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## *Foxes and Hedgehogs in Legislatures: Why Do Some MPs Become Policy Specialists and Others Generalists?*

Which legislators become specialized in particular policy areas (hedgehogs), and which develop into policy generalists (foxes)? Instead of focusing on the individual characteristics of MPs, we build on institutionalist literature and argue that an MP's specialization arises from an interaction between MP and parliamentary leadership. These interactions generate demand for policy generalists depending on a leadership position, committee membership, government status, and parliamentary group size. Policy specialization is measured by how many different topics a legislator addresses in Parliament. Using data from Germany from 1998 to 2013, topic-coded parliamentary questions are combined with MPs' personal and partisan data. Descriptively, foxes are common in Germany and dominate in Parliament. The subsequent estimation indicates that policy specialists are related to government status and parliamentary group size.

When entering Parliament, legislators face a series of decisions about how to spend their time and resources within the chamber and thereby define their legislative style. Using Isaiah Berlin's metaphor, we can distinguish between two types of MPs: foxes and hedgehogs. Foxes are generalists who participate in political debates about many issues. As to say, they "know many little things." Conversely, hedgehogs "know one big thing."

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These MPs speak only about a narrow set of topics on which they presumably have a high degree of knowledge. Knowing to what extent legislators could be classified as foxes or hedgehogs, and which factors drive such decisions, will help us to better understand the current challenges of democratic governance. In a context of increasing governance complexity, legislators face a dilemma. On the one hand, they need to gain deep knowledge on certain issues to effectively inform the lawmaking process. Parliaments and parties rely on the specialization of legislators, so they can become “cue-givers” and guide their fellow members in a certain policy area. On the other hand, MPs need to know about many policy areas to ensure public deliberation and appropriately represent the interests of increasingly diverse electoral constituencies.

Under which conditions do MPs become foxes or hedgehogs? We propose that individual specialization is a function of the personal interests of the politicians who run for office and the collective electoral interest of a given political party (Carey and Shugart 1995; Cox 1987; Fiorina 1977). Members of Parliament (MPs) must make decisions about their work in the house to maintain their reelection chances. At the same time, parties act as crucial gatekeepers of the most desired parliamentary activities (Cox and McCubbins 2007; Strøm 1997). In this context, MPs and parliamentary leadership are jointly responsible for developing legislative foxes and hedgehogs.

MPs’ policy portfolios have been studied in the context of the US House of Representatives and Senate (Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Bernhard and Sulkin 2018; Curry 2015), where the incentive structure for legislators to comply with the collective electoral interest of the party is far lower than in other advanced democracies (Saalfeld and Strøm 2014; Strøm 1997). This article contributes to the existing literature by studying the formation of legislators’ policy portfolios under different institutional constraints. Besides the innate psychological inclinations of each person (Tetlock 1984), traditional explanations of policy specialization within Parliament have focused on preparliamentary career factors (Bernhard, Sewell, and Sulkin 2017; Bernhard and Sulkin 2018) or strategic considerations of a legislator in anticipation of future actions (Victor 2011). Other authors argue that individual MPs’ capacity to take

positions distinct from those of their party depends on their party-leadership monitoring and sanction capacity (Carey and Shugart 1995; Fenno 1978). Party leaders are responsible to maximize the party's collective goals (e.g., ensuring collective reelection and majority status), and as such they coordinate the parliamentary group, prevent shrinking, and sanction discordant members (Cox and McCubbins 2007). Thus, we expect the leadership's preferences to have a critical role on explaining the individual policy specialization of legislators, especially in those political systems where parties possess tight control on critical resources for MP's reselection and career advancement within a chamber.

In the following, we rely on a principal-agent framework where we consider MPs as agents of their respective parliamentary groups (Cox and McCubbins 2007). Thus, we consider that MPs will adapt to the needs of their parties when developing their individual policy portfolio and turning into policy specialists or generalists. Partisan factors refer to the ways in which parliamentary leadership can allocate to each member within the parliamentary group, while individual factors correspond to an MP's response to the incentive structure set up by the leadership. Building on the institutional logic of access to the floor (Döring 1995; Proksch and Slapin 2012), we identify a number of partisan factors that contribute to an MP's degree of specialization. In particular, we contend that being in opposition and belonging to a less numerous parliamentary groups is associated with a broader portfolio of policy topics.

Empirically, our study leverages data on parliamentary activities, institutional features, and biographical information from Germany over a 15-year period. We construct individual specialization scores for each MP, at each legislative period, based on content analysis of parliamentary questions where each question is classified in a policy topic using the comparative agendas scheme (Baumgartner, Breunig, and Grossman 2019, Baumgartner and Jones 1993). In our sample, foxes who speak about many topics are more common than hedgehogs. Estimates from a Heckman selection model indicate that demand-side factors set up by the party leadership correlate with the degree to which an MP becomes a specialist or a generalist. These findings suggest that legislators differ in the degree of specialization beyond their innate interests.

We discuss some implications of our findings with regard to democratic representation in the conclusion.

