate and the group of those who cannot in the 18th period. However, Table 4 shows the opposite. Two sample t-tests suggest that Five Star Movement MPs serving their second mandate submit fewer speeches and written questions and are more prone to rebelling, on average, than Five Star Movement MPs serving their first mandate in the same period. These differences are statistically significant at the conventional levels, except for rebel votes. The figures related to legislative proposals are consistent with the fact that we do not find private members’ bills to significantly impact the probability of re-election. These tests also speak to the heterogeneity between parties: in this case, we are comparing M5S legislators to other M5S legislators, meaning that the statistically significant differences that we detect cannot be driven by fundamental differences between the Five Star Movement and the other parties in the Italian Parliament.

Going back to the incentives that drive parliamentary behavior, the electoral disconnection hypothesis and our analysis are built on the assumption that legislators are single-minded seekers of re-election, implying that other political goals become secondary to the re-election constraint. The increase in rebel votes that we observe is consistent with the fact that, no longer limited by re-election constraints, term-limited parliamentarians have fewer incentives to follow party directives as opposed to personal (or constituency) policy preferences in the event of misalignment between these preferences and the party line. Term limits could induce a “Burkean shift,” as hypothesized by Carey et al. (2006), that is, a shift from a party delegate to a more “trustee” style of representation. It follows that non-electoral goals become drivers of MPs’ voting behavior once the electoral incentives are lost due to term limit restrictions. An alternative is that legislators were primarily interested in policy rather than re-election all along. If that were the case, we would expect to see the observed increase in rebel votes to be correlated with higher policy activism. To investigate this possibility, we run a simple test. We collected data on Italian representatives serving as “rapporteurs,” which implies high levels of interest and engagement in policymaking in parliamentary committees. We looked at the correlation between rebel votes and serving as a rapporteur in term-limited M5S MPs in the 18th electoral term and in their non-term-limited

Table 5. Average differences between Five Star Movement party switchers and non-switchers in the 18th electoral period

Strategic activity	Mean of switchers	Mean of non-switchers	<i>p</i> -value difference
Legislative Proposals	6.20	5.08	0.36
Parliamentary Speeches	22.00	18.58	0.55
Parliamentary Questions	11.52	8.35	0.24
Rebel Votes	0.28	0.27	0.89

Note: Welch Two Sample *t*-tests.

colleagues.²¹ We find a positive, albeit weak, correlation between the two in both cases, but the coefficients are not statistically different, meaning that the Five Star Movement does not exhibit an unusual behavior that might be explained by term limit restrictions in this regard (see Table B5 in the online Appendix). Thus, rebel votes do not appear to be linked to an increased interest in policy, which would not be coherent with the idea of disengagement that comes with electoral disconnection. Although we agree with scholars such as Strøm (1997) that reducing parliamentary behavior to the single-minded re-election goal is a “simplification of reality” (p. 172), this result makes us more confident that re-election is, at the very least, at the top of representatives’ concerns rather than policy.

Another possibility is that changes in behavior might be due to at least some Five Star Movement legislators anticipating that they would switch parties. By changing party affiliation, Five Star Movement MPs would no longer be constrained by term limit rules. Consequently, they might carry out strategic parliamentary activities regularly to further re-election goals rather than losing the incentives to do so as posited by the electoral disconnection hypothesis. To rule out this possibility, we compared the levels of parliamentary activity of Five Star Movement affiliates serving their second mandate (18th electoral period) who switched parties to those who did not. If party switching is driving the observed changes in behavior, the levels of our outcomes of interest should be significantly different across the two groups. However, Table 5 (two sample *t*-tests) suggests that, while representatives who switched tend to exhibit slightly higher levels of electorally lucrative activities and rebel votes, the differences between the two groups are not statistically significant at the conventional levels. In general, it is plausible to think that our main results suggesting that term-limited members exhibit higher rates of rebel votes might be linked to party switching. Specifically, MPs interested in joining a different party once they can no longer run in affiliation with the Five Star Movement might start rebelling in roll-call votes to position themselves closer to the party they intend to join in the future (Nokken 2000; Meneghetti et al. 2023). Yet, we find that the average level of rebel votes is almost identical across the two groups, making us more confident that the observed change in behavior is not affected by party switching.

