

Luck of the Draw?

Private Members' Bills & the Electoral Connection

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Abstract

The legislative agenda in most parliamentary systems is controlled tightly by the government and bills offered by individual members of parliament have low rates of success. Yet, MPs do seek to present (private) members' bills even where the rate of adoption is very low. We argue that members' bills serve as an electoral connection but also as an opportunity for MPs to signal competence to their co-partisans. To demonstrate the presence of an electoral connection we take advantage of the random selection of private members' bills in the New Zealand House of Representatives and show that survey respondents approve more of electorate MPs whose bills were drawn on the ballot. In addition, we show that MPs respond to the incentives created by the voters and parties' willingness to reward legislative effort and, consequently, that electorally vulnerable legislators are more likely to place members' bills on the ballot.

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1 Introduction

Parliamentary democracy is sometimes described as a chain of delegation; from voters to parliamentarians, from parliamentarians to the cabinet, from cabinets to ministers, and from ministers to the bureaucracy (Strøm, 2000). Each link in the chain of delegation may exhibit the common problems associated with principal-agent relationships. An interesting feature of this view of democracy — in contrast with a classical view of hierarchical organizations in which the principal at the top of the hierarchy is seen as wielding the greatest amount of power — is that the cabinet is typically seen as most influential in the parliamentary chain of delegation. Thus, we are more prone to ask whether voters hold governments accountable than their immediate agents, i.e., their representatives in parliament (see, e.g., Powell, 2000; Powell & Whitten, 1993; Hellwig & Samuels, 2008). Indeed, the view that parliament has limited influence on government policy is quite common and often the role of parliament is seen as being reduced to providing the cabinet with support in parliament and protection against votes of no-confidence.

This view of parliamentary democracy raises questions about whether the role of MPs extends beyond providing the government with legislative support and whether voters hold them accountable for their legislative behavior rather than for government performance. The latter can be seen as a precondition for MPs acting as faithful agents of their constituents. Without promise of a reward, MPs have little incentive for pursuing their constituents' interests and are, instead, likely to align more closely with their party leadership (Kam, 2009).

Re-election is seen as one of the primary motives of legislators (Mayhew, 1974; Rae, 1971) that helps align legislators' behavior with voters' interests. There is a rich literature that argues that legislators have an incentive to cultivate a personal vote in order to maximize their chances of retaining office. Others have noted that the incentives vary in their intensity depending on whether the electoral system allows legislators to translate personal following into favorable electoral prospects (Carey & Shugart, 1996). The electoral system is not the only factor as Cox's (1987) work suggests — though sharing an electoral system with the U.S., British legislators are less concerned with building a personal vote. Cheibub & Limongi (2002) suggest that this is likely a function of centralized decision-making, i.e., individual legislators' lack of ability to exert policy influence. Martin (2011), similarly, notes how legislators cultivate a personal vote via fiscal legislative particularism (as in the US) or extra-legislative constituency service (as in Britain) and argues that particularistic mechanisms strengthen committees and affect personal vote building activity.

Although control of the legislative agenda is firmly in the hands of the cabinet in many parliamentary systems, MPs routinely seek to take advantage of their right to propose "private member bills". The right to propose members' bills is often restricted. Mattson (1995) finds, e.g., that the passage rate of members' bill ranges from 0 to 46% with a mean

of 18.4% and median of 14% in Western Europe. Nevertheless, the mere act of proposing legislation may be important for MPs to signal effort to their constituents.

That MPs seek to offer members' bills — often in the face of near-certain defeat — raises two questions. First, why do they propose members' bills? Second, do members' bills have the intended effect? We argue that the answers to these questions are slightly more complicated than those suggested by the literature as MPs can occupy two roles; as *electorate candidates*, those competing in single-member districts, and *list candidates*, those standing on a national list using proportional representation. Each type of candidate faces a different electorate and, therefore, seeks to influence different audiences. In their roles as electorate candidates, MPs wish to represent, show responsiveness to, or signal effort to their constituents in the hope of building a personal vote but as Carey & Shugart's (1996) argue, candidates in single-member districts have a strong incentives to build a personal vote whereas candidates on a (closed) party list share their personal vote with the list. One might, thus, expect members' bill activity to be concentrated among electorate MPs and primarily be influenced by competition within their electorate. While list MPs may gain little from a personal vote they nevertheless have an incentive to present members' bill — their legislative efforts are, however, directed at a different audience. Their electoral fortunes are determined by their placement on the party list, placing list MPs in competition with one another for a favorable list position.¹ In their roles as list candidates, MPs propose members' bills to signal effort, an ability to appeal to voters, or other qualities to their party leadership and those influential in the parties' candidate nomination process.

New Zealand presents a unique opportunity for evaluating our claim that the electorate of the MPs' conditions their behavior as well as whether their efforts bear fruit for two reasons: New Zealand employs a mixed-member electoral system and members' bill are selected randomly for introduction in the legislature. The mixed-member electoral system allows us to evaluate whether the MPs' standing with the different electorates influences their legislative behavior. After examining whether New Zealand MPs members' bill activity targets different audiences — depending on their placement on the party list and their popularity in their electorate — we turn to the question of whether those activities were effective. Here the random selection of members' bills for debate helps estimate the causal effect of members' bills.²

¹In their candidate typology, Siavelis & Morgenstern (2008), note that closed-list proportional systems are conducive to the emergence of party loyalists because the candidates owe their list position to the party. Taylor (1992) similarly argues that Costa Rican legislators engage in constituency service, despite facing term-limits, to curry favor with party leaders in the hope of receiving political appointments.

²The random selection falls short of being a 'natural experiment' as the MPs must place a bill on the ballot. We discuss those limitations below but for lack of a better term for the procedure we will refer to it as a 'natural experiment'.

2 The Electoral Connection

Mixed-member electoral systems create two types of MPs — those elected from a party list and those elected in single member districts — which scholars have exploited to examine how electoral systems shape legislative behavior.³ As the fortunes of MPs elected in single member districts are tied closely to the voters in their district, they have a strong incentive to build a personal vote (Carey & Shugart, 1996). In contrast, list MPs are generally more dependent on their party as electoral success requires occupying a seat sufficiently high on the party list. In addition, single member districts may offer greater rewards for pork barrel projects as co-partisan MPs have little incentive to challenge the incumbent’s credit claiming. In mixed-member systems that allow candidates to stand simultaneously for election in a single-member district and on the party list, MPs’ strategies will reflect the incentives at both tiers of the system.