### **Foxes and Hedgehogs in Parliament**

In the past, studies tackling under which circumstances legislators become policy specialists or generalists have been developed in the US context, where legislators face far fewer institutional and partisan constraints than their parliamentary counterparts in Europe (Bernhard and Sulkin 2018; Victor 2011). In the United States, legislators are relatively free to decide if they devote their activity to a narrower or broader range of policy issues. Part of such freedom is based on electoral rules that encourage the individual exposure of legislators (Proksch and Slapin 2012), as they can benefit electorally by developing a personal portfolio and reputations distinct from those of their party (Fenno 1978; Geddes and Neto 1992; Jacobson 1990; Nielson and Shugart 1999; Uslander 1985). Moreover, this explanation is complemented by the lower capacity of US parties to sanction their deviant legislators in comparison to their European counterparts (Saalfeld and Strøm 2014). Given these circumstances, this article studies the conditions under which legislators become specialized in certain policy areas while others address many topics in parliaments characterized by strong party groups (PPGs).

#### *Parliamentary Organization and Policy Specialization*

Many authors have documented patterns of functional specialization among MPs within PPGs (Bowler and Farrell 1995; Eulau 1984; Meyer and Wagner 2021). Saalfeld and Strøm (2014) highlight how members can mutually benefit from policy specialization. On the one hand, the parliamentary leadership tasks a group of MPs specializing in certain policy issues. This division of labor increases the efficiency of the parliamentary work as each MP becomes an expert on particular topics and generates economies of scale as each MP is able to specialize and eventually produce more and better legislation, oversight of the government, or both. On the other hand, MPs who specialize enjoy a significant impact on policy proposition and agenda setting. The leadership compensates their opportunity cost through other perks and benefits, such as supporting their reelection. In short, legislators who

specialize enter a delegation relationship with their PPG leadership, the former being the agent and the latter the principal.

We follow this logic and understand MPs as strategic actors who respond to the demands of a principal, their PPG, in a given institutional setting that constrains their behavior (March and Olsen 1984). In this interaction, MPs seek to fulfill their individual goals: reelection, career advancement, and promoting policy change (Bäck and Debus 2016; Kam 2009; Müller and Strøm 1999). They make decisions seeking to maximize their votes, get a better position in the legislature or the executive, and promote their preferred policy outcomes (Müller and Strøm 1999). At the same time, PPG are collective actors who monitor, coordinate, and discipline legislators in order to prevent shrinking and promote the party's collective goals (Cox and McCubbins 2007; Müller 2000). The leadership of a PPG seeks to (re)elect as many as copartisans as possible, influence public policies in their preferred direction, obtain a majority in the legislature, and ultimately run government. In Cox and McCubbins' words: "parties arise to ensure that the usual problems of providing and maintaining public goods are overcome—and in particular to internalize electoral externalities that would otherwise arise" (2007, 18). Moreover, those MPs who form the leadership are rewarded with safe electoral positions and further promotion. This setup theoretically enables all legislators to fulfill their ambitions together.

For legislators fulfilling their ambitions together, it is instrumental for all of them to enhance the common party label, understood as the legislative accomplishment that a party and its leaders are associated with (Cox and McCubbins 2007, 21–22). Thus, division of labor and specialization emerges as a strategy for MPs to advance their political careers while meeting the demands of their leadership. MPs need to differentiate themselves from other MPs within the PPG (Damgaard, 1995; Mattson and Strøm, 1995; Sieberer, 2006; Van Schendelen, 1976; Vos, 2016), as MPs within the same party compete to get leadership positions as minister or parliamentary leader, to reach the best positions on the ballot list, or both. Policy specialization is one mechanism MPs can use to differentiate themselves from other politicians within the party and to capture the attention of their electorate and party leaders.

At the same time, the PPG is responsible for managing the legislative agenda and assigning policy issues to its members. This task is not a deterministic consideration. Legislators may face significant trade-offs when pursuing both goals. For example, Bailer

et al. (2022, 5) show for the case of the German Green MPs Cem Özdemir and Ekin Deligöz, that despite their desire to focus on environmental policies, they had to enlarge their policy portfolio as their party wanted them to engage with migration and integration policy due to their personal migration background. Conversely, we can think of an MP who refuses to tackle a policy area where their party has a fringe position that may potentially affect their electoral standing—even at the cost of jeopardizing their own standing within their parliamentary party group, thus preventing them from obtaining career promotion and policy influence. Consequently, MPs carefully adapt their behavior, including selecting issues to prioritize and considering their potential rewards. Strategic choices for obtaining such rewards are encoded in the institutional settings and the role requirements that MPs receive from their parliamentary party groups. In short, MPs' specialization relates to the functions they need to fulfill within their PPG.

### *Partisan Demands and MP's Policy Specialization*

In this section, we propose that the party leadership requests certain behaviors from their MPs, depending on particular institutional circumstances, with the goal of contributing to partisan needs. We concentrate on leadership positions, committee assignments, government status, and PPG size and relate these institutional features to an MP's propensity to become a legislative hedgehog or fox.

In the first instance, MPs differ in their leadership status. Members of the PPG leadership possess two crucial functions. First, they control the rest of the parliamentary group to prevent free riding. Second, they are responsible for engaging with other PPG in debates and shaping parliament's agenda. When in government, frontbenchers must ensure that Parliament passes the government's legislative agenda and defend the government from opposition attacks. When in opposition, frontbenchers try to influence the agenda and transform or even boycott governmental legislative proposals. Compared to backbenchers, their status within a party necessitates that they converse on a diverse set of policy topics. For example, concerning the Belgian case, de Vet reports how a substantive number of PPG leaders believe that they—instead of a policy specialist—“should take the floor when an issue becomes a hot topic to give more political weight to the

message” (2021, 14). Thus, on many occasions frontbenchers are not able to select the issues they talk about, and this should be reflected in a more diverse individual agenda.

