The security of politicians: towards a research agenda

Neil Matthews¹,∗ and Sean Haughey²

¹School of Sociology, Politics and International Studies, University of Bristol, Bristol BS8 1TU, UK
²Institute of Irish Studies, University of Liverpool, Liverpool L69 7ZX, UK

*Correspondence: neil.matthews@bristol.ac.uk

Members of Parliament (MPs) are increasingly experimenting with a variety of measures to protect their personal security. This trend is particularly evident at the local level, with MPs adjusting their constituency service on security grounds in ways that likely affect how they interact with constituents. Despite potentially significant representative implications, these enhanced security measures have yet to be problematized in detail. This article calls for a new research agenda to address this deficit. Exploring some of the anecdotal evidence, we highlight potential trade-offs arising from a more securitized constituency service experience, noting, in particular, costs pertaining to (1) accessibility, (2) symbolism, and (3) resources. We conclude by sketching out the broad parameters of a multi-method, multi-level, and multi-disciplinary research agenda on the security of politicians.

Keywords: constituency service; MPs; political violence; representation; security.

1. Introduction

To be a politician in the UK today is to have made something of a dangerous life choice. Elected representatives, at all levels, are subject to record abuse and harassment from the public (JCCC 2024). Likened by some to an epidemic, politicians regularly present exposure to violence as a normalized feature of the role.¹ ‘Living in fear’, as one Member of Parliament (MP) explains, ‘has become a routine part of many of

¹The definition of violence we adopt here is deliberately broad, encompassing, as Buffachi (2005) argues, any ‘act of violation’ against a candidate or politician. For claims of normalization, see LGA (2022), JCCC (2024), Savage, Helm and Tapper (2021).
my colleagues’ lives’ (Savage, Helm and Tapper 2021). That abuse occurs both online and offline and takes many forms, including death threats, threats of sexual violence, abusive and discriminatory language, threats to family members, and the destruction of property. Whilst much rarer, there have also been instances of extreme physical violence against individual MPs and their staff, with the most egregious cases occurring as MPs were directly engaged in constituency service. In 2016, Labour MP Jo Cox was murdered en route to a constituency surgery, while Conservative MP David Amess was murdered during one in 2022. Those fatal attacks brought renewed efforts by Parliament and state security services to strengthen the constituency-level security arrangements of MPs. Cox’s murder saw the establishment of the Parliamentary Liaison and Investigation Team—under the command of the Metropolitan Police—and the launch of Operation Bridger, a nationwide programme designed to offer MPs access to extra security at their homes and constituency offices. Following the killing of David Amess, the Parliamentary Security Department recommended further ‘tailored security advice’ for MPs in their constituencies (Sky News 2022).

These developments are having subtle and not-so-subtle effects on constituency service. Anecdotal evidence shows MPs adopting a variety of security measures at constituency-level. Examples of these include equipping constituency offices with panic buttons, CCTV, bomb-proof letterboxes, bullet-proof glass, reinforced doors, security lighting, and additional locks. Some MPs have employed private security personnel, requested police attend constituency-based events, or relocated to offices with security staff on-site. Others have opted to wear ‘stab vests’ or utilize other personal protective equipment when meeting constituents (see ITV News 2016; 2023; BBC 2019; Stewart 2021; Sky News 2022; Strudwick 2024). Similarly, procedural changes concerning constituency service provision have occurred, including replacing ‘drop-in’ surgeries with appointment-only meetings, avoiding in-person meetings with constituents, reducing the frequency of surgeries, no longer holding surgeries in public venues, and liaising with police concerning constituency service plans, including running background checks on constituents (see CSPL 2017; Savage, Helm and Tapper 2021; BBC 2023). Some MPs even advise their constituents that they should prepare ‘to be searched’ prior to a surgery appointment (Smith n.d.), whilst others have advocated for a range of security initiatives, including self-defence training for politicians (Donohoe 2021).³

²Sixteen years prior to Cox’s murder, Liberal Democrat MP Nigel Jones was attacked by a constituent with a sword during a weekly surgery. Their parliamentary aide, Andrew Pennington—also a Liberal Democrat councillor at the time—was fatally wounded in the incident. A decade later, Labour MP Stephen Timms was stabbed during a constituency surgery.

³The security of MPs can come in various forms—but the aspects we are interested in exploring in this article concern those that relate directly to the in-person interactions politicians have with their constituents. We do not, therefore, address the cyber-security of politicians or the security they implement at their personal residences.
For some MPs at least, then, constituency service is now deemed a security issue. This is not only to say that MPs are alert to potential threats whilst conducting their constituency activities—that is common sense—but that the perceived severity of those threats has reached a level to warrant extraordinary security measures that depart from the traditional practices of constituency service. This break from normal practice, the elevation (or dramatization) of security risks, and the use of extraordinary measures might lead some to conclude that constituency service has been ‘securitized’ (Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde 1998: 24–29). We do not make this argument per se: for securitization to occur, there must be a collective agreement between decision-makers and the audience (in this case constituents) that the threat posed is of an existential nature (ibid). There is probably a lack of consensus among MPs in terms of the seriousness with which they regard threats to their security, and we know even less about the views of constituents on the matter. What we do know, however, is that a growing number of MPs appear to be changing their constituency practices, in significant ways, on security grounds. We argue that this securitized response merits greater attention. Our focus here is not whether these security measures are justified or (dis)proportionate; that is a separate (and legitimate) question. Rather, we are interested in the representational effects of these security measures, namely, whether they are altering (if not depreciating) the constituency service experience for MPs and constituents.

The enhanced security measures pertaining to constituency service have not yet been problematized or analysed in detail. This is a little puzzling. The traditional image of the ‘constituency MP’—as a relatively approachable, accessible, and engaged figure—is hard to reconcile with the security protocols outlined above. If constituency service provision is changing, as seems likely, we argue that the nature and extent of these changes require further investigation and that the consequences merit deeper analysis. Constituency service is a central feature of British democracy, prized by the public and MPs alike, and is regarded as a crucial means of linkage between civil society and formal politics (Norton 1994, 2002; Korris 2011). But how is this linkage facilitated in the context (or constraints) of the security measures adopted by MPs? The existing scholarship does not shed much light on this question. Studies have examined the prevalence and form of political violence (James et al., 2016a; Gorrell et al., 2020; Ward and McLoughlin 2020; Southern and Harmer 2021), its potential drivers (Stoker 2017; Clarke et al., 2018; Weinberg 2021a), its perpetrators (James et al., 2016a), and its impact on

---

4In the field of International Relations, securitization (or securitization theory) relates to the discursive construction of certain issues as security issues and the ‘removal of those issues from “normal politics” to more exclusive circles of decision-making’ (Neal 2019: 86).

