Legislatures and Citizens

Communication Between Representatives and Their Constituents

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December 1997

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements
Representative Democracy
Why is This Important to Democracy?
Defining Constituents
Looking Ahead
Summary Guide to Legislator/Constituent Communication
Methods of Communication
Newsletters
Media Releases
Public Meetings
Many-To-Many Communication
Types of Constituent Contacts
Constituent Service-Problem Solving
Community Projects
Policy Issues Affecting the Constituency
Variables That Affect Constituent Interaction
Type of Legislature
Electoral Systems
Political Parties
Professionalism
Resources
Political Culture
Strategies
Conclusion
Bibliography

Acknowledgements

This paper is funded in part by a subcontract to the National Conference of State Legislatures from a contract by the United States Agency for International Development to the State University of New York Office of International Programs. It was prepared under the direction of Pat Isman of the United States Agency for International Development and John Johnson of the State University of New York Office of International Programs. They both contributed thoughtful and insightful comments that improved the paper.
Anders Johnsson of the International Parliamentary Union and Diana Reynolds of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association contributed useful bibliographic citations and leads to elusive information on the nuts and bolts of legislatures around the world. Susan Benda of the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs, Kathy Brennan-Wiggins and Bruce Feustel of the National Conference of State Legislatures, Sam Fitch of the University of Colorado, Malcolm Jewell of Connecticut, Phillip Laundy of Canada, Gary Moncrief of Boise State University, and John Turcotte of the Florida Legislature read a draft of the paper and provided useful ideas and suggestions.

Representative Democracy

Long before legislatures began to assert their role as policy makers, they served as representative institutions: they provided a link between citizens and their legislatures. In more recent times in some parts of the world, under highly centralized or one-party regimes, virtually the only role that legislators could play was to articulate the views of their constituents and serve as liaison between government and citizens. This linkage between citizens and legislatures helps to legitimize government actions, even under parliamentary systems that may serve only as rubber stamps for executive decisions.

Scholars identify three core functions of legislatures: linking citizens to government, legitimizing government actions and making decisions (Copeland and Patterson 1994). A legislative leader in Colorado explains how closely these three functions are tied together:

My constituents' access to state government is often through me. Certainly being a public policy maker is a big part of that. But my role is also as an educator, to help my constituents feel part of the democratic process (NCSL 1996).

This paper deals with all three functions. The linkage function of the interaction between legislatures and the public is obvious and needs no elaboration here. Attention to the concerns of constituents and opportunities for citizens to participate in the legislative process help to legitimize government action and enhance public support for representative democracy. The very notion of representative democracy assumes that public participation in the decision-making process improves the quality of decision-making.

To both legislators and citizens in well-established democracies, the importance of these functions may seem obvious. But elsewhere in the world, especially where democratic practices may just be emerging, parliamentarians and constituents do not always understand them as well. Various barriers may exist to effective communication between legislators and constituents such as:

- Electoral and party systems that provide little reward for constituent communication or legislative outreach to citizens.
- Lack of resources for parliamentarians to communicate with constituents.
- A history of political repression that discourages the expression of citizens' viewpoints.
- Inadequate media reporting that impedes communication to the public about the legislature.
• High rates of illiteracy that inhibit written communication between legislators and citizens.

• Poor educational systems that do not adequately ground citizens in how they can affect decisions by their government.

Building stronger links between legislatures and citizens may be particularly important in transitional democracies in which civil society is not well established. Effective communication between legislators and constituents and between the institution and the general public can help to build democratic traditions. In these societies, legislators may not yet play a significant role in policy-making due to traditions of strong executive authority or tight party control, but they can still contribute to democracy by voicing the concerns of constituents and assisting them in dealing with the government bureaucracy. Over time, placing emphasis on this linkage function educates both citizens and legislators about their role in a representative democracy. It may contribute to the legitimacy of democratic government and, eventually, lead to a more significant policy role for elected representatives.

This paper is one of two companion papers dealing with the relationship between legislatures and citizens. While this one deals at the individual level with the relationship between parliamentarians and the citizens in their districts, the companion paper, "Legislatures and Citizens: Public Participation and Confidence in the Legislature" focuses on the legislature as an institution. While the distinctions between the two papers are useful for organizing purposes, it is not always possible to separate the activities of the members of the legislature from the institution, so we will have occasion to cross-reference the two.

Throughout this paper we use the terms "legislature" and "parliament" interchangeably. Similarly, we refer to "legislators," "parliamentarians," "members of parliament" and "deputies" without any meaning other than to reflect the variety of names by which elected representatives of the people are known throughout the world.

**Why Is This Important To Democracy?**

At a workshop for legislators from Gauteng province in South Africa, a former member of the U.S. Congress explained the importance of communication to both legislators and constituents in these terms:

Legislators take in information which keeps them informed about the constituency and can be taken back to the legislature to educate other legislators about the province, resulting in more informed policy decision-making. Legislators facilitate the flow of information and services out back to the constituency, making government more real and accessible, improving delivery and empowering constituents to participate in developing their communities (NDI 1996a).

Another reason to emphasize interaction between citizens and legislators is that people expect it, often even in relatively closed societies with centralized governments.

Serving communities of constituents as well as tending to their personal requests in matters within the competence of government are...among the major expectations the average Turkish voter holds regarding the job of a deputy (Turan 1994, 126).

Still another reason is that legislators have the power to do good on behalf of their citizens. A handbook for members of the Malawi National Assembly advises:
Being an MP gives you a great deal of stature and respect. You have the right to question civil servants and government officials about their activities in your constituency. You have access to information and resources that most citizens do not. You can negotiate with government and donors on behalf of the people you represent. You can act as a bridge between your constituents and the complex and sometimes confusing government. Using your power for the benefit of your constituents will bring you their support and will ensure that things are accomplished in your constituency (NDI 1996b, 2).

The last sentence of that homily brings up a final reason: the self-interest of legislators who want reelection. Incumbent legislators who respond effectively to constituent concerns may have electoral advantages in the next political campaign.