Second, legislators similarly differ within their group in terms of committee assignments. The role of committees is an essential institutional tool for distributing labor. Indeed, in the UK context, Norton (2000, 49) notes how the creation of Select Committees in 1979 allowed each member an opportunity to specialize in a particular subject area or areas, something that was not possible before through formal parliamentary channels. Parties tend to select certain MPs in committees whose background allows them to specialize on a topic at a low cost (e.g., professional training) (Gilligan and Krehbiel 1990; Krehbiel 1991).

The division of labor across parliamentary committees affects MPs’ access to the parliamentary floor (Döring 1995). Parties typically trust those MPs who sit in a given legislative committee to gather technical information about a given topic which is influential in determining the party’s position in that particular policy area (Fernandes, Goplerud, and Won 2018). This expertise translates into increasing access to floor time (Proksch and Slapin 2012) and importance within the PPG. Many scholars have stressed the importance of parliamentary “cue-taking” besides the United States (Sullivan et al. 1993), for example, in the Netherlands, Denmark, Austria, and Germany (Andeweg 2000, 102; Bille 2000, 134; Müller and Steininger 2000, 80; Saalfeld 2000, 35). These are MPs who mainly focus on a particular policy field, often in relation with their committee membership, and they advise the rest of the PPG on position taking and parliamentary negotiations. Taken together, the outlined logic suggests that MPs who are assigned to a lower number of committees are more likely to have a narrower policy agenda.

Third, the role of government and opposition legislators diverges greatly based on the government’s control of the parliamentary agenda (Cox and McCubbins 2005; Slapin et al. 2018). Parties in government shape the parliamentary agenda according to their governing priorities, while opposition parties react to the government’s agenda-setting capacities by identifying those topics for which they possess a competitive advantage (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2015). Each type of party strategically chooses which topics they set on the agenda, and more importantly, each party allows different levels of entrepreneurial activity by MPs. Parties in government keep tight control over all MPs’ activities to strengthen

party unity and prevent opposition attacks (Döring 1995). Thus, governmental MPs will only engage with whatever topics are associated with the daily agenda.

Opposition MPs are more likely to be entrepreneurial and try to shape the political agenda. Moreover, their parties are more likely to allow MPs to address whatever topic they consider appropriate to confront the government (Sulkin 2005)—for example, when preparing parliamentary interpellations and questions for the government. MPs of opposition parties therefore are more likely to take up new issues and let MPs try them out in Parliament, which may differentiate them from other fellow MPs and being promoted by the leadership. The former proposition exposes a general trend across parliamentary groups, yet individual MPs have different roles within their group.

A simple, final expectation is that specialization becomes more likely with an increasing labor supply. PPG leadership is able to demand of their MPs different commitments as a function of the PPG size because the marginal benefits of legislative trade, information acquisition, and specialization increase with size (Krehbiel 1991). Like the overall legislature, parties have incentives to institutionalize some sort of arrangement that economizes the transaction costs of obtaining information and achieving deals within the party. In particular, large parties have better opportunities to develop systems of internal specialization within their PPGs (Saalfeld and Strøm 2014, 389). Commonly, PPGs form internal working groups shadowing parliamentary committees or ministries, whose members potentially become policy specialist and “cue-givers.” Parties differ in their capacity to form such specialized working groups. For example, Bille (2000, 133) notes how legislators of small Danish parties tend to be spokespersons of several policy areas. In addition, Hagevi (2000, 150) and Saalfeld (2000, 29–30) report similar developments in Sweden and Germany. Therefore, parliamentary size structurally limits the opportunities of specialization that an MP may have in Parliament, as it shapes its overall workload and the function MPs would develop within the PPG.

Taken together with the different demands that the leadership can require of their MPs, we propose the following hypotheses:



**Hypothesis 1:** MPs that belong to their parliamentary group's leadership are more likely to have a more diverse policy agenda than the rest of MPs.

**Hypothesis 2:** An increase in the committee membership of an MP leads to a more diverse individual policy agenda.

**Hypothesis 3:** MPs from opposition parties are more likely to have a more diverse agenda than those from government parties.

**Hypothesis 4:** MPs that belong to bigger PPGs are more likely to specialize and show a more concentrated policy agenda.

### Design and methodology

This article seeks to explain under which conditions MPs are more likely to become policy specialists or generalists under existing institutional constraints. To develop our analysis, we study the lower chamber of Germany between 1998 and 2013 (14th to the 17th legislative periods). The German Bundestag represents a very useful case for several reasons, as it combines strict rules that grant party groups control over the agenda and the floor while providing moderate personalization incentives for MPs to build their own personal brand. Moreover, the German Bundestag has often been described as highly functionally specialized. As Saalfeld puts it “German parliamentarism relies heavily on a parliamentary division of labor, in which experts become ‘cue-givers’ for their fellow members, and in which careful party management, internal ‘give and take’ and anticipatory ‘appeasement’ of backbench opposition are characteristic of decision-making” (2000, 35). As such, the German case is a challenging test for our expectations.

Parliamentary rules provide PPG leaders extensive control over access to the floor within the parliamentary group (Martin and Rozenberg 2012; Saalfeld 2000, 26), but the parliamentary agenda is consensually allocated among the different PPG (Döring 1995). This reinforces the incentives that MPs must comply with the preferences of the party leadership. For some MPs, the electoral system is a countervailing force. German *Bundestag* is elected using a mixed-member electoral system where seat allocation is based on parties' results in the proportional tier. Therefore, those MPs elected in SMD—or who also compete on an SMD—may have incentives to pursue their own political agenda, even to

the detriment of the party's one. Parties are well aware of incentive to personalize, and they carefully scrutinize and punish deviant MPs, when necessary (Baumann, Debus, and Klingelhöfer 2017). The contrasting incentives for complying with the PPG leadership provide an appropriate setting to test to what extent MPs comply with their parties' preferences.

