**Extra-parliamentary behaviour in Northern Ireland: MLAs and constituency service**

**ABSTRACT**

Little is known about the attitudes and behaviour of Northern Ireland’s subnational legislators (Members of the Legislative Assembly or MLAs) beyond their activities at Parliament Buildings, Stormont. This article provides the first analysis of MLAs’ extra-parliamentary behaviour through a mixed methods study of their constituency service. The study finds that MLAs attach considerable importance to constituency service, devoting more time to its provision than to parliamentary duties. Noticeable variation exists between and within parties in terms of constituency service effort, although Unionist MLAs tend to have a stronger constituency focus than non-unionist MLAs. Variation in constituency service effort at the individual level has more to do with MLAs’ role orientations than electoral incentives. In terms of their home style, MLAs exhibit local behaviour that is more characteristic of their contemporaries in the Republic of Ireland than their counterparts in the rest of the United Kingdom.

Keywords: Constituency service; Northern Ireland; devolution; roles

**Introduction**

Legislators represent the public face of democracy. To be precise, they represent the ‘faces’ of democracy, since legislators face in two directions: toward the parliament and toward the constituency (Norton & Wood, 1993). With a few notable exceptions (André, Gallagher & Sandri, 2014c; Norton, 2002; Cain, Ferejohn & Fiorina, 1987; Bogdanor, 1985), Fenno’s (1978) point that academic attention focusses more on legislators’ parliamentary face, at the expense of the constituency face, remains valid. Addressing this imbalance within the research is a worthwhile undertaking. As André and her colleagues note (2014c: 166), whether an ordinary European feels represented by an MP ‘may depend less on the views that the MP expresses on the floor of parliament…than on what the MP does at a more local level’. Given the importance of representative-constituent interaction to the representational relationship (Pitkin, 1967), and in light of increasing public disillusionment with elected representatives and political institutions (Norris, 2011; Dalton 2004), it is surprising that the literature has not paid more attention to the ways in which representatives connect with their constituents on a day-to-day basis (Brack & Pilet, 2016).

That representative-constituent interaction is under-researched in Northern Ireland is particularly puzzling. Although the establishment of the Northern Ireland Assembly (NIA) in 1999 was part of a United Kingdom (UK) wide devolution project, the circumstances of its creation were unique. Unlike the situation in Scotland and Wales, the primary objective of devolution in Northern Ireland was the ending of protracted political violence (Jeffery, 2006).

The establishment of the all-inclusive power-sharing NIA represented a new democratic experience in which, for the first time in the region’s history, citizens from across the ethno-national spectrum could meaningfully participate.[[1]](#endnote-1) Each of Northern Ireland’s 18 constituencies would henceforth elect six Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs), creating a tier of 108 legislators to fill the region’s political vacuum.[[2]](#endnote-2) The relationship between MLAs and their constituents poses a number of interesting research questions, yet the literature has continued to focus on constitutional, party political, and security issues (Knox, 2010). Whilst a limited literature has developed recently on MLAs’ intra-parliamentary behaviour (Conley & Dahan, 2012; Conley 2013; Raymond & Holt, 2017), their extra-parliamentary activities remain uninspected.

With this omission in mind, this article attempts to scratch the surface of extra-parliamentary behaviour in Northern Ireland through an exploratory analysis of MLAs’ constituency service. In terms of what is meant by ‘constituency service’, some variation is apparent in the literature. André *et al*. (2014c), for instance, limit the term to the casework legislators undertake on behalf of individual constituents. This often involves (but is not limited to) the legislator acting as an intermediary between the constituent and state agencies to redress grievances with, for instance, social security benefits or public housing. Others use ‘constituency service’ in a broader sense to include the efforts legislators undertakes to promote the collective socio-economic wellbeing of their constituencies (Cain *et al*., 1987; Searing, 1994; Mezey, 2008). This might entail encouraging companies to set up shop in the area, supporting small businesses in the constituency, or petitioning central government for the repair of local infrastructure. It is this broader understanding of constituency service that we adopt here.

How committed MLAs are to constituency service is, at present, simply unknown. Studies spanning diverse political environments consistently show that legislators engage in constituency service (Mezey, 2008), however the effort each individual devotes to it varies significantly both within and across legislatures (Heitshusen, Young & Wood, 2005). In terms of what might motivate MLAs’ constituency service, the literature points to a range of electoral and non-electoral rationales (Carey & Shugart, 1995; Shugart, Valdini & Suominen, 2005; Cain *et al*., 1987; Johannes, 1980; Searing 1994), though speculating as to which might apply to Northern Ireland is difficult given the lack of research on MLAs. Information on the preferred approach of MLAs to constituency service, their ‘home style’ (Fenno, 1978), is also lacking.

To address these unknowns, we pursue three main lines of inquiry: MLAs’ constituency service effort, constituency service rationale, and constituency service style (hereafter ‘home style’). In doing so, we provide the first study of MLAs’ extra-parliamentary behaviour and, it is hoped, present information that will be useful from a comparative perspective.[[3]](#endnote-3) Using a mixed-methods approach, the study sheds light on the connection between representatives and constituents in a polity where, as the NIA notes,[[4]](#endnote-4) democratic engagement is a relatively new concept.