Defining Constituents

When we talk about relations between legislators and their constituents, what does the term "constituent" mean? The most common meaning is the citizens who reside in a legislator's district. Of course, in different political systems, the meaning of district can vary widely from relatively small single member districts to very large multimember districts in which parliamentarians run at-large in entire countries. Differences in electoral systems can significantly affect relations between legislators and constituents. This topic will be addressed in more detail in a later section.

It is important to recognize, however, that to a legislator the term constituent includes many others besides ordinary citizens. Some of these constituents may be more important than others. Organized interests in a member's district are constituents who may command particular attention and request more services from the parliamentarian. Such organized interests include large businesses or other employers, labor unions or non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Governmental entities such as hospitals, schools, universities or local governments located in a legislator's district may similarly require special support and attention. Most people normally think of organized interests as "lobbyists" who attempt to influence the entire legislative policy process. But to a legislator, strong, organized interests in their own district are especially important constituents.

Looking Ahead

The focus of this paper is on post-election interaction between citizens and their elected representatives. While the paper discusses reelection motivation and its effect on communication between parliamentarians and constituents, it does not cover elections and campaigning.

The paper is organized into five sections. At the outset a summary guide reports the key findings of the paper in tabular form. The next sections report on various methods of communication between legislators and constituents before discussing the content, or purposes, of that interaction. Concluding sections analyze the variables that affect the amount of legislator/constituent communication from one country to another and suggest strategies for strengthening the relationship.

Summary Guide to Legislator/Constituent Communication

The following table summarizes each of the different types of communications between legislators and constituents discussed in this paper. It provides a quick, practical guide for aid organizations that seek to strengthen legislatures to help determine whether and how to invest in...
improving the link between people and parliamentarians in a given country. The "Factors that Impede" column lists major conditions that hinder the development of effective communication between legislators and citizens and that must be overcome to improve the link. The "Ways to Promote" column suggests types of programs that would encourage development of improved legislator/constituent communication.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Communication</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Factors that Impede</th>
<th>Ways to Promote</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>One-to-one</td>
<td>Telephone, letters, face-to-face communication with individual constituents regarding policy issues or constituent problems</td>
<td>- Poor telephone system</td>
<td>- Training and education of legislators</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Large multimember districts</td>
<td>- Civic education programs</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- History of repressive government</td>
<td>- Offices or conference areas in the capitol or district</td>
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<tr>
<td>Newsletters</td>
<td>Periodic reports to large numbers of constituents on policy issues; often include surveys of constituent opinion and advertise constituent service</td>
<td>- Large multimember districts</td>
<td>- Training and manuals for legislators</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- High illiteracy rates</td>
<td>- Computers/photocopiers</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Poor postal communication systems</td>
<td>- Staff to individual members</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- No postage allowance</td>
<td>- Technical assistance</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Lack of staff or equipment</td>
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<tr>
<td>Media Releases</td>
<td>Press releases on issues or events relating to the legislative district</td>
<td>- Government owned or controlled media</td>
<td>- Training and manuals for legislators</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>- Lack of staff or equipment</td>
<td>- Computers/photocopiers</td>
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<td>- Staff to individual members</td>
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<td>- Technical assistance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Meetings/Office Hours</td>
<td>Meetings with constituents in the district to discuss issues or community problems</td>
<td>• Large multimember districts</td>
<td>• Training and education of legislators</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Casework</td>
<td>Assistance to constituents in dealing with government agencies</td>
<td>• History of repressive government</td>
<td>• Civic education programs</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Large multimember districts</td>
<td>• History of repressive government</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Political parties that do not encourage constituent service</td>
<td>• Training, manuals and directories of government and community agencies for legislators</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Lack of staff</td>
<td>• Civic education programs</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Poor communication systems</td>
<td>• Staff to individual members</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Projects</td>
<td>Assistance in obtaining community development projects for a legislative district through government funding or facilitating private investment</td>
<td>• Large multimember districts</td>
<td>• Training, manuals and directories of government and community agencies for legislators</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>• Parliamentary system of government</td>
<td>• Political culture of patronage or corruption</td>
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**Methods of Communication**

Legislators use many methods to communicate with constituents. One-to-one communications include face-to-face meetings, telephone, e-mail and letter. Constituents often initiate these one-to-one communications and legislators respond. It is an article of faith in U.S. congressional offices that all letters from constituents receive a response from their representative. Few members of Congress ever refuse to meet with constituents who visit the capitol. Almost all phone calls from constituents are returned, although sometimes by a staff person rather than the member.

Many members of Congress initiate their own one-to-one communications by sending out congratulatory letters to constituents who receive a significant scholarship, award or other
noteworthy accomplishment. One Georgia state legislator makes it a practice to call 20 of his constituents every day during that state's 40-day legislative session to ask citizens how they feel about issues currently before the legislature (NCSL 1996). Parliamentarians in Commonwealth countries often hold "surgeries" where they make themselves available to talk about citizens' concerns. Surgeries may be nothing more than publicly announced office hours in the district or they may take the form of personal appearances in public places, such as pubs or public parks. Surgeries are announced in advance through advertisements, press releases and other public notices.

Personal communications may be the most valuable and effective interaction between legislator and constituent, but they do not reach many people in a large legislative district. Parliamentarians usually initiate one-to-many communications, on the other hand, because they are efficient ways to reach large numbers of people. Such broadcast communications include newsletters, press releases and public meetings.

**Newsletters**

Legislators in countries with highly literate populations and good postal communication systems often communicate through newsletters. Most members of the U.S. Congress and many state legislators send out newsletters to selected people (usually their most active supporters) in their districts at least once a month during legislative sessions. The speaker of the Michigan House of Representatives summarizes the benefits of such regular written communication:

I started writing a weekly report [to my constituents] the first week I arrived in the legislature. It's been a tool I've used to build not only communication but also a level of trust. When I decide to vote my conscience over my constituency, my [key supporters] may not agree with me but they have respect and trust in how I arrive at my decisions (NCSL 1996).