To measure an MP's level of specialization, we rely on content analysis of government oversight tools. While the US literature has focused on bill sponsorship to measure MPs' policy specialization (Schiller 1995; Victor 2011), we turn to oversight tools given high control that party leaderships and the government keep on bill-initiation activities in party-centric electoral systems. We use minor and major interpellations (*Kleine und Große Anfragen*). Interpellations are a form of parliamentary questions where a parliamentary party group, or 5% of all MPs, ask the government about a particular issue (Saalfeld 2000). To identify the policy topic of particular MPs (and not their party group), we use those interpellations that are signed by individual MPs. Commonly, MPs use interpellations as a signaling tool toward their constituents or group leadership (Bailer et al. 2022; Siefken 2010).

Oversight tools are valid and reliable instruments to infer the individual policy agenda of an MP, and they are functional equivalents for our purpose. Interpellations are important attention-seeking devices that policy actors use to raise the visibility of the issues they identify as their policy priorities (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2015). Yet, as in other parliamentary democracies with strong party discipline, the capacity of individual MPs to use these oversight tools depends on parliamentary groups, which impose significant limitations on which MPs can participate and what they can do during question time (Borghetto and Chaqués-Bonafont 2019; Russo and Wiberg 2010). Indeed, in the German Bundestag, "motions, legislative proposals, and questions, which have not been tabled as a result of an explicit decision of the parliamentary party group's caucus are expected to be cleared with the relevant party working groups" (Saalfeld 2000, 27). Therefore, we expect the topic distribution of each MP in each oversight tool to be a function of the MP's individual preferences and the group leadership needs. This institutional constraint stands in contrast to other legislative tools, such as written questioning, where MPs possess higher autonomy from their parties, or floor speeches, where MPs maintain even less autonomy.

Moreover, interpellations initiated outside of the party faction have two advantages to revealing the true specialization of an MP in institutionally constrained environments. First, they are a costly signal for MPs. In contrast to written questions, interpellations have a higher opportunity cost for the MPs. Questioning the government is a limited resource that parties and MPs need to use wisely for achieving their objective of flattering or embarrassing the government. Major interpellations even consume plenary time, MPs ask about a particular topic to a government member, and the minister replies, often allowing for a short debate with the MP. Second, major interpellations require the personal participation of MPs. MPs need to prepare the questioning thoughtfully as ministers receive the question in advance. Thus, MPs need to be familiar with the topic. In short, parliamentary party groups play a critical role in determining who speaks about what, and therefore to what extent MPs specialize or become a generalist (Chaqués-Bonafont, Palau, and Baumgartner 2015).

The data on interpellations and the classification of each observation into policy topics come from the Comparative Agendas Project (Baumgartner, Breunig, and Grossman 2019; Breunig and Schnatterer 2020). The time span of the data ranges from 1998 until 2013; such a long period can capture parliamentary careers in their entirety, including MPs in different parliamentary roles and government status. In total, 146,164 interpellations in Germany have been classified in 21 policy areas provided by the Comparative Agenda Project. These observations are then aggregated according to MP and legislative period. Thus, our unit of analysis is the MP-legislative period dyad.

The dependent variable—issue specialization—is measured with a concentration index. We calculated a Herfindahl–Hirschman Index (HHI) for each MP in each legislative period, where the value of 1 indicates that an MP asks questions about a single policy issue, while a number close to 0 implies that an MP asks a similar number of questions in all 21 policy areas. Out of 2253 observations during four legislative periods, the average German MP has a concentration agenda value of 0.25 during a legislative period ( $SD = 0.36$ ). On average, then, a German MP is more of a fox than of a hedgehog, yet great differences in the degree of specialization exist.

Some MPs never participated in submitting a personal interpellation and need to be accounted for in our estimation strategy. In our sample, 36.22% of MPs in Germany have never used one of

these instruments as individuals during the legislative period. To solve this selection problem in the sample, we estimate our model using a Heckman selection model (Heckman 1979; Sigelman and Zeng 1999). This model combines two regression equations: a probit component for estimating the selection and linear estimation of the main dependent variable. To estimate the likelihood of submitting a question in the first equation, we include a series of well-known factors associated with access (Bäck and Debus 2016). We add the governmental status of the party, whether the MP holds a leadership position, the PPG size, the number of committees, and the gender of the MP. Furthermore, all models include clustered standard errors at the MP level.

The independent variables measure concepts related to the behavior that political parties demand from their MPs. As we argued, such behavior is associated with the different roles that party leaders and MPs agree on. We consider if MPs belonged to their *party group leadership* (party-group president, spokesperson, or one of their deputies), the *number of committees in which they participate* (excluding policy committees such as the petitions committee), whether MPs' parties are in *government or opposition*, and the *size of their PPG* (in seats).