New Zealand has used a mixed-member system since 1996. Seventy members are elected in single member districts under plurality rule while 50 members are elected using proportional representation from a single national district.⁴ Voters cast two votes; one for an electorate candidate and one for a (closed) party list. The incentive to cultivate a personal vote thus varies among New Zealand MPs. How an MP was elected does not necessarily determine whether the MP seeks to build a personal vote as most MPs run as both electorate and list candidates. However, for these MPs, their electoral vulnerability in their electorate and on the party list is likely to shape the strategies they adopt.⁵

Since 1993 the New Zealand parliamentary procedures have limited the number of members’ bills by allowing only three to eight members’ bills on the Order Paper for first reading each members’ day.⁶ When space becomes available, members’ bills are selected by lot. MPs can enter bills in the ballot at any time but, on average, a ballot is held about once a month. Thus, random selection determines which MPs propose legislation and have it debated in the legislature. The ballot method was seen as a fairer and more efficient method of members’ bill selection than the previous ‘first come, first serve’ method (Spindler, 2009).

That members’ bills are selected randomly offers distinct advantages for evaluating whether legislative behavior affects voters’ evaluation of MPs.⁷ Where MPs do not face restrictions on proposing legislation, endogeneity is a concern. For example, if electorally

³The effect of these difference in MPs’ incentive to cultivate a personal vote have been examined in other context where mixed member electoral systems are used such as in Germany, Mexico, Wales, and Scotland. See, e.g., Moser & Scheiner (2011); Ugues et al. (2012); Stratmann & Baur (2002); Bradbury & Mitchell (2007).

⁴Currently seven of the 70 single member districts are reserved for the Māori roll.

⁵The differences in the roles of MPs are recognized formally to a degree — electorate MPs receive greater allowances for office and staff support. See, e.g., Banducci & Karp (1998). For information on allowances, see <http://www.ipu.org/parline-e/reports/2233.htm>.

⁶Members’ day is every second Wednesday. The number of members’ bills allowed on the Order Paper has increased from three at the beginning of the time period under study to eight in the last session.

⁷Loewen et al. (2014) have similarly taken advantage of random selection of which MPs propose members’ bills in the Canadian Parliament.

vulnerable MPs are more likely to propose members' bills than estimates of their effect on electoral success would tend to be biased downwards. As MPs must place a bill on the members' ballot for a chance of being selected, the selection of members' bills is not completely random. However, the randomization remains useful as the causal effect of members' bills can be estimated by conditioning on the MPs' observable effort.

We expect electorate MPs to cultivate a personal following with the aim of re-election. The electoral connection has been examined in a number of countries but the use of members' bills to build a personal vote has not been studied systematically with a few notable exceptions. Bowler (2010) argues that private member bills constitute one form of cultivating a personal vote. Loewen et al. (2014) suggest that in the face of limited opportunities to claim credit for policy initiatives or service, MPs will welcome any opportunity to increase name recognition or popularity. Solvak & Pajala (2016) study members' bill in Finland and Estonia and find that the behavior of MPs depends on both whether they are elected under open or closed list systems and district magnitude. Employing similar logic, Bräuninger et al. (2012) show how patterns of members' bill proposals are shaped by intra-party competition in the Belgian flexible list system.

One may be skeptical of the claim that members' bills have an electoral impact and think that other forms of constituency service may be more effective. Indeed, voters may only pay attention the major issues on the legislative agenda. When it comes to members' bills, which generally have little chance of success, we can be virtually certain that the vast majority of voters pay little attention. That, however, does not mean that members' bills do not have an effect. While voters may pay limited attention, proposing members' bills may attract the attention of political journalists and help MPs establish themselves even if the bill itself does not receive much media coverage.⁸ But occasionally they do. Writing in the *New Zealand Herald*, David Farrar notes, e.g., that

[h]aving your bill selected from the ballot can be life changing for an MP. It can take you from an obscure backbencher to a national figure. Sue Bradford was already well known before her anti-smacking law was selected, but the bill saw her become one of the highest profile MPs." (Farrar, 2012)

Proposing members' bill may, thus, help MPs gain name recognition and even popularity.

Proposing a bill also allows the MP to signal effort and dedication directly to her constituents (Bräuninger, 2009). MPs can highlight their legislative efforts in campaigning in their constituency and some of the parties highlight members' bills on their websites. Even if MPs expect the benefits to be fairly small it must be kept in mind that proposing a member's bill is not a costly exercise — they are rarely substantial pieces of legislation. To put it bluntly, with the government's firm grip on the legislative agenda, what else is a

⁸While most member's bills don't attract much media attention, it is not that uncommon. A search for "members' bill" on the *New Zealand Herald* website turns up about 1000 stories containing the term (March 26th).

backbencher to do?

The incentive to propose members' bills, or engage in other forms of constituency work, is a function of the MP's electoral security. MPs in safe seats have little to gain for proposing a member's bill. In marginal districts, members' bills are more likely to have a decisive effect. Bowler (2010) finds that British MPs in marginal seats propose more private member bills. French (2009) and Kellermann (2013) come to a similar conclusion with regard to early day motions. While New Zealand MPs face similar incentives, those incentives are slightly more complicated because of the electoral system being a mixed-member system where candidates may simultaneously run as electorate candidates and be on the party list. Thus, the meaning of occupying a safe seat is not as clear.

New Zealand MPs can attain electoral security in two ways. First, the MP can run in a 'safe' electorate. Electorally secure MPs are expected to offer fewer members' bills than electorally vulnerable MPs.

Hypothesis 1 *MPs in safe seats in their electorate are less likely to propose members' bills.*

Alternatively, electoral security can be achieved by obtaining a seat relatively high on the party list. A candidate low on the party list is vulnerable in two ways. First, a decline in her party's vote share reduces the number of seats allocated to the party. Second, because the electoral system is compensatory, the number of list seats allocated to a party depends on the number of electorate seats won by the party and can, thus, affect a list MP's chances of a seat. However, a list MP's chances are only affected by the success of electorate candidates that appear lower, or are not present, on the party list.

While it is clear that offering a members' bill is potentially valuable for electorate candidates, it is not obvious that list candidates benefit in the same way. Offering members' bills may help the party win votes but the benefits accrue to the party as a whole and are unlikely to have a decisive effect on the MP's individual electoral fortune. While list MPs are unlikely to be motivated by personal vote incentives, offering members' bills may also be a way of building a reputation and to signal ambition, legislative competence, or other qualities valued by the party. List MPs, therefore, face similar incentives as electorate MPs to offer members' bills but their audience is different, i.e., list MPs offer members' bills in the hope of influencing those responsible for list nominations.⁹ List MPs that face greater electoral uncertainty, that is, were lower on the party list in the past election, are expected to put greater effort into offering members' bills.

Hypothesis 2 *MPs high on the party list are less likely to propose members' bills.*

⁹McLeay & Vowles (2007) argue that there are several reasons list MPs may engage in constituency service including the hope of securing a favorable place on the party list and the possibility of standing as an electorate candidate. Williams & Indridason (2016) find that placing bills on the members' ballot affects the MP's placement on the party list.