These newsletters (known as "householder letters" in Canada) are typically two to four pages in length and report on issues before the legislature. They often include a questionnaire that constituents can return to express their viewpoints to their representatives. They may also advertise or promote legislators' willingness to help solve constituents' problems with government agencies. Many legislators send these newsletters to media in their districts, and newspapers often publish them as submitted.

The viability of newsletters as an effective means of communication to constituents depends not only on the ability of the population to read and the quality of a country's communication system but also on the resources available. The U.S. Congress provides its members with a "franking" privilege that allows them to make virtually unlimited mass mailings of newsletters to their constituents. Many U.S. state legislatures provide their members an office or postage allowance that at least partially defrays the cost of sending newsletters. In legislatures that do not provide funds for this purpose, political parties or a legislator's campaign fund often pay for newsletter mailings.

In countries where legislators have fewer resources, members of the same political party or regional delegation may pool resources to send out newsletters or post them in community gathering places.

**Media Releases**

A handbook on constituent relations for members of the Malawi parliament advises:
Press releases can be a cheap and effective way of having your activities covered by the media. You should issue a press release whenever you accomplish a major goal, initiate a large project or do something interesting or unusual in your constituency. Do not issue a press release every time you hold a public meeting—save press releases for important events (NDI 1996b, 7).

Many parliamentarians around the world who recognize that mass media are a cost effective way to get their message to their constituents follow this advice. Many newspapers and radio and television stations are looking for material and will often publish or broadcast press releases as written. Many U.S. legislators go beyond press releases to produce radio and television tapes or feeds to broadcast media outlets in their district. The companion paper to this one on public participation in the legislative process deals in more detail with the subject of media relations. (Kurtz 1997)

**Public Meetings**

Legislators in different parts of the world commonly hold public meetings in their districts to share information about their work and to obtain the views of citizens on community issues and problems. These sessions, often called town meetings in the United States, may be general in nature or designed to address a specific problem or piece of legislation. Legislators announce these meetings well in advance through mailings, public notices and advertisements. The "Constituent Service Manual for Romanian Parliamentarians" provides four pages of detailed advice on how to plan, promote and conduct public meetings of citizens to discuss legislative affairs (NDI 1996c, 15-18).

Legislators also often communicate with constituents by participating in other organizations' meetings. Many parliamentarians regularly attend meetings of civic groups or NGOs in their constituencies. They may attend simply to "see and be seen," or they may request opportunities to speak before such groups. Most civic organizations like to hear from their elected representatives and willingly make spots available on their programs. Meetings of other governmental entities may also provide opportunities for communication. For example, Botswana parliamentarians commonly attend the traditional tribal Kgotla, a regular gathering of village elders for considering community issues, to consult constituents on proposed legislation before the parliament.

All of the above one-to-one communications assume that legislators have something to communicate—i.e., they have stories to tell about things that their legislature has accomplished. Legislators who are not prepared to report on their work may be embarrassed in meeting with inquiring constituents. Legislative staff, political parties and legislative support organizations can provide valuable assistance by preparing summaries of accomplishments that legislators can report to their constituents.

**Many-To-Many Communication**

Finally, to conclude this discussion of methods of communication, we should note that special interests may use a third general method of interaction: many-to-many communications. Organized lobbying campaigns encourage large numbers of constituents to send post cards or letters to their own members of the legislature as well as other influential legislators on that issue. Form letters generated by such "grass roots" lobbying efforts are often the only exceptions to the rule that all mail receives a response from a member of Congress.
Types of Constituent Contacts

In addition to the different methods that legislators use to communicate with their constituents, the purposes of that communication may vary. Key types of legislator/citizen contacts include constituent problem solving, community development projects and policy issues affecting the constituency.

Constituent Service—Problem Solving

The best known and most time consuming type of contact between legislators and citizens is constituent problem solving, commonly called casework in the English-speaking world. In performing such services, legislators function as ombudsmen between citizens and government agencies. Typical cases might include:

- Mediating a housing dispute.
- Finding out why a government pension payment has not been received.
- Assisting a small business in obtaining a government loan.
- Facilitating trash collection.
- Recommending constituents for a job or a scholarship.

The types of problems with which citizens need help in dealing with government bureaucracies vary in different parts of the world. In Africa constituent service often revolves around jobs and money. Rural constituents who come to the capital seeking jobs want their member of parliament to help. If they can't find a job, they may ask their legislator for money to help them get back home. In the process of democratization and privatization in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, deputies have had to deal with citizens who expect government to provide benefits and services that have now been privatized. The elimination or significant reduction of publicly funded pensions has been a particular problem in the economic conversion process in these countries. Whatever the problem, these cases are all part of a theme of citizens looking to their elected representatives as a last resort to help them solve problems.

Legislators' personal attitudes and orientation toward constituent service vary greatly, as reflected in the following opposing viewpoints from two American state legislators:

Just cutting through the bureaucratic red tape—if you do that you are doing 90 percent of what you were elected to do.
I don't do [casework]; I will not ask for favors or apply political pressure to help constituents (Jewell 1982).

Most U.S. legislators probably fall somewhere in the middle of these extreme statements. Few would probably agree that cutting red tape is "90 percent of what you were elected to do," but even fewer refuse to do it. They probably rank constituent service second only to policy-making in importance in their work. A survey of veteran (15 years or more) U.S. state legislators found that the great majority of them felt that the demand for constituent service and the amount of time that their offices spend on casework had increased significantly during their tenure in office (Moncrief, Thompson and Kurtz 1996, 63).

Attitudes toward constituent service vary greatly from country to country. In the United Kingdom, for example, more than two-thirds of British MPs identified "constituent work" as
their most important activity (Jogerst 1993, 122-27). At the opposite extreme, only 3 percent of parliamentarians in the Netherlands mentioned mediation with government agencies on behalf of citizens as an important role (Gladdish 1985, 141). The reasons for these variations include constitutional rules of the game, party systems, political culture and resources available to the members and will be discussed in more detail in a later section.

