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Constituency service, the role of the TD, and the electoral system

In summary, there are three main points:

1. There are many factors other than the electoral system that lead to constituency work, so even if the electoral system were changed the demand from the electorate for constituency service would be likely to remain
2. The causal link between electoral systems and constituency role may be less strong than some people assume. The evidence for this is that
 - (a) MPs in many countries, with a range of different electoral systems, have a significant constituency workload and attach great importance to their constituency role
 - (b) Electoral systems that incorporate intra-party electoral competition in multi-seat constituencies, far from being unusual, are the norm in the EU, yet the constituency role of MPs varies significantly in these countries
3. Constituency work should not be seen as inherently bad, as a 'problem' to be 'solved', or as a distraction from MPs' 'proper job'. TDs' responsiveness and availability to their constituents might well be seen as a strength, rather than a weakness, of the Irish political system.

The link, if any, between electoral systems and constituency work has been much discussed in the debate in this country about the possibility of electoral reform. In the two referendums held on the subject, in 1959 and 1968, the issue was scarcely mentioned, the focus of the debate being on the ‘single-party majority government versus proportionality’ argument that is rarely heard in Ireland these days. In recent decades, though, the electoral system debate has largely centred on the constituency work aspect, with critics maintaining that the electoral system, and especially the intra-party competition that it generates, compels TDs to focus unduly on constituency duties to the neglect of their national parliamentary duties and also discourages many potential candidates from even putting their names forward in the first place. Therefore, or so goes the argument, under a different electoral system, one that did not allow voters to choose among candidates of the same party, TDs would be placed under less pressure to pay such close attention to their constituents and would be able to spend more time on national political issues and their purely parliamentary duties.¹

While many of these critics are speaking from personal experience when they describe heavy constituency workloads, there are nonetheless reasons to question whether the causal links between electoral system and constituency service are quite as clear as is alleged.

1. The causes of constituency work in Ireland

Clearly, the electoral system does not itself cause the demand from constituents that their TDs respond to their questions and requests. It may, of course, affect the supply by TDs of constituency service, by giving TDs a strong incentive to be responsive to their constituents’ wishes, whatever those wishes might be. In theory, though, constituents might care little about constituency service and might instead be concerned primarily about the work of TDs on committees, about the amount of legislation that their TDs have introduced or influenced, or about the views of their TDs on salient policy issues. In practice, most observers feel that for most voters those questions are not the prime determinants of their voting behaviour and that TDs’ record as constituency workers counts for more, and this is borne out by the most comprehensive survey of voting behaviour (Marsh et al 2008: 156).

There are several other explanations for the demand in Ireland from constituents that their parliamentary representatives be active constituency representatives. That being the case, it may well be that altering the electoral system would have little impact on the demand for constituency service (Sinnott 2010: 128–33). These include political culture, the small size of society, and the nature of the administrative system with which citizens interact.

1. This is the sense of, for example, Boland (1991); Carty (1981: 109–39); Dempsey (1999); FitzGerald (2003: 92–3); Hussey (1993: 57–61). For a review see Sinnott (2010: 128–33); Gallagher (2008a: 525–6, 529).

1(a) Political culture

While this is difficult to measure, and as such is a factor that some feel does not really ‘explain’ anything, there is little doubt that Irish voters expect their parliamentary representatives to be active in their role as constituency representatives, both as ‘welfare officers’ (dealing with individual questions, complaints or grievances) and as ‘local promoters’ (trying to advance the interests of the constituency generally, or of a region within it, by helping to attract industry, avert factory closures, securing public investment, and so on).

This is borne out by surveys such as the one mentioned above, and is also evidenced by the way in which people’s use of their representatives in this capacity dates back in Ireland to the nineteenth century, prior to independence (and of course prior to the introduction of PR-STV). In the nineteenth century there was, understandably, a widespread perception that the state was remote, alien, and best approached via an intermediary, and it has been plausibly suggested that these attitudes carried over into the independent state (Chubb 1992: 210). In addition, the political culture of TDs themselves is broadly supportive of the idea that working for one’s constituency generally and for individual constituents is a normal and natural part of the role of the TD.

1(b) Small size of society

With 166 TDs and only 4.2 million people, the ratio of deputies to population, at 1:18,741, is unusually high.² When the ratio of MPs to population is this high – as high as the ratio of councillors to population in many cities around the world – it is hardly surprising that constituents should expect to have quite a close relationship with their MP and should expect MPs to take an intense interest in the area they represent.

