

**The constituency as a focus of representation: studying the Italian case through the analysis of parliamentary questions.**

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**Abstract**

This paper analyses the constituency focus of Italian deputies elected in the XV legislatures, that is under a closed PR system, through the study of parliamentary questioning. Non legislative activities such as questions offer a precious opportunity to look at the role of individual parliamentarians even where, as in the European case, parties enforce a strict voting discipline. Looking at parliamentary questions with a territorial focus we learn that some parliamentarians do play the role of “constituency servant” even in a context which is not expected to reward this choice. Who are they? What kind of incentives can lead them to spend time performing constituency related activities?

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## **Introduction**

In the last decade there has been a heated debate among Italian political scholars and practitioners about the constituency role of parliamentarians. Changing three electoral systems in less than 15 years, Italy has offered to political scientists a quasi experimental setting to test the effect of different electoral rules on the recruitment and behaviour of political elites (Carey and Shugart 1995 and Shugart et al. 2005). After 45 years (from 1948 to 1993) in which Italy has elected its representatives with an open list PR with large magnitude districts, a popular referendum introduced a mixed system assigning 75% of the seats through a plurality system and the remaining 25% with a closed list proportional system at national level. However this system never excited centre right parties, which in 2005 decided to adopt a closed list proportional system with regional districts.

The incentives to select locally oriented parliamentarians have naturally changed over time: according to Marangoni and Tronconi (2008), who analysed the localness of MPs elected under the three different electoral systems, the plurality system gave to parties more incentives to select parliamentarians with strong roots in the constituency. In fact, the plurality system had a double positive effect of constituency representation: firstly, it favoured the recruitment of locally oriented candidates. In addition, as a quasi experimental research design clearly showed (Gagliarducci et al. 2007), it created incentives for individual parliamentarians to perform more geographically targeted initiatives.

Although important, electoral system is just one of the factors influencing the relation between representatives and their constituencies. Looking at parliamentarians elected under the closed list proportional system introduced in 2005 it appears that some of them still spend time and effort to champion the interest of the district they come from. This can be taken as a proof that beyond macro institutional variables (such as electoral systems) there are also individual factors to take into consideration: this paper will evaluate the impact of parliamentarians career path on their likelihood to choose the constituency as a relevant focus of representation.

### **Why studying representation through non legislative activities?**

The study of non legislative activities has been neglected by political scientists for a long period of time. It was not before of the '90s that some scholars wrote comprehensive studies on some of them, focusing mainly on parliamentary questions (Franklin & Norton 1993, Wiberg 1994). All parliamentary procedures which are not intended to introduce new pieces of legislation or to modify existing laws can be classified as "non legislative activities". Parliamentary questions,

interpellations, motions and resolutions are clearly non legislative activities, but also amendments and private bills with no hope to be approved could be classified in the same way. Recent comparative analyses have shown that from the '70s onwards there has been a clear growth in the number of non legislative activities produced by Western European parliaments (Wiberg 1995, Russo 2008). There is no agreement on the causes of this growth, which has been explained with the increasing scope of governments (Wiberg 1995), with the growing demands that citizens address to their representatives (Russo 2008) or with the utility of non legislative activities to influence the public agenda (Green-Pedersen 2005). The study of these activities through the framework of the policy agenda represents an innovative strategy to answers some classic questions of parliamentary studies, allowing researchers to:

1. Study the “dyadic” relation between parliamentarians and their territorial constituency overcoming the difficulties encountered in the European context (Thomassen & Andeweg 2003).
2. Observe issue competition among parties (Green-Pedersen 2005, Peneer et al. 2006).
3. Analyze the relations between parties belonging to the same coalition (Martin and Vanberg 2004).

This paper focuses on the first of these objectives. While in literature on the American Congress there are a number of studies on the relation between congressmen and their constituency (Miller & Stokes 1963), in Europe this stream of research had only limited fortune (Converse & Pierson 1986). As a matter of fact, American studies look at the voting behavior of congressmen to see whether they vote for or against the interest of the place in which they have been elected. However, when it comes to voting, European parties enforce a strict discipline and parliamentarians almost always vote with their group (Thomassen 1994). We argue that in this context it is more useful to look at the content of non legislative activities which offer plenty of opportunities to defend the interests of territorial or sectoral defined constituencies. Knowing on what issues each parliamentarian has an interest will bring about substantive advancements about interests representation in the Italian parliament and will allow researchers to analyze the influence of personal (age, past career, ideology..) and institutional characteristics on the decision to represent certain interests (Whalke et al. 1962).