We also include a set of adjustment variables. First, a binary variable indicates the gender of MPs, with women receiving the value of 1. Women are more likely to focus on a narrower set of topics upon which they gain recognition from the party leadership (Bäck and Debus 2019; Chaqués-Bonafont and Cristancho 2022). Similarly, *junior* MPs are more likely to concentrate on one or two policy issues, especially if they can claim expertise due to any ascriptive trait they possess (Bailer et al. 2022). As MPs gain seniority, they are more likely to participate in additional policy domains, and thereby they begin to address a more diverse set of issues. We account for seniority measured as years in Parliament and the MP's age. Third, *electoral safety* measures if MPs who are electorally safe have the luxury to deviate from public concerns (Stimson, Mackuen, and Erikson 1995). We operationalize electoral safety as the probability of getting reelected using Stoffel and Sieberer (2018) data. Using a series of multilevel logistic regression models, their index calculates the probability of reelection that a candidate has based on their list position and the electoral history of their party in the last three elections. It thus provides a comparable probability scale across electoral systems and time. In the case of German MPs competing in both the majoritarian and the

proportional tier, we take the highest value of the reelection probability. Fourth, we account for the difference in whether the MP is elected in a *single-member-district* or a multimember-list district. Fifth, the total number of interpellations that MPs asked during that legislative period was adjusted because a higher number of interventions is likely to imply a more diverse agenda.

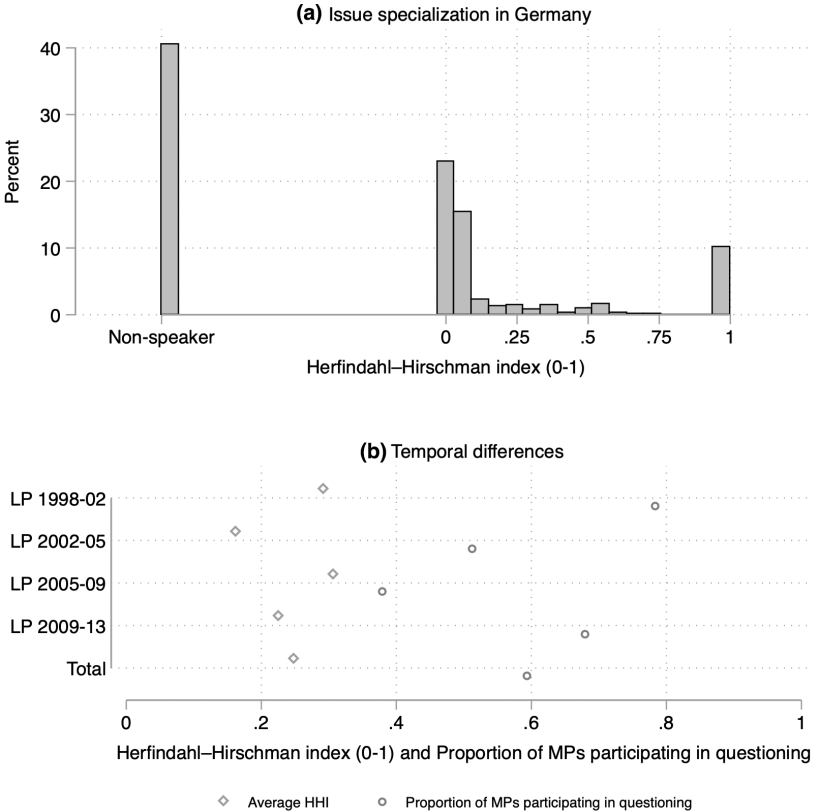
Finally, we include a series of adjustment variables at the party level. First, we incorporate a variable indicating the “*niche-ness*” of the party using Meyer and Miller’s (2015) continuous measure of party nicheness. Niche parties have been traditionally conceptualized as competing in a narrower range of policy issues (Meguid 2005), and thus we may expect that such behavior covaries with their legislators. Second, a party’s *ideological stance* is measured on the left–right dimension. Both variables are based on the Comparative Manifesto Project’s data (Volkens et al. 2018). Third, we use party and legislative-period fixed effect to account for idiosyncratic factors. To ease interpretation, we standardize our continuous variables and use the observed values for calculating estimated effects (Hanmer and Ozan Kalkan 2013). Appendix A.1, in the online supporting information, contains descriptive statistics for the variables used in the analysis.

### Becoming Foxes and Hedgehogs in a Parliamentary Democracy

To what extent are legislators’ foxes or hedgehogs? How concentrated is the individual agenda of a legislator? Our descriptive data illustrate substantive differences among legislators. The theoretical upper limit on agenda concentration takes the value of 1, indicating that an MP only focuses on a single topic. In contrast, a number close to 0 (i.e., 1/21 in our design) indicates that an MP pays attention to all policy areas with the same intensity. For a simple description, Figure 1 plots the distribution of legislators’ issue concentration and the share of legislators who did not use interpellations under their names. The second subfigure plots the degree of issue specialization per legislative period.

The subfigure (a) in Figure 1 presents interesting differences across MPs and legislative periods. First, a substantive group of German MPs engages in political debates about a large number of topics, among them Sabine Leutheusser-Schnarrenberger (FDP), Hans-Peter Reppnik (CDU), or Kirsten Tackmann (The Left). In addition to these policy foxes, the Bundestag is also populated by a significant number of hedgehogs—policy experts that concentrate

FIGURE 1  
Fox and Hedgehogs in the German Bundestag.