Legislators commonly handle casework problems by referring them to the appropriate agencies and following up at a later date to make sure that some action has occurred. Following is a dialog between a freshman member of the Georgia Legislature and a veteran Colorado legislator on how best to handle constituent problems:

A mistake I made early on was trying to get in the middle of issues between constituents and a particular agency when I really wasn't adding anything to the process. I learned that a good part of my job is telling people where they can get help and handing off problems to the appropriate agency.

...That's tough to do....It means giving up control and all the glory that goes with solving someone's problem. I had a hard time doing that at first until I found myself solving no one's problem because I was so bogged down [in the details of individual problems] (NCSL 1996).

Members of the British Parliament frequently write letters to ministers on behalf of constituents to obtain answers to problems. Often, receiving some response or explanation from the ministry satisfies constituents, even if it is not the result that they want. (Norton and Wood 1993, 51-52)

In many Westminster-style parliaments members also use question time to raise constituent concerns with a minister on the floor of parliament.

In some nations where legislatures have been historically weak, legislators may not receive any better treatment by ministers than ordinary citizens. Opposition party members in countries dominated by one party may have particular problems in dealing with government ministries. Or majority party members in such systems may feel constrained about filing complaints for fear of embarrassing the government. These problems are difficult to overcome until the legislature begins to assert a more active role in government and politics.

Detailed suggestions on how to manage casework can be found in manuals on constituent services for the Romanian parliament (NDI 1996c, 29-35), the Gauteng (South Africa) provincial legislature (NDI 1996a) and the Florida House of Representatives (1995). Among the suggestions in these manuals are important recommendations on when to say "no" to constituent requests such as when the matter is in the private rather than the public sector (although one study found a case where a British MP helped a constituent get his toaster fixed-Cain, Ferejohn and Fiorina 1987, 57). In most countries, casework on behalf of constituents is confined to executive branch matters. Intervention in judicial matters is generally regarded as inappropriate in virtually all countries.

Community Projects

An analog to solving constituents' individual concerns is developing community projects. The constituency handbook for the Malawi Parliament says,

Initiating, facilitating and encouraging community development projects in your constituency is one of the best ways to bring benefits to your constituents and to increase your popularity (NDI 1996b, 2).

The handbook goes on to suggest ways in which MPs can assist groups or organizations with self-help projects, identify private sources for credit and loans and facilitate government grants.
Other examples of work on community projects might include helping citizens concerned about air pollution caused by a factory, obtaining new roads and bridges, mediating a strike or aiding workers displaced by a plant shutdown.

In some instances legislators support community projects in their official capacities by obtaining government funding for public works projects in the district. In U.S. legislative practice appropriations for specific local projects are referred to variously as "pork" (as in "bringing home the bacon"), members' items or special projects. In other cases, though, parliamentarians solve community problems in unofficial ways by using their "good offices"-obtaining information, applying personal powers of persuasion or connecting people to nongovernmental resources such as political parties, NGOs, private foundations or international aid organizations.

The extent to which legislators engage in developing community projects varies greatly in different countries. While U.S. congressmen regard pork barrel functions as very important, British MPs do not engage in this activity extensively (Cain, Ferejohn and Fiorina 1987, 39). This difference in attitude and activity may reflect U.S. legislators' greater power over policy decisions in a separation of powers system compared to a parliamentary system.

The extent to which legislators engage in funding local projects raises difficult questions about democracy. In an effective democracy there must be some sense that the greater good of all the people outweighs the needs of particular communities, sectors or groups of society. In the United States, despite occasional media exposés or executive complaints, there appears to be a reasonable balance between allowing the pork barrel projects that entice members to vote for the budget and recognizing programmatic national interests. In countries dominated by traditions of patronage and clientelism (much of Latin America, for example), on the other hand, the desire by legislators to promote their own electoral self-interest through particularistic local projects (roads, schools, hospitals, sanitation systems) may overwhelm the need for them to be accountable for more programmatic, national social reforms. In the case of Brazil, the desire on the part of members of Congress to fund local projects has led to large reductions in the national defense budget (Hunter 1997).

Government funding of community projects may also provide opportunities for corruption. Such practices as bribes, kickbacks and nepotism may appear when government money funds community projects. Effective administrative practices may need to be put in place to overcome such problems. Open communication and extensive community discussion of proposed projects can also discourage corrupt practices.

**Policy Issues Affecting the Constituency**

The last type of constituent contact is communication about policy issues. The discussion of newsletters, media releases and public meetings above covered methods of doing this, but a few comments need to be added.

In well-established democracies with strong traditions of civic involvement, communication between legislators and constituents on policy issues emphasizes obtaining input from citizens on pending matters before decisions are made. This occurs both in the capitol, when committees hold public hearings, and in the districts, when legislators send out newsletters, conduct surveys of their constituents or listen to public input at town meetings.

In emerging democracies, however, where traditions of strongly centralized authority linger or the legislature is not effectively empowered, the emphasis is more likely to be on telling people...
after the fact about legislative action and how it will affect them. A survey of Turkish parliamentarians, for example, found that they regarded informing their constituents about new laws and policy as their most important activity when visiting their districts (Turan 1994, 122).

Variables That Affect Constituent Interaction

The previous discussion of constituent service indicated that personal attitudes of legislators toward casework have a great deal to do with how much time they spend communicating with constituents. A study of American states found that legislator attitudes are a major predictor of the provision of constituent service (Freeman and Richardson 1996, 49). In the classic terms of Edmund Burke, some legislators see themselves as "delegates" sent to the capital to represent the concerns of their district, while others regard their role as "trustees" of the common good of all the people. The delegates tend to pay more attention to constituent communication and the trustees less. Within the common constitutional and political structure of a single country (the 51 legislatures in the United States for example), these variations in attitude toward constituent communication are largely personal.

From one country to another, however, a variety of factors significantly affect the extent of interaction between parliamentarians and people. They include constitutional rules of the game, the structure of political parties, the resources available to legislators, their degree of professionalism and political culture. These factors, which are analyzed in the succeeding sections, are closely interrelated; favorable conditions that might promote effective interaction in one area may be nullified by unfavorable circumstances in another. No one variable by itself explains why legislators in one country pay more attention to constituent service than do those in another.