Small size has another consequence: it seems to make unnecessary the creation of intermediate tiers of government, such as regional or provincial government, whose MPs, if they existed, would be called on to deal with much of the demand for constituency service. In Ireland, above the level of local government, which is exceptionally weak (Collins and Quinlivan 2010: 363–4), there is nothing other than national government, and as a result members of the national parliament receive casework and constituency demands that in other countries would go instead either to local councillors or to members of the regional or provincial parliament. In Belgium, the volume of constituency demands coming to national MPs decreased sharply after reforms in 1993 which brought about a fully federal system with regional parliaments.

2. This is not to suggest that Ireland has too many TDs, which is an entirely separate issue. In fact, cross-national research finds a close relationship between the number of MPs in a country and the cube root of its population (Taagepera and Shugart 1989: 174–5). On this basis Ireland should have 162 TDs, very close to the actual number.

1(c) Nature of the administrative system

In Ireland, as in pretty much every other country, bureaucracies can develop rigid characteristics and, in adhering strictly to the rules, may not always leave citizens satisfied with a decision or with a clear understanding of why a particular decision has been reached. In this situation, some citizens may well want ‘a helping hand and a friendly ear’, as one TD (P. J. Sheehan) once put it. At the least, they hope, the TD may be able to explain why their particular case received the decision it did, or get the consideration of the case speeded up, and at best the TD may be able to have an adverse decision overturned – not through improper behaviour such as ‘pulling strings’ but by using his or her experience and expertise to suggest additional supporting evidence that could have been presented, or by bringing to the relevant civil servant’s attention an aspect of the case that does not seem to have been taken into account. Thus, if the relevant government departments and areas were to increase the quality of their service and responsiveness to citizens – as, it has been suggested, both the Department of Social Welfare and the Revenue Commissioners have in recent years – then the demand for TDs’ assistance would diminish.

2. Is there really a causal link between electoral system and constituency focus?

It might seem a priori that we can virtually take for granted the assumption that there is a close causal link between electoral system and the constituency service role of deputies, so that if a country's electoral system is changed the constituency service role will change fundamentally in response. Evidence from a range of countries, however, suggests that the link between electoral system and constituency focus is not as strong than one might assume.

There are two types of evidence that are relevant to an examination of this link. What we find when we examine it is:

- (a) MPs in many countries, with a range of different electoral systems, have a significant constituency workload and attach great importance to their constituency role even if there seems to be no electoral incentive to fulfil it;
- (b) Electoral systems that incorporate intra-party electoral competition in multi-seat constituencies, far from being unusual, are if anything the norm in the EU, yet the constituency role of MPs varies significantly in these countries.

This paper will look at these in turn.

2(a) A significant constituency workload under a range of different electoral systems

There may be a tendency in this country to believe that a heavy constituency workload is unusual for a national member of parliament (MP). In fact, it is not unusual. Writing thirty years ago, Michael Mezey, a leading US scholar of legislatures, said (Mezey 1979: 159):

members of every type of legislature say that they are subjected to an incessant flow of such demands [i.e. constituency casework], and they indicate that coping with them requires a substantial portion of their time and resources.

This is borne out when we look at a few examples. France, the UK and Canada all use single-member constituencies (the two-round system in France, single-member plurality or 'first past the post' in the UK and Canada), under which of course there is no intra-party electoral competition, as each party runs only one candidate in each constituency. Far from this resulting in MPs being able to spend all their time on national political business, though, in each they do a great deal of constituency work.

In France, where constituency representation has always been the main role of a *député*, research produced a diary of a typical rural French MP (reproduced in Safran 1998: 223–4), which shows the MP arriving in Paris on Tuesday morning and returning to his or her constituency on Thursday evening. Friday, Saturday, Sunday and Monday are all spent in local political activity and, even while the deputy is in Paris, some of his or her time is spent in following up constituency business.

In Britain, there has been a huge increase in the volume of constituency work since 1970, with MPs spending about half of their time on it (Rush 2001: 210–11, 216). One study of MPs described them as ‘self-generating workaholics’ who actively seek constituency work because they find it more satisfying than the pointlessness of life on the backbenches:

Members of Parliament are preoccupied with endless meetings, ceaseless letters, difficult constituency problems ... There is the sense of an ‘endless treadmill’ of late nights and early mornings, perhaps allowing little time for reflection’ (Radice, Vallance and Willis 1990: 154).