Note: The HHI measures the concentration of policy issues for each legislator in a legislative session. N = 2253

their attention on a small number of issues. For example, in the 14th legislative period, Wolfgang Lohmann was the health policy spokesman and chairman of the health working group of the CDU/CSU parliamentary group, and of the 46 interpellations that he signed, 35 of them addressed the health policy area (76%). Another example is Ingo Wellenreuther (CDU/CSU), a judge by profession, who in the 17<sup>th</sup> legislative period, participated in 41 interpellations, 39 of them addressing issues related to civil rights (95%).

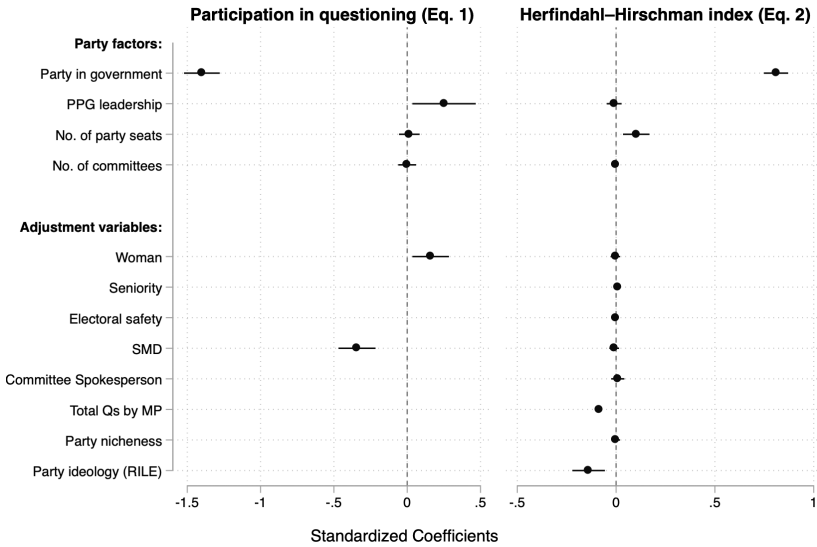
The subfigure (b) displays the proportion of legislators who signed interpellations and the issue concentration for a legislator

in each period. The plots indicate that, on average, there is little variation in the degree to which issue specialization occurs over time. Even during the 16 legislative period, when Merkel governed with a grand coalition and the number of questioning legislators declined, only a slight increase toward more diverse agendas occurred. We now turn to multivariate analysis to assess the underlying dynamics behind different degrees of specialization among German legislators.

To what extent do partisan demands shape whether an MP becomes a fox or a hedgehog? When does an MP engage in several different policy topics? To understand how parties shape the individual agenda of MPs, we estimate a Heckman selection model to account for the probability of participating in parliamentary interpellations at the first stage. This way, we discard the fact that different levels of parliamentary specialization may be the result of different levels of participation in parliamentary questioning. The censoring variable in the selection equation is participating in parliamentary interpellations, coded 0 for all MPs who do not submit any interpellations during the whole legislative period and 1 otherwise. Following previous work on floor access and parliamentary activities (Bäck and Debus 2016, 2019; Slapin and Proksch 2010), we include as covariates: government status, holding a leadership position, the PPG size, the number of committees, and the MP's gender. There are good reasons for including some of these covariates in both the first and second stages. For example, MPs belonging to small PPGs need to cover a broader number of topics, and thus, they would have a more diverse agenda; but at the same time, we would expect them to participate in a higher number of interpellations. Thus, it is very unlikely that an MP belonging to such a group will not ask any interpellation during the legislative period. Similarly, MPs belonging to more committees are more likely to ask more parliamentary questions and about a broader range of issues.

Figure 2 summarizes the main model for the selection stage (left panel) and for the diversity of MP's agenda through the Herfindahl–Hirschman Index (right panel). For a straightforward interpretation, we present the findings as standardized coefficients and marginal effect plots (Hanmer and Ozan Kalkan 2013) in Figures 2 and 3. The full tables are available in the online supporting information. In the selection equation, a positive coefficient indicates a higher probability of participating in parliamentary interpellations, while in the outcome equation, a positive

FIGURE 2  
Partisan Demands and MPs' Agenda Specialization.



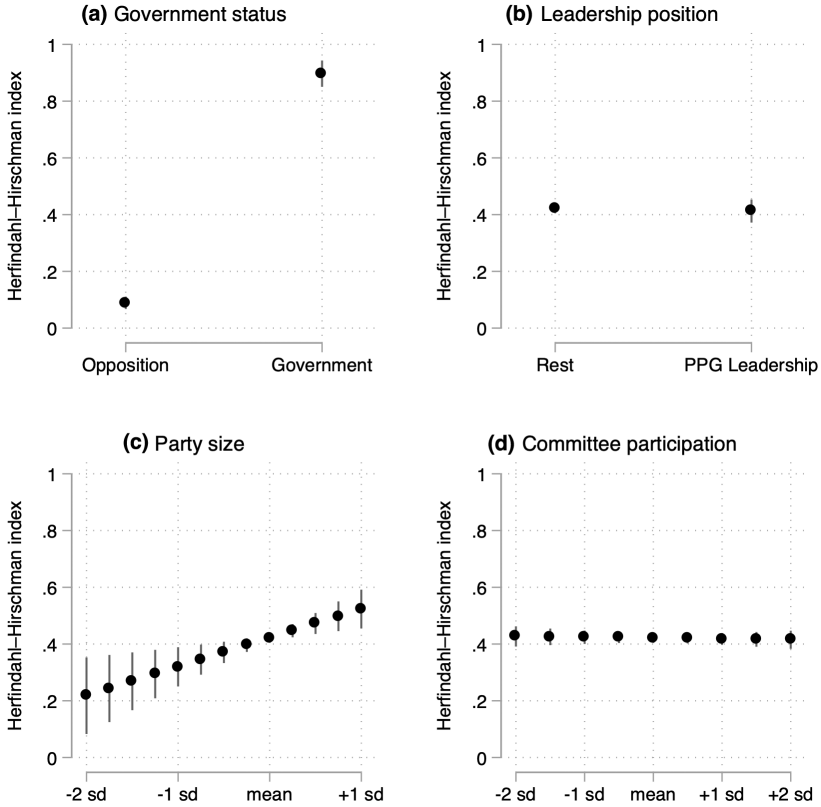
Note: The dots are the point estimates, and the horizontal lines represent the 95% confidence intervals. The figure is based on Model 4 from Table 2 in Appendix A.2 in the online supporting information