The article proceeds in several stages. In the next section we briefly outline our research methodology. Attention then turns to how much time MLAs, and the main political parties, devote to constituency service provision. Assuming that some individuals will be more constituency-orientated than others, we then attempt to explain why. Two possible explanations are explored: constituency service as a response to intra-party electoral competition, and constituency service as a result of MLAs’ role orientations. In the penultimate section we examine the range of local activities that characterise the MLA’s home style. We conclude with a summary of main findings and briefly outline opportunities for further research.

**Research methodology**

This article adopts a mixed-methods approach which combines a quantitative survey of MLAs with elite interviews of representatives from the five main political parties in the NIA. Although there are caveats to the value of this approach (see Bailer, 2014), there is a long precedent in legislative studies research of investigating legislators’ constituency service in this way (e.g. Martin, 2010; Wood & Young, 1997: Searing, 1994). Postal surveys were distributed to MLAs over a four month period, from November 2015 to February 2016. 49 of 108 MLAs responded, making for a response rate of 45 percent, which compares favourably with similar studies.[[5]](#endnote-5) Our sample roughly reflects the party and ethno-national composition of the 2011-2016 NIA (Table 1).[[6]](#endnote-6)

[Table 1 about here]

Follow-up semi-structured interviews were held with 12 MLAs over the course of six months, from February 2016 to July 2016. It was decided that interviews would not be conducted during the official campaign period (29th March – 5th May) for the fifth Assembly elections on 5th May 2016. All interviews were recorded with the MLA’s consent and, as with survey respondents, participants were promised anonymity. Interviews typically lasted between 40 minutes to an hour, although several lasted longer. Each MLA was asked a variety of questions, approximately 21, most of which were open-ended. Representatives from each of Northern Ireland’s five main political parties participated in the interview process and, with the exception of two interviews conducted at constituency offices, all interviews were held at Stormont, Parliament Buildings, in Belfast.

**Constituency service effort**

We use time – an elected representative’s scarcest resource (Fenno, 1978) – to measure MLAs’ constituency service effort, asking each survey respondent to approximate how many working hours per week they devote to constituency service. Table 2 reports the results and provides a breakdown in terms of party affiliation and ethno-national background. We can see that MLAs attach considerable importance to constituency service, with each devoting an average of 27.9 working hours per week to its provision. That figure is remarkably commensurate with the constituency service provision of Members of the Scottish Parliament (MSPs) and National Assembly for Wales (AMs), at 27.4 and 28.1 weekly hours respectively (Bradbury & Mitchell, 2007).[[7]](#endnote-7) However, given the number of MLAs per constituency and the region’s relatively small population, constituents in Northern Ireland undoubtedly receive the most attention from their representatives in the devolved UK context. The latest census figures indicate an MLA to citizen ratio of approximately 1:17,000 in Northern Ireland, compared to 1:51,000 in Wales and 1:41,000 in Scotland.

[Table 2 about here]

The importance of constituency service to MLAs is further underscored when we compare constituency service effort to parliamentary effort. MLAs were asked to estimate how many hours per week they devote to parliamentary tasks in the NIA including ‘plenary, committee, and All Party Group (APG) activities’. The weekly average declared by MLAs for these tasks is 22.9 hours, which indicates that MLAs spend more time on constituency matters than parliamentary duties. The same observation emerges from interviews with MLAs, some of whom unambiguously state that their priority lies in the constituency. One MLA, for instance, states: ‘I would actually sacrifice some of the work here [Parliament] to help constituents […] I don’t have any ambition other than my constituency’.[[8]](#endnote-8)

Table 2 reveals noticeable variation between the main political parties in terms of their constituency service effort. Although this type of inter-party variation is not unusual (Russo 2012; Cain *et al*. 1987), lack of data until now has made it difficult to establish the general dispositions of Northern Ireland’s main political parties towards constituency service.

Our data reveals Democratic Unionist (DUP) MLAs to be the most constituency-orientated, with the party’s MLAs devoting over 32 hours per week to constituency service. Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) MLAs closely follow as the second-most constituency orientated, devoting just under 30 hours per week to constituency service. A more noticeable gap in constituency service effort then emerges between unionist and non-unionist parties. Nationalist Sinn Féin and Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) MLAs rank joint third, both providing 25.6 hours of constituency service per week. Of the five main parties in the NIA, Alliance Party MLAs, who designate as ‘Other’ (neither nationalist nor unionist), are the least constituency-orientated, allocating 23.4 hours per week to constituency service.