5For a basic indicator of this development, we can point to the substantial increase in security expenses claimed by MPs, from just over £77,000 in 2014–15 to more than £4.2m in 2017–18 (IfG 2024).
the well-being of individual politicians (James et al., 2016b; Flinders et al., 2020; Weinberg 2022). The literatures on political violence and constituency service, however, do not intersect in any significant way.

There are, therefore, two aspects missing from the present picture on political violence in the UK, which this article draws attention to. The first of these is the response of those individuals who, despite concerns around their (in)security, remain in public office. What measures do they implement to protect their security in the constituency service context? And what impact does security have on the service they provide their constituents? Secondly, how is enhanced security affecting the experience of the constituent? Research into other sites and processes whose design has been ‘hardened’ in response to security threats demonstrates the impact of that development on the behaviour and perceptions of those who engage with them. At present, however, we know virtually nothing about how constituents are experiencing and interpreting a fortified constituency service context. The agenda we outline in this article is, therefore, deliberately bidirectional in focus, concerned with the ‘representational experience’ (Oppenheimer 1996) in its entirety, accounting for both the providers and beneficiaries of constituency service, and their respective behaviours and attitudes concerning security.

To sketch that agenda, we combine insights from existing research, in the UK and beyond, on representation and security, drawing also on testimony from politicians addressing constituency service security. In a first step, we highlight the key experiential qualities of constituency service in the UK, for both MPs and constituents, not least those of accessibility, visibility, and co-presence. The multisite and dynamic nature of constituency service is also presented as significant. We then problematize the potential ‘trade-offs’ (Schneier 2003) associated with enhanced constituency-level security, noting costs pertaining to (1) accessibility, (2) symbolism, and (3) resources. Our argument is that these costs are multifaceted, underexplored, and have potentially far-reaching implications, including a degraded affective aspect to the interactions between constituent and MPs; an impression of democratic withdrawal; fuelling distrust; and the myriad attendant burdens of implementing and maintaining security systems. We then conclude by outlining the parameters of a multi-method, multi-level, and multi-disciplinary comparative agenda on politicians’ security and the representational experience.

*Just as there have been recent calls to deepen the research base on the stressors experienced by politicians (Flinders et al., 2020), we suggest there also needs to be a deeper understanding of their response to the specific stressor of personal security. On this point, we are aligned with Weinberg (2023) who, in their recent work on distrust, identified a need for scholars to supplement existing stressor frameworks with an item that ‘accounts for political violence as its own distinctive threat to politicians’ well-being’ (p. 132).*
2. The representational experience

A useful first step in problematizing the tightening of security around constituency service in the UK is to sketch out the nature of the process itself. Surprisingly, insights on the practicalities of constituency service—or the experiential aspects—are relatively thin on the ground, especially compared with the large body of work addressing why MPs do it (e.g. Searing 1994; Judge 1999; Gauja 2015). Whilst we will touch upon the ‘puzzle’ (Norris 1997) of constituency service, it is not our primary concern here. The key point, from our perspective, is that we know that, despite not being required to, most MPs provide a constituency service—with most ranking it as their priority focus—and we know that constituents expect and value that service (Campbell and Lovenduski 2015; Vivyan and Wagner 2016). Indeed, constituency service demands have drastically increased over time in the UK (Norton 1994; Gay 2005), with MPs developing an infrastructure and devoting considerable resources to supply it. We can, therefore, assert that the concept of the constituency MP is deeply embedded in the UK’s political culture and landscape.

David Arter (2018: 7) has identified the core aspects of constituency service, three of which are exclusively constituency-based and which contain within them the possibility for some physical interaction and connection-building between constituent and MP. These are Casework, Information Provision, and Outreach. ‘Casework’ concerns the, “surgery work” performed on behalf of individual constituents by the MP and/or a dedicated staff, often in a personalized office in the district. ‘Information provision’ relates to MPs, ‘supplying constituents with relevant information about district matters’. And ‘Outreach’ sees MPs, ‘actively seeking out the opinion of citizens and in this way identifying common concerns and problems. Inter alia by organizing meetings with strategic local stakeholders, staging constituency tours, soliciting opinions and views digitally’. As we will demonstrate, each of these aspects of constituency service is vulnerable to the effects of heightened security.

The first feature of constituency service to highlight—as a process through which MP and constituent interact—is its multi-site character and variable nature. As Soo (2017: 68) explains, ‘At the core of the constituency service are pursuits that enable constituents and MPs to meet, listen and interact … These interactions can vary wildly and can come about in different ways’. The most prominent occasion where such interaction occurs is the ‘advice surgery’; a meeting in which constituents present their concerns and queries to their local representative. The frequency of these surgeries varies from MP to MP, as does their nature. Some MPs may offer a weekly or fortnightly service, others may schedule multiple surgeries a week. Some operate their surgeries on an appointment-only basis, and others encourage constituents to simply ‘drop-in’. Research suggests that MPs go
to great lengths to advertise their surgery arrangements, amplifying their visibility to constituents (see Searing 1985, 1994; Soo 2017). Surgeries typically take place in a local constituency office, arguably the site most synonymous with constituency service in the UK. Again, MPs, traditionally, will make their presence and availability clear and obvious, via office signage and window displays, and many offices occupy a prominent place in the constituency (e.g. a high street or popular thoroughfare). Some MPs permit ‘cold callers’ to the office and offer meetings to constituents by appointment, outside of advice surgery slots. MPs may have multiple offices (or ‘advice centres’), or a main office and another centre of some description, dependent on constituency size.

