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Introduction

MPs between territories, assembly and party – Investigating parliamentary behaviour at the local level in France, Belgium and Germany

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Abstract This article introduces the special issue on constituency representation in France, Belgium and Germany. First, it proposes a brief state of the art to show that the literature on European parliamentary systems concentrates on the legislators' activities in the house but it remains comparatively limited regarding their activities outside Parliament. It is even more so in the three countries under study. This lack of comprehensive knowledge is problematic, considering the centrality of political representation in modern democracies but the current context of declining trust and confidence in representative institutions. Second, it describes the data from the CITREP and IMPLOC(BEL) projects as well as the original methodology used by the articles. Indeed, this special issue takes a new approach and combines different types of data and methods to analyse the concrete practices of parliamentarians on the ground. Finally, this article explains the main research questions, hypothesis and variables to be tested in the special issue, including institutional and individual factors.

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In parliamentary democracies, Members of Parliament (MPs) are prominent actors in the public space. They incarnate, collectively, people's sovereignty, and are well known by their constituents, especially in political systems based on single-member districts. Citizens are quite familiar with the main functions of the parliament: most of them know that it is the institution that votes the law and controls the government



and that it is at the parliament's stage where majority and opposition interact. Consequently, people have expectations and preferences about political representation as well as the behaviour of their MPs (Bengtsson and Wass, 2011; Carman, 2006; van Haute and Depauw, 2010). However, as shown by the literature (Rozenberg, 2013; Russo and Verzichelli, 2012), citizens finally have little concrete knowledge about their competences and activities, especially at the local level.

This conclusion is not surprising since even scholarly work on that aspect of the representative process is comparatively limited. Most work on European parliamentary systems concentrates on the representatives' activities in the house, more specifically on MPs' attitudes and behaviour through an analysis of role orientations. We start to know quite well what elected representatives do in the chamber, with quantitative analysis of their amendments, motions for resolution, speeches and their voting behaviour. Similarly, qualitative and quantitative research has improved our understanding of how MPs conceive and carry out their parliamentary role (Blomgren and Rozenberg, 2012). But we still know little about what they do outside Parliament (Deschouwer, 2010; Uslander and Zittel, 2008). There is little research on how MPs then spend their time, the people they meet, the visits they do or the meeting they attend. Regarding the constituency, there is of course an extensive literature on the trustee/delegate orientations of MPs, but these works are mainly focused on the US Congress and the British Parliament (see, for instance, Hibbing, 1991; Jewell, 1983; Schlesinger, 1996; Mayhew, 1974; Norton and Wood, 1993). Although the centrality of constituency work is widely acknowledged, there is little information on the concrete activities MPs develop in their district: who do they meet? What is their agenda at home? In which events are they participating? How do they choose between the many solicitations they get? How do they behave during those meetings?

Despite the seminal work of Fenno (1978), it is only recently that a still limited literature developed on MPs' home styles in Europe. Some studies propose categorizations of district activities. For instance, André and Depauw (2013a, b) suggest a distinction on the basis of the activities' cost-effectiveness and identify three categories: one-to-one relationships between the MP and the voter (such as casework), one-to-a-few relations (social events) and one-to-many activities such as the use of media to reach citizens. As their time is scarce, MPs face a trade-off between these strategies and need to choose a so-called home style (André *et al*, 2013a).

Most studies, though, concentrated on the impact of the electoral system on constituency representation (Martin, 2014). As MPs seek to be re-elected, they might try to develop a personal reputation depending on the electoral system. District magnitude and particularly the ballot structure generate incentives for politicians to seek a personal vote. MPs will therefore display a different behaviour towards their district under different electoral systems (Carey and Shugart, 1995; Pilet *et al*, 2012; Scully and Farrell, 2001). A limited number of researches have



further examined other aspects than electoral rules, such as seniority in parliament, the characteristics of the constituency itself and the personal satisfaction MPs derive from constituency work in order to explain differences in the MPs' behaviour at home (Cain *et al*, 1987; Costa and Kerrouche, 2007; De Winter and Baudewijns, 2015; Fenno, 1978; Heitshusen *et al*, 2005; Norton and Wood, 1993; Searing, 1994; Tavits, 2009).