That nationalist MLAs do not outperform their unionist counterparts in constituency service provision might come as something of a surprise. A perception has developed in Northern Ireland that unionist MLAs are not quite as engaged in local community work as nationalist MLAs (see, for example, McManus, 2015: 60-61). Our results suggest the opposite. This seems somewhat counter-intuitive, particularly in the case of the largest nationalist party, Sinn Féin, which owes much of its development into a mainstream political party to a network of community-based advice centres established in the 1980s and 1990s (Frampton, 2009: 27-28). Kusche’s (2017) study is also interesting in this regard: although her study focuses on the Republic of Ireland, it finds Sinn Féin, whose members also sit in the Irish Parliament, to have a weaker constituency orientation than most other parties.

Misdirected enquiries, and the manner in which MLAs responds to such enquires, must also be taken into account when considering constituency service caseloads. In discussing their casework, some MLAs cite constituents seeking assistance with planning applications, a matter outside the MLA’s jurisdiction, since town planning is the responsibility of local government.[[9]](#endnote-9) In those circumstances it is advisable for the MLA to redirect the enquiry elsewhere – in this case to the local council – since ‘there is a danger of poor accountability if members pursue cases outwith the competence of their own institution, and citizens lose sight of who is accountable for what’ (Russell & Bradbury, 2007: 114). There is some evidence that redirection occurs. One Sinn Féin interviewee, for instance, discusses ‘referring’ cases to his party’s local councillors.[[10]](#endnote-10) Likewise, on the issue of town planning, an Alliance Party MLA notes ‘if someone has written to me about [that] my first port of call is my party councillors’.[[11]](#endnote-11) Redirection, however, does not appear to be a universal practice: ‘if they want something done’, notes one DUP MLA, ‘no matter how small it is, I do it. I could say “there are other places where you could do that” but I don’t’.[[12]](#endnote-12) Redirection of queries (or lack thereof) is likely to effect the MLA’s caseload and, in that regard, future research might explore constituency service from the perspective of local councillors.

**Constituency service rationale**

Even within Northern Ireland’s political parties, it is clear that some MLAs are more constituency orientated than others. Although much more research is needed on the factors that affect legislators’ constituency effort (Heitshusen *et al*, 2005), existing literature highlights the influence of electoral rules (Carey & Shugart, 1995; Shugart *et al.*, 2005), electoral vulnerability (Cain *et al*., 1987; Johannes, 1980), and legislators’ role orientations (Searing, 1985; 1994). All MLAs in Northern Ireland are elected via the Single Transferable Vote (PR-STV) and, as such, the effect of differing electoral rules used to explain constituency service variation in devolved Scotland and Wales (Bradbury & Mitchell, 2007) is not applicable here. Thus, in this section we assess the relationship between MLAs’ constituency service, their electoral vulnerability, and their role orientations.

***A response to electoral vulnerability?***

Constituency service enables legislators to credit-claim in their districts (Mayhew, 1974) and is of strategic value in developing a favourable local reputation (Fenno, 1978). Whether or not constituency service translates into concrete electoral reward, however, is open to question (Studlar & McAllister, 1996; Martin, 2010). Nevertheless, evidence that electorally vulnerable legislators conduct more constituency service (Johannes, 1980; Cain *et al*., 1987) suggests that, at the very least, it is perceived to be a means of improving one’s electoral security.

Given that MLAs are elected via PR-STV, a highly preferential electoral system, their electoral security is particularly precarious. Whereas legislators in non-preferential systems risk losing their seat only to another party, those in preferential systems can be unseated by other parties *and* party colleagues (Katz, 1986). Competition from party colleagues – intra-party competition – creates a ‘product differentiation problem’ for those affected since party label must be shared with others and, by itself, does not guarantee election (Cox & Thies 1998: 271). To circumvent this problem, legislators seek to distinguish themselves by cultivating personal support in the constituency through, among other things, the provision of constituency service (Carey & Shugart, 1995). Thus in the Republic of Ireland, which also uses the PR-STV electoral system, TDs’ constituency service has been attributed to fierce competition between co-partisans (Komito, 1984; Boland, 1991). ‘With little to distinguish themselves from their opponents (particularly party colleagues)’, agues Carty (1981: 134), TDs ‘are driven to emphasise their brokerage services to constituents’.

Given the NIA’s use of PR-STV, there is a *prima facie* case for MLAs’ constituency service to be linked to intra-party vulnerability. The majority of NIA constituencies elect co-partisans, with some districts having as many as three to five party colleagues competing for election alongside one another. Given the product differentiation problem this can create, it is reasonable to assume that MLAs might use constituency service to gain a competitive edge over co-partisans. To test for this, we operationalise the intra-party vulnerability measure devised by André, Depauw and Martin (2015) and run a simple bivariate correlation analysis with MLAs’ constituency service hours.[[13]](#endnote-13)

Contrary to what we might expect, however, intra-party vulnerability is not a reliable predicator of MLAs’ constituency service; only weak and statistically insignificant correlation emerges. MLAs elected alongside co-partisans are no more constituency-orientated than those elected as the sole representative of their political party in the district. In accounting for this, the views of MLAs on co-partisan competition – or, as the case may be, co-partisan cooperation – are helpful. Interview evidence suggests that MLAs do not view their co-partisans in overly competitive terms. Co-partisans, for the most part, represent more friend that foe, easing the ‘burden’ of constituency work by enabling a division of labour.[[14]](#endnote-14) As opposed to representing the constituency in its entirety, co-partisans agree to a territorial division of the district which, in essence, accords each MLA their own personal sphere of influence within which to act as the party’s primary representative:

It’s a matter of geographically dividing things […] if you make a sensible division of areas, you can avoid that kind of [co-partisan] rivalry. My constituency is easy because it has two large centres of population. So we base one representative in one centre and one in the other.[[15]](#endnote-15)

Having a personal sphere of influence deals with the product differentiation problem that MLAs might otherwise experience in circumstances of unbridled co-partisan competition. Party label is not shared in the sub-constituency, affording the MLA an individual profile. Crucially, sub-constituency boundaries are integrated into parties’ vote management strategies, with each co-partisan MLA only canvassing for first preference votes in ‘their’ area:

We have three candidates running in [constituency]. The first decision we had to make after we were selected for the constituency was how we were going to divide the district up in terms of who will be canvassing in which areas. I will be canvassing in *my* area and the other candidates will canvass in *their* areas.[[16]](#endnote-16)

This type of con-partisan cooperation is not, of course, unique to Northern Ireland. Most notably, parties in the Republic of Ireland adopt a similar practice of establishing personal ‘bailiwicks’, where constituencies are parcelled up among co-partisans (Sacks, 1970). Evidently, however, the practice does not inhibit co-partisan TDs from defying bailiwick boundaries and campaigning in one another’s areas (Downing, 2014). Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, research reveals a statistically significant relationship between co-partisan competition and constituency-orientation in the Republic of Ireland.[[17]](#endnote-17) In Northern Ireland, where MLAs are particularly loyal to party (see Wilford, 2015), sub-constituency boundaries are, for the most part, rigidly adhered to. A veteran Sinn Fein MLA notes that she has ‘never’ witnessed friction or electoral rivalry between co-partisans in her party: ‘Sinn Fein work as a team’.[[18]](#endnote-18) Even within the DUP, the largest party with the most co-partisans among its ranks, ‘aggravation’ between co-partisans, according to one MLA, is rare.[[19]](#endnote-19) As such, the sub-constituency arrangement manages co-partisan competition, mitigating against party colleagues having to outperform one another in a contest of constituency service.

***A consequence of role orientation?***

Role analysis is experiencing something of a revival in legislative studies (Blomgren & Rozenberg, 2012) and offers an alternative, non-electoral, explanation for constituency service variation. ‘Role’ refers to a perceived set of norms which legislators associate with their position (Wahlke, Buchanan, Eulau & Ferguson, 1962). Although some question the behavioural consequences of role orientations (e.g. Jewell, 1970), Searing (1994) offers empirical evidence supporting the use of role as a predicator of legislative behaviour. Roles, he argues, are adopted in accordance with the legislator’s personal preferences such that, for instance, some adopt a Policy Advocate role for ‘rectitude and hubris’ while others, desirous of a ‘sense of competence’, opt for a Constituency Member role (1991: 1253-54). As such, a legislator’s constituency effort has less to do with electoral circumstances than one’s individual motivations. Crucially, the Constituency Member role which Searing identifies among Westminster MPs covariates with their constituency service effort: MPs that adopt the role spend more time on constituency work than MPs that do not adopt the role (1994: 133-36)

Inspired by Searing (1994) and André *et al*. (2014c), we operationalise a framework that identifies each MLA’s role orientation according to his or her political priority (as stated in our survey). MLAs who prioritise assisting individual constituents or the collective interests of their constituency are designated Constituency Members, MLAs who prioritise alternative objectives – policy, party, or parliamentary – are designated Non-Constituency Members (Table 3). This allows us to test if MLAs’ constituency service effort relates to role orientation. If Searing is correct, Constituency Member MLAs should be more constituency-orientated than their Non-Constituency Member counterparts.

[Table 3 about here]

Table 4 displays the distribution of role orientations among MLAs. In line with Searing’s thesis, considerable variation in constituency service effort emerges between Constituency and Non-Constituency Member MLAs. The difference is quite striking, with Constituency Member MLAs devoting over 30 hours per week to constituency service compared to Non-Constituency Member MLAs, who devote 21. An independent samples t-test confirms the difference in mean constituency service hours between Constituency Member (M = 30.9, SD = 7.9) and Non-constituency Member MLAs (M = 20.8, SD = 18.2) to be statistically significant (p < 0.05) with equal variances not assumed.[[20]](#endnote-20)

[Table 4 about here]

Given the statistical significance of role on MLAs’ constituency service, it would be remiss not to ask if any particular socio-demographic characteristics stand out among Constituency Member MLAs. A cursory glance at the Constituency Member sample, however, reveals a wide range of ages, a roughly proportionate gender balance, mixed educational attainment, and MLAs of various levels of seniority and electoral marginality. Such heterogeneity, though perhaps frustrating, aligns with Searing’s central claim that the legislator’s role choice is shaped by personal preference.