Indeed, it is surprising to find that in the long-running ‘PR or not PR’ debate in Britain, one argument frequently heard is that the links between MPs and constituents are closer under the first past the post system than under any kind of multi-member constituency system:

One merit of single-member constituencies, whatever their drawbacks, is that each member represents a specific constituency. Thus there is achieved in the British system a closer contact between an MP and his constituents than can be achieved with the multi-member constituencies that are necessary for party list or STV systems (Punnett 1994: 68).

Most striking, perhaps, is the constituency role of MPs in Canada. A study of Canadian MPs found that constituency work takes up more of their time than any other activity (Franks 2007: 32). Experience there shows that ‘more office staff leads to more constituency service work, not to more time and attention devoted to broad policy matters’ (Franks 2007: 40). Parliament even adjourns every fourth or fifth week to enable MPs to spend more time in their constituencies! As in Britain, MPs do this not primarily for electoral motives – in fact, those who regard it as unimportant to their re-election prospects actually do more of it than those who regard it as electorally important – but because it is seen as part of the job and as a ‘satisfying’ activity (ibid: 30). Constituents are relieved to ‘reach someone real’ as opposed to discussing their situation with a faceless bureaucrat on the other end of a phone line, or even spending a lot of time trying to find out which bureaucrat they should be ringing in the first place. Moreover, constituents really do benefit from contacting an MP: some departments assign experienced and skilled teams of civil servants to deal with the cases raised by MPs, while constituents who operate under their own steam find their cases handled by less qualified staff who give them slower and less personal attention (Franks 2007: 33–4).

We should also bear in mind that intra-party competition for seats in parliament is unavoidable – indeed, it is an important component of a democracy – and that if this competition cannot take place at electoral level then it will be displaced to the candidate selection level. Under PR-STV candidate selection is very important but not all-important, in that the selectors characteristically offer the voters a ‘menu’ from which the voters can choose, meaning that candidates of the larger parties are in electoral competition with each other. When there is no electoral competition between members of the same party, the candidate selection stage becomes decisive, because anyone selected for the dominant party in a safe seat in a single-member constituency system, or in a high position on the party list in a closed list electoral system, is virtually certain to be elected to parliament. Aspiring candidates, or incumbent MPs, thus have a strong incentive to be responsive to the wishes of the candidate selectors.

A couple of examples illustrate the impact this can have on MPs' behaviour. In Belgium in the 1990s, when the country had in effect a closed list system (that is, a list system under which the voters cannot alter the candidate ranking drawn up by the candidate selectors), MPs feared that they would fall out of favour with their party's candidate selectors unless they maintained a high local profile, and they acted accordingly. They hardly dared venture out of doors because of the demands that were continuously pressed upon them: 'when MPs participate in local social life, they return home with their pockets full of beercards on which they have noted down the requests of people they met at these social gatherings' (De Winter 1997: 141–2; De Winter 2002: 96–7). As already noted, the introduction of federalism has now led to a decrease in Belgian MPs' constituency workloads even though the country has moved to an open-list PR system (under which candidates of each party compete with each other for electoral support).

A second example concerns Israel, which has an electoral system that uses closed lists and in which the entire country forms one large constituency – the electoral system that could be designed to minimise TDs' incentives to pay any attention to local matters at all. Yet, precisely because MPs were seen by many people as too remote and unresponsive, the Israeli parties opened up their candidate selection processes to all of their members. This internal democratisation led to MPs doing their best to build up support among enough members to ensure that they would be picked in a high position on the party list, and they went about doing this by promoting in parliament the cause of their home region or of interest groups, with a resultant explosion in the volume of private bills passed in the Knesset and a decline in party cohesion (Rahat and Hazan 2008: 343–4). Most of the parties drew back from these selection methods in consequence, but the experience emphasises the crucial nature of candidate selection under an electoral system where the voters do not have any choice among candidates of the same party.

If Ireland were to switch to an electoral system based on single-member constituencies TDs would remain under heavy pressure to deliver constituency service, and they would see a strong electoral incentive to respond to this. The loyal 'party vote' is evidently much less strong than it once was, and voters say the candidates' ability to work for the local area is the most important factor determining their vote (Marsh et al 2008: 156). As a result, incumbents and challengers alike are likely to see constituency service as the most promising way to retain or gain a seat. In these single-member constituencies a TD's personal appeal would be extremely important, and it would be a very brave (or foolish) TD who neglected *any* request for assistance, no matter how trivial, in the belief that his or her re-election was assured on the basis of voters' party loyalty.