In France, the level of knowledge on the MPs' activities in their districts is generally weak (Nay, 2003). Aside from Abélès' anthropological work (1998), and some work by Costa and Kerrouche (2007), there is no comprehensive approach of MPs' behaviour at the local level. Available studies all focus on one specific aspect of the whole phenomenon: Escarras *et al* analyse the mail of MPs (1971), Le Lidec (2008) and Kerrouche (2009) describe the role of surgeries in the construction of links with citizens, while others deal with the implications of the plurality of representative mandates (Marrel, 2002; Dewoghélaëre *et al*, 2006).

In Germany, Patzelt has devoted some work to the MPs' linkages and practices of representation in their districts, mobilizing the concept of "roles" (1993). He has studied MPs' activities at home and their role orientations in the daily routines. Borchert and Stolz (2003) have underlined the importance of simultaneous office holding in parties and associations for MPs in terms of networking at local level. Research has also examined the impact of the electoral system on MPs and their seniority (Manow, 2007), on the campaigning strategies of MPs (Wüst *et al*, 2006; Zittel and Gschwend, 2008) and on the relations between MPs and the executive power (Saalfeld, 2000), but this aspect of their work is not directly connected to their activities on the ground.

In Belgium, the literature on MPs in general is quite limited. The literature has shown, however, that Belgian MPs are quite active outside the chamber: they are very much involved in casework, promote local interests and put a strong emphasis on their constituency (De Winter, 1998; André *et al*, 2013b; André *et al*, 2014). The electoral system (flexible lists system) provides strong incentives to legislators to spend time in their district in order to attract preference votes. At the same time, parties remain crucial for the career of politicians as they select the candidates. Being re-elected without the support of a political party and even without being at the top of the party list is very difficult in the Belgian context (De Winter and Baudewijns, 2015).

Why Does It Matter?

This lack of comprehensive knowledge is problematic, considering the centrality of political representation in modern democracies. The process of representation has been adopted alongside with the principle of people's sovereignty as the key



mechanism of political decision-making in the wake of the French Revolution. It became even more indispensable with the increasing democratization, in particular the introduction of equal voting rights in the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

However, the legitimacy of the representative logic has recently been called into question due to several factors (Costa *et al*, 2004): the difficulties of public authorities to efficiently address the economic and social crisis; the inaccurate notions of democracy often proposed by the media and opinion polls; the growing interest for “direct”, deliberative and participative democracy; the idea of power being confiscated by a caste of politicians; the impact of devolution, European integration and globalization; and the claim for more decentralization. The rhetoric of the “crisis of parliamentary representation” is certainly not new (e.g. Bryce, 1921; Schmitt, 1923; Perin, 1960; Loewenberg, 1971; Andersen and Burns, 1996; Chrysochoou *et al*, 1998), but it seems that the confidence in politicians in general, and in MPs in particular, has become particularly low.

Political theorists insist on the fact that contemporary democracies suffer from a problem of “linkage” between citizens and their representatives. This issue has been studied in different ways in many countries. However, we are missing comparative data on the actual activities of MPs in their district, on the way MPs and citizens are (or not) directly connected. This is even more surprising as the MPs’ everyday work and their networks in the district are crucial as well for the fulfilment of the parliamentary functions of legitimization and representation, as also for their re-election.

The objective of this special issue is to investigate this dimension of the representative mandate and of the representative role. To do so, we will analyse three country-based cases: France, Belgium and Germany. The choice of those countries is not a coincidence. First of all, as we explained, in all cases the literature on this topic is really limited and the need for an extensive empirical research can be identified. Secondly, the differing institutional designs and cultural traditions in the three countries make a comparison of representation a highly interesting endeavour. Thirdly, the three cases are nevertheless quite similar and correspond to a logic of Most Similar Systems Design (Przeworski and Teune, 1970), which is necessary to obtain reliable results for comparison. France, Belgium and Germany are all long established democracies, and their political systems offer much communality, especially with regard to their low chambers.

To explore the behaviour of MPs in their respective constituency, we use data gathered within the framework of two research projects: CITREP and IMPLOC/IMPLOCBEL.

CITREP¹ (“Citizens and Representatives in France and Germany”) is a project funded by the French Agence Nationale de la Recherche (ANR) and the German Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG) for the period of 2011–2013. Conducted by Eric Kerrouche (Bordeaux) in France, and Suzanne Schüttemeyer (Halle) and



Oscar Gabriel (Stuttgart) in Germany, it included several/numerous empirical operations to investigate the constituency work of MPs in the two countries. Citizens' opinions about their MPs' constituency work and about representation in general were also investigated.