Interviews with Constituency Member MLAs do, however, reveal some similarity in terms of the motivations that underpin the role. For the most part, as Searing suggests, the role is associated with emotional incentives. Asked about their prioritisation of constituency service, MLAs’ comments indicate that the work provides job satisfaction or, simply, that they enjoy the personal interaction it involves. ‘I do it’, notes one MLA, ‘because I get a buzz from helping people’.[[21]](#endnote-21) Use of vocation-like language is suggestive of attachment to the idea of public service: ‘I would find it very difficult to do anything less, I would feel like I was letting people down […] if people want to see me it is just like making an appointment at the doctor.’[[22]](#endnote-22) Another discusses his Constituency Member role in the context of community spirit and activism:

I have always been passionate about making a contribution to my community. I was a volunteer youth worker with my church when I was younger, providing youth drop in facilities for at risk young people. Then a member of the inaugural district policing partnership. Now I do this [elected office]. It’s all out of a desire to build a better community.[[23]](#endnote-23)

Emotional ties to individual constituents and to the local area more generally are also in evidence. Family-like relationships develop through frequent interaction with vulnerable constituents, one MLA notes ‘they almost see you as a family member [and] need you for a lot of emotional support’.[[24]](#endnote-24) Another describes siphoning off some of his constituency duties to his party’s local councillors to provide them with constituency work experience. Tellingly, the member admits to missing the local interaction that constituency service provides: ‘as time goes by you ask ‘am I still in touch with the community?’ […] almost without realising it, I started taking on more constituency work again to reconnect with the ground.’[[25]](#endnote-25) Comments such as these suggest, firstly, that the Constituency Member role is indeed a matter of personal choice and, secondly, that the choice is cemented by emotional and or psychological bonds.

**Home Style**

Since Fenno’s (1978) work on the ‘home styles’ of US Congressmen, a limited literature has developed around the different ways in which legislators connect with their constituencies (Norton & Wood, 1993; Norton 1994). Searing (1994), for instance, distinguishes between MPs that focus on the individual problems of constituents (‘Welfare Officers’) and those that concentrate on the district’s collective interests (‘Local Promoters’). The former tends to concentrate his energies on the constituency surgery and, perhaps, visiting constituents at home, whilst the latter visits sites of industry, meets with employers, and lobbies for local businesses. André and Depauw (2013a; 2013b) offer a more systematic framework that categorises legislators’ constituency styles based on the nature of their communication strategies: one-to-one, one-to-few, and one-to-many.

Inspired by the PatriRep Survey (see Deschouwer, Depauw & André, 2014), we provided MLAs with a list of constituency service activities and asked each respondent to indicate how frequently (if at all) they participated in each. The results, presented in Table 5, reveal an interesting pattern. MLAs clearly have a preference for one-to-one interactions, with constituent home visits and constituency surgeries the most frequently provided services. One-to-one activities create a closer and more solid relationship with constituents, but are costly in time and resources (Brack & Pilet, 2016). Visiting constituents at home is particularly time consuming, yet more than two-thirds of MLAs participate in the activity at least once a fortnight. Local event attendance, a one-to-few activity, is also popular among MLAs with almost one-third of our sample attending a wedding, party, funeral, or similar event at least once a week. Although meeting local businesses is also a one-to-few activity, it is noticeably less popular among MLAs, narrowing the MLAs’ preferred style to mostly social one-to-one and one-to-few activities. Despite being perhaps the most cost-effective, newsletter publication, a one-to-many activity, is rare among MLAs, with most producing one every three months or not at all. This contrasts sharply with newsletter usage in devolved Scotland and Wales, where around 44% of MSPs and 30% of AMs produce one at least fortnightly.**[[26]](#endnote-26)**

[Table 5 about here]

The MLA’s ‘home style’ is therefore more personal than corporate, with a premium placed on one-to-one relationships and one-to-few social events. Arguably, this style is more in sync with legislators in the Republic of Ireland than with those in the rest of the UK. The importance MLAs attach to local events is a case in point: whereas 57% of MLAs attend an event at least once a fortnight, the collective figure for MPs, MSPs, and AMs for the same is less than 7% (André *et al*., 2014c). More than 70% of TDs, on the other hand, attend a local event on a fortnightly basis (*ibid*). For most MLAs, local events represent an opportunity to be seen ‘out and about’ in the constituency, although some were openly critical of the willingness of their colleagues to forego parliamentary business in the NIA in favour of constituency events. According to one MLA, certain members would not contemplate missing a funeral in the constituency, even if the event coincided with a vote on legislation. Another MLA’s comments are suggestive of a parochial mind-set not dissimilar to that ascribed to TDs in the Republic of Ireland (see Gallagher & Komito, 2010):

They open every flower show that there is, go to every church that there is, every school show, and they will be the bee’s knees and everybody will love them! But they might not make much of a contribution in terms of their legislative role. You have got to ask, is that what you want from an MLA?[[27]](#endnote-27)