### **Dependent variable: the constituency focus.**

In the seminal analysis of Wahlke and colleagues the concept of role orientation was divided in two dimension: the focus and the style of representation. The term “focus” refers to the interest(s) defended by representatives, while the expression “style of representation” refers to the modalities

with which such interest is defended. The literature on representative roles is now sharply divided into two competing traditions. Some scholars define roles in terms of representatives' self perceptions and self definitions (Searing 1994) while others consider them as strategic plans for actions (Strøm 1997). This paper relies on the second research tradition, and assume a close correspondence between “representative roles” and behaviors: it follows that observing parliamentarians' activities is the most direct way to measure their strategic plans. In fact, a representative who decides to play the role of constituency servant will actually focus on his/her constituency with observable actions<sup>1</sup>. According to the perspective adopted in this paper the variability in the behaviours of representatives can be understood by considering that parliamentarians have different objectives (individual preferences) and operate under different conditions (institutions). Strøm (1997) suggests that parliamentarians may have an ordered set of preferences: being re-selected, re-elected, acquiring party and legislative offices.

In the Italian case there are not strong reasons to think that constituency service may be an extremely useful strategy to reach any of those objectives. The power to select candidatures has traditionally been in the strong hands of central parties, with the partial exception of the Christian-Democratic party (DC) where candidatures were decided in negotiations among different factions and between centre and periphery (Gallagher & Marsh 1988). The new electoral law adopted since the 2006 general elections is a closed list PR which leaves no room for voters to choose among candidates of a given party. However, provided that voting behaviour of a share of the electorate depends on the quality of the candidates there are good reasons to think that parties will try to select those who have the right attributes. Then, as far as locally oriented candidates are a valuable electoral resource parties will be ready to endorse them. In turn, parliamentarians who aim to be re-selected will have an incentive to demonstrate their commitment to the constituency. However, this process will work just as long as candidates within the lists are visible and recognisable, and the wide and high magnitude regional districts of the 2005 Italian electoral law seems not to fulfil this requirement.

In the light of these considerations one would not expect many parliamentarians to choose to play the role of constituency servants. In fact, this seems to be the case. However, looking at parliamentary questions, it appears that there are a certain number of parliamentarians with a clear territorial focus, and there is considerable variation in the territorial focus of different parliamentarians. Understanding the sources of this variation is the major puzzle that this paper aims to solve.

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<sup>1</sup> As far as behaviour is assumed to be strategic, we can be confident that representatives will take care of making their activities observable.

## **Measuring the dependent variable: constituency targeted PQs**

In the Italian Chamber of Deputies there are five procedures that allow parliamentarians to question the government: written questions (*interrogazione a risposta scritta*), oral questions (*interrogazione a risposta orale*), oral questions for question time (*interrogazione a risposta immediata*), interpellations (*interpellanza*) and urgent interpellations (*interpellanza urgente*). Written questions can be presented by any member of the House and should receive a reply in 20 days. Every member has the right to ask oral questions, which are debated 14 days after their submission. Question time is held once per week, usually on Wednesday, and questions must be submitted the day before through the president of the parliamentary group. In fact, each group can present only one oral question per question time. Questions for question time have to be on a topic of general and urgent interest, and the debate is televised on the public broadcast company. Interpellations must be presented at least two weeks before the day in which they are to be debated, which happens each Thursday. The content of interpellations is regulated by the Rules of Procedures, which describe interpellations as questions about the reasons for which the Government pursues or intends to pursue a given policy. Urgent interpellations can be presented by a parliamentary group or by at least 30 members.