IMPLOC/IMPLOCBEL (“L’implantation locale des députés nationaux et européens en France et en Belgique”) is a research project funded by the Région Aquitaine in France, and the FNRS (Fonds National de la Recherche Scientifique) in Belgium. Conducted in France by Olivier Costa (Bordeaux) and in Belgium by Nathalie Brack and Jean-Benoît Pilet (Brussels) during the period of 2013–2015, it developed a protocol similar to the one used within the CITREP project to study district work in these two countries, and further included a comparison between national and European MPs.

The papers of this special issue are thus based on the data compiled in a sample of constituencies in France, Belgium and Germany. They rely on two types of data: moderate participant observation (Dewalt *et al.*, 1998), completed by interviews. This mixed-method approach leads to a better and more comprehensive knowledge of MPs' work than similar studies based only on interviews could have provided (Dolezal and Müller, 2001). Observations on the ground allow us to catch the reality of MPs' work, and their contacts with citizens and other actors. They allow going beyond their declarations and perceptions, which may be biased by strategies of self-presentation or, for MPs holding another office, a desire to disentangle their national and local mandates.

In the three countries under study, we have adopted a systematic approach of observations through the application of a strictly formalized protocol. Investigators had to fill in a standardized booklet for each specific event under study, in order to seize the variety of MPs' behaviours and to facilitate comparison between them. The investigator answered a detailed set of questions, about the type of the event the MP attended under his observation, the number of participants involved, the issues under discussion, the way the MP presented himself, etc. The typology of events was derived from the results of previous research projects (Costa and Kerrouche, 2007; Kerrouche, 2009) and from the general literature on constituency work (Fenno, 1978). Thirteen different types of activities have been identified, totalizing 94% of the cases; the remaining ones were included in an “others” category.

For each event, the investigator further narrated the observation by highlighting interesting behavioural features of the MP, which were not necessarily included in the investigation booklet, such as jokes or particular body language, and his/her general impression of the event. The reports also include the content of informal discussions between MPs and their collaborators, which could not be considered as “events”. To complete the observations, we finally conducted interviews with the MPs, in order to analyse their own opinion on their constituency work. As a result, we can provide observations of concrete MPs' behaviour combined with their subjective perception of the activities' meaning and their place in the MP's representation role.



Overall, the two research projects have allowed us to follow 50 MPs in France, 64 in Germany and 43 in Belgium. Investigators have accompanied all of them during two or three days spent in their constituency. We have analysed a total amount of 336 events in France, 618 in Germany and 258 in Belgium. We further have conducted, at the end of each observation period, in-depth interviews with 29 MPs in France, 67 in Germany and 43 in Belgium (as well as 96 regional MPs). These interviews were conducted along a questionnaire of 45 items, dealing with the issue of representation in general, and more specifically the role, activities and strategies of the MP in his constituency. In France and Belgium, we have decided to guarantee the anonymity of MPs, because of their traditional reluctance to be quoted in scientific work; we will thus only mention the group to which the MP belongs and his/her age. In Germany, interviews were transcribed and sent back to the MPs for authorization, so that they can be quoted nominally.

Using a total of 19 selection criteria, all set of samples are representative of the national low chambers in terms of party, seniority, gender and type of constituency. The empirical work and the data collection were synchronized between the three countries, even if some freedom was left to adapt the observation protocol and questionnaire to national specificities.

Research Questions and Variables

This special issue aims at describing and explaining the normative conceptions and key practices of representation in three European countries. Instead of conducting independent studies, we have integrated the analysis of the similarities and differences in the process of representation and its perceptions by MPs in the three countries. The main objective was to gather data on the concrete activities of MPs in their district. The two research projects CITREP and IMPLOC had a clear heuristic dimension, and considering the lack of pre-existing work and publications, their aim was to explore and provide a better understanding on this topic. The main research question was thus: what do the MPs' local practices of representation look like? Other questions, based on the comparative dimension of the projects, were also considered: how far and in what respects do attitudes and behaviours of MPs differ in the three countries, and how and to what extent are they similar? Which environmental and attitudinal factors account for differences and similarities between and within the countries?

