What MPs Say and Do. German Members of Parliament in their Constituencies: Concepts and Practice of Representation

presented at the IPSA XXII World Congress of Political Science
Madrid, July 8 – 12, 2012
- not for publication -

1. Representation and its Mechanisms........................................................................................................2
2. Data: “Citizens and Representatives in France and Germany”.................................................................3
3. MPs in their Districts................................................................................................................................5
   3.1 What do MPs do in their District?...........................................................................................................5
   3.2 Listening or Leading in the District?......................................................................................................9
   3.3 Are MPs Generalists or Specialists? ..................................................................................................12
4. Conclusion .............................................................................................................................................18
5. References.............................................................................................................................................19

---

1 Sven T. Siefken, Assistant Professor, sven.siefken@politik.uni-halle.de, Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg, Institut für Politikwissenschaft, 06099 Halle (Saale), Germany.
1 Representation and its Mechanisms

Representation is an old concept that can be traced back to corporatist and federalist political systems (cf. Patzelt 2003: 15). In its most basic sense, representation means to make something present which is not currently there (cf. Leibholz 1966: 26), or simply put: “standing for, or in the place of, a person, group, institution, etc., esp. with the right or authority to speak or act on behalf of these” (OED 2012). Nowadays, political representation is usually linked to democratic government and the definition is thus extended to: “Acting in the interest of the represented, in a manner responsive to them” (Pitkin 1967: 209). Obviously, this opens up a wide range of other questions classic in political science: What is “in the interest” of the represented? And how can responsiveness be measured? The first question’s foundations lead to Jean Jacques Rousseau’s distinction between “volonté generale” and “volonté de tous” which has been debated by theoretical scholars at length. The latter, following the landmark study by Warren E. Miller and Donald E. Stokes (1963) has been investigated by quantitative empiricists who have tried to measure the correlation between policy orientations on various issues of citizens and representatives and how they are influenced by political parties and the mass media.

Members of parliament did not wait for the results of those scholarly debates. They need to act – both in their districts and in parliament. An early way of grappling with the behavior of MPs was to investigate their role orientation by interviewing them. Based on Edmund Burke’s distinction of the role of delegate vs. trustee which he made in his “speech to the electors of Bristol” (Burke 1774), Wahlke’s research group found that a third role must be added which they termed “politico”. It describes an MP who integrates – or alternates between – both delegate and trustee roles (Eulau et al. 1959, Wahlke et al. 1962). More recently, an alternative model has been suggested by distinguishing the direction of influence between representatives and the represented (“from above”, “from below”) from the temporal perspective of control (“ex ante”, “ex post”) yielding a four-by-four matrix (Andeweg / Thomassen 2005: 512).

In investigating representation, research has mostly focused on the work of MPs in parliament – and largely neglected the second side of the coin: their work “at home” in the districts. But this constituency work not only takes a considerable amount of representatives’ time and effort; it also provides the basic democratic linkage function of MPs to citizens. In the United States, Richard Fenno (1978) started to not only ask but to observe MPs during their district work. Based on his many travels with members of Congress (cf. Fenno 2007), he distinguished different types of behavior and saw three criteria as relevant to understand the “home style” of an MP: the allocation of resources, the presentation of self and the style in explaining legislative activity (cf. Fenno 1977, 1978).

In Germany, Patzelt (1993) has interviewed MPs about their district work on the federal and subnational level and others have followed suit with larger studies and more standardized data collection (Best et al. 2007, 2011). One of those studies also included observation (Patzelt / Al-

---

2 I thank Danny Schindler for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper, Benjamin Greiner, Servan Deniz and Florian Hüfner for their support in compiling and analyzing the data, and the CITREP team for the observations and interviews conducted.
gasinger 2001) but otherwise the scholarly knowledge of Germany’s MP work in their districts was based on their own statements about it. As it is well-known in social research, what people say they do and what they actually do is sometimes not the same: For reasons of political benefit, social desirability but also the mere lack of reflection political actors may say things a little bit different than actually do them.

Based on data collected in 2011 and 2012 as part of the Franco-German research project “Citizens and Representatives” (CITREP) by interviews and participant observation, this paper investigates both what MPs say they do – and what it is that they actually do in their districts. As the data collection has only been completed recently and consolidation is still ongoing at the time of writing, this paper can only take a first look at the final data, generate some hypotheses and sketch the steps of further analysis.