In the 15th legislature Italian Deputies tabled 10165 parliamentary questions. Each of them is classified by parliamentary staff according to its content and its geographical focus, using a thesaurus of descriptors (TESEO). Therefore it is possible to associate each single question in our database, with the region(s) it refers to. Once marked the regional oriented questions in our dataset (namely those having any pertinence with any regions), it has been possible to target those having constituency nature by matching the region(s) they pertain to, with the region of election of the MPs presenting them (as first signatories). In other word, we have classified as constituency oriented question each parliamentary question having any affinity with the region of election of its first signatory.

The first unexpected result is that more than one third of all questions tabled by deputies in the XV legislature can be classified as “constituency oriented questions” (3288 out of 10165). The frequency distributions of the number of parliamentary questions and of constituency oriented questions tabled by Italian representatives shows that there are 95 (15,5%) parliamentarians who did not ask any questions, and 229 (37,5%) who never tabled a constituency oriented questions. Although the vast majority of representatives employed both questions and constituency targeted questions there is a group of them which can be defined “non-questioners”. Naturally, we expect all members of the government to be non-questioners, and they were excluded from the dataset. We are then left with a dataset of 581 members of the 15<sup>th</sup> Chamber of Deputies (2006-2008) who served

for the whole period and did not participate in the government. The distribution of the “number of parliamentary questions tabled ” and the “number of constituency oriented questions tabled” are highly non normal, resembling the usual shape of count data: the right tails of both figures are longer and the *peaks* of the distribution is concentrated on the left, indicating that most parliamentarians asked only a few questions during their mandate (figure 1 and 2).

**[Figure 1 and 2 around here]**

### **Previous experience (career record) as the main independent variable**

The framework suggested by Strøm indicates that parliamentarians choose the role that maximises their chances to achieve their objectives. Under the closed list proportional system adopted since the 2006 general elections both candidate selection and election are in the hands of party organisations. In 2006 no party adopted inclusive methods to form the electoral lists, and the closed list proportional system made completely useless for parliamentarians to cultivate a personal vote and to campaign on personal reputation. If there is no reason to think that selection and election could be enhanced by focusing on constituency service, this is even truer with regard to leadership positions.

Notwithstanding these considerations, the existence of a considerable number of constituency targeted questions reveals that, at least to a certain extent, parliamentarians play the role of constituency servants. What can explain this paradox? The fact that voters and party activists do not have a direct influence of candidates' selection and election does not automatically mean that their preferences have no role at all. On the contrary, parties will find useful to incentive and reward constituency service as far as they think that it would benefit their electoral success: in other words, parties can be the mediators between electors' and activists' preferences and the behaviour of parliamentarians. As a consequence, focusing on their constituency can be a successful strategy for some representatives to obtain reselection from their own parties.

If this is the case, who are the parliamentarians most likely to profit from this strategy? The literature does not give many hints to formulate strong hypotheses. However, there are sensible reasons to think that junior parliamentarians, without a strong national profile, can try to reinforce their credibility championing the interests of the constituency. Likewise, those who arrive in parliament after a significant local political career can build on their past experience to present themselves as the champions of a given territory. On the contrary, politicians with have already built a national role in the party have not to worry much about selection and election, but only aim at defending their position or acquiring a more prominent one. Either way, there is nothing

constituency service can do for them, as other skills are required to play a national role (demonstrating competence on certain issues, being able to communicate with public opinion etc.) In summary I consider parliamentarians' past career as the main factor which can explain the choice of the constituency as the main focus of representation.

With regard to their career, parliamentarians are divided into 3 groups:

1. Parliamentarians having a national role or “National parliamentarians”
2. Parliamentarians having a local role or “Local parliamentarians”
3. Parliamentarians with neither a local nor a national role or “Civil society parliamentarians”

Firstly, I consider whether parliamentarians have (or have had) a position in the national party (leader, member of the national executive or committee) in the government (ministers, junior ministers) or whether she was elected to the European Parliament: parliamentarians fulfilling at least one of these requirements are classified as “National parliamentarians”. Among all those can not be classified in that group, I checked whether they come from a relevant local or regional career (i.e. if they have had roles in the city, province or regional party organizations or if they had any experience in local or regional government): parliamentarians who had at least one of those roles are classified as regional parliamentarians. All other parliamentarians without previous significant national or local experiences are considered “Civil Society Parliamentarians”. Figure 3 shows the distribution of Italian deputies among the three groups.

