

Politicians are more likely to forward constituent inquiries to the appropriate level if they are of the same party as the recipient

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By Democratic Audit UK

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*The UK has enjoyed a significant degree of multi-tiered governance since the introduction of the Scottish Parliament in 1999, with recent events suggesting this dynamic will intensify further. Here, **Audrey André**, **Jonathan Bradbury**, and **Sam Depauw** look at constituent correspondence patterns, and find that politicians are much more likely to forward correspondence to the appropriate level if they are of the same party as the recipient, creating blurred lines of accountability and increasing confusion for the constituent.*



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The *Partirep* survey of political representation across Europe has looked into how political representatives negotiate devolved and federal systems in serving their voters. Audrey André, Jonathan Bradbury and Sam Depauw write that constituents are often confused as to who is responsible for what, and when a representative receives an inquiry on an issue relating to another level of government how they respond varies hugely. This is as true for the UK as for other European states.

The challenge of constituency service in devolved or federal systems

Holding constituency surgeries and dealing with constituents' problems has been a key part of the welfare officer function of MPs for more than half a century, to a significant extent arising from the growth of welfare states. Increasingly though, services are divided or spread across national and regional levels of government in devolved

or federal political systems. It leads to confusion among constituents as to which MP to go to over any given issue. Nevertheless, constituents still go in their thousands each week, particularly in the UK, and whether MPs decide to deal with the inquiry themselves or forward misdirected inquiries to MPs at the appropriate level is a key issue.

National and Regional MPs from the Same Party

Our research suggests that it matters a great deal whether the regional and national MPs representing the same area are from the same party or not. If they are then there is a much higher chance of co-operation. This is especially so when there are several MPs from the same party at the other level, possibly both constituency and regional list members.

Six in ten representatives on average across Europe generally pass on misdirected inquiries to their party counterpart at the other level of government. In the UK party loyalties are actually among the strongest in Europe. In Scotland and Wales our survey results suggest that 73.3% of national MPs forward constituent inquiries to their counterpart at the regional level, and 74.6% of regional MPs to national MPs if they are from the same party.

National and Regional MPs from Different Parties

In stark contrast MPs rarely co-operate over misdirected inquiries with MPs from other parties. Less than one in eight MPs will forward inquiries to an MP from another party at another level of government, a reflection of party competition felt most intensely in areas where the parties are close in popularity.

When they do co-operate it is generally a result of the MP concerned being overwhelmed by inquiries and glad of a reason for offloading ones they can legitimately say they don't need to deal with. It can also be the result of career experience and aspirations, where MPs have served at the other level of government or wish to do so in the future.

In federal systems where there are stronger arrangements over sharing responsibilities across levels of government then the constitutional impulse to forward inquiries to the appropriate elected MP can be stronger. There can also be strong incentives to forward inquiries to MPs at the other level who are from large parties, ideologically close parties or parties who are in government, all of which can enhance either party relationships and/or the chances of the inquiry receiving a positive result.

Even so, in Austria, Belgium, Germany, Spain, and Switzerland on average only 15 to 20 per cent of national and regional legislators report forwarding misdirected inquiries to another party. In the UK all of these factors have an even weaker influence. In Scotland and Wales just 6.7% of national MPs forward misdirected inquiries to MSPs or AMs; and just 7.0% of MSPs and AMs forward misdirected inquiries to MPs from another party. Only in Italy is co-operation across parties as rare.

Successful Adaptation?

If we expect successful adaptation to involve a strong relationship between formal constitutional lines of responsibility and MP behaviour then our results suggest a mixed outcome. Successful adaptation is best seen in a reasonably effective adaptation where MPs from the same party at different levels to a large extent have come to respect each other's jurisdictions.

Even so typically 30-40% of MPs from the same party still do not co-operate in this way, and MP co-operation when MPs are not from the same party is much lower. Non co-operation can raise concerns over the quality of their service: about the result that an MP might get for a constituent in dealing with authorities not at their own level of government; and the blurred lines of accountability that result. This is an issue particularly for Scotland and Wales in the UK since devolution.

The survey results help us to paint a general picture of this street level representation for constituents under

devolution but we still need to know more about how MPs organise themselves across levels of government to provide constituency services; and whether patterns of responding or forwarding are related to types of inquiry. We also need to know more about the success rates of MPs and the satisfaction rates of constituents they have served to see more precisely whether it really matters, and if so how much and over what types of inquiries it matters, who deals with their inquiries.

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Note: the above findings are drawn from A.André, J.Bradbury and S.Depauw, 'Explaining cooperation over casework between members of National and Regional Parliaments' Parliamentary Affairs, 68 (4), 2015, 665-689. This post represents the views of the authors and not those of Democratic Audit UK or the LSE. Please read our comments policy before posting.

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