2 Data: “Citizens and Representatives in France and Germany”

CITREP (“Citizens and Representatives in France and Germany”) investigates representation in the constituencies. Two general questions guide the project: What do MPs do in their districts? And how does this relate to the people? To find answers, members of the German Bundestag and the Assemblée Nationale were visited and observed in their districts and general population surveys were performed. The present paper is based on information from the visits to German MPs’ districts.

For data collection 64 German MPs were accompanied in their districts between February 2011 and May 2012, usually for three days each. In part, data collection followed the approach of “soaking and poking” (Fenno 1978: 249), but instead of “just hanging around” (ibid.), observers documented each attended event in a structured fashion by filling out observation sheets, while leaving room for taking in – and reporting – all surprises. One sheet was filled out for each event attended during the district visit, which adds up to between eight and sixteen manuals for each three-day observation. The observations included a few nominal choices for categorizing (e.g. the type of event attended, whether it was open to the public or not) but mostly ordinal judgments by Likert scale (e.g. “how often were policy positions discussed: never, seldom, sometimes, often, very often?”; “how strong was criticism of political opponents: very strong, strong, medium, weak, very weak?”) and a few metric measures (number of people attending the event, duration of event). These data are readily accessible for quantitative analysis.

For various reasons, not all the events during the visits could be participated in. Sometimes matters where too personal: For example, one MP went to visit her sick neighbor in the hospital but when the observer remarked “Well, this is not district work but more of a personal issue any-

---

3 CITREP is funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG) and the Agence Nationale de la Recherche (ANR). Project leaders are Suzanne S. Schüttemeyer (Halle), Oscar W. Gabriel (Stuttgart) and Eric Kerrouche (Bordeaux).

4 See Brouard et al. (2011) for a first analysis based on data about the French MPs, Gabriel et al. (2011) for a first analysis of the citizen perspective, Schüttemeyer (2012) and Schindler/Siefken (2011) for first analyses of the data on German MPs; further information is available online http://www.citrep.eu (last checked: June 4, 2012).
way”, the MP strongly rejected that statement: “No actually this is very much district work.” Oth-
er events were too political in the judgment of the MPs: individual meetings with local politicians or sessions of party councils – or at the height of ongoing scandals in the department of defense an observer was even excluded by the event organizers from a session of the MP with regular soldiers on political education. All in all, observers were let into 86.1 % of all the 618 events during the district visits – and the rest was coded according to the available information, sometimes just by the name of the event, sometimes the times and participants, too, and occasionally based on later information from the MP about what had happened.

At the end of the visit to the district, a semi-standardized interview was conducted with the MP. It included around 45 questions on topics such as working in the district, the views on representa-
tion, how work in the district and in parliament are connected and also some questions on the events observed. An additional three MPs were interviewed only but could not be accompanied in their districts for personal or organizational reasons. Thus the total number of interviews con-
ducted with Members of the German Bundestag is 67. All interviews were transcribed and sent back for authorization to the MPs; to analyze them they are coded using MaxQDA software em-
ploying a unified coding scheme.

Finally, the observers were asked to provide a non-standardized protocol about their visit to the districts so that further information, illustrative anecdotes and judgments would not be missed. Those protocols will also be coded with MaxQDA.

21 observers – mostly PhD- and graduate students – conducted the district visits. The first six observations were used to develop the observation material and to check inter-coder-reliability by double coding and multiple observers at senior and junior levels.

Over ten percent of the members of Bundestag are included in the observations (10.8 %). They were chosen by theoretical sampling based on district properties that might influence MPs on the one hand (rural or urban character, the degree of industrialization, the age distribution, education level, the number of citizens per district, unemployment rate and whether the district is a strong-
hold or diaspora of the MP’s party) and factors that are related to the MP (seniority, age, position, party and direct vs. list mandate). On top, the sample was checked for a few secondary criteria (East-West, gender, migration background, professional background, district changes, and competition in the district). For plausibility, a cluster analysis was conducted with the main constituency-related criteria. It shows 20 clusters which the final sample of MPs covers com-
prehensively.

In all, 101 MPs were approached of which 67 agreed to a visit in their district (n = 64) or to be interviewed only about their district work (n = 3). Those that declined did so for a number of rea-
sons, mostly lack of time. It was most successful to contact either the MP personally or the par-

---

5 Observation protocol, anonymous MP.
6 We thank Florian Rabuza for his help in conducting the cluster analysis.
liamentary party staff. The findings of this paper are based on the 618 events registered during the 64 observations of German MPs in their districts between February 2011 and May 2012. This adds up to 969 hours of net observation time, i.e. the equivalent of 121 working days. Quotations from the conducted interviews are also included – at the time of writing this paper, 39 interviews had been transcribed, authorized and coded and form the base of the interview statements. The present paper is the first to analyze the complete observation data set. Still ongoing are the coding of interviews and protocols, the technical consolidation of data and the analysis, so this paper can only provide preliminary findings based on a limited number of variables.