**[figure 3 around here]**

Local parliamentarians account for more than half of those included in the dataset: this percentage slightly over represents their actual proportion in the XV Chamber of Deputies because members of the current government are excluded from this analysis. For the same reason most National parliamentarians come from the opposition. It is worth spending some time on those classified as “civil society” parliamentarians, who have never had a prominent national position and have no past administrative experience. How did they arrive in parliament? Unlike their colleagues, whose main professional activity is often politics, they often come from non political careers: they are mainly journalists, trade-unionists, university professors, private managers and professionals.

According to the argument local parliamentarians are expected to be more likely to play the role of constituency servants and to ask more constituency targeted parliamentary questions than both national and civil society parliamentarians.

## Data analysis

The Anova analysis presented in Tables 1 and 2 confirms the working hypothesis advanced in the paper: while there is no significant difference in the number of constituency targeted questions asked by national and civil society parliamentarians, local parliamentarians are clearly more constituency oriented than their colleagues.

[table 1 and 2 around here]

However, Anova can not control whether the relation between parliamentarians' profile and constituency targeted questions is spurious and how much variance it can explain. In fact, other variables beyond the type of political career can influence representatives' commitment to their constituencies and the number of related questions. Firstly, members of opposition parties might have more incentives to embarrass the government with parliamentary questions and less opportunities to informally get information from ministers. Moreover, everything else being equal, candidates elected in the same constituency in which they were born and live can be more prone to champion its interests regardless of the type of career they have had. Other control variables such as age, tenure, sex, and university education should be included as well.

The distribution of parliamentary questions, which is generated by a count process, (figures 1 and 2) advises against using OLS regression<sup>2</sup>. A specific model for count data should be employed, and as data are overdispersed ( $\alpha > 0$ , see table 3) I opted for a negative binomial regression. The initial model included the following variables:

- “Sex” is a dummy variable, where 1 indicates man
- “Age” refers to parliamentarian's age in 2006
- “University” is a dummy variable where 1 indicates university level education
- “Tenure XV” refers to the number of parliamentary mandates excluding the current one
- “Birth & live in the constituency” is a dummy variable where 1 indicates that the MP has born and currently lives in her constituency.
- “Civil Society MP” and “Local MP” are dummy variables where 1 indicates that the MP belong to the respective category. “National MP” is excluded from the analysis and represent the baseline category against which assessing the effect of being either a Civil Society or a Local MP.

After a first analysis Sex, University and Civil society were removed from the analysis because not

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<sup>2</sup> Count variables can be modelled with OLS but linear model can yield negative predicted values, whereas counts are never negative. Moreover, count variables are often highly skewed, violating the normality assumption of OLS regression.



significant.

### [table 3]

The negative binomial regression model predicting number of constituency targeted questions from Age, Tenure, Birth & Live in the Constituency and Local MP was statistically significant (chi-squared = 51,77, df = 4,  $p < .0000$ )<sup>3</sup>. The pseudo R-square (0,0171) can not be compared with OLS R-square, but tells that the model has a weak predicative power. However, all the predictors were statically significant. For these data, the expected change in log count for a one-unit increase in age was 0.02 and the expected change in log count for a one unit increase in tenure was 0,12. Local parliamentarians had an expected log count 0.55 more than their colleagues, and parliamentarians who were born and live in their constituency had an expected log count 0,64 more than others representatives. To make this results more intuitive it is possible to calculate the effect of a one unit increase of the independent variables on the dependent variable: results are reported in table 4. Everything else being equal, Local Parliamentarians ask 73% more questions than both National and Civil Society MPs while those who are born and still live in their district ask about 83% more questions than parliamentarians “parachuted” in different constituencies. The effect of age and tenure, though not impressive, seems in consonance with studies of the American Congress where safer and more experienced congressmen tend to perform more constituency service.

### [table 4]

## Conclusions

This paper has showed that even holding the electoral system constant, there is variation in the focus of representation chosen by parliamentarians. If the choice of playing a given “representative role” is influenced by the different set of constraints and opportunities of each parliamentarian, we should expect that those who can not count on a recognisable national role but have had a relevant career in local politics will find useful to cultivate the constituency. On the contrary, parliamentarians without a national role who have been recruited outside the world of local politics can not credibly affirm themselves as constituency member, but will probably adopt different strategies. Rather independently from their political career, this paper showed that candidates who are deep local roots are also more active in addressing the problems of the constituency.