The great majority of elected MPs run both as electorate and list candidates. The electoral rules imply that those elected from the party list failed to win a plurality in their electorate. In some sense list MPs are more vulnerable as they are, a priori, less likely to pull off a win in their electorate and their chances of reelection are, therefore, almost entirely dependent on obtaining a favorable spot on the party list. More generally, MPs that are electorally vulnerable *both* in their electorate and occupied a seat low on the party list ought to face greater incentives to offer members' bills.

Hypothesis 3 *MPs that are electorally vulnerable both in their electorate and as list candidates are more likely to propose members' bills.*

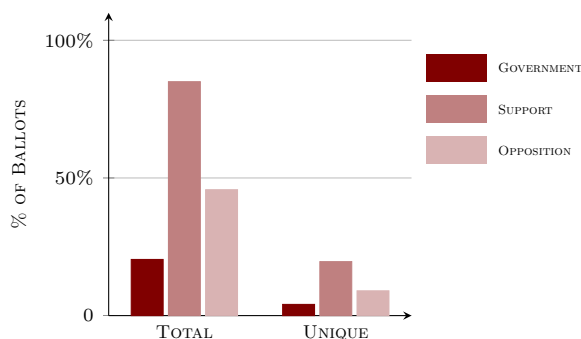
In terms of the marginal effect of the two electoral safety variables, the expectation is that the marginal effect of a higher placement on the party list declines the safer the MP's electorate seat. Conversely, the marginal effect of the MP's vote share in his electorate declines the higher the MP is on the party list.

The above hypotheses are predicated on the notion that offering members' bills does influence how voters, and parties, evaluate the candidates. Members' bill may do so in several ways. First, voters may notice the MPs' effort in proposing members' bill. It does, however, seem somewhat unlikely except for those voters that would be directly influenced by the legislation — or may, perhaps, have lobbied for it — or in exceptional cases where members' bills have addressed highly salient or controversial issues such as the *Marriage (Definition of Marriage) Amendment Bill* introduced in 2012 that expanded the definition of marriage to same-sex unions. Second, having proposed members' bills may be useful in the MP's reelection campaign both in terms of signaling her policy emphasis and as documentation of the MP's legislative effort. Third, journalists may pay attention to members' bills. While the bills' content is not always of great importance, they may still serve to draw attention to the MP. Members' bills may be more likely to be offered by backbenchers with high ambitions, MPs that are electorally vulnerable, and mavericks — all of which have the potential of making a good news story. The expectations about the effects of proposing members' bill are straightforward — proposing members' bills improves voters' evaluation of the MP.

Hypothesis 4 *MPs that propose members' bills are viewed more favorably by voters in their electorate.*

To examine how the electoral connection conditions legislative behavior in New Zealand, we focus on members' bill proposal in the 46th-50th parliaments, using the results and party lists from elections held between 1999 and 2011 to evaluate whether electorally vulnerable MPs are more likely to propose members' bills and, subsequently, whether their activity influenced their approval ratings.

FIGURE 1: SHARE OF OPPORTUNITIES TO ENTER BILL USED*
—BY GOVERNMENT PARTY MEMBERSHIP—



*Excludes Ministers, House Leaders, and All Speakers.
SOURCE: New Zealand Parliament (www.parliament.nz)

3 Empirical Analysis

The data on members' bills placed and selected on the ballot were gathered from the parliamentary archives and website.¹⁰ Constituency level electoral results were obtained from the constituency level electoral archive (Kollman et al., 2013) while the party lists fielded by the parties in the elections were obtained from the website of the New Zealand Electoral Commission.¹¹ Information on the approval of electorate MPs comes from the New Zealand Election Studies (1999, 2002, 2005, and 2011).¹²

3.1 Proposing Members' Bills

The members' bill ballot is held whenever room opens on the Order Paper, which typically means at most once or twice a month. One or two bills are drawn out of about 40 bills placed on the ballot. If a members' bill is not drawn, the MP is allowed to place the same bill on subsequent ballots. A total of 3174 members' bills were placed on the ballot during the 46th-50th parliaments. The chances of success are fairly low. Only 159 bills were drawn in the ballots (5.0%). Figure 1 graphs the average participation rate in members' ballots by government, support party, and opposition MPs during the 46th-50th parliaments. Opposition MPs were quite active, participating on average in nearly half the ballots and placing a total of 1805 bills on the ballot or on average 6.91 bills per MP (per session). In contrast, government MPs placed 516 bills on the ballot, averaging only 1.80 bills per MP (per session). MPs of government support parties were the most active, making use over 80% of their opportunities to place a bill on the ballot.

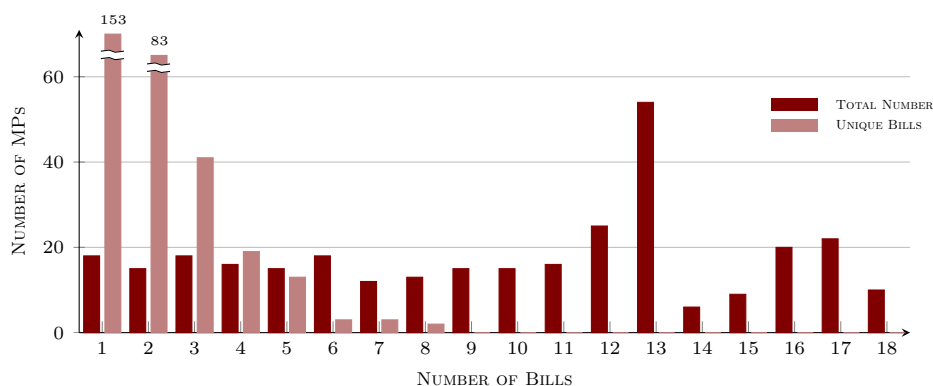
Figure 2 graphs the number of unique bills placed on the ballot by a MP as well as the

¹⁰<http://www.parliament.nz/en-nz/pb/legislation/proposed-bills/>. Accessed 8/2/2015.

¹¹<http://www.elections.org.nz/>. Accessed 8/2/2015.

¹²<http://www.nzes.org/>

FIGURE 2: BILLS PLACED ON THE BALLOT BY MP
 —TOTAL NUMBER OF BILLS & UNIQUE BILLS—



SOURCE: New Zealand Parliament (www.parliament.nz)

number of attempts made. About 35% of the MPs (excluding ministers) didn't participate in the ballot at all. The number of attempts is fairly evenly distributed although a fair number of MPs appear to take every opportunity to place a bill on the ballot.¹³ However, about 94% of the MPs who placed a bill on the ballot did so more than once. A plurality of MPs, 48%, placed a single bill (i.e., a unique bill) on the ballot with about 27% placing two separate bills on the ballot.