Generally speaking, we hypothesised that the MPs' behaviour in their constituency in France, Belgium and Germany is influenced by several kinds of factors: institutional constraints, normative ideas of representation, perception of citizens' expectations, environmental characteristics and a more diffuse context that can be called "culture". We can, however, distinguish two sets of factors that



may explain the different patterns found in the three cases, which refer to the properties of each political system and each individual.

First, at the macro-level, characteristics such as the institutional setting and national cultural traditions may account for differences, but also for similarities between the three countries. There are important dissimilarities regarding the institutional settings, which may have an impact on patterns of representation. For instance, the Belgian and German political systems are strictly parliamentary, with a strong position of the Prime Minister or Chancellor, while France has a “semi-presidential” system (Elgie, 1999), in which the President enjoys its own representative legitimacy. A second important difference is the electoral system: France has a first-past-the-post system, in uninominal constituencies; in Germany, MPs are elected according to a personalized system of proportional representation: half are elected in electoral districts and half through party tickets; in Belgium, members of the low chamber are elected by proportional representation, in 11 constituencies. From a theoretical point of view, French MPs are thus expected to develop a more individualist conception of representation, compared to Belgian and German MPs, who are mainly elected on a party ticket. The role of political parties certainly also has an impact: the Belgian and German systems are described to be more stable and better rooted in the society than the French one, if we consider the legal status of parties, the number of their members or their role at local level (Gallagher *et al.*, 2011). Similarly, Germany and Belgium are both federal states, whereas France has a rather strong tradition of centralization. As shown by Siefkens and by Brack and Pilet in this special issue, representation is a multilevel process and the level at which MPs are elected as well as the structure of the state have an impact on their constituency activities. A last key factor at the macro-level is the MPs’ structural involvement in their constituency. In France and Belgium, a vast majority of MPs are cumulating their office with other representative mandates at the regional and local level, and even with executive positions; they are thus very present in the district and consider that representing local interests at national level is part of their mission. On the contrary, law prohibits German MPs to simultaneously hold executive positions at the local or regional level and their national representative mandate. Cultural traditions have also certainly an impact on the MPs’ behaviour: the role of the State, the degree of law formalism, the level of centralization, the amount of confliction of the society, the public image of politicians, etc., vary from one case to the other and condition the definition MPs give to their representative mandate.

Second, at the individual level, also many factors are at play to condition the behaviour of MPs in their constituency. Normative ideas on democracy and parliamentary representation will directly influence the MPs’ choices regarding their agenda and their involvement in the many aspects of their mandate. Those ideas will also impact their conception of the role as an MP and thus concretely, their level of presence and activity in the assembly and in their constituency, as well as their relationship to their parliamentary group, party and voters. The way citizens



perceive their MPs also has a potential impact on the latter's behaviour, since they try to meet their voters' expectation and to be re-elected. The features of the district need to be taken into account as well, since several assumptions exist in the literature regarding the impact of the size of the district, its nature (urban/rural), its economy, its distance from the capital, etc., on the practice of representation (time spent in constituency, strategy of communication, type of network, etc.). Finally, the features of the parliamentary mandate may have an impact on the MP's behaviour at home. In France and Belgium, we must pay attention to the local aspects of the "cumul des mandats": it is arguable that MPs who simultaneously hold public office at the local level are more engaged in constituency services. In Germany, the interesting point is the impact of electoral rules on MPs, and the potential difference between those directly elected in the constituency, and those elected through party lists.

The contributions to this special issue examine all these elements and shed light on the impact of these institutional and individual variables on the home styles of MPs in the three examined countries. More generally, they concentrate on the electoral connexion in France, Germany and Belgium in a context of declining trust and confidence in representative institutions. While many studies have established the diagnosis of a crisis of democratic representation, they usually fail to consider the role of some of its fundamental mechanisms, which represent together the foundation of the democratic logic. To fill in this gap, this special issue takes over a new approach and combines different types of data and methods to analyse the concrete practices of parliamentarians on the ground. By investigating the MPs' work in their district, their contact with citizens and the varying role of political parties, each paper provides some food for thought regarding the legitimization potential of parliamentary representation and the ability of elected representatives to maintain (or not) the citizens' trust in political institutions.

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Note

- 1 More information on: www.citrep.eu.

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