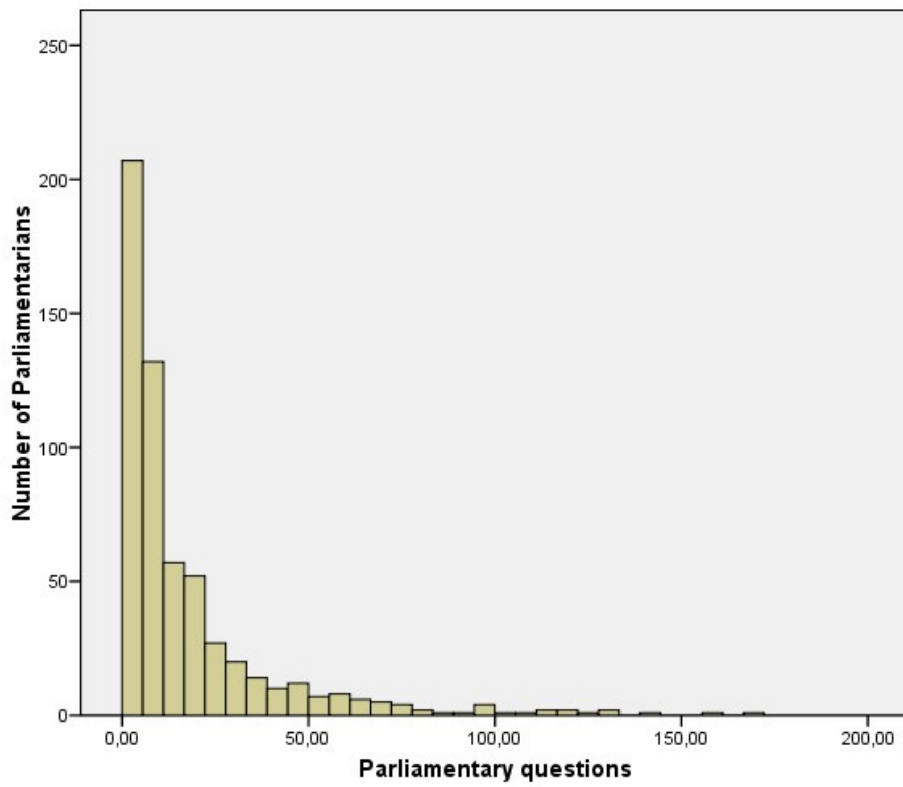
Although it has been possible to find statistically and substantively significant relations between our independent and dependent variables, the model is not able to gives predictions. In fact it is possible

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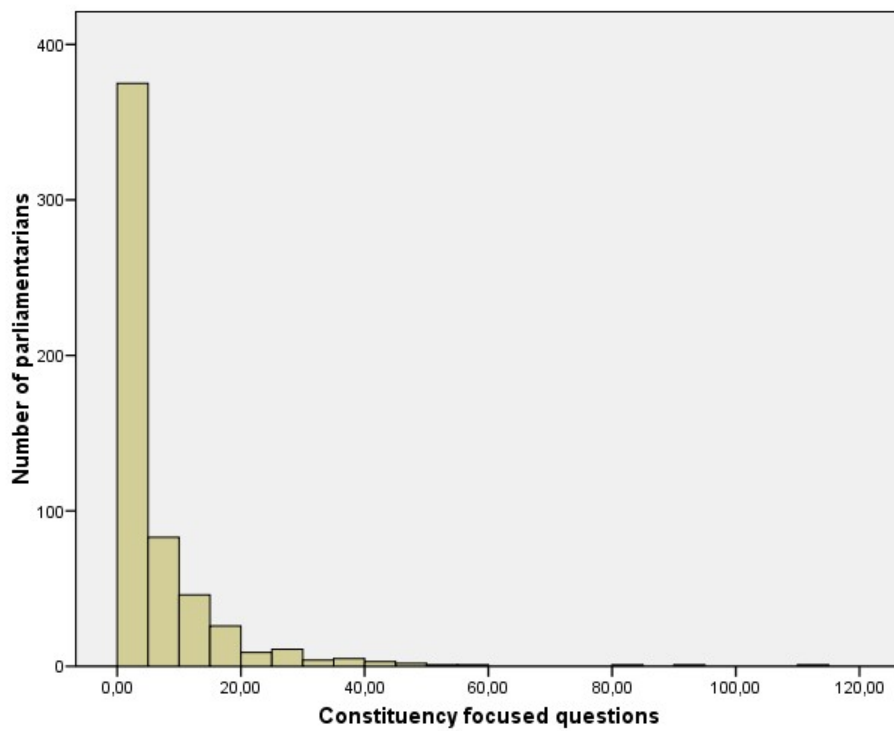
<sup>3</sup> The same level of significance for the model and extremely similar values for predictors were found with robust standard error. Thus, the results of that model are not reported.