If the country adopted a closed list PR system, then TDs would have no direct electoral incentive to be responsive to the voters, but they would need to be very responsive to the wishes of the candidate selectors, who would have the power to prolong their political careers by placing them high on the list, or to end their political careers by placing them in a low position. If Ireland had such an electoral system, it would be important to know who the candidate selectors would be, and what kind of behaviour they would want to see from elected TDs. The selectors might, in theory, prize parliamentary activity highest of all, or, alternatively, they might expect TDs to keep in very close contact with the local area.

2(b) The widespread use of electoral systems that incorporate intra-party electoral competition in multi-seat constituencies

There seems to be a view in some quarters that Ireland is unusual in its use of what is termed ‘multi-seat PR with competition among candidates of the same party’. Indeed, Dr Garret FitzGerald, the former Taoiseach, writes that ‘what is unique about the Irish system is that the electorate, who vote for individual candidates rather than for parties, can choose *between* different members of the same party’ (FitzGerald 2003: 92). This view is, though, mistaken: in fact, most member states (14 out of 27) in the EU have such electoral systems, and providing for voter choice among candidates of each party is especially common among the smaller member states.

Ireland and Malta are, it is true, the only two countries to employ PR-STV. However, 12 other EU countries employ what are known as open-list PR systems, under which the parties present lists of candidates, and the voter is able to vote for one particular candidate on the list. If a party wins enough votes for, say, 3 seats in a particular constituency, those seats go to the 3 candidates who received the highest number of preference votes from the electorate. Under these systems candidates of each party are competing with each other for electoral support just as they are in Ireland and Malta. The 12 EU countries employing open list PR systems are Belgium, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Greece, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Poland, and Sweden, while Switzerland also employs an open-list PR system.

The ballot paper below illustrates the Danish electoral system (reproduced from Elklit 2008: 459). A supporter of the Social Democrats, for example, can place an X beside any of the party’s seven candidates, and since the candidates who receive the highest number of Xs are the ones who will be elected, each Social Democrat candidate is competing with the other six for these preference votes. Yet, while candidates tend to compete for personal votes by increasing their local visibility in Denmark (Elklit 2008: 467) and in the other countries employing open-list systems, this does not seem to result in competition on the terrain of constituency work specifically. Similarly, in Finland, which also employs an open-list PR system, MPs try to ensure that they are well known to the voters in their constituency, and yet ‘Finnish MPs primarily focus on national level politics in their daily work’ (Raunio 2008: 485).

Sønderjyllands Amts
3. opstillingskreds

Folketingsvalget 2001

Sæt x til højre for en listebetegnelse (et partinavn)
eller et kandidatnavn.

Sæt kun ét kryds på stemmesedlen.

A. Socialdemokratiet

Frode Sørensen
Inger Bierbaum
Dorte Dinesen
P. Qvist Jørgensen
Eva Roth
Lise von Seelen
Søren Ebbesen Skov

B. Det Radikale Venstre

Nicolas Lund-Larsen
Per Kleis Bønnelycke
Bente Dahl
Inger Harms
Bjarke Larsen
Henrik Larsen

C. Det Konservative Folkeparti

Kaj Ikast
Martin Andresen
Bent P. Have
Jens M. Henriksen
Bente Lassen
Lars Munk
Klaus Rehkopff

D. Centrum-Demokraterne

Henning Nielsen
Henning Borchert-Jørgensen
Helmuth Carstens
Flemming Hübschmann
Holger Madsen
Peter Berthel Nissen
Kai Paulsen

F. Socialistisk Folkeparti

Bjarne Eliassen
Bent Iversen
Jesper Petersen
Kirstine Rask Lauridsen
Jørn Ulrik Larsen
Jørgen Jørgensen
Mathias Gotthardsen

O. Dansk Folkeparti

Søren Krarup
Kell Kristiansen

O. Dansk Folkeparti

Søren Krarup
Kell Kristiansen
Jørn Larsen
Jytte Lauridsen
Theis Mathiasen
Niels Oluf Michaelsen Petersen
Lars Rydhard

Q. Kristeligt Folkeparti

Michael Lund Markussen
Vibeke Christensen
Bjarke Friis
Knud Erik Hansen
Henning Holm