coefficient indicates that an MP is more likely to concentrate her agenda on a narrower number of policy areas (more specialization). Conversely, a negative estimate indicates a more diversified agenda. Coefficients are statistically different from zero if the horizontal confidence band (95%) does not touch the horizontal axis at zero. It is worth mentioning that the results of the selection equation indicate that MPs in the opposition, who have leadership positions and belong to smaller PPGs, will have a higher chance of signing at least one parliamentary interpellation.

Our expectations identified four factors corresponding to the demands and opportunities that a parliamentary party group can place on their MPs. Namely, if the MP belongs to the PPG leadership or not, the number of committees an MP belongs to, the party's government status, and the size of the PPG. We discuss each expectation in turn. First, MPs who belong to governmental parties have a much more concentrated agenda than those in opposition, indicating how governmental parties aim to keep tight control over the legislative agenda (Döring 1995). This expectation is further



**FIGURE 3**  
**Marginal Effects for the Demand of Generalists Based on the Main Model.**



Note: The dots represent predicted values, and the horizontal lines represent the 95% confidence intervals

supported by the fact that government MPs are far less likely to participate in questioning opposition MPs. The association between government participation and agenda concentration is positive and statistically significant. As Figure 3 shows, MPs belonging to government parties are estimated to have, on average, an agenda concentration of 0.9, while opposition ones have a very diversified agenda, indicated by the estimated HHI of 0.1. In short, MPs of opposition parties are more likely to be policy generalists.

Second, we do not find a statistical significance between the agendas of MPs that belong to their party leadership and the other copartisans. The former are more likely to participate in questioning time, however. [Figure 3](#) clarifies that belonging to the party's leadership does not induce even a slight edge toward becoming a policy generalist as both groups have a predicted agenda specialization of around 0.4. The similarity that we find between PPG leaders and regular MPs coincides with other empirical studies (Brack, Costa, and Pequito Teixeira 2012; Dudzińska et al. 2014; de Vet and Wauters 2018). As de Vet and Wauters (2018) explain, PPG leaders remain MPs besides their additional role as leaders, and they fulfill the rest of their tasks.

Third, we expect MPs from bigger parliamentary groups to have more chances to specialize. In our analysis, a one standard deviation increase in the size of the PPG is associated with an increase of 0.1 in the agenda concentration of the average MP. In [Figure 3](#), we can observe how an MP belonging to an average-sized PPG has an agenda concentration of 0.4 while one belonging to a smaller PPG with two standard deviations below the mean, such as *Die Linke* or *die Grünen* during this period, has an average agenda concentration of 0.2. In Appendix A.3 in the online supporting information, we provide a further test of the idea that size allows specialization by comparing MPs' specialization in opposition and governmental parties as a function of PPG size. We do not find differences within MPs from governmental parties who belong to PPG of different sizes. Conversely, we do find a substantive variation in the average specialization of opposition MPs as a function of PPG size. Opposition MPs that belong to an average PPG in terms of size show a predicted HHI of 0.18 while those belonging to bigger groups have an average HHI of almost 0.4. The estimates suggest that with increasing size, MPs can become policy hedgehogs. If their group is small, they roam the Bundestag as foxes.

Fourth, our estimates in [Figure 2](#) suggest that the number of committee memberships is unrelated to policy specialization. The coefficient is not statistically significant and close to 0. As can be observed in [Figure 3](#), the relationship is barely visible. MPs with more committee membership have, on average, the same agenda specialization as their colleagues with few assignments.

All in all, there is broad evidence that MPs are more likely to become policy generalists when they serve an opposition party and when they belong to small PPGs. At the same time, MPs who hold leadership positions and serve on many committees do not seem to differ from the average MP. In short, particular partisan demands contribute to shape MP's policy specialization.

It is worth commenting on some of the estimated adjustment variables. Female MPs are statistically indistinguishable from their male colleagues regarding policy specialization at the individual level. Similarly, seniority, electoral safety, committee speakerships, or being elected in a single-member district do not make a difference. The key individual variable shaping the agenda of an MP is mechanical: their degree of participating in questioning tools. An increase of one standard deviation in the number of questions an MP asks is associated with a decrease of 0.1 in the MP's HHI, thus denoting an increasing diversity on the individual policy agenda of the legislator.

For the party-level adjustments, a higher degree of ideological nicheness is not associated with an increase in the number of topics an MP addresses in Germany. Thus, we can conjecture that MPs belonging to so-called niche parties aim to express to their constituents that their party is not restricted to a certain number of topics. Yet, we do find a relationship between party ideology and MP's agenda specialization. Concretely, MPs belonging to left-wing parties are associated with having a more diverse agenda, which is in line with previous US studies (Victor 2011).