The advice surgery is not, however, confined to the brick-and-mortar of a constituency office. Indeed, research suggests that the constituency service activity of MPs is marked by a certain mobility and dynamism. As Norton and Wood (1990: 1999) have noted, ‘of the extensive work undertaken on behalf of constituents, not all is reactive; a significant number of members adopt a pro-active approach.’ Many MPs, for example, conduct so-called ‘pop-up’ surgeries in a limitless range of settings: restaurants, supermarkets, village halls, post offices, the local library, etc. These can be on a scheduled and regular basis or impromptu. Some MPs organize surgery ‘roadshows’, journeying around the constituency and interacting with constituents as they go (see Cain and Ritchie 1982). Arter (2018: 14) dubs this ‘casework on the road’, citing the example of an MP in a large rural constituency who, ‘organises an annual summer tour in a “surgery bus”, which stops off for about 20 minutes at village halls, pubs or local schools’. Some roadshows even operate on a ‘come-to-you’ basis, whereby individuals or organizations within a (usually rural) constituency can request that the MP deliver a surgery in their local area (e.g. Winter 2021). Other MPs conduct ‘home visits’ for those constituents unable to attend scheduled surgeries in person (Soo 2017: 77–8).

Some MPs appear then to take considerable steps to go to where their constituents are, not restricting casework to the constituency office. Indeed, that image of the roving representative also applies to the other aspects of constituency service, in outreach and information provision. Early participant observation studies of MPs’ constituency service identified those with the personal communication style (or ‘home style’ (Fenno 1978)) of the ‘local promoter’ (Searing 1985). These representatives are inclined towards mass interaction, walking around town centres to meet and greet constituents as they shop, mingling in all of the right social spaces, be they factories, schools, or market-squares (Cain, Ferejohn and Fiorina 1979; Searing 1994). Some MPs may convene or simply attend public meetings on pertinent topics, consulting with strategic local stakeholders (e.g. small businesses)

---

7Similar observations have been made of constituency service in Ireland, not least the role of festivals and funerals as key sites of interaction between representatives and constituents (Komito 1984).
The security of politicians

in the process. In doing so, those MPs are ‘gaining the ear of the constituency’ (Arter, 2018: 14), practicing what has been termed ‘constituency attentiveness’ (McAllister 2015: 338). As one MP has explained, their outreach activity is significant from a representative standpoint:

I refer to it as the currency of the job. … Whether it is a fete or a coffee morning or meeting a resident’s group, it is the only way you can really feel, or you can really keep in touch with your patch. There is a real danger in [Westminster] that you feel removed [from your constituency]. So I think it is really important to be out and about. You just understand what matters to people. (cited in Soo 2017)

Beyond these purposive modes of constituency service, MPs also highlight the benefits derived from more spontaneous, informal, and incidental interactions with their constituents. These occur as the MP simply moves around the constituency in a personal capacity. As one MP recently explained:

My constituents like to see me in the pubs, in the shops, in the streets, in the petrol station filling my car up. They like that from their local representative …. A twenty-minute walk to the shop can turn into a two hour stroll, because people try and stop you. (Anderson 2024)

Soo’s (2017) conception of MPs ‘on standby’ is apposite here. The MP is perpetually accessible—and approachable—be it via the planned appointment in the constituency office or in a brief (or possibly not so brief) conversation on the garage forecourt. There is also a potential symbolic significance to these interactions. Through those innocuous occurrences—dining at a local restaurant, grocery shopping, a trip to a village fair—representatives are able to forge important symbolic connections with their constituents (Fenno 1978). This potentially makes some MPs more relatable in that they can present themselves as one of the people, sharing the same interests and inhabiting the same spaces as those they represent (Koop, Bastedo and Bildook 2018). Being seen, in and of itself, is therefore key to the development of ‘symbolic presence’, which some MPs value and work towards in the cultivation of their specific representational style (Bildook and Koop 2024).

Viewing these incidental interactions as an important aspect of constituency service (and so of consequence from a representational standpoint) therefore requires embracing a broad-gauge conception of representation. Michael Saward’s (2010) constructivist approach to ‘the representative claim’ is a useful perspective.

---

*Soo’s (2017) ethnographic study of MPs constituency service suggests that MPs use these events to augment their visibility, broadcasting their attendance via newsletters and/or social media. These events are, therefore, part of a broader communicative endeavour by some MPs.*
to employ here. Saward presents representation as a dynamic process, highly contextualized, and extending beyond formal and public institutions. Wherever claims are ‘made’ and ‘received’—on the bus, at the pub, in the local park—representation is occurring. As Saward (2010: 161) puts it, ‘[If] representation can be seen as a widespread process of claim-making and claim-receiving, within and outside formal political structures, then representation “happens” in a variety of spaces and scales in any society’. Helpfully, Leston-Bandeira (2016: 505) has evoked Saward’s conception in the context of another component part of British deliberative democracy—parliamentary engagement—writing that:

Representation doesn’t take place only when, for example, an MP puts a question to the government about fisheries on behalf of the main industry of their constituency, but also when the same MP visits the local market.

Any audit of constituency service activity should not, therefore, overlook (or understate) the informal and seemingly trivial interactions that occur between an MP and constituent as they move about the constituency. As Fenno rightly noted, ‘connections involve continuous interaction, and all connections count’ (1978: 4). Such interaction presents as a useful opportunity for casework, outreach, and information provision. Importantly, as we will see below, it appears vulnerable to the effects of securitization.

What this review has highlighted so far, then, is that there exists a variety of opportunities where personal interaction can occur between MP and constituent. But how important is it that such interaction does indeed take place face-to-face and in-person? We have known for some time that MPs use digital tools and social media for constituency service purposes (Jackson 2008; Jackson and Lilleker 2011). But can symbolic connections be as effectively forged between constituent and representative in these online spaces? The research on constituency service activity suggests not. Soo’s (2017) ethnographic study, for instance, reports that MPs prioritize face-to-face engagement with their constituents over digital interaction, viewing it as ‘absolutely paramount’ and the ‘currency of the job’ (p. 219). That preference for in-person interaction appears driven, in large part, by the emotional character of casework especially. Attending a surgery is often the last resort for constituents, many of whom present with painful and personal issues and grievances (Searing 1994; Judge and Partos 2018). Many, it is reported, also possess a limited understanding of what is ‘requestable’—i.e. what MPs are for (Wright 2010)—and what the ‘institutional rules’ of the surgery are (Hofstetter and Stokoe 2018). Put simply, the surgery experience can be a fraught one, laden with a degree of uncertainty, anxiety, even frustration on the part of some constituents. Personal, face-to-face interaction between MPs and constituents is
framed as crucial in these circumstances. To cite one MP from an earlier study of constituency service:

[Constituents] are nervous because it’s an ordeal for them to have to come and sit and see you. And what you have got to try and do is make them feel relaxed. … You have got to try in a short space of time too, to get their confidence and get them to open up. (Searing 1985: 357)

Building on this, Warner (2021) has invoked the sociological concept of ‘co-presence’ to argue that in-person meetings are key to the development of empathic relationships between MPs and constituents. Having attended over 30 meetings between MPs and constituents, Crewe (2015: 105) makes a similar observation, arguing that personal interaction facilitates the creation of ‘a social relationship—a human bridge’ between the two. Such interaction, they assert, is often crucial to the success of a surgery encounter, not least because people who have struggled with anonymous (and potentially, from their perspective, unfriendly) bureaucracies can see that someone of importance has sat down to listen with care and respect to their problem. In summary, then, effective constituency service—not least in respect of casework—appears to be that which sees MPs and constituents in close proximity.