Type of Legislature

Interestingly, one variable that does not appear to be strongly related to constituent service is the type of legislative system. The classic distinction between the American presidential, or separation of powers, system and the Westminster-style parliamentary system that plays such an important role in discussions of legislative policy making does not appear to affect legislator/citizen linkages. This is particularly true in regard to casework. There are many examples, led by the U.S. and British prototypes, in which legislators in both types of systems provide extensive constituent service and regard it as a high priority.

The two areas covered by this paper in which the parliamentary vs. separation of powers distinction may make a difference are the development of community projects and communication about policy issues. Because legislators in parliamentary systems have less influence over public policy, they may not have as much power to include projects for their districts in the budget and they are less likely to seek constituent advice and input before the fact on matters pending before parliament.

Like the presidential/parliamentary typology, distinctions among newly emerging legislatures, transitional legislatures (in which previously quiescent parliaments are seeking to assert themselves) and long-established legislatures do not appear to be major factors in explaining the extent of legislator/constituent communication. As with the dichotomy between parliamentary and presidential systems, however, there are exceptions. The history of authoritarianism or political repression that is common to newly emerging democracies is discussed under political culture below. The problem of powerless legislators in transitional parliaments has already been
covered in relation to casework above. The tendency for long-established legislatures to have more staff, funds and technology appears under the resources section below.

**Electoral Systems**

One of the more important constitutional rules of the game that affects legislator and constituent interaction is the type of electoral system. Different countries use a wide variety of electoral systems. Discussions of their features and impacts are often complex, involving an intricate interplay between proportional and plurality voting systems and the number of legislators in each geographic district. For the sake of this paper, we reduce the discussion to single member districts and multimember districts. Most single member district systems (U.S., U.K., Canada) use a plurality voting system, and most multimember district systems (Brazil, Israel, The Netherlands) use proportional voting to determine how many members will be elected to the parliament from lists submitted by each political party.

In the literature on legislatures there is a substantial debate about whether single member districts are more or less "representative" than multimember districts and which system creates closer links between legislator and constituent. That debate deals extensively with representation of ethnic and racial minorities and women. We will avoid the details of that discussion and focus instead on the question of the impact of the type of legislative district on demands for constituent service and the extent to which legislators view constituent service as important.

Within the subject of electoral systems, important variables include the apportionment of the districts, geographic size, population and number of seats per district. In relation to the impact of the type of district on constituent service, the most important variable is seats per district, often referred to as district magnitude by scholars. District magnitude can be viewed as a continuum from one (single member district) to a few (two to seven seats) to many (eight or more).

The single member district system, which apportions one seat to a defined geographic area, predominates in the United States and most Commonwealth countries. Most multimember district systems also organize legislative districts on a geographic basis. Varying numbers of seats are assigned to geographic subdivisions. For example, members of Brazil's Chamber of Deputies run at-large in each of 26 states (districts); the number of seats in each state ranges from eight to 70. Austria, Portugal and Spain also elect their members from multimember districts made up of provinces (Laundy 1989, 18-20). In the most extreme versions of multimember districts, all legislators are elected from party lists in proportion to the votes for their party in the entire country. Israel, for example, elects all 120 members of the Knesset from a single nationwide constituency.

The single member district system clearly encourages a personal connection and identification between legislators and their constituents. Citizens vote directly for one legislator in their district, so they are more likely to know who that person is and to identify with him or her. Legislators elected from single member districts identify more with that specific geographic area. There are no other legislators representing that district to whom a problem can be handed off. All other things being equal, we expect that the demand for constituent service and the extent to which parliamentarians view it as important work will be greatest in countries with single member district systems.

There are not many countries with multimember district systems that fall in the category of few (two to seven) seats per district. Turkey's Grand National Assembly has 550 seats apportioned to 79 multimember constituencies, so the average district has seven members. Because the
connection between legislator and district in this situation is more diffuse and less personal than in the case of single member districts, we would expect somewhat less demand by constituents for service and attention by legislators to casework (Jewell 1982). Very limited evidence from the United States on this hypothesis shows that there is no significant difference between legislators from single member districts as opposed to few multimember districts (Freeman and Richardson 1996).

When there are many seats per legislative district and a party list system, parliamentarians are not directly accountable to a local constituency. Under these conditions citizens are less likely to demand constituent service because they do not directly identify with or know the individual legislator for their district. Legislators have little motivation to provide constituent service because it is not likely to make a difference in election outcomes. Their primary loyalty is to the party and not the district. We previously cited the case of The Netherlands where only a small proportion of parliamentarians mentioned "mediator" as an important role, and Dutch citizens do not expect such services from their elected representatives.

Within multimember district systems that have defined geographic areas, legislators in the same district may develop some division of labor on constituent service. This may be due to personal interest in providing the service, political party (members of the governing party are more likely to get constituent service requests) or home base of the legislator (constituents seek out legislators who are friends or neighbors) (Turan 1994).

The following graph summarizes the expected relationship between number of seats per legislative district and demand for constituent service, assuming all else is equal.

Germany's mixed electoral system blends features of proportional representation with those of single member districts by electing half the members of the Bundestag from each state (Land) by proportional representation in the state as a whole and half in single member districts. German state legislatures use the same system.

Members of the German Bundestag generally regard "mediator" as an important role (Gladdish 1985, 141). But do legislators who represent the single member districts pay more attention to
constituent service? If so, this would confirm our hypothesis about the impact of electoral systems on constituent relations.

One analysis says that there appears to be little difference in demand for constituent services between members of the Bundestag elected from the party list and those elected from constituencies (Burkett 1985, 129-30). Recent personal interviews with German state legislators, however, contradict this finding. A district-elected legislator in the former East German state of Saxony says that the members elected from party lists for his Christian Democratic party are mostly "the old and honored." They have no interest in or need to perform constituent service. His own reelection chances, on the other hand, will depend on how well he serves his district (where unemployment is high) and especially on whether he can help bail out two cash-strapped large employers in danger of going out of business.