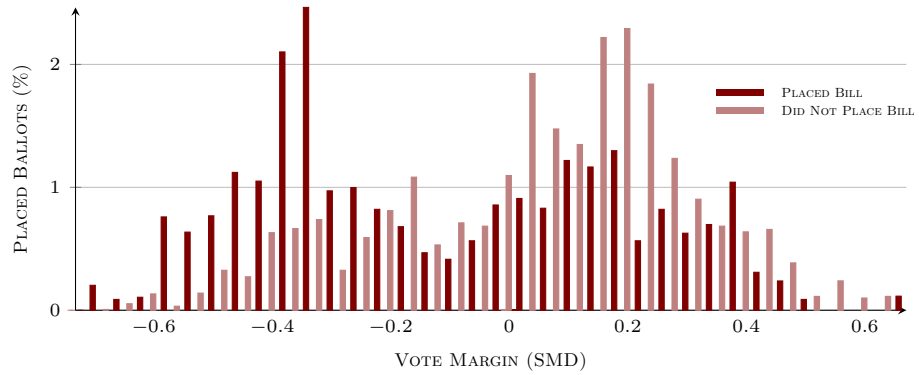
To evaluate our hypotheses concerning the effect of electoral vulnerability on the incentive to participate in the members' bill ballot, we consider whether each MP entered a bill in each members' ballot held. Proposing members' bill can be seen to have an effect for different reasons. For example, if the MP seeks to signal legislative effort, placing the same bill on the ballot repeatedly and proposing several different bills may both be effective strategies, i.e., in either case her name appears on each ballot and is more likely to be noticed by party members or journalists. If the benefits are only expected to be realized if the MP's bill is drawn and debated in parliament then the number of attempts rather than the number of unique bills is more relevant for maximizing the probability of the MP's bill being selected. If, on the other hand, the MP is targeting his constituents the number of unique bills placed on the ballot may be more effective, i.e., the MP may benefit more from having advocated several different issues. For these reasons we measure members' bills activity in two ways. First, whether the MP placed a bill on the ballot. Second, whether she placed a *new* bill on a given ballot.¹⁴

Our key independent variables measure electoral safety. LIST SAFETY is the difference between the number of seats won by the MP's party and the MP's place on the party list.

¹³The number of ballots held varied from twelve to eighteen, and in the shorter sessions participating in all the ballots was quite common, thus accounting for the relatively high number of MPs having presented 12 or 13 bills.

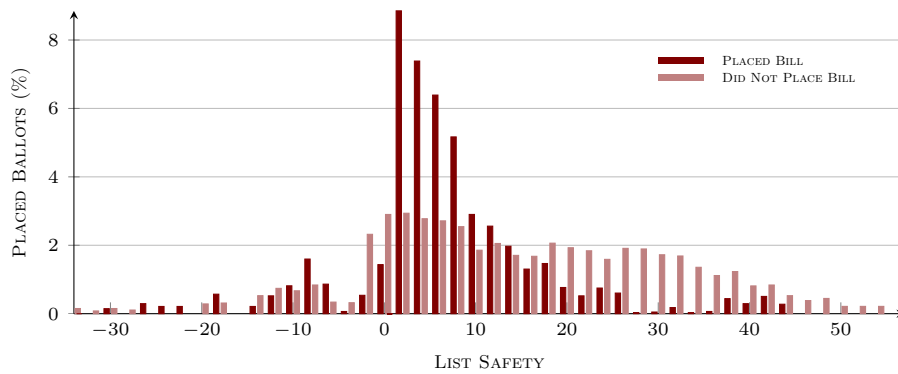
¹⁴Summary statistics are presented in the appendix.

FIGURE 3: VOTE MARGIN AND PLACING BILLS ON THE BALLOT



SOURCE: New Zealand Parliament (www.parliament.nz)

FIGURE 4: LIST SAFETY AND PLACING BILLS ON THE BALLOT



SOURCE: New Zealand Parliament (www.parliament.nz)

Similarly, SMD SAFETY is the MP's margin of victory in her electorate.¹⁵ The variables are also interacted as MPs that are low on their party's list and have limited support in their electorate are the most vulnerable. In contrast, an MP that, e.g., won by a large margin in her electorate has little reason to worry about her list placement.

Figures 3 and 4 graph the distributions of SMD SAFETY and LIST SAFETY for MPs that placed and didn't place a bill on the members' ballot. If the MPs' incentive to propose members' bills were unrelated with electoral safety then the distribution of those that did and did not place a bill on the ballot would have the same shape. That is clearly not the case. Figure 3 suggests that MPs that placed bills on the ballot are more likely to be those that fared poorly in their electorates and entered parliament on the party list. In contrast, MPs that did not bother to place a bill on the ballot are more likely be electorate MPs in relatively safe seats. Figure 4 reveals a clearer pattern. MPs that placed bills on the ballot are far more likely to be at the lower rung of their party's list while those who did not are more evenly distributed.¹⁶ Taken together, the figures perhaps suggest that offering members' bills is directed more at the MP's party than intended to build a personal vote — MPs that offer members' bills appear to be those that fail to win a seat in the electorate they contested and were among the last ones to come in off the party list.

Several control variables are included. GOVERNMENT MP and SUPPORT PARTY MP are coded one for, respectively, government and government support party MPs and zero else. As participating in the ballot is potentially seen as a rebellion for government MPs, we examine an interaction between GOV'T MP and SMD SAFETY. The coefficient for the interaction term should be negative, indicating that government MPs reduce their members' bill activity more rapidly than opposition MPs as their margin of victory in their electorate increases.¹⁷ To control for MPs facing different incentives depending on whether the anticipating campaigning as electorate or list candidates (or both) we control for the MP's candidacy. The variables SMD ONLY and LIST ONLY indicate whether the MP ran, respectively, only in an electorate and only on the party list with the baseline category being MPs that both ran as electorate and list candidates. PARLIAMENTARY LEADERSHIP is an indicator for a parliamentary leadership position (Leader of House, Speaker of the House, or Deputy or Assistant Speaker). DAYS LEFT is the number of days until the end of the session.¹⁸ Electoral motives become more salient at the end of the session and MPs ought to be more likely to enter a bill on the ballot. Indicators for parliamentary session are included as the use of members' bills may have changed over time. The analysis of whether MPs

¹⁵SMD SAFETY is coded zero for candidates that did not contest an electorate seat. For unsuccessful electorate candidates that nevertheless were elected on the party list, SMD SAFETY is coded as their 'margin of victory', i.e., a negative number. Descriptive statistics are provided in the online appendix.

¹⁶It bears noting that there are more MPs with low values on LIST SAFETY as its value for each party is capped at the number of list seats won by each party, i.e., a small party that only wins four seats has no MPs with LIST SAFETY greater than three. However, comparing the shape of the two distributions suggests that LIST SAFETY does matter.

¹⁷Note that MPs that are vulnerable because of their list position rely on their party to obtain a better place on the party list and, thus, do not face similar incentives to place bills on the ballot.