Although constituency styles have been linked to the conditions under which legislators compete for re-election (André & Depauw, 2013b), attributing the approach of MLAs to their electoral circumstances is not straightforward. Legislators in open-list systems, for example, are thought to favour one-to-many over one-to-one activities (*ibid*), though this is clearly not the case with MLAs. Interestingly, the presence of co-partisans in the constituency significantly reduces the frequency with which MLAs participate in local events (r = -.372, p < 0.01). However, we would argue that this is not an effect of co-partisan competition, but rather co-partisan cooperation. If we recall that co-partisan MLAs territorially divide the constituency, it is reasonable to assume that a division of labour also occurs in terms of local event invitations which, no doubt, are in abundance. Conversely, MLAs that are the sole party representative in the constituency need to attend events throughout the district if the party is to maintain a reasonable social presence.[[28]](#endnote-28)

Although Searing’s Welfare Officer/Local Promoter distinction has become common currency in the literature, no attempt has been made to investigate if these Constituency Member subtypes exhibit differences in home style. In that regard, our data reveals some interesting findings. After identifying the subtypes in our sample (see Table 4 above) we compare the frequency with which each participate in five constituency service related activities (Table 6).

[Table 6 about here]

As Table 6 illustrates, one-to-one activities are the clear favourite with Welfare Officers, with almost three-quarters of the sample holding weekly surgeries and more than half visiting constituents at home on a weekly basis. One-to-few and one-to-many activities, on the other hand, are more popular with Local Promoters, who attend local events and meet with local businesses more often, whilst also making use of constituency newsletters. These behavioural patterns neatly align with Searing’s description of the subtypes: Welfare Officers focus on the ‘individual’, Local Promoters on the ‘collective’ (1994: 124). Not only, then, do roles account for variation in MLAs’ constituency service effort, they are also helpful to understanding differences in home style.

Conclusion

In concluding their study of constituency service in European democracies, André and Depauw (2013b: 1002) note that ‘studies of the ways in which legislators “connect” to constituents have largely been limited to the realm of single-seat districts and the United States in particular. More research, in particular in the context of multi-member PR, is called for’. The PartiRep survey of legislators in (mostly) European assemblies (Deschouwer & Depauw, 2014) has made a significant contribution to filling that gap. Yet among the project’s long list of assemblies under consideration, including the Scottish Parliament, National Assembly for Wales and dozens of sub-state legislatures from across Europe, the NIA is conspicuous by its absence. To be sure, the NIA is no stranger to suspension and premature dissolution and does not always make for an easy subject matter. However, as we have seen, beyond the headlines and political crises, the region’s MLAs go about the business of ‘connecting’ with constituents unabated and, as such, their activities provide scope for enquiry.

This article establishes that MLAs attach great importance to the provision of constituency service. The average MLA devotes more time to constituency service than to parliamentary duties and, for a majority of members, seeing to the individual or collective needs of their constituency is priority. Contrary to expectations, intra-party electoral vulnerability does not provide a reliable predicator of MLAs’ constituency service. In the case of Northern Ireland, then, André and her colleagues are correct: constituency orientation is not always reducible to ‘a pure mechanical response’ to electoral incentives (André *et al*., 2014c: 179). Rather, at a time of renewed interest in the behavioural consequences of role (Andeweg, 2012), this study associates MLAs’ constituency service with role orientation and, in that regard, lends support to Searing’s (1994) original Constituency Member thesis. It also suggests a further use for the Constituency Member role, in that its subtypes help to explain some of the differences in home style among MLAs. This represents a modest contribution to the literature, which has thus far limited explanations of home style to cost-effectiveness, electoral conditions, and local political culture (Fenno, 1978; André & Depauw, 2013b; Saward, 2010).

Of the MLA’s home style, it has been shown that their approach is more characteristic of their contemporaries in the Republic of Ireland than their counterparts in the rest of the UK. MLAs favour one-to-one and one-to-few relationships, and have a particular affinity for visiting constituents at home and attending social events. Cost-effectiveness is evidently not the determining factor in the MLA’s home style, given that one-to-many activities are the least costly in time and resources yet something of a rarity among MLAs. The preference for such a personalised and time-consuming home style would support a parochial characterisation of MLAs which, as interviews reveal, might not auger well for their parliamentary obligations.

In scratching the surface of extra-parliamentary behaviour in Northern Ireland, new questions are revealed. In terms of the gap in constituency service provision between unionist and non-unionists, future research might explore the relevance of an MLA’s ideological position. Weaker constituency orientation among left-wing legislators has been attributed to a ‘greater importance of a general ideological framework within left-wing parties’ (Kusche, 2017: 16). In that regard, it is worth noting that those MLAs on the left– Alliance, the SDLP, and Sinn Fein – have a weaker constituency orientation than those on the right, the DUP and UUP (see Garry, Matthews & Wheatley, 2016). In discussing their constituency agendas, it is the non-unionist interviewees that reference wider policy, or ideological, matters more often; be it class and LGBT issues or a ‘shared future’.[[29]](#endnote-29) This is not to say that unionists are devoid of ideological objectives (consider their defence of Northern Ireland’s constitutional position within the UK), nor that the distinction between constituency service and wider policy goals is absolute (an LGBT constituent seeking support for same-sex marriage could be considered either or both). There is, however, tentative grounds for further research. A survey eliciting MLAs’ left-to-right positions would, for instance, enable an empirical test for correlation with constituency service provision.