Overall, these results are coherent with our theoretical framework for which we expect term-limited legislators to become electorally disconnected when they can no longer seek re-election.

Conclusion

In his work, Carey (1996) scrutinized the consequences of term limits for legislators, emphasizing the idea of “electoral disconnection,” the notion that MPs behave differently when they know that re-election is no longer a possibility. We expanded the research agenda on term limits by

²¹Rapporteurs are appointed by parliamentary committees at the end of a review process (Rules of Procedure of the Chamber of Deputies, rCD, Art.79.12; Rules of Procedure of the Senate, rS, Art. 43.5). Serving as a rapporteur multiple times typically indicates a strong policy interest, as majority or opposition rapporteurs are the representatives who handle bills at the committee stage and act on behalf of the committee in plenary meetings. Rapporteurs are responsible for presenting a proposal to the legislature (rCD, Art. 73.3; rS, Art. 43), but they must receive authorization from the committee prior to presenting the proposal (rCD, Art. 79.14; rS, Art. 77).

investigating the electoral disconnection hypothesis, leveraging the case of the Italian Five Star Movement. According to its founders, the party introduced term limits to improve the quality of representation. The “citizen legislator” would work as a party delegate and bring their working experience to the political institutions, performing better than a professional politician. What we find is that Five Star Movement parliamentarians, when constrained by the term limits, become more disloyal towards their party and engage in fewer parliamentary activities, compared to their non-term-limited peers. These results are in line with the empirical evidence from cases other than Italy where term limits have similarly been shown to affect the behavior of elected MPs (e.g., Fourniaies and Hall 2022).

While the scholarly work on term limits is quite rich, particularly in the American context, this study fills several lacunae. First, the electoral disconnection hypothesis has yet to be examined at the *party level*, as the literature usually focuses on differences between US state assemblies with and without term limits, especially in the realm of policymaking, rather than individual parties. Second, the evidence evaluating the idea of electoral disconnection *directly* (and empirically) is limited. In this regard, our findings add to the research on the consequences of term limits for democratic representation and the incentives that drive the behavior of elected officials. Third, we go beyond extant analyses’ spatial and temporal breadth by considering the case of the Five Star Movement in Italy. This offers a unique opportunity to monitor changes *within* the population of term-limited legislators and *between* term-limited and non-term-limited legislators *in the same environment*. Furthermore, we believe that gaining a better understanding of these dynamics is timely in light of the fact that, since 2022, Beppe Grillo has been more vocal about the wish to amend the Italian Constitution to extend the Five Star Movement’s term limit rules to all Italian MPs and that the number of countries introducing or considering term limit reforms is increasing globally.

We list some considerations related to our analysis. First, we focused on some of the behavioral effects identified by the academic literature on term limits. Other potential effects concern the relationship between MPs and interest groups and bureaucracies. Considering the impossibility of re-election, parliamentarians might be more prone to cultivate extra-parliamentary relations with different actors for future career paths (Carey 1996). Future research might dive deeper into the career trajectories of Five Star Movement legislators whose parliamentary career was truncated by term limits. Second, the term limit restrictions examined in this study are party-based. One might wonder whether the effects of term limits enforced at the national level could be comparable to those produced at the party level. Our underlying assumption is that term limits would indeed cause similar effects regardless of the scale of their application, given that they are typically introduced for reasons that do not differ much from the reasons stated by the M5S founders. Further research could investigate whether other cases conform empirically to what we observed in this case.

Finally, we believe our evidence is suggestive that electoral disconnection does play a role in affecting the performance of parliamentarians. Still, we reiterate that treating legislative behavior purely as a function of re-election incentives is a simplification of what is likely a much more complex reality. In practice, there might be a hierarchy of incentives that parliamentarians prioritize at different times. Moreover, parliamentary activities can serve multiple purposes. Our results reveal that there is a significant relationship between term limits and the extent to which MPs allocate resources to each one of the election-related activities we consider. However, the data at hand does not allow us to unequivocally separate the degree to which changes in the intensity of these activities are due solely to the loss of electoral incentives (which we contend is the main effect) from the degree to which these changes might be due to other movements within the incentive structure of legislators, which also includes policy and office incentives. Additional research could complement our study by shedding some light on this incentive structure through qualitative evidence and textual analysis of speeches and interviews.

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