3. Security and the representational experience

The process of security necessitates trade-offs. ‘We get security’, as Bruce Schneier reminds us, ‘by giving something up’ (2003: 4)—be it money, time, convenience, comfort, values, freedoms, and so on. In this section, we draw attention to some of the potential costs attached to enhancing the security measures concerning constituency service, noting that, broadly speaking, these costs relate to accessibility, symbolism, and resources (see Table 1).

3.1 Accessibility costs

The most significant—and perhaps obvious—cost attached to an MP bolstering their security in the constituency concerns accessibility. This accessibility trade-off manifests in two ways: either through a reduction in opportunities for constituents to access their MPs on security grounds (e.g. dispensing with ‘public surgeries’; a reduced level of purposive socializing by MPs in the constituency) or through newly adopted security measures which complicate access pathways (e.g. mandatory pre-screening; searches). The impact of this trade-off is, therefore, potentially broad in nature; encompassing aspects of casework, outreach, and information provision and affecting the formal and informal spaces where
MPs and constituents interact. Take, for example, the Labour MP Mike Freer, who outlined, in detail, how their constituency service provision, namely, their accessibility, changed due to security concerns:

You do kind of shrug these things off [threats and attacks], but it certainly changed the way we operate. Now if people want a surgery

---

**Table 1** Potential costs of enhancing security around constituency service provision

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Security response</th>
<th>Accessibility costs</th>
<th>Symbolic costs</th>
<th>Resource costs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Constituency surgery: office</td>
<td>Pre-screening; by appointment only; exclusively online; office fortification;</td>
<td>Reduced availability; increased demands on constituent; constituents denied access;</td>
<td>Chilling effect of ‘defensive design’ on public democratic culture (Graham 2014);</td>
<td>Administrative (e.g. pre-screening processes); financial (e.g. hiring security personnel); psychological (i.e. security stressor)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>surveillance technology; security personnel; searches of person/property; personal protective equipment (PPE)</td>
<td>‘outsider’ intrusion/privacy compromised</td>
<td>ideas of openness, transparency, and inclusion undermined (Prior and Sivashankar 2023);</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constituency surgery: ‘pop-up’/ public</td>
<td>Reduced promotion; PPE; liaising/co-planning with police; security personnel; partial or complete discontinuation</td>
<td>Less public awareness; reduced opportunities for (impromptu) interactions</td>
<td>loss of ‘co-presence’ developed via face-to-face interaction (Warner 2021)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Moving around’ the constituency</td>
<td>Reduced outings in the constituency (e.g. local pub; supermarket; family activities; commute)</td>
<td>Decrease in informal interactions between MPs and constituents; fewer opportunities for representative ‘claim making’ in everyday spaces (Saward 2010)</td>
<td>Undermining of ‘symbolic connections’ forged through informal mixing (Fenno 1978); MPs perceived as aloof, disengaged or out of touch; ‘ivory tower syndrome’ (BBC 2024)</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
[appointment], we ask for proof [of identity]. If they aren't on the electoral register we want some proof that they live in the constituency. My husband doesn't like me using the tube, so he likes me to drive to and from work because it is door-to-door. I pride myself on being accessible. It is a great part of our tradition – but if I am walking down the street and someone stops me, because I am reasonably well-known, immediately now I step back and create a space. I do supermarket surgeries, like many MPs do; you stand at the supermarket door, people come over and talk to you. Now I’ve decided to wear a stab-proof vest. … I’ve got a very old mobile home at the back of the [constituency office]. That’s what I called ‘Parliament on the Pavement’. I would drive, park on a street corner, and let people come and talk to me. Now if I’m doing that kind of stuff and I’m literally on the pavement and accessible, I’ll wear the stab vest. (cited in The News Agents 2024)

In this one snippet of testimony, we are presented with not just the sheer variety of security measures adopted by an individual member, ranging from the overt (stab vest) to the subtle (spatial awareness), but, crucially, how security concerns have structured access in several settings, including the conventional surgery, the ‘pop-up’ surgery, and the everyday, casual interactions between Freer and their constituents.

Indeed, there is ample evidence from MPs on the tension(s) between preserving their security in the constituency and their status as easily accessible and highly visible representatives. Reflecting on the issue in the wake of David Amess’s killing, one government minister explained:

We try to be, as constituency MPs, recognisable, available, accessible to all. A successful constituency MP is the person who people feel they can go to in the pub or, as frustrating as that sometimes is, come up to you when you’re doing your shopping. We don’t want to be speaking to people through plate glass or have two burly security guards [attend the surgery]. (cited in Savage, Helm and Tapper 2021)

Other related data reveal a similar unease on the part of politicians around the accessibility trade-off. A Scottish Parliament review of security measures for MSPs, for example, reported that, ‘the majority of members [surveyed] were not interested in having security personnel accompany them to constituency surgeries. The most common reasons [being] the perceived impact on access to parliamentarians and on the open relationship with constituents’ (BBC 2022). Even MPs who have been victims of serious assault have baulked or displayed some unease at compromising accessibility in the pursuit of greater security. The Labour MP Stephen
Timms, who was stabbed in 2010 during a constituency surgery, explained how, ‘After what happened to me I was offered a knife-arch for my surgeries, but I refused because that just makes it more difficult for people to come and see you. It isn’t the MP I want to be’ (cited in Boffey 2016). It is, of course, worth reminding ourselves that, despite such objections, the evidence outlined above is suggestive of tightened security. Whilst they may be uncomfortable with the trade-off, many MPs are nevertheless curbing accessibility on security grounds. The challenge for those concerned with this development is to gauge the degree to which accessibility is being subordinated and determine the impact of that development on the representational experience at constituency-level.