Although inconclusive, the German experience is noteworthy because a number of emerging democracies, especially in Latin America, have adopted such a mixed electoral system. Guatemala's legislature elects 25 of its members from a national list and 75 from multimember constituencies. Bolivia has recently switched to a mixed system in its lower house in large part because it would like to restore the role of deputies as mediators between citizens and their government. Brazil has also recently considered conversion to a mixed system like Germany's.

**Political Parties**

In reviewing four recent books on Western European parliaments, Michael Mezey, a leading scholar on legislatures, argues,

The variable that emerges from these works as having the greatest impact on the status of the legislature and the behavior of its members is the nature of the political party system (Mezey 1994, 436).

He points out that political party systems must be evaluated in terms of both the internal cohesion of the parties within the legislature and the number of parties represented. He suggests that legislatures are most prominent (have the most impact on decision making) in countries where (a) parties are less cohesive internally and (b) there are more parties represented in the legislature. The combination of strong party cohesion and few political parties is likely to mean that the legislative process is tightly constrained, and the legislature has little freedom of action. As evidence he points to the increasing independence of the British Parliament as internal party discipline has declined, and to increased prominence and activity of parliaments in Denmark, Norway and Sweden resulting from larger numbers of political parties and more frequent coalition governments.

More interesting than the prominence of the legislature for purposes of this paper, however, is Mezey's argument about the effect of the party system on constituency work. He suggests that parliamentarians are more likely to perform constituent service when parties are relatively weak and do not control the reelection process. Weak political parties mean that the personal vote (as opposed to the party vote) for legislators is more important, and legislators have greater incentives to perform constituent work in order to obtain that personal vote.

While this argument makes logical sense, the evidence from the rest of the world is not conclusive. Turkey is a country with a history of strong political parties and highly centralized executive authority. Turkish legislators do not have a significant policy role because they are bound by party decisions and dominated by the executive. Instead, Turkish members of parliament have carved out an important niche for themselves in serving the needs of
constituents and assisting them in dealing with the government bureaucracy (Turan 1994). A similar argument that the absence of policy-making authority may encourage legislators to perform other, less formal, roles such as constituent service has been made regarding the Kenya National Assembly (Ornstein 1992, 7). Ilter Turan, the Turkish analyst, concludes, 

In evaluating performance of legislatures in many societies, it may be useful to remember that while their role in policy-making and effecting major resource allocations may be modest, they may perform a critical role in achieving service responsiveness, a function that other agencies of government may not provide. In environments in which a tradition of strong central government and a powerful bureaucracy prevails, such a role may be indispensable for the successful functioning of a competitive democratic system and representative government (Turan 1994, 126). 

To complicate this argument further, strong political parties may encourage parliamentarians to perform constituent service through their own internal expectations of what constitutes the job of a parliamentarian. It is often argued that British MPs regard constituent work as particularly important because the two major political parties expect it of them and place pressure on them to perform it. In El Salvador observers say that some legislators' offices in the capitol are filled with people waiting to see them, while others are not. The key variable appears to be the party the legislators represent. Some parties, especially the populist ones, encourage their deputies to provide constituent services, while others do not.

In conclusion, we expect that constituent service will be greatest in countries in which parties are weak and there is a significant personal vote for legislators. Political parties that promote constituent interaction by their parliamentarians or party/legislative systems that allow no other meaningful role for elected representatives may also lead legislators to emphasize constituent service.

The complex evidence about the impact of political parties emphasizes the importance of our original point that no single factor taken by itself explains why constituent service is more important in one country than in another.

Professionalism

Another important factor affecting constituent service is the motivation of individual legislators. Parliamentarians who view themselves as full-time professional legislators are more likely to seek reelection and to pursue strategies that will maximize the chances for victory in the next election. Taking care of constituent needs is one way that incumbent politicians can boost their reelection chances. Research in the United States and Britain has shown that attentiveness to constituent service can significantly improve voters' evaluations of the performance of their legislators and the reelection chances of incumbents (Cain, Ferejohn and Fiorina 1987; Norton and Wood 1993). Both U.S. congressmen and British MPs tend to devote more time to constituent service early in their legislative careers, when they are less established in their districts and they have less influence over policy matters, and more time to policy making at later stages of their government service (Norton and Wood 1993).

The high reelection rates for incumbent legislators in the United States, in part due to their attentiveness to constituent work, has been subject to criticism in recent years. Legislative reformers who are critical of entrenched incumbents who almost always win elections have initiated term limit measures that have proven popular with voters. Term limits, of course, effectively weaken reelection incentives and discourage professionalism on the part of
legislators. As term limits for legislators are implemented in the states, it will be interesting to see if they cause attention to constituent service to decline.

Resources

The resources available to legislators to support legislator/constituent communication—travel, office expense allowances, equipment and staff—strongly affect the extent of the linkage.

Reimbursement for legislators' travel between the capital and the district is a very basic resource that allows for communication with constituents. A survey of Romanian MPs found that four-fifths of them travel to their districts at least three times per month (NDI 1996c, 5). This approximates the number of times that most U.S. members of Congress and state legislators return to their districts during legislative sessions. Most legislatures provide reimbursement for such travel, but this subsidy cannot be taken for granted. Some Nepali legislators' districts are eight days travel from Kathmandu, and they receive reimbursement for travel only at the beginning and end of session (USAID 1996c, 10).

Support for routine office expenses such as stationery, postage, telephone, photocopying and computers also enables more effective communication between legislators and citizens. The U.S. Congress is probably the most generous legislature in the world in supporting office expenses, as witnessed by the virtually unlimited franking privilege previously described. Most legislatures provide at least some reimbursement for basic office expenses (IPU 1986, 179-203). Nepal, again, provides an extreme case of how the lack of resources can inhibit constituent communication. Telephone communication in Nepal is extremely unreliable, and members of Parliament are not reimbursed for telephone expenses (USAID 1996c, 10). With no travel support and poor telecommunications, how can Nepali representatives communicate effectively with their constituents?