¹⁸We define the expected end of a session as three years from the previous election.

enter a new or unique bill on the ballot includes two additional variables. First, `PREVIOUS BILL DRAWN` is an indicator for whether the previous bill proposed by the MP was drawn in order to account for the fact that a bill that has already been drawn cannot be resubmitted. Second, we include an indicator variable for the first ballot of each session as each bill is new by definition.

The MP’s propensity to enter a bill is modeled using a logit model. The unit of observation is the MP-Ballot, i.e., there is one observation for each MP for each ballot held.¹⁹ As each MP contributes multiple observations, standard errors are estimated assuming errors are clustered by MP in each session.

The estimated logit models, table 1, suggest that electoral vulnerability matters. Greater safety, whether in the electorate or on the party list, generally reduces the likelihood of a members’ bill being submitted by MPs. To gauge the substantive effect of the safety variables, we calculate the change in the dependent variable as the value of the safety variable goes from its mean minus its standard deviation ($\mu_s - \sigma_s$) to its mean plus its standard deviation ($\mu_s + \sigma_s$). The effect of such a change in `LIST SAFETY` reduces the probability of entering the ballot by 13.6% pts. while the corresponding change in `SMD SAFETY` reduces the probability by 11.0% pts. Over a parliamentary session, in which 12-18 member ballots are held, this amounts to, on average, about one and a half additional bills.²⁰

The coefficient for the interaction is correctly signed but is only statistically significant when the dependent variable is whether the MP entered a bill in the ballot (models 1 and 2). This suggests that members’ bill activity is related to the MPs’ concerns over their electoral standing. As shown in figure 5, improvement in a MP’s `SMD SAFETY` has a smaller effect for MPs that are in safe seats on their party’s list than MP that are low on the list. Conversely, moving up the party list has less of an effect on participation in the members’ ballot for an MP who carried her electorate by a wide margin than a MP who failed to win in her electorate or did so by a narrow margin. Moreover, the graphs of the marginal effects show that improved safety only reduces the number of bills proposed if the MP lacks safety as measured by the other safety variable. That is, improved `SMD SAFETY` has no effect if the MP was high on the party list. This is in line with expectations — as most MPs run both in an electorate and on the party list they only face electoral insecurity if they are in vulnerable position in both. If a MP occupies a safe seat on the party list then her standing in her electorate is of little concern to her.

Government MPs are less likely to place bills on the ballot. Similarly, the interaction between government MP and electoral safety for electorate MPs provides an indication that government MPs respond more sharply to electoral vulnerability although there is considerable statistical uncertainty about the effect. Overall the results suggest that MPs are influenced by electoral concerns and that their behavior reflects concern about their

¹⁹Ministers are excluded as they are not allowed to place bills on the ballot.

²⁰With regard to new bills, the same changes in `LIST SAFETY` and `SMD VOTE SAFETY` reduces the probability by, respectively, 2.9% pts. and 3.1% pts.

TABLE 1: MEMBER BILL ATTEMPTS & ELECTORAL SAFETY:
—46th-50th PARLIAMENT, LOGIT MODELS—

	ALL ATTEMPTS		UNIQUE BILLS	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
SMD VOTE SAFETY	-1.67*** ($<.001$)	-1.24*** (0.009)	-0.97*** ($<.001$)	-0.91*** ($<.001$)
LIST SAFETY	-0.026*** (0.003)	-0.025*** (0.005)	-0.013*** (0.01)	-0.013** (0.011)
SMD×LIST SAFETY	0.074** (0.030)	0.075** (0.027)	0.020 (0.25)	0.021 (0.24)
Gov'T. MP×SMD SAFETY		-1.30* (0.066)		-0.28 (0.47)
Gov'T MP	-1.31*** ($<.001$)	-1.28*** ($<.001$)	-0.82*** ($<.001$)	-0.82*** ($<.001$)
SUPPORT PARTY MP	1.83*** ($<.001$)	1.94*** ($<.001$)	0.95*** ($<.001$)	0.97*** ($<.001$)
SMD ONLY	-1.09*** (0.002)	-1.12*** (0.002)	-0.57** (0.049)	-0.56* (0.053)
LIST ONLY	-0.23 (0.42)	-0.28 (0.35)	-0.095 (0.60)	-0.11 (0.56)
PARLIAM. LEADERSHIP	-0.30 (0.68)	-0.29 (0.70)	-0.92* (0.085)	-0.91* (0.084)
SENIORITY	0.025 (0.12)	0.021 (0.19)	0.019** (0.034)	0.018** (0.043)
DAYS LEFT OF SESSION	-0.00070*** (0.002)	-0.00070*** (0.002)	0.000093 (0.68)	0.000096 (0.67)
47 th PARLIAMENT	-0.69** (0.012)	-0.68** (0.013)	-0.14 (0.49)	-0.13 (0.50)
48 th PARLIAMENT	-0.41 (0.13)	-0.46* (0.093)	-0.31* (0.093)	-0.32* (0.089)
49 th PARLIAMENT	-0.19 (0.48)	-0.19 (0.47)	0.050 (0.75)	0.052 (0.75)
50 th PARLIAMENT	2.09*** ($<.001$)	2.14*** ($<.001$)	1.01*** ($<.001$)	1.01*** ($<.001$)
PREVIOUS BILL DRAWN			1.51*** ($<.001$)	1.51*** ($<.001$)
FIRST BALLOT OF SESSION			2.52*** ($<.001$)	2.52*** ($<.001$)
CONSTANT	0.32 (0.24)	0.36 (0.20)	-3.11*** ($<.001$)	-3.10*** ($<.001$)
OBSERVATIONS	7567	7567	7567	7567
CLUSTERS	515	515	515	515
LOG LIKELIHOOD	-3695.4	-3682.7	-1786.9	-1786.7
χ^2	326.8	320.6	708.7	704.9

p-values in parentheses. * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

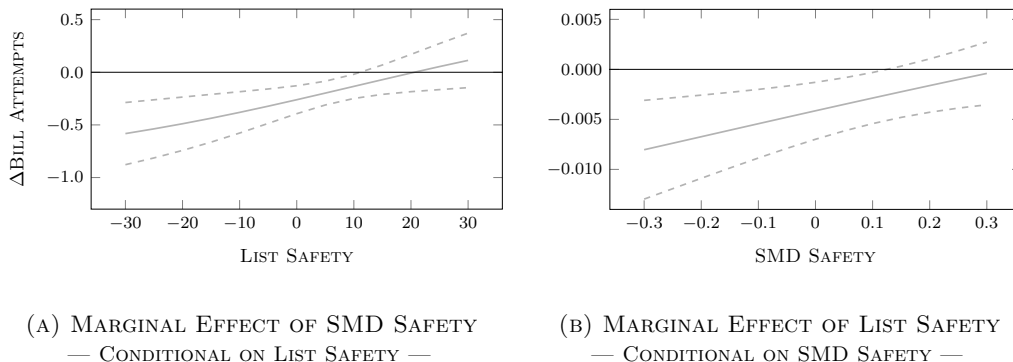


FIGURE 5: THE EFFECT OF LIST & SMD SAFETY ON THE NUMBER OF ATTEMPTS

ability to win votes in their electorate as well as their standing within the party.