To strengthen our estimation results, we undertake four robustness checks. First, we address alternative modeling strategies and re-estimate our models using random and fixed effects. These models do not account for selection, but the results are substantively similar as in the main analysis and are available in Appendix B in the online supporting information. Second, we use matching to obtain something closer to a causal estimation of being in government, holding a leadership position, seating in more committees, and belonging to bigger PPGs. Appendix C contains the details on the matching procedure, and, again, the results are very much in line with our original specification.

Third, we reestimate the full model using an alternative dependent variable. Specifically, we use the proportion of the most common question topic for each MPs as a measure of specialization. To construct this variable, we identify the policy area in which an MP submitted the most interpellations and divide this number by the total number of interpellations. Proportion on top issue captures, thus, to what extent a legislator focuses on a particular policy area. In our sample, the value goes from 0.10 to 1 (meaning all interpellations were about one issue), with a mean of 0.48. The estimation results are presented in Appendix D in the online supporting information. The substantive interpretation of the results mirrors the previous analysis and discussion. Among

the four partisan demands that contribute to MP's policy specialization, opposition status has the largest substantive effect, while belonging to a larger parliamentary group is associated with asking more questions about a single policy issue. Similar to the main analysis, the estimated effects of holding a leadership position and the number of committee memberships do not reach standard statistical significance. Overall, the robustness check reinforces the importance of the demand-side factors.

Finally, we account for the extent to which the characteristics of single-member districts can shape the individual agenda of a legislator. MPs may use their legislative agenda for building a personal platform within the district that helps their reelection prospects by asking about salient topics to their constituents (Bäck and Debus 2018). As a proxy for the heterogeneity of interests present within a district, we classify each electoral district as urban, rural, or mixed based on whether they are formed by urban districts (*Kreisfreien Städten*), rural districts (*Landkreisen*), or a combination of both.<sup>1</sup> Then we linked each district to each MP based on where they ran in the previous election. In total, 55% of MPs are linked to a rural district, 20% to mixed ones, and 25% to urban districts. The coefficients indicate that MPs representing rural districts are likely to possess a more diverse agenda, thus reflecting the interest heterogeneity of such districts, but these estimates fail to reach the standard levels of statistical significance. The main results essentially remain unchanged. The full analysis is available in Appendix E in the online supporting information.

## Conclusion

In this article, we explore if parliamentary democracies are populated by hedgehogs—legislators who know one policy topic very well—and foxes—legislators who address many policy topics. Our results drawing from the German Bundestag suggest that the average MP is more of a fox. We contend that, in contrast to innate motivations, MPs adapt their issue specialization to their strategic situation. Our argument indicates that different species might flourish in highly constrained institutional environments.

When do MPs become legislative foxes or hedgehogs? Instead of concentrating on individual attributes of MPs, such as gender or professional background, we develop a series of expectations about the political context, particularly in relation to political

parties' representation functions, under which MPs engage in more policy topics. The core idea is that MPs respond to the demands of the PPG leadership. MPs adapt their degree of specialization to their party's governmental status, leadership position within the group, PPG size, and the number of committees they serve in.

In a sample of German MPs over a 15-year period, we find strong evidence for partisan demands. MPs clearly, and very visibly adapt to their party governing status, while their capacity to specialize in a narrower set of policy areas is constrained by their parliamentary group size. MPs of governmental parties address fewer topics than those of opposition parties. MPs belonging to small PPGs have a more diversified individual policy agenda. At the same time, PPG leaders do not seem to talk about many more topics than regular MPs, and MPs who are members of more committees do not tend to address more policy topics. In sum, MPs' position within the parliamentary group and the role the parliamentary groups need to perform within the parliamentary system determines if an MP becomes a hedgehog or a fox. This finding enriches previous works that studied MP specialization in institutional environments with lower constraints on individual behavior, such as the US Congress.

This article contributes to the literature on legislative style in party-centric electoral systems. We show that the specialization of MPs into a narrower or broader number of policy areas in party-centric contexts is not only the decision of individual legislators as the US case would suggest. We find evidence of clear adaptation to the party-leadership preferences while there seems to be little margin for personal preferences based on gender, seniority, or profession. Beyond the scholarly contribution, the article raises questions about democratic governance. If it is true that MPs in some legislatures are more likely to be policy generalists than in others, how can a democratic system then ensure that legislatures populated by hedgehogs—who know just one or two issues very well—represent the interests of a diverse citizenry?

Finally, we would like to propose several future lines of research. Future research should probe deeper into how electoral systems incentives shape the individual agenda of MPs. While we focused on political parties as one of the two main principals that legislators face when defining their legislative style, constituents are the other major competing principal. Such research could take two potential issues. First, it is necessary to explore how the political and socioeconomic composition of the constituency may shape the individual agenda of MPs. Second, future works should

inquire to what extent and under which conditions incentives emanated from the electoral system, such as the need to build a personal brand in majoritarian systems, counteract party-level incentives by comparing countries with different electoral settings.

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## NOTE

1. The German Federal Returning Office offers data on the socioeconomic characteristics of the single-member electoral district only since the 2013 election, after our period of study.

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### **Supporting Information**

Additional supporting information may be found in the online version of this article at the publisher’s web site:

**Appendix S1**

**Appendix S2**

**Appendix S3**

**Appendix S4**

**Appendix S5**

**Appendix S6**

**Appendix S7**