Most of the wealthier nations provide computers and other sophisticated electronic communication tools to their legislators. The U.S. Congress and the Minnesota Legislature even supply television studios in the capitol where members can videotape messages to send to the media in their district. In emerging democracies and poorer countries around the world, however, equipment such as photocopiers and computers may not be available to the legislature, much less to individual legislators. U.S. organizations have often aided legislatures in emerging democracies by providing photocopiers and computers. This type of technological aid has been oriented primarily to supporting the legislative functions of the institution, but to the extent that such equipment is available to individual members, it can also aid legislators in constituent communication.

The most expensive, and perhaps the most effective, method of increasing legislators' ability to communicate with and supply services to constituents is to provide them with their own staff and district offices. Again, the U.S. Congress is easily the leader in this regard. Members of the Senate receive staff allowances in proportion to the population of their states. Members of the House of Representatives can hire up to 18 personal staff and allocate them between their capitol and district offices as they see fit. Approximately a dozen of the 50 American state legislatures (mostly the states with large populations) provide small personal staffs to the members. Most other parliaments in the larger and wealthier nations also provide personal staff to their legislators, although not on the same scale as Congress.

In legislatures that provide personal staff to their members, the primary occupation of most staff, especially those in district offices, is service to constituents. Unlike central, nonpartisan staff to
the entire legislature who more often support the administrative and policy functions of the parliament, personal staff tend to devote their time to the specific concerns, usually district-oriented, of individual legislators. Increasingly in recent years, members of Congress have chosen to place large portions (40 percent on average) of their staff in district offices to enhance their casework and communication with their constituents. They believe that this allocation of staff to district affairs will strengthen their reelection chances.

The allocation of district office support can affect demand for service. Members of the Legislative Assembly of New South Wales, Australia, observed significant increases in the expectations and demands of constituents for service after they established electorate offices. The cost of providing personal staff to all members of a legislature is very high; few legislatures can afford it. More cost-effective support services for constituent communication and service can be provided through pooled staff for members from the same region or from the same political party. In the small state of Maryland, the legislative delegation from each of five counties shares support staff to help legislators respond to constituent concerns. Party caucus staffs in U.S. state legislatures devote extensive time to constituent communication and service on behalf of the members of their party. A memorandum from party whips for the African National Congress in South Africa suggests "members of the national Assembly and the Senate may club together into groups of two, three or four and open up a main or central Parliamentary Constituency Office in an area...."

Legislators in different settings have used creative cooperative mechanisms to pool resources with organizations outside their own legislature. In New York City some members of Congress co-locate their district offices with state legislators and city council members from the same area to promote cooperation between different levels of government in solving constituent problems. Such an arrangement works best when the legislators from the different levels of government are of the same political party. In Poland, some members of the Sejm have combined their district offices with local political party offices to strengthen constituent support and communication. The question of resources available to parliamentarians is related to the previous topic of professionalism. Legislators who view themselves as full-time professionals and value reelection will take steps to ensure that they have the resources necessary to support their constituents' needs.

While providing personal staff to legislators can strengthen democracy through improved constituent communication and service, there are a number of potential consequences, some positive and some negative, that should be considered:

- Staff who can effectively serve the needs of constituents can free legislators up to spend more time on policy matters.

- However, staff also create more work for legislators. Legislators who may have little management experience suddenly find that they have to oversee staff work. Staff generates ideas for legislators. Staff who perform constituent casework may generate more public demand for service (see New South Wales example above) and in the end create more work for the elected member. Virtually all legislatures that provide significant numbers of personal staff to members in the United States are full-time legislatures.
• In cultures where political patronage thrives, the personal staffs who are hired by legislators may not be qualified and, as a result, may not effectively aid legislators in improving constituent communication and service. A few U.S. state legislatures counteract this problem by maintaining control of the hiring process in a central leadership office that sets minimum job qualifications and ensures that all candidates meet the requirements.

• Promotion of services to constituents by legislators and their staff may lead to heightened citizen expectations of what can be achieved. In other words, legislators may promise more than they can deliver.

• Providing legislators with large personal staffs and other resources can lead to a substantial advantage for incumbents in elections. The constituent communication and service that legislators with substantial staff are able to provide may make them better legislators but may also provide them with a personal vote, independent of political party, that makes them difficult to unseat (Cain, Ferejohn and Fiorina 1987). However, only a very few legislatures in the world, most of them in the United States, have enough personal staff—more than three or four, say—for this to be a significant concern for democratic practice.

Political Culture

The political culture of a country—the sum of its citizens' acquired history, attitudes and experience—contributes to the extent to which constituents seek services from their elected representatives. In the countries of the former Soviet Union, for example, decades of political repression and the consequent lack of civic involvement by citizens may make them reluctant to approach government officials for help. Conversely, new deputies in these countries, accustomed to such a quiescent culture, tend to stay in the capital and ignore constituent communication.

At the opposite end, France has a long tradition of localism among members of parliament and a "clientelist" style of political culture in which people attach themselves to notables or patrons who then protect and support them. Three-fourths of the members of the French National Assembly hold local government offices at the same time as they serve in parliament. One observer concludes that the result of this culture is that:

...The role of the député is considered as primarily that of interceding with central government on behalf of individuals or local councils, rather than as a legislator or watchdog over executive power or debater of the great issues of the day (Frears 1985, 109).

Clientelism prevails in large parts of Latin America. Throughout long periods of military rule, traditional elites (who had ruled through clientelism prior to military control) were able to hold onto elected offices by effectively distributing jobs (patronage) and government projects (pork) to favored groups of constituents (Hagopian 1996). Military rulers gave elected officials the power to do this in exchange for legitimization of their regime by politicians. Since the transition to civilian authority, legislators and governors in countries like Brazil have continued to maintain power and authority through the selective distribution of government benefits.

These political cultures of repression (typical in countries with newly emerging legislatures) and clientelism (often found in transitional legislatures) are enduring and difficult to overcome in the short term. Programs of civic education and training for elected officials can help to overcome the problems of a history of repressive totalitarian regime. Promoting more effective
legislator/constituent communication in countries with traditions of patronage politics may first require focusing on administrative and management reforms to control patronage and corruption.