3.2 Rewarding Legislative Action: Approval

We now turn our attention to the question whether voters approve more of MPs that place members’ bills on the ballot or are afforded the opportunity to present them in parliament. The 1999, 2002, 2005, and 2011 New Zealand Election Study asked respondents to indicate how strongly they approved or disapproved of their electorate MP on a five-point scale.

The respondents’ answers to the MP approval question are modeled using ordered logit models, estimating the effect of the total number of attempts to place a bill on the ballot, the number of unique bills placed on the ballot, and whether the respondent’s MP was lucky enough to have her bill drawn. When it comes to whether the MP had a bill drawn on the ballot, we take advantage of the members’ bill ballot approximating a natural experiment, i.e., members’ bill are drawn at random. The ‘natural experiment’ brings us closer to establishing a causal relationship as the random selection of bills implies that the treatment (a MP’s bill being drawn) is exogenous and the possibility of endogeneity is, thus, eliminated. There are, however, some complications as the probability of having a bill drawn is not completely exogenous, i.e., in order to have a bill drawn the MP must have placed a bill on the ballot and the more bills she has placed, the better her chances. As this non-random selection onto the ballot interferes with the random assignment of the ‘treatment’, we also estimate models that only include respondents represented by MPs that placed a bill on the ballot, include controls for the number of times the MP placed a bill on the ballot, and estimate models for subsamples of respondents whose MPs placed the same, or similar, number of bills on the ballot.²¹

²¹The decision to enter a bill may be correlated with MP characteristics such as their electoral strength, persistence, etc. Estimating the effects of having a bill drawn for subsamples of MPs with similar levels of participation helps address this problem. This strategy is potentially limited if the MPs’ strategy is to stop participating once they have a bill drawn. In that case the number of attempts doesn’t reflect a MP’s persistence, i.e., a MP who has a bill drawn on the first ballot will have made a single attempt while she might otherwise have made multiple attempts. Our data suggests that this is not a significant concern as

A reason for questioning the ‘natural experiment’ generated by the members’ bill ballot is the possibility that MPs that place more bills on the ballot are different from other MPs. Other factors, whether characteristic or context, may both induce the MP to place more bills on the ballot and cause voters to evaluate her more highly. This is one version of the popular refrain ‘correlation doesn’t imply causation’. Why, then, do we bother estimating models of the number of attempts and the number of unique bills placed on the ballot. The reason is simple. While the above refrain is certainly true, it is also true that ‘correlation does not imply the absence of causation’. That is, in some instances there are good reasons to think that a causal relationship exists even when one can only estimate correlations. Consider the number of bills placed on the ballot. As we have argued theoretically and shown empirically, electoral vulnerability affects MPs’ attempts at proposing members’ bills. Electorally vulnerable MPs typically suffer from lower levels of approval. Thus, if placing bills on the ballot has no effect on approval, one would actually expect a negative coefficient for the number bills placed on the ballot. While examining the effects of the number of bills placed on the ballot doesn’t offer the clean identification that a natural experiment offers, it does offer some insight into the question whether legislative effort matters apart from the chance of having one’s bill debated.

Several control variables that are likely to affect MP approval are included. We control for the absolute distance between the respondent’s self-placement on the left-right scale and her placement of the electorate MP’s party (L-R DISTANCE). We also control for the respondent’s approval of the electorate MP’s party. MP’S PARTY APPROVAL is expected to be positively correlated with the respondent’s evaluation of the MP.²² GENERAL MP APPROVAL captures the respondent’s evaluation of MPs in general. The variable accounts for heterogeneity in the respondents’ attitudes towards parliamentarians. Finally, we control for MPs in the PARLIAMENTARY LEADERSHIP.

The first three columns of table 2 examine separately the effects of the three measures of legislative activity. Each of the measures has a positive effect on the respondents’ approval of the MPs. In the fourth column, which includes all three variables, the total number of bills and the number of bills drawn remain statistically significant while the effect of the number of unique bills is now negative. While these results suggest that participating in the ballot and having one’s bill drawn is more beneficial to the MP than presenting multiple different bills, it must be noted that the three variables are correlated, which inflates the estimated standard errors and makes coefficient estimates unstable. MPs that participate in the ballot may differ from MPs that don’t participate. Column 5 presents the results of the ordered logit model for the subsample of respondents whose MPs placed at least one bill on the ballot. The effect of the number of bills drawn remains substantively similar,

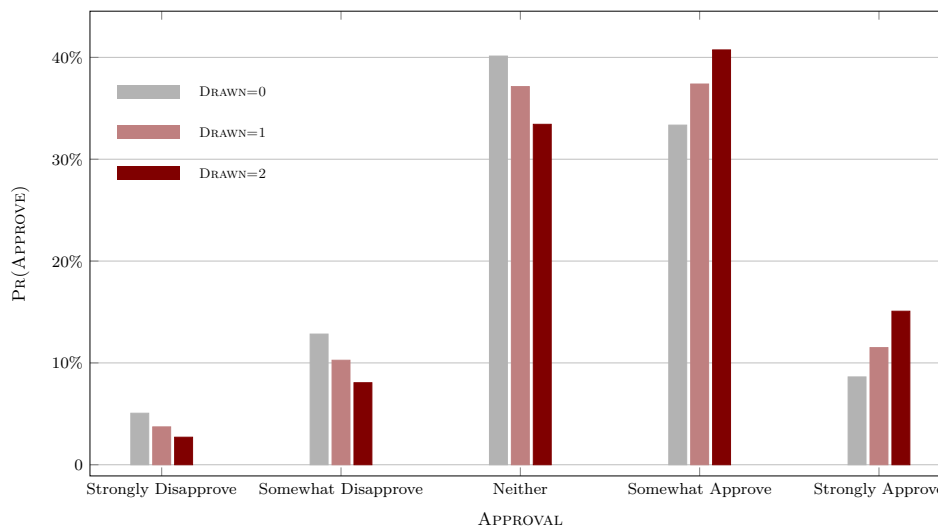
most MP submit a new members’ bill after having a bill drawn. Moreover, those that do not place a new bill on the ballot tend to have had their bills drawn late in the session and may not have had much time to prepare a new bill. Overall, there is little to suggest that MPs are satisfied with having a single bill drawn.

²²MP’S PARTY APPROVAL may largely be determined by the respondents’ evaluations of their electorate MP. However, the substantive conclusions are not affected by the exclusion of the variable.