V. Venstre, Danmarks Liberale Parti

Bjørn Scherbarth
Sven Buhrkall
Peter Christensen
Allan Emiliussen
Gunnar Hattesen
Helga Moos
Hans Chr. Schmidt

Z. Fremskridtspartiet

Ole Jensen
Heine Andresen
Henning Brandt
Carl Hahn
Margit Petersen
Preben Ravn
Jens Willatzen

Ø. Enhedslisten - De Rød-Grønne

Baltser Andersen
Svend Brandt
Signe Færch
Jette Hedegaard
Egon Laugesen
Niels-Erik Aaes

2(c) Conclusion: no strong link between electoral systems and constituency focus

While it might seem at first sight that there must surely be a close relationship between a country's electoral system and the level of the constituency focus of its MPs, the evidence suggests that this is not as strong as might be supposed. MPs in countries operating under a number of different electoral systems are called on to undertake significant levels of constituency work, while MPs in a range of countries employing electoral systems that see candidates of one party competing against each other for the support of the voters (Ireland, Denmark, Finland) vary greatly in the constituency workloads they face. Indeed, a broad cross-national survey of MPs' links with their constituents concluded that

electoral systems are *not* fundamental in determining parliamentary / constituency relationships

and that

electoral systems are, perhaps, more passive elements ... than either supporters or opponents of electoral reform tend to believe (Bogdanor 1985: 299).

The summary of a later study modified this, concluding that

other things being equal, open list PR and PR-STV encourage greater attention by MPs to constituency-related activities, closed list PR encourages MPs to prioritise party loyalty rather than constituency-related activities, and single-member constituency systems are broadly neutral in their effects (Gallagher, 2008b: 562).

The phrase 'other things being equal' is important here. If other factors generate significant demand for constituency service from MPs, then MPs will be under pressure to respond to this, whatever the electoral system, whereas if the voters do not expect MPs to engage in casework or to be local promoters, then, regardless of the electoral system, MPs will not face high constituency work demands.

3. Constituency work as a problem or as an integral part of TDs' work

Finally, it is worth asking whether TDs' constituency work should be seen as a problem that requires a solution or as an integral feature of the job of being a parliamentarian.

The constituency work undertaken by TDs, incidentally, is sometimes referred to sweepingly as 'clientelism', usually in a pejorative sense, but in the academic literature the term 'clientelism' has a more specific meaning and is not just a loose way of referring to constituency work. It refers to politicians building up a clientele by being able to direct specific state benefits to their supporters, usually by having the power to secure the hiring, firing or promotion of public officials. In exchange for having got the constituent something to which they were not entitled, the politician receives the constituent's vote at the next election. All the evidence is that this is simply not an accurate account of what happens in this country, which consists overwhelmingly of routine constituency work and is better summed up by the word 'brokerage', referring to the intermediary role of the TD between the constituent(s) and the state (Gallagher and Komito 2010: 242–4).

It is unlikely that anyone would seriously suggest that TDs, or MPs in any country, should not be available to deal with their constituents' requests. For one thing, it is clear that TDs are responding to popular demand in doing this work. As we have already noted, virtually every survey enquiring into the criteria that voters employ when deciding how to cast their first preference vote finds that voters say the candidate's ability to work for the local area takes precedence over all other considerations, such as candidates' national-level abilities or their policy views (for example, Marsh et al 2008: 156). Of course, some might say that this shows that all too many voters simply cannot be trusted to make a choice between different candidates, because they will employ the 'wrong' criteria when they do this, so the electoral system should not 'pander to' this localistic mindset of voters. The alternative view is that in a democracy the electoral system should attempt to accommodate voters' preferences, not to thwart these, and that TDs are there to do what the people want them to do.