Much of the apprehension displayed by MPs regarding accessibility touches upon how the dynamic—or atmosphere—of the constituency service experience will be negatively impacted by the adoption of security measures. Consider, again, comments from MP Freer, on their decision to retire from public life following an arson attack on their constituency office:

I’m passionate about being accessible. Our surgeries are a fundamental – a very special – part of our democracy. I don’t want to get to the stage where I have a surgery with a policeman sat in the corner, because it changes the dynamic. (cited in The News Agents 2024)

Here, the trade-off relates to the presence of outsiders, in this case security personnel, who might intrude upon the intimacy of the surgery and seemingly make it a less comfortable space for constituents and MPs to speak openly. The cost borne by the constituent in this regard is not a lack of access to the MP per se, but a lack of access to an appropriate space within which (often) personal or sensitive issues can be discussed. As noted above, meeting with an MP can be a daunting and stressful experience for constituents. Some MPs, therefore, endeavour, as best they can, to create a welcoming and relaxed atmosphere. However, whether a securitized environment, be it physical and/or procedural, is conducive to making constituents feel at ease is an open question. Some may well be reassured by the presence of security guards in the constituency office, for instance, whereas others may feel intimidated or anxious. Since the affects and effects of security are highly subjective, we should not second-guess how constituents are interpreting and experiencing it within the context of constituency service.

*The same could be asked of virtual surgery appointments. We know that some MPs, following threats to their safety, have migrated their constituency surgeries online and no longer offer in-person appointments (e.g. Butler n.d.). Particularly for constituents presenting with deeply personal or distressing problems, it is a fair question to ask whether some of the therapeutic value or personal touch of meeting with an MP in person is lost when such a meeting occurs in a digital space.
A related question concerns the impact of security measures upon the anxiety levels of MPs. They may, for example, be victims of a common security ‘paradox’, whereby the pursuit of security in one space serves to heighten an overall feeling of vulnerability (Zedner 2000: 202). As Lucia Zedner (2003: 165–6) explains, ‘the more provision for security that is made, the more people regard it as normal or necessary, and the greater their anxiety when it is not available.’ To rework their description of SUV drivers for MPs: the subjective security created by the fortified environment of the constituency office only exacerbates the sense of personal vulnerability encountered on leaving it. We know, for instance, that some MPs have stopped socializing in their constituency because of fears of attack or abuse (Madeley 2023). This appears to be particularly true of female MPs, 45% of whom have reduced their social outings because of fears for their safety (Akhtar and Morrison 2019). Security, therefore, has an impact on the accessibility of MPs both inside and outside of the surgery. Whether the latter is driven by the security measures adopted in the former is another open question. To borrow a phrase from Monteyne (2014: 88), to what extent is the security response of MPs ‘materializing the sense that they live in an age of uncertainty?’

3.2 Symbolic costs

One approach to understanding the symbolic costs of securitizing is to view the space(s) in which constituency service occurs—not least the constituency office—as a ‘text’ which is ‘read’ by users (Daniels 1993: 1026).10 Space, as Lefebvre views it, contains a ‘code and language’, operating as a nexus between ‘the physical, the mental and the social’ (Fuchs 2019: 134; see also; Gieryn 2000). What then is being signalled by the security measures that MPs are adopting? For Flusty (1997), spaces marked by heightened monitoring, by either CCTV or security guards, can be labelled as ‘jittery’. Are the constituency offices of the UK coming to resemble jittery spaces? On this, and to make our point, we offer this brief hypothetical vignette of the constituency service experience that some citizens may be required to navigate—a crude one, admittedly, but not fantastical, given the evidence above. Following a rigorous, multi-step pre-screening process of identification, authentication, and authorization, the constituent arrives at an ostensibly fortified office entrance, is buzzed through via video intercom, has their person and property searched, and is then escorted through to an office, where their MP sits at a distance, wearing a stab-proof vest and accompanied by a security guard. The medium, as the saying goes, is the message. And what is the message being broadcast in this instance?

10Critical security scholars term this ‘affective atmosphere’ (Wall 2019).
Evidence from other securitized processes and environments demonstrates the literal and symbolic implications of securitization, including the potential for certain behavioural and psychological responses on the part of both adopters and users; the nature of which could be cause for concern from a representative standpoint. Criminologists, for example, have focussed on the symbolic signals transmitted by security paraphernalia and their impact on citizens’ behaviour. The presence of CCTV, to take one example—and a seemingly ubiquitous feature of the contemporary constituency office—has been presented by some as, ‘marking places as dangerous and thereby sensitizing people to the possibility of danger’ (Atkinson 2003: 1834). A major UK Home Office report in 2005 reviewed the usage of CCTV and found that, ‘those who were aware of the cameras admitted higher levels of fear than those who were unaware of them’ (Gill and Spriggs 2005: 60). The experience of US High Schools in the post-Columbine era, subject to a marked increase in security countermeasures, including policing, surveillance technology, and emergency preparedness strategies, have also, for some observers, done more harm than good, not least by having psychological impacts on students’ perceptions of safety (Bracy 2011; Casella 2018). As one review of that development puts it, ‘Fear of school violence drives the implementation of school security measures that scholars have found actually increases fear and negatively impacts school climate’ (King and Bracy 2019: 282–3). Anthropologists and sociologists have highlighted similar negative effects in other sites, processes, and cultures that have been ‘hardened’ in response to security threats, assessing the ‘experiential meaning’ of these spaces and their political significance (see, e.g. Ochs 2011).