TABLE 2: MP APPROVAL: NO. & UNIQUE ATTEMPTS, BILLS DRAWN

	ALL MPs				ONLY PROPOSERS
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
NO. ATTEMPTS	0.033*** ($<.001$)			0.037*** ($<.001$)	
NO. UNIQUE BILLS		0.14*** ($<.001$)		-0.16*** (0.003)	
NO. BILLS DRAWN			0.36*** ($<.001$)	0.37*** ($<.001$)	0.26*** ($<.001$)
L-R DISTANCE	-0.022* (0.061)	-0.022* (0.062)	-0.023* (0.051)	-0.023* (0.051)	-0.025 (0.13)
MP'S PARTY APPROVAL	0.19*** ($<.001$)	0.19*** ($<.001$)	0.19*** ($<.001$)	0.19*** ($<.001$)	0.22*** ($<.001$)
GENERAL MP APPROVAL	-1.18*** ($<.001$)	-1.18*** ($<.001$)	-1.18*** ($<.001$)	-1.18*** ($<.001$)	-0.97*** ($<.001$)
PARLIAM. LEADERSHIP	-0.14 (0.17)	-0.15 (0.14)	-0.23** (0.025)	-0.21** (0.037)	0.38*** ($<.001$)
ELECTION: 2002	0.067 (0.25)	0.095 (0.11)	0.11* (0.065)	0.077 (0.19)	0.18** (0.042)
2005	-0.16** (0.014)	-0.14** (0.032)	-0.14** (0.030)	-0.16** (0.012)	-0.17* (0.079)
2011	0.14** (0.038)	0.13* (0.054)	0.13** (0.044)	0.15** (0.028)	0.13 (0.21)
CUTPOINT: μ_1	-5.84*** ($<.001$)	-5.83*** ($<.001$)	-5.85*** ($<.001$)	-5.86*** ($<.001$)	-5.06*** ($<.001$)
μ_2	-4.17*** ($<.001$)	-4.16*** ($<.001$)	-4.18*** ($<.001$)	-4.18*** ($<.001$)	-3.43*** ($<.001$)
μ_3	-1.80*** ($<.001$)	-1.80*** ($<.001$)	-1.81*** ($<.001$)	-1.81*** ($<.001$)	-1.08*** ($<.001$)
μ_4	0.66*** ($<.001$)	0.65*** ($<.001$)	0.65*** ($<.001$)	0.65*** ($<.001$)	1.39*** ($<.001$)
OBSERVATIONS	7102	7102	7102	7102	3513
LOG LIKELIHOOD	-8392.8	-8400.0	-8385.5	-8376.3	-4130.1
χ^2	2417.9	2403.5	2432.5	2450.8	1062.1

FIGURE 6: PREDICTED RESPONDENT APPROVAL OF MP
—CONDITIONAL ON NUMBER OF BILLS DRAWN—



which suggests that the results are not being driven by the different incentives MPs face in participating in the ballot. Figure 6 graphs the predicted probabilities of a respondent’s answers to the approval question. MPs who had one or two bills drawn were less likely to be rated negatively or neutrally but were more likely to be rated favorably. The effect is substantial — the probability of a respondent approving of a MP was about seven percentage points higher for each bill drawn.

There is still significant variation in the legislative effort of MPs who had a bill drawn (table 2, col. 5). Further conditioning on legislative effort is methodologically straightforward except that further partitioning implies fewer observations within each subsample. For example, the subsample of respondents whose MPs placed a single bill on the ballot consists of only 528 observations. Because of these data limitation, four ordered logit models are estimated; for MPs that made a single attempt, for MPs that made two to four attempts, for MPs that proposed one unique bill, and for MPs that proposed two unique bills.²³

The results suggest that having a bill drawn does affect approval ratings (Table 3). The effect is positive across the subsamples and statistically significant except in the second model. Each bill drawn increases the average approval rating between .2 and .3 points on the 5 point approval scale, which corresponds to between one in every five voters and three in every ten voters ranking the MP one point higher on the scale.

In sum, there is clear evidence of members’ bill mattering MP approval and, furthermore, that they may matter in two distinct ways. First, as the results in Table 3 show, having

²³ The online appendix presents models estimated on different subsamples (0-5, 6-10, and >10 attempts).

TABLE 3: MP APPROVAL: ORDERED LOGIT
— CONDITIONING ON NO. ATTEMPTS & UNIQUE BILLS —

	ATTEMPTS		UNIQUE BILLS	
	ONE	TWO TO FOUR	ONE	TWO
NO. BILLS DRAWN	0.39** (0.025)	0.34** (0.033)	0.27*** (0.002)	0.23 (0.11)
L-R DISTANCE	-0.029 (0.48)	0.015 (0.69)	-0.031 (0.15)	0.021 (0.58)
MP'S PARTY APPROVAL	0.19*** ($<.001$)	0.27*** ($<.001$)	0.20*** ($<.001$)	0.26*** ($<.001$)
GENERAL MP APPROVAL	-1.10*** ($<.001$)	-0.80*** ($<.001$)	-1.07*** ($<.001$)	-0.96*** ($<.001$)
PARLIAM. LEADERSHIP	—	—	1.82** (0.017)	0.45 (0.18)
ELECTION: 2002	-0.072 (0.76)	0.56** (0.022)	0.11 (0.31)	0.36* (0.077)
2005	-0.62** (0.017)	-0.36* (0.077)	-0.35*** (0.003)	-0.11 (0.66)
2011	-0.18 (0.43)	0.23 (0.21)	0.030 (0.80)	0.077 (0.72)
CUTPOINT: μ_1	-5.45*** ($<.001$)	-4.22*** ($<.001$)	-5.68*** ($<.001$)	-4.43*** ($<.001$)
μ_2	-3.97*** ($<.001$)	-2.46*** ($<.001$)	-3.98*** ($<.001$)	-2.97*** ($<.001$)
μ_3	-1.69*** ($<.001$)	-0.063 (0.89)	-1.57*** ($<.001$)	-0.78* (0.083)
μ_4	0.75 (0.13)	2.45*** ($<.001$)	0.88*** (0.001)	1.74*** ($<.001$)
OBSERVATIONS	528	722	2060	642
LOG LIKELIHOOD	-637.2	-847.0	-2411.6	-766.5
χ^2	173.4	244.6	662.4	205.5

p-values in parentheses. * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

the opportunity to present a members' bill in parliament affects MP approval. Second, the results in Table 2 suggest that respondents give their MP an 'A' for effort — merely placing a bill on the members' bill ballot appears to improve the MP's approval rating.