It can sometimes seem that the debate on TDs' constituency work is dominated by a well-educated and articulate commentariat consisting of those who are unlikely themselves ever to have a problem with, for example, social welfare benefits and who are perhaps unaware of the difficulties of some of those who do. Probably every TD, reflecting on their experience of constituency work, can cite examples of timewasters (people who want a TD to obtain all-Ireland final tickets for them, for example, or those constituents who contact every TD in the constituency about the same case) or chancers who try to obtain something to which they are not entitled. However, every TD can no doubt also cite very genuine cases where someone needed their assistance. For example, Labour TD Róisín Shortall said in 1995 (quoted in Gallagher and Komito 2010: 237):

I represent an area with a very high level of unemployment, poverty, housing problems, and people who spend their lives in queues, trying to sort out social welfare issues. I get up to 250 letters a week, and the follow-up on all these takes time. I wish it were not so. I wish people were sufficiently

empowered to sort out their own problems. I wish they could go to their citizens' advice bureau and get the help they need. But this doesn't happen. It seems unlikely that anyone would seriously suggest that any TD should shut their door on such constituents on the ground that, in their own minds at least, the role of TDs is to concentrate solely on legislation and national policy issues rather than on the personal concerns of individuals or the community concerns of the constituency. That would hardly amount to an enhancement of democracy. Even if there were a link between electoral systems and constituency focus, thus opening up the possibility that we could 'reform' the electoral system in such a way that TDs could simply ignore their constituents without fear of electoral punishment, many would pause before putting an end to TDs' willingness to be responsive to their constituents.

That is not to say that constituency work is unambiguously beneficial in its consequences.

Clearly, it takes up time that TDs might otherwise be spending in their national political role, on Oireachtas committees for example. Likewise, even if constituency service is important, if it is taken to excess and becomes virtually the only thing that some TDs do, we might well feel that there is a problem that requires addressing – though perhaps by reducing the demand for these services (for example, by providing alternative avenues of redress, or by improving the responsiveness of state agencies) rather than by simply making TDs less available to assist constituents.

But there are also benefits from TDs' constituency work. By engaging in constituency work TDs are kept aware of the reality of life for ordinary people, preventing the development of a completely out-of-touch political class and better equipping TDs to bring the concerns of ordinary people to the work they do in parliament. It provides a form of representation that to many people is at least as meaningful as the representation of opinion. In addition, the availability of TDs to meet constituents, and to listen to and try to assist with their problems, makes it more likely that voters will feel that at least someone is 'on their side', and reduces the risk of alienation from the political system as a whole. If it were somehow possible to devise a political system in which MPs could ignore the demands of their constituents without fear of electoral retribution, there would be a risk that the entire political system would be perceived by many people as remote and unresponsive.

The perspective that TDs, or MPs anywhere, should not be doing constituency work at all and that they have no responsibility to their constituents is one that few would seriously endorse. While it is true that the Constitution makes no mention of constituency work as being among TDs' responsibilities, it should not be inferred that TDs therefore 'should not' be undertaking constituency work, any more than the fact that the Constitution makes no mention of political parties means that we should try somehow to operate the political system without parties. While nineteenth-century textbooks on government may have made no mention of constituency work as being among the responsibilities of parliamentarians, those who study politics no longer look at the work of parliaments and parliamentarians from this formal and abstract perspective that bears little relation to the real world of politics in which TDs, and MPs in most countries, operate. It is hard to imagine a job specification for members of parliament anywhere that does not include defending and promoting the interests of one's constituents to the best of one's abilities, and TDs' responsiveness and availability to their constituents might well be seen as a strength, rather than a weakness, of the Irish political system.

Conclusion

Despite the widespread belief that the PR-STV electoral system generates constituency work for TDs, in reality constituency work emanates from other sources. The electoral system simply gives TDs an electoral incentive to respond to it. This incentive would be less under either a closed-list PR system (as used, de facto, in such countries as Netherlands, Portugal and Spain), under a mixed system as in Germany or Hungary, or under an electoral system where each party runs only one candidate (as in the UK, Canada or Australia). In those cases the main incentive of candidates is to be responsive to the wishes of the candidate selectors rather to those of the voters.

However, evidence from a number of countries shows that deputies seem to feel that it is a very important part of their job to respond to demands for constituency service, whether there is any electoral pay-off for them or not, and indeed deputies often get more gratification from solving constituents' problems than from other aspects of their political life on the backbenches or the opposition benches. Where this demand exists, MPs respond to it. Conversely, there are countries where, as in Ireland, candidates compete for votes against running mates of their own party, yet the voters do not demand a high level of constituency service. Both of these points suggest that the electoral system is, at most, just one among a number of factors influencing the amount of constituency work that MPs do.

Moreover, constituency work should not be identified automatically as a problem to be solved or eliminated. While a high constituency workload inevitably means less time for committee work, it brings benefits not only to individual constituents and to constituencies but also to national politics, by keeping TDs informed about the impact on ordinary people of policies adopted or under consideration.

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