Scholars of security and urban design, drawn from the disciplines of architecture, human geography, and political science/international relations, have also addressed the symbolism and affects produced by the security measures populating the spaces in which people interact. The fortification and militarization of public space as a response to terror threats has been a key concern. Coaffee, O’Hare, and Hawkesworth (2009: 506–7), reflecting on the aesthetic changes of urban design wrought by counter-terrorism measures, stress how: ‘security policy is more than words and ideas. Its manifestation within the built environment can transmit powerful messages, both intentionally and unintentionally, eliciting a range of subjective emotional responses’, including, ‘fearfulness, suspicion, paranoia, exclusion, and ultimately insecurity’. David Monteyne (2014: 92), in a piece reviewing architecture and building security, notes how, ‘[k]nee-jerk responses can actually increase the perception of threat, and instil fear, rather than promote a secure feeling’ (see also Hollander and Whitfield 2005; Grosskopf 2006). In a similar vein, Graham’s 2014 study, Cities Under Siege, highlighted, ‘the anxious

In critical security studies, especially, there has been increased interest in what Ciax and Runkel (2024) term, ‘the affective potentials of security and counter-terrorism measures’ (p. 7).
state of perpetual fear and emergency [which] pertains in many cities’ (p. 12), and the chilling effect that ‘defensive’ design has on ‘urban and democratic public culture’ (p. 16). Similar observations have been made about the enhanced security at formal political sites in particular. Vale’s (2005) critique of the ‘landscape of fear’ (Longstreth 2006) which emerged in Washington DC in response to the 9/11 terror attacks, pondered how security features at the United States Capitol building, ‘may affect the sense of welcome that the institution conveys, and may result in subtle changes of attitude on the part of the visitor’ (p. 41). They conclude that same study with a telling question, for our purposes: ‘What happens as other public and private institutions [fearing attack] also choose to seek comfort in the securescape?’ (p. 40).

Indeed, similar questions have been raised about the security adopted at parliament in the UK. John Parkinson’s comparative research on legislative assemblies as public space has addressed the significance of the heightened security presence at Westminster.12 On London, as a ‘democratic space’, they note how, ‘its public spaces are policed to an extent unmatched except by Washington’ (2012: 217)—with Westminster the focus of the following summary:

The new security agenda in the first decade of the twenty-first century has fundamentally altered the relationship between citizens and assembly buildings in many countries. Where once assembly buildings symbolized openness and accessibility most are now protected by heavy perimeter security in the form of large set-backs from the road – and when the building cannot be moved away from a road, attempts are made to close the road instead – with fences and barriers that create barren zones around buildings, decreasing the likelihood that citizens will interact with them accidentally. At the same time, certain kinds of purposive citizen … are treated with suspicion not only by parliamentary officials but also by the very design of the chamber. Visitors to the public galleries are set apart in the cheap seats unable to interact, sometimes even held behind thick plate glass. (2012: 140)

This development could be viewed as a cause for concern from a representative standpoint, with security overriding democratic values of accessibility and openness. The effects of this are both practical and symbolic, limiting the space in which people can interact with their elected representatives whilst also ‘problematising the images of openness, transparency and inclusion that [parliament] may wish to communicate’ (Prior and Sivashankar 2023: 465). If parliamentary buildings

---

12Parkinson’s study does mention constituency offices as ‘public space’ but, by their own admission, does not explore those sites in any depth.
articulate political values and culture (Goodsell 1988) and citizens engage with the state partly through some engagement with ‘spaces’ (Gallagher 2022), then enhanced physical security at sites of constituency-level representation could carry similar negative connotations. Some may view security as mere practice, but, importantly, beliefs are played out through everyday practices (see Geddes and Rhodes 2018; Geddes 2020). Concluding their study, Parkinson recommends that, ‘the symbolic language of assemblies lines up with democratic values; in particular, that symbols of openness are not undermined by realities of closure and isolation’ (2012: 144). Again, an identical concern could be raised about securitizing constituency service and what this conveys about beliefs and values.

It is possible, therefore, to situate constituency service security measures within a more general assessment—or perception—of the weakening ties between representatives and citizens. Much of the concern raised about the enhanced security at parliament, for example, centre on it reinforcing a broader trend affecting many representative democracies, whereby politicians are becoming increasingly detached from those they represent. In their classic work, Ruling the Void (2013), Peter Mair identified a process of ‘mutual disengagement’ between citizens and politicians, with opportunities for meaningful interaction between the two either greatly diminished or lost entirely. The picture Mair painted has found some resonance in popular and elite discourse about party politics in many established democracies. Reflecting on this notion of democratic withdrawal or retreat, Parkinson (2013: 448) notes how, ‘the new security agenda [at assemblies] is just the latest way in which elite hostility to the masses manifests. Elites have, in some instances, managed to build isolation into the very fabric of legislative assemblies’.

Whilst elite hostility is not a term we would necessarily opt for in this instance, we venture that similar concerns can be raised about the security measures MPs are building into the ‘fabric’ of constituency service and what they symbolize about their connectedness with those they represent. Up to now, the linkage between citizen and representative at constituency-level has been held up as a positive counterbalance to the weakened connections in other spaces, including parliament’s ‘isolation’. The argument here is that MPs may well be increasingly detached from those they represent whilst at Westminster but at least they are available to them and interacting with them in the constituency. The negative effects of securitization in one setting are, therefore, potentially undone by the positive effects of

---

13The economist Bruno Frey, (2007), in their work on the security of political leaders, has identified similar, arguing that ‘the extensive security system to protect politicians isolates them from the population’. Whilst their focus is on presidential motorcades and the closure of entire streets or districts, there are parallels with security at constituency-level, in terms of reduced accessibility and the symbolism of certain countermeasures.
accessibility in the other.¹⁴ Petter’s (2023) work on the connection-building activities of Australian MPs, for example, has pushed back against the core expectations of Mair’s ‘democratic void’ thesis on that very basis; reporting that, instead of isolating themselves, ‘MPs are working to ameliorate disengagement through extensive personal effort and integration within their communities’ (p. 384). We know, of course, that a similar development has occurred in the UK case; with MPs growing more personally attentive to their constituencies. Some MPs have also couched their resistance to enhanced security at constituency-level by reference to a security-obsessed environment at Westminster. As one explains:

In Parliament, we’re surrounded by security 24/7 – leaving parliament and heading down the M1 to return to my constituents is like returning to normality for me. … Is everyone going to have to be patted down before they speak to me? We’ll be in prison. (cited in Patel 2021)

Another has noted the potential harm that constituency-level isolation, driven by security concerns, may bring to public perceptions of representative democracy:

If we start sequestering politicians away from the public, I’m worried that the Westminster bubble, the ivory tower syndrome, will only get worse and divorce politicians from the people they represent. (cited in BBC 2024)

Crucially, then, if a sense of detachment is indeed growing at constituency-level, literally and/or symbolically, as a consequence of heightened security, then the mitigating power of constituency service in the context of a general crisis of representation may be diminished, and we move closer to ‘the void’.¹⁵

Furthermore, if the securitization of constituency service is indeed reinforcing an impression of withdrawal on the part of politicians, then we are presented with another potential paradox, one common to security projects, whereby the response to a threat, in the form of certain security measures, can be counter-productive (see Schneier 2003; Valverde 2011). Rather than mitigate

¹⁴In a telling passage, Parkinson (2013) suggests that a counter to his concerns about the securitization of assemblies might be, ‘that there is nothing worrying here given earlier points about the importance of the daily work of representation, especially when representatives do see citizens, often, in district offices and constituency surgeries’ (p. 448–9).