Placing a new bill on the ballot or having one's bill drawn is expected to have bigger impact on approval than placing an 'old', and thus less newsworthy, bill on the ballot. Placing the same bill on the ballot repeatedly can still signal effort, even if fairly minimal, and the MP may also hope to convey persistence. Nevertheless, introducing a new bill or having one's bill debated is more likely to raise the profile of the MP. The results suggest that these expectations are borne out by the data. Each additional attempt nets the MPs considerable less positive approval than placing a new bill on the ballot or having her bill drawn.²⁴

In addition to MP approval, we explored the effects of private members' bills on whether survey respondents knew their electorate MP's name and on the MP's electoral performance. Respondents were more likely to know their MP if they had proposed members' bills and if they had placed multiple different bills on the members' ballots whereas the effects of having a bill drawn were ambiguous — perhaps because voters are more likely to be informed about members' bills by the MPs themselves than from observing legislative politics. The results with regard to electoral performance are at first sight in stark contrast with previous findings by Loewen et al. (2014), and to a lesser extent Bowler (2010), who find clear evidence of voters rewarding MPs that present members' bills. Our results suggest that members that participate more frequently in the ballot and place more unique bills fare, if anything, worse electorally. However, given our analysis above of the incentives to participate in the members' ballot, this stands to reason. MPs that place bills on the ballot do so because they face electoral insecurity — the observed negative relationship is the result of endogeneity problems. Indeed, when we consider the effect of having a bill drawn, which allows us to condition on the MPs' effort we find that having a bill drawn has a positive, but statistically insignificant effect. Thus, there is a slight indication that members' bills positively affect electoral outcomes. The results are in an online appendices.

There are, however, good reasons why members' bills have a limited impact on electoral performance — even when important for MP approval. In New Zealand, as in many parliamentary systems, politics are dominated by parties and elections largely revolve around which party, or parties, will form government. Evaluations of individual electorate candidates, therefore, play a rather limited role. Members' bills may help the MP's approval rating but is unlikely to overcome partisan differences.²⁵ Moreover, one might ask which voters reward MPs' for members' bill activity — our analysis suggests, unsurprisingly, that approval

²⁴Of course, column 4 in table 2 suggests that the number of attempts might be more important than the other variables. One must keep in mind, however, that the three variables are correlated and that there is considerably more variation in the number of total attempts than the other variables. Thus, if the number of total attempts has a slight effect then maximizing the likelihood of observing the actual outcome may allocate more of the effect to the number of attempts as it affects a greater number of respondents, which may lead to an underestimate of the effect of the other two variables.

²⁵It bears noting that two ballot systems certainly affords voters greater flexibility to reward MPs.

increases most among ideologically proximate voters. That is, it appears that the voters that respond most positively to the MP's effort to present members' bills are primarily the voters that were already most likely to vote for the MP.²⁶

4 Conclusions

Parliamentary systems are characterized by tight government control of the legislative agenda and high levels of party discipline. As a consequence, MPs generally face limited options outside their parties when it comes to achieving their career goals, whether related to policy or their reelection. Private members' bills are one opportunity for MPs to achieve such goals. There are many reasons why MPs might not want to propose members' bills. First, members' bills are usually highly unlikely to be adopted. Second, offering members' bills can be a costly exercise — especially for government MPs whose parties may put a premium on party discipline. Third, parliamentary elections tend to be party focused, i.e., voters pay greater attention to the party platforms and leaders than individual candidates. Fourth, some electoral systems, e.g., closed list proportional representation systems, vastly limit the value of a personal vote and, therefore, diminish the incentive to propose members' bill or engage in other legislative activity that might otherwise appeal to voters. Yet, MPs do propose members' bills.

We have sought to explain why MPs propose members' bills and to show that, despite everything, members' bills represent a form of an electoral connection. In particular, electorally vulnerable MPs are more likely to propose members' bills and voters respond by evaluating them more favorably. New Zealand has particular features that are conducive for studying members' bills. Its mixed-member proportional system has distinct benefits. In order to say something interesting about the electoral connection, the system under study ought to provide MPs with some incentives to build a personal vote. The presence of single-member districts provides this condition in New Zealand — electorate MPs have a strong incentive to build a personal following, especially if they are located in electorates where their party is weak and they are placed low on the party list. List MPs owe their parliamentary seat to the party and have, therefore, little incentives to worry about a personal vote. We find, however, that there is an electoral connection when it comes to list MPs but that it is quite distinct from the one that electorate MPs must grapple with. Vulnerable list MPs, those that are low on the party list, are more likely to offer members' bill. In this instance the goal of the MP is not to signal competence or legislative effort to the voters but rather to the members of their own party who influence the nomination of candidates to the party list.

The major advantage of studying New Zealand is that the ability to introduce members' bills is decided by lot. The members' ballot comes close to creating a natural experiment,

²⁶The results are in an online appendix.

which helps estimate the causal effect of presenting members' bills in parliament. We find that MPs whose bills are drawn on the ballot have higher levels of approval. The effect is quite substantial — as many as 20-30% of the respondents are estimated to rate a MP that has had a bill drawn on the ballot a point higher on the five-point approval scale. These are rather remarkable figures considering that it is unlikely that respondents pay close attention to members' bills. We argue that such politically attuned voters are not a necessary condition for members' bills to affect voters' attitudes. The MPs, themselves, e.g., can bring the members' bills to voters' attention when campaigning for reelection. Members' bills may also draw media attention to the MP — whether it is because of the content of the bill or because it signals ambition, or electoral vulnerability, to political journalists.

The total number of bills and number of unique bills placed on the ballot also affect the MPs' approval rates positively but, of course, it is not possible to assert that there is a causal relationship running from placing bills on the ballot and approval. However, if MP approval affects the incentive to place a bill on the ballot it seems more likely that MPs who face a poor approval rating are more likely to place bills on the ballot. That is, indeed, what we find when examining how often MPs place a bill on the ballot and, thus, if endogeneity is a problem it is likely to bias the estimated effects of members' bills downwards.

The MP's decisions to take part in the ballot does introduce a potential confounding factor. Simply put, the more often the MP places a bill on the ballot, the greater are her chances of having her bill selected. Thus, the MPs whose bills are drawn may differ from MPs in general. That MPs facing low levels of approval have a greater incentives to place bill on the ballot (and, thus, biasing the results against our hypothesis) helps mitigate this problem but we also address it by comparing MPs that placed a similar number of bills on the ballot and find that the effects of having a bill drawn on approval remain positive.

Our findings contribute to a growing body of literature that has sought to demonstrate how members' bills connect MP with their constituents but suggest that members' bills may also have an important role in systems where MPs do not gain much from a 'personal vote'. The results suggest that MPs use members' bills to signal effort and competence to their own parties in the hope of securing a more favorable list position. While our analysis takes place within a mixed-member system where contamination between the electorate and proportional representation part of the electoral system are a concern, we do find that MPs respond to electoral safety within the two parts of the system in a predictable manner. It is, thus, plausible that similar effects would be found in examining members' bill — or constituency service and legislative behavior more broadly — in other electoral systems, whether they employ only single member districts or are proportional representation systems.

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