Finally, the recent reduction in the size of the NIA from 108 to 90 MLAs invites further enquiry. With fewer representatives elected per constituency, one would expect the MLA’s caseload to increase and, in that regard, our data provides a benchmark for future comparison. How any ‘slack’ is picked up among the smaller group of MLAs may be interesting. In Newry and Armagh, for instance, unionist representation has been halved from two to one MLAs: has this essentially doubled the constituency demands of the remaining unionist MLA, or have the nationalist MLAs experienced something of an increase also? More generally speaking, it is reasonable to assume that nationalist constituents seek assistance from nationalist MLAs, and the same for unionist constituents and unionist MLAs. What, then, of unionist constituents in West Belfast, for example, where no unionist MLA has been elected for over a decade? Interviewees, of course, claim to ‘work for everyone’, but to remove ethno-national identity from the constituent-representative relationship in Northern Ireland would be naïve. The reluctance of nationalist and unionist MLAs to remove flags and emblems from their constituency offices (BBC, 2015) suggests that even constituency service in Northern Ireland is tinged with ethno-nationalism. Research on constituency service from a citizen’s perspective might explore the extent to which this influences, or even deters, constituent-representative interaction in the region.

Notes

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Table 1: Characteristics of the Survey Sample

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Sample | | Population | |
| *Party* | N | % | N | % |
| DUP | 16 | 33 | 38 | 35 |
| Sinn Féin | 13 | 27 | 29 | 27 |
| UUP | 5 | 10 | 13 | 12 |
| SDLP | 6 | 12 | 14 | 13 |
| Alliance | 5 | 10 | 8 | 7 |
| Others | 4 | 8 | 6 | 6 |
| *Community designation* |  | |  | |
| Unionist | 24 | 49 | 56 | 52 |
| Nationalist | 19 | 39 | 43 | 40 |
| Other | 6 | 12 | 9 | 8 |

Table 2: Working hours per week devoted to constituency service

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | Sample % (n) | Hours per week |
| *Political party* |  |  |
| DUP\* | 32.6 (16) | 32.25 |
| Sinn Féin\*\* | 26.5 (13) | 25.6 |
| UUP\* | 10.2 (5) | 29.8 |
| SDLP\*\* | 12.2 (6) | 25.6 |
| APNI\*\*\* | 10.2 (5) | 23.4 |
| *Community designation* |  |  |
| Unionist | 48.9 (24) | 31.04 |
| Nationalist | 38.7 (19) | 25.68 |
| Other | 12.2 (6) | 20.30 |
| Weighted average | 100 (49) | 27.9 |

*Note*: \*Unionist, \*\*Nationalist, \*\*\*Other.

Table 3: Role orientation matrix

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Priority | Subtype | Role Orientation |
| Providing assistance to individual constituents | Welfare Officer | Constituency Member |
| To advance the social and economic wellbeing of my constituency | Local Promoter |  |
| To influence policy and legislation |  | Non-Constituency Member |
| To advance my political party’s objectives |  |  |
| To advance the interest of the Northern Ireland Assembly |  |  |

**Table 4: The distribution of Constituency and Non-Constituency Members**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Role | N | % | Mean constituency hours |
| Constituency members | 34 | 69.3 | 30.9 |
| Welfare Officer | 20 | 40.8 | 29.8 |
| Local Promoter | 14 | 28.5 | 28.1 |
| Non-Constituency members | 15 | 30.6 | 20.8 |

Table 5: Activities of MLAs in the constituency

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| *Activity* | At least once a week | At least once a fortnight | At least once a month | At least once every 3 months | Do not participate |
| Hold Surgery | 59.1 | 10.2 | 16.3 | 2 | 12.2 |
| Visit constituents at home | 40.8 | 26.5 | 22.4 | 0 | 10.2 |
| Attend event in your local area (wedding, party, funeral etc.) | 32.6 | 24.4 | 20.4 | 8.1 | 14.2 |
| Meet with local businesses | 8.1 | 22.4 | 38.7 | 24.4 | 6.1 |
| Send out personal newsletter | 4 | 0 | 6 | 59.1 | 30.6 |

Table 6: Role orientation and constituency activities

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | Welfare Officer | Local Promoter |
| Hold surgery | 73.7 | 50 |
| Visit constituents at home | 57.9 | 42.9 |
| Attend local event | 31.6 | 42.9 |
| Meet with local businesses | 10.5 | 14.3 |
| Send out personal newsletter | 0 | 14.3 |

*Note*: Entries display the percentage of MLAs that engage in the activity at least once a week.