to find active and reluctant constituency representatives among all groups of parliamentarians considered. Indeed, this should be considered as a precious result, because this analysis can not but confirm what students of legislatures know well: when institutions do not constraints the choices of parliamentarians their behaviour will exhibit a greater variance. In other words, in the absence of strong incentives different preferences directly results in different behaviours. Under the current candidate selection procedures and electoral system focusing on the constituency is just one among a set of different strategies to defend one's seat. Each representative is now free to pick it only as far she likes it.

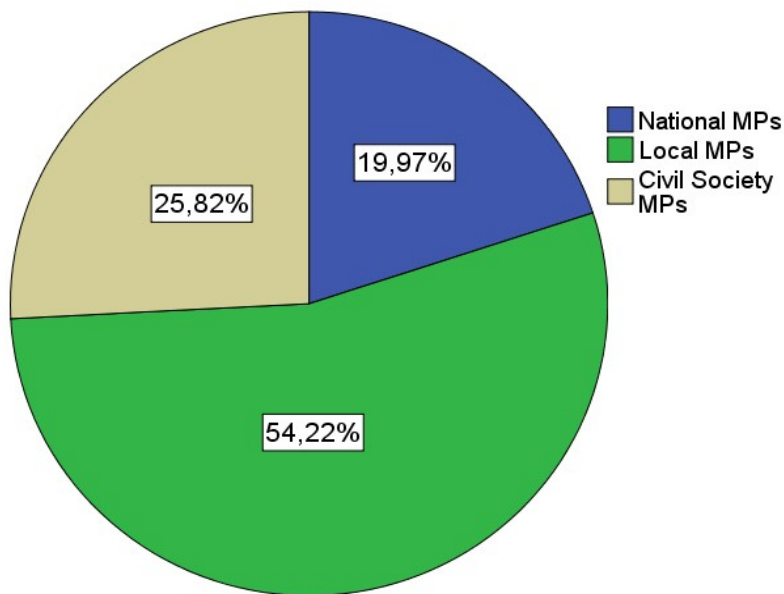
**Figure 1: distribution of parliamentary questions**



**Figure 2: distribution of constituency targeted questions**



**Figure 3: distribution of Italian members of the XV Chamber of Deputies among three career profiles**



**Table 1: One way Anova analysis of Constituency Targeted Questions tabled by National, Local and Civil Society parliamentarians.**

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	1565,274	2	782,637	6,867	,001
Within Groups	65871,565	578	113,965		
Total	67436,840	580			

**Table 2: Post Hoc comparison (Tahmane D2) of Constituency Targeted Questions tabled by National, Local and Civil Society parliamentarians.**

(I) TypeofMPs2	(J) TypeofMPs2	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
National MPs	Local MPs	-3,012	1,298	,063	-6,14	,11
	Civil Society MPs	,473	1,271	,976	-2,59	3,54
Local MPs	National MPs	3,012	1,298	,063	-,11	6,14
	Civil Society MPs	3,485*	,875	,000	1,39	5,58
Civil Society MPs	National MPs	-,473	1,271	,976	-3,54	2,59
	Local MPs	-3,485*	,875	,000	-5,58	-1,39

\*. The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.



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