¹⁵Importantly, the logic of our argument also holds in the context of more recent steps taken by parliament to bolster and improve their connections with citizens. As Leston-Bandeira (2012) explains, ‘the value of transparency and openness has become a key theme for parliaments’ (p. 269). The benefits of that endeavour would be undermined, however, if, politicians are becoming less accessible to those they represent at constituency-level.
a threat, they exacerbate it. Put differently, the steps politicians are taking to preserve their security in the constituency service context may make them less safe. And, by extension, their measures to protect representational connections may be weakening them. Our argument here is that the abuse directed towards politicians is widely regarded as a symptom of an age of ‘anti-politics’, which is itself indicative of a steady decline in public trust in politicians (see Stoker 2017; Clarke et al., 2018; Weinberg, 2023). A contributing factor to that trend is, for some, the growing disconnect between politicians and citizens. It follows then that if the response to the threats they face is to limit accessibility on security grounds—to retreat in some way—then, theoretically, that fuels the sense of ‘representative withdrawal’ driving the abuse itself. As Parkinson (2013: 447) has identified in the case of securing assemblies, ‘in a world of declining engagement, the instinct of those in authority to wall themselves off seems counter-productive, to say the least. Representative withdrawal from digital spaces is observable too. Female politicians, in particular, report self-censoring their views online to limit exposure to abusive backlash (CPA 2021). In the British case, some female MPs have quit social media platforms altogether, losing an important constituency communication tool in the process (Lynch, Sherlock and Bradshaw 2022). If there is a link between effective constituency service and public trust in politics and the broader system (Norton and Wood 1993; McKay 2020), the withdrawal of MPs from interactive representative space is not a welcome development.

The paradoxical relationship between security and trust, generally, is also worthy of note here. As Lucia Zedner cautions, security is both an indicator and a driver of distrust. By its very nature, a security system, ‘both signals and fosters a lack of trust in fellow citizens and impoverishes social relations’ (Zedner 2003: 171). As Duff, Garland, and Marshall (2000: 22) explain, ‘if an employer introduces a policy of searching employees as they leave work, we should question not just the cost-effectiveness of this measure, but the attitude it displays towards her employees’. For employer, read MP; for employee, read constituent. The security systems embraced by MPs are founded upon the presumption that some constituents are untrustworthy, and constituents may in turn be conditioned to think of themselves as suspect. The (potential) cost of such a situation, as Zedner explains, is perverse, as, ‘the climate of generalized suspicion it purveys both degrades civil society and, insofar as it diminishes trust, is liable to foster yet further demands for more security’ (2003: 172–3). It is difficult, therefore, to see how a more securitized relationship between MPs and those they represent does much to counteract the broader trend of distrust. In any case, this relationship between heightened security at constituency-level and the issue of public trust in politicians remains to be properly investigated.
3.3 Resource costs

A final trade-off worth highlighting concerns the burden(s) wrought by security in terms of key resources, such as time, cost, and effort, on the part of both MPs and constituents. Security systems, by definition, increase the effort not just of those with malign intent but all users (Schneier 2003). Does this disproportionately disincentivise some constituents from interacting with their representative or place certain constituents at a disadvantage? Navigating the architecture of security is a challenge that some constituents may find onerous and potentially off-putting. Think here, perhaps, of the labour costs or personal sensitivities of a pre-screening process of identification and authentication before a constituent can meet with their MP. Such processes might have particularly negative connotations for constituents from immigrant backgrounds, for example, not least because the UK government has used background checks in the past as part of its ‘hostile environment’ policy (Essex et al., 2022). We should not overlook the fact that some individuals will experience the burdens of security in subjectively different ways for a variety of reasons (e.g. cultural, educational, physical)—and how security may be skewing the equal provision of representation as a result.

The burden of security also falls on those who employ it. Implementing, administering, and reviewing a security system is an ongoing process (one described as ‘potentially maddening’ (Schneier 2003: 48)). Put differently, it is a perpetual drain on MPs and their staff. The extent to which security is encroaching on other aspects of constituency service and leeching precious resources warrants scrutiny. Ethnographic research into constituency service paints a picture of hyperactive and pressurized representatives (Korris 2011; Crewe 2015; Soo 2017). Security may, in some cases, be presenting as an additional (and considerable) burden in what is already a vocation and working environment characterized by a notable degree of stress (Flinders et al., 2020).

Importantly, too, that security burden—be it practical, financial, electoral, psychological—will not be evenly shared. The cost(s) of security will inevitably be higher for some politicians than others, reflecting personal circumstances but also the subjective risk calculus of individuals. The MP in a large rural constituency, for example, who oversees multiple advice centres and hosts numerous ‘pop-up’ surgeries, might shoulder a heavier security load than an MP in a smaller constituency who, by dint of geography, need only secure one office. We also know that women MPs are subject to greater levels of abuse and harassment and that gender informs how certain types of abuse are perceived (Pedersen, Petersen and Thau 2024). As the literature on Violence Against Women in Politics demonstrates, gender ‘appears’ in the impact of political violence, in addition to its motives and form (Baradall, Bjarnegård and Piscopo 2020: 924; see also; Krook & Sanin 2019; Krook 2020). If women MPs are securitizing to a greater degree than their male
peers—which anecdotal evidence suggests is the case—then this has potential implications from a representative standpoint, as a disproportionate amount of their energy, time, and/or expenditure is being directed towards security matters, and away from some of the aspects of the role, some of which may well boost their chances of re-election.\textsuperscript{16} Collignon and Rüdig's (2021) research into electoral abuse in the UK has shown how women candidates who experience intimidation tend to moderate their campaigning strategies and see their chances of electoral success undermined as a result. Are the gendered penalties of abuse continuing once in office, as security presents as a disproportionate burden to women MPs? Recent research has also revealed clear gender differences in the occupational tasks undertaken by MPs; with women MPs reporting a higher level of ‘emotional labour’ in the role (Weinberg 2021b). The costs of security may, therefore, be making political life all the harder for women.