1. From 1921 to 1972 Northern Ireland had its own Home Rule parliament within the UK, the Parliament of Northern Ireland. Although the region’s minority Irish Catholic population had representation in the Parliament, the period has been dubbed ‘Government without Consensus’ (Rose, 1976: 14-15) because, for the most part, the Irish Catholic community neither supported nor engaged with the Unionist regime. After the suspension of the regime in 1972, subsequent attempts to establish power-sharing institutions in the 1970s and 1980s were opposed by sections of both Nationalist/Republican and Unionist communities (Tonge, 2002: 113-126). As such, the cross-community endorsement of power-sharing via referendum in 1998 marked a new departure. Although some ultra-Unionists, namely the Democratic Unionists (DUP), opposed the 1998 settlement, they came to support power-sharing after a renegotiation of the 1998 settlement at St Andrew’s in 2006. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. The district magnitude of NIA constituencies decreased from six to five for the March 2017 Assembly elections, reducing the size of the NIA from 108 to 90 seats. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. André and Depauw (2013b: 1002) note that studies of the ways in which representatives connect to their constituents have largely been limited to single-seat districts in the USA. They call for more research in the context of multi-member PR districts. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. *Engagement Strategy for the Northern Ireland Assembly* (2010), available at [archive.niassembly.gov.uk/corporate/EngagementStrategy.pdf](http://www.archive.niassembly.gov.uk/corporate/EngagementStrategy.pdf) (accessed 28th January 2016) [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Response rates for Bradbury and Mitchell’s (2007) survey on constituency work in devolved Scotland and Wales: Members of the Scottish Parliament n = 44-55 (34-43%); Members of the National Assembly for Wales n = 26-30 (43-50%). Also see Bailer’s (2014: 178-184) overview of recent parliamentary surveys and their response rates. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Party composition figures accurate as of February 2016. ‘Others’ refers to smaller parties and independent MLAs. One respondent withheld their party political affiliation and is included in the ‘others’ category. Ethno-national designation refers to the community identity which each MLA, upon election, must register as. Community designation is necessary for the operation of cross-community consent mechanisms established as part of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement. Those MLAs who do not identify as unionist or nationalist are designated ‘other’. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Bradbury and Mitchell distinguish between Constituency and List Member MSPs and AMs. The figures reported here (27.4 and 28.1) represent the author’s calculation of the average per jurisdiction. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Independent Unionist MLA, interview, 14th March 2016. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. SDLP MLA, interview, 22nd February 2016; Independent Unionist MLA, interview, 24th February 2016. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Sinn Féin MLA, interview, 14th March, 2016 [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Alliance Party MLA (1), interview, 23rd February 2016. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. DUP MLA, interview, 14th March 2016. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. André *et al*. (2015: 472) suggest the following calculation for measuring intra-party vulnerability in strong preferential systems: 1 – ([PV candidate – PV first non-elected co-partisan] ÷ PV party’s candidates), where PV = number of preference votes. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. DUP MLA, interview, 14th March 2016. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Alliance Party MLA (1), interview, 23rd February 2016. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. SDLP MLA, interview, 22nd February 2016. Emphasis added. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. In a survey of TDs in the Republic of Ireland (n = 75, 47%), Wall (2011) reports a statistically significant relationship between co-partisan competition and TDs’ constituency work (p < 0.05). See <https://politicalreform.ie/2011/03/29/what-did-tds-do-and-who-did-they-represent-in-the-previous-dail/> (accessed 6th February 2017). [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Sinn Féin MLA, interview, 22nd February 2016. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. DUP MLA, interview, 14th March 2016. Although uncommon, co-partisan disagreements are not unheard of. One former DUP MLA recently accused her party colleague’s election campaigners of canvassing in ‘her’ area during the most recent Assembly elections (see Bell, 2017). [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. The magnitude of the difference in the means (mean difference = -10.14, 95% CI: -20.0 to -.21) is medium (eta squared = .09) [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. SDLP MLA, interview, 22nd February 2016. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. UUP MLA, interview, 23rd February 2016. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Alliance Party MLA (2), interview, 23rd February 2016. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. SDLP MLA, interview, 18th July 2016. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Sinn Féin MLA, interview, 14th March, 2016 [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Data made available by the PartiRep MP Survey (see [www.partirep.eu](http://www.partirep.eu) also Deschouwer *et al*., 2014). [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. SDLP MLA, interview, 26th February 2016. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. One Sinn Féin MLA from a rural constituency notes ‘where I would be envious of the DUP in our constituency is that they have three MLAs and they can split up the constituency, whereas I have the whole of [constituency]. I get invites to events all over the constituency and I can’t delegate that or share those with another MLA’. Interview, 14th March, 2016. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. ‘A Shared Future’ is the Alliance Party’s flagship policy. It aims to end sectarian divisions in Northern Ireland through promoting integration (e.g. in housing and education), reconciliation, and mutual respect for religious, political, and cultural diversity. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)