Finally, in the category of other factors, the availability of alternative methods of redressing citizens' grievances with government may also affect the extent of demand for constituent services from elected officials. Canada has an official, well-staffed ombudsman at the provincial government level whose job it is to mediate between citizens and government. In other countries administrative courts may serve a similar function. Bolivia set up local "vigilance committees" designed to intercede with government on behalf of citizens and prevent abuses. Bolivians have come to rely on these local committees rather than on their deputies in the National Congress.

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**Strategies**

What strategies can be used to strengthen democracy by improving interaction between people and their members of parliament? In the table at the outset of this paper the last column listed ways to promote each of the key methods and purposes of different kinds of constituent/legislator interaction. The two strategies that appear under virtually every category are training and education for legislators and civic education for the general public. We will summarize the importance of each of these briefly here.

Training and education for legislators can help to sensitize them to the benefits of improved communication with the public for democratic practice and procedure. It can also provide them with tools for performing constituent service. The National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI) has conducted training programs for parliamentarians in Bulgaria, Malawi, Romania, Gauteng province in South Africa and the Palestine Legislative Council. Their training programs covered virtually all the topics in these papers. The manuals that have resulted from these programs provide not only specific suggestions about how to provide constituent service but also include forms that legislators can fill out to gather information for profiles of their districts and develop directories of community resources. The NDI programs were conducted in 1995-96, and there are no evaluations of their effectiveness.

Another effective means of training parliamentarians is the United States Information Agency-sponsored International Visitor program. Parliamentarians who participate on such visits to the United States often ask questions about constituent relations. Visits can be targeted to address specific topics such as improving the linkage between citizens and their legislatures. Effective International Visitor programs focus at least as much on state legislatures as on Congress, because most national legislatures operate on a scale more like the states than the Congress.

Is in-country training better than study tours? Study tours to established democracies have the advantage of immersing key legislators in the subject of legislative strengthening for an extended period of time. If targeted to the right people who can make a difference in their own country (ideally both legislators and staff), they can be an effective means of training and education. However, these programs reach only a limited number of people. In-country training, on the other hand, reaches far more people but in less depth. The ideal professional development program combines both strategies-in-depth training in the United States for a few who can then champion in-country training for all members of their legislature. NCSL has used this model successfully in Brazil, South Africa and Francophone Africa.
Civic education is, by necessity, a long-term process for educating citizens about their proper role in a democratic civil society. CIVITAS, an international consortium of organizations for civic education (in which USIA plays a leadership role), says in its statement of purpose, ...No democracy can adequately function without the support of citizens who understand its foundations in ideas, institutions and practices, and know how to ensure that their problems and aspirations are addressed by the governments charged with representing them (http://www.civnet.org/civitas). [Emphasis added.]

This statement effectively emphasizes both the importance of the link between citizens and their representative institutions and the role that civic education can play in promoting informed and responsible citizenship. In all countries strengthening citizens' involvement in their government and in community problem solving by building partnerships with local and international civic education organizations is a vital strategy for improving the link between citizens and their elected representatives. This is especially true in emerging democracies with a history of political repression.

Conclusion

In summary, a social engineer intent on designing a legislative institution that maximized communication between legislators and constituents would:

1. Educate legislators at an early stage, perhaps even in the schools long before they are elected, to believe that constituent service is important.

2. Create single member districts for all legislators.

3. Ensure that political parties are relatively weak and not able to dominate election outcomes (or, if parties are strong, ensure that they encourage legislators to serve constituent needs).

4. Make the job of legislator full-time and pay an adequate salary.

5. Provide legislators with generous travel and office expense allowances, high tech communication tools, a large number of personal staff and district offices.

6. Establish a political culture in which citizens expect their elected officials to take care of their problems and avoid creating any alternative mechanisms for citizens to redress grievances with government.

The country that best fits this description is the United States. Thus, it is no accident that the U.S. Congress is probably the most advanced in constituent service and communication. American state legislatures share the congressional characteristics of single member districts and weak parties. But they vary greatly in the degree of professionalism of legislators, resources provided to support constituent work and political culture. A comparative study of casework in state legislatures showed that legislators in states with more professionalism, more resources and strong service cultures performed more casework (Freeman and Richardson 1996).

Most other countries have some of these elements that contribute to strong constituent/legislator relations in abundance and others not at all. Under such circumstances, the interplay of electoral system, political parties, professionalism, resources and political culture is important and
complex. Costa Rica provides an interesting example of this complexity. The Costa Rican Legislative Assembly consists of seven large multimember districts ranging from four to 21 seats elected from centrally controlled party lists, and members are limited to only one four-year term of office. In other words, Costa Rican legislators have little constituency connection and no reelection motivation—both conditions that normally predict low attention to constituent concerns. Yet, they view constituent service as important and work hard at delivering projects to their home areas. The reason is that political parties evaluate legislators in part on the basis of their service to their constituents, and the parties influence decisions about future appointive positions that many legislators seek after their terms in the assembly. (Carey 1996).

Another factor to consider in assessing strategies is that maximizing conditions that contribute to effective legislator/constituent communication may involve tradeoffs with other values. For example, establishing single member districts may strengthen ties between legislators and constituents but weaken political parties, discourage responsible party government and inhibit the formation of minor parties that might better represent the views of the electorate. Or well-paid, full-time legislators with significant staffs may communicate more effectively with their districts but become less accountable because incumbents are difficult to defeat in elections.

These two examples both involve tradeoffs in values among the parliamentary functions of linkage, legitimation, and decision making discussed in the introduction. Decisions about how much to emphasize the linkage between legislators and constituents may affect the extent to which various interests in the society are represented in the legislature and how accountable legislators are for policy decisions.

The relationships among these values are as complex as the interplay of factors that determine the effectiveness of the legislator/constituent linkage. Legislators or any outside organizations that wish to strengthen the link between constituents and their representative in a particular country must always consider the broad political and institutional context in which the parliament operates.

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