4. Conclusion

In problematizing the potential costs associated with adding layers of security to constituency service, this article has raised more questions than it has provided answers. We conclude by making the case that those questions are worth addressing and suggest how and where they might be addressed.

Understanding the costs—or trade-offs—of any security project is ‘essential’ (Schneier 2003). The measures concerning constituency service in the UK are no exception. By their very adoption, they are impacting upon a crucial aspect of representative democracy in the UK and structuring the broader deliberative enterprise of ‘claim-making’ and ‘claim-receiving’ (Saward 2010). There are clear signs too that the tightening of security around constituency service is not a passing trend and may even grow in pervasiveness and significance. In the course of writing this article, the British government unveiled a £31m package to boost the constituency-level security of MPs (BBC 2024), whilst a range of civil society organizations, not least the Jo Cox Foundation, have called for improvements in politicians’ security at all levels (JCCC 2024). The Speaker of the Commons has also reiterated the need for, ‘Parliamentarians to be active participants in their own security and transform the security culture’ in which they fulfil their duties (Hoyle 2023). Whilst some onlookers may have hoped that the security of MPs was a problem confined to the historically polarized era of Brexit, the more recent spate of abuse provoked by the conflict in Israel-Palestine, demonstrates that MPs’

\textsuperscript{16}See Håkansson (2023) for a comparative theoretical framework concerning the ‘gendered representational costs’ of violence against politicians. Among other factors, that study assesses the disproportionate amount of time and energy women politicians devote to responding to threats of political violence.
security is indelibly connected to broader (and unpredictable) geopolitical developments and conflagrations. In a world marked by political crisis and instability—and public disaffection with political elites—the challenge of personal security is likely to remain a perpetual burden of a life in office.

On the second, more practical consideration, a future research agenda would, we argue, benefit from a pluralistic approach to inquiry, drawing on a range of methodological techniques and availing of insights from a variety of disciplines—many of which we’ve delved into above. As emphasized, constituency service is a multi-site and dynamic process; shaped not just by the circumstances and preferences of individual MPs but also those of their constituents. Likewise, ‘security processes are inherently dynamic’ (Valverde 2011: 4). We are presented therefore with a research area where two highly (inter-)subjective processes—representation and security—are working upon each other. Ascertaining how security manifests in a constituency service setting, and assessing its representational effects, will require an equally dynamic analytical toolkit and mindset; from the ‘soaking and poking’ (Fenno 1978: 249) of ethnography through to ‘at-a-distance’ experimental research.

We would, however, issue an especial appeal for greater attention to be paid to the affective and symbolic qualities of the ‘spaces’ where constituency service occurs. That would complement growing interest in the ‘physical fabric’ of other sites of representative democracy, namely parliaments (Parkinson 2012; Prior and Sivashankar 2023). The dearth of research on the physical form and symbolism of constituency offices, for example, is glaring given their feted status in the landscape of British representative democracy. Constituent perceptions (and interpretations) of the space(s) where representation occurs, beyond legislatures, is also little understood. Importantly, if security measures must remain a feature of political life and contemporary representation, then that more ‘design-oriented’ perspective (see Flinders, Meakin and McCarthy 2019; Austin and Leander 2021) may ultimately assist politicians and political authorities in minimizing the attendant trade-offs; enabling them to arrive at a position where they are safe but not sorry. To borrow from Vale (2005: 42), the goal from a representative standpoint is ‘to strike a balance between the risks of insecurity and the risks of a diminished public life’.

The relationship between the threats politicians receive online, and their subsequent adoption of certain offline security measures is also an aspect ripe for scrutiny. The vast majority of violence experienced by MPs occurs virtually, either via email or social media. The impact of such behaviour on politicians’ personal and occupational well-being is relatively well-understood (see Weinberg 2022), and, as highlighted above, there is some evidence of MPs responding to a toxic online environment by abandoning social media—as a means of communicating with their constituents—altogether. A great deal less is known, however, about the
role online political violence plays in shaping a ‘real-world’ security response, of
the kind highlighted in this article. Irregardless of the validity of the threats they
receive online, or indeed the existence of any corresponding offline threat, poli-
ticians may be fortifying the spaces in which they perform representation, phys-
ically and/or procedurally. If online threats are indeed conditioning real-world
representative space, shaping the interactive opportunities between politicians
and citizens in turn, then the democratic implications of virtual political violence
may be more significant than hitherto framed and understood.

Finally, whilst our focus in this article has been on the British case, and
exclusively at national-level, the questions we have raised apply to all instances
where a form of securitized interaction occurs between elected representative
and citizen. A future research agenda on the security of politicians should
therefore aspire to be multi-level in nature and cross-national in scope. As
flagged at the outset of this article, in the UK case, there is ample evidence to
suggest that politicians at the regional and local level are also experimenting
with a range of security measures. Elsewhere, politicians in other systems with
a tradition of constituency service, such as Ireland, Australia, Canada, and New
Zealand, are grappling with the identical challenge of balancing their security
with their representative duties (see Galloway 2023; McQuinn 2023; Pearse
2023; Thompson 2024). Those interested in these Anglosphere cases may also
draw insights and heed lessons from several countries situated primarily in
the Global South, in which personal security has long been a key concern for
elected representatives operating in a context of frequent and extreme politi-
cal violence (see, e.g. Blume 2017; Sanin 2020). The insecure and securitizing
politician is not, therefore, a phenomenon unique to the British case and we
should be alive to the representative implications of that development wherever
it manifests.

Acknowledgements

A very early version of this article was presented at a departmental research sem-
inar at the School of History, Anthropology, Politics & Philosophy at Queen’s
University Belfast. The authors would like to thank the participants for their
feedback. They are also grateful to: Marc Geddes and Peter Allen for their feed-
back on a later draft of the article; Philip Grindell for sharing his professional
insights on the topic; and to the anonymous reviewers for their constructive
comments.

Conflict of interest statement. The authors have no conflict of interest to report.

Funding

This work is not associated with any direct research funding.
References


The security of politicians


The security of politicians