3 MPs in their Districts

3.1 What do MPs do in their District?

The lack of focus on the district when regarding MPs work can not only be found in its scholarly study, but equally in media coverage. So, scholars, journalists and citizens often only see one side of the coin when looking at MPs: that is “law making” – the work in Berlin. And actually MPs themselves do not seem to get much guidance for their district work. When learning about the focus of the CITREP-project, one MP told us: “That is great! Maybe after you are done, you can give us some suggestions on how to best do the district work”. Another MP when stepping out of his car for the first event of the day looked quizzically at the observer and asked “What am I supposed to do now?”

So: What are they doing there? In an open question, MPs were asked to describe their work and the most important things they do in the districts. Usually, they mentioned more than one activity. Categorizing the answers yields six groups of statements (see figure 1). Most MPs say they are in the districts to listen to the people (46,1 %). One MP described it as follows:

“I am trying to get as many impressions from real life here and carry them to Berlin in order to make them a base for my political decisions and my political work there”.

Equally high is the number of MPs describing themselves as an accessible contact person that is ready for exchange (43,6 %). Both of these groups focus on a soliciting input. While the bottom-up approach of gathering information is clearly predominant, its direct counterpart is not to be neglected – the explaining approach (35,9 %): “What an MP always has to do, namely explain the policies and politics we make in Berlin”. Some MPs are using metaphors such as serving as a “translator” or “mediator”.

footnotes:

1 For a detailed discussion of the ways of approaching MPs and the respective success rates see Schindler / Siefken 2011: 9.
2 Some paragraphs of this paper are revised and updated based on Schindler/Siefken (2011), see also Schindler (2012).
3 Observation protocol, anonymous MP.
4 Interview with MP Josip Juratovic, February 16, 2011.
5 Interview with MP Michael Kretschmer, May 18, 2011.
6 Interview with MP Michael Groschek, March 30, 2011.
Quite high is the number of MPs who engage in case work and mention this as one of the important things they do in the district (35.9 %):

“I get active upon request: If there are any problems, sorrows or needs in my district, I will try to deal with them”

is how an MP described his approach\(^\text{15}\). One said:

“The most important thing in the district is to work off the citizens request – concrete requests that are brought forth during office hours or in personal talks with me.”\(^\text{16}\)

And another formulated:

“I am responsible for the people here, in all their facets, mostly with a federal point of view, but also very much in concrete counseling, as soon as I am asked for it.”\(^\text{17}\)

In the German federal system with much responsibility for policy implementation resting in the states and municipalities, there are not many issues where case work of MPs is immediately useful. Often, they theoretically could “pass the buck” and confer requests to some other level of representation such as state parliaments or city councils – but they don’t. However, they seem to be ready to take up the task of case work, as has been witnessed during the observations, too:

\(^\text{14}\) Interview with anonymous MP.
\(^\text{15}\) Interview with MP Stefan Liebich, March 13, 2011.
\(^\text{16}\) Interview with MP Jens Ackermann, June 22, 2011.
\(^\text{17}\) Interview with MP Dieter Wiefelspütz, March 3, 2011.
Some MPs were providing legal counsel – even picking up the phone to call a citizen’s lawyer, some lending a helping hand in filling out social insurance or unemployment forms, others gave advice about a visit to the immigration authority or on applying for subsidies\(^{18}\).

MPs rarely mention taking care of their party when answering the question what is important in their district work (10.2 %). When asked about the meaning of parliamentary representation parties are mentioned even less frequently (5.0 %, cf. Schindler 2012: 11). But mirroring these very reserved statements about the role of parties in the district work with the reality of observed events, it becomes visible that MPs actually spent the most time (18 %) in internal party meetings. And with a share of 14.9 % of all events observed, internal party meetings score second highest (figure 2).

![Figure 2: type of events attended by observed MPs](image)

To be sure, the strong party orientation of MPs is not surprising in a parliamentary democracy where parties fulfill the important linkage function between society and the political system. This is consistent with the information that MPs have given about their own contact channels in previous surveys, that found local party organization and local public agencies to be their most important reference groups (see Patzelt 1996: 484). And networking of MPs was found to be strongest with holders of party and public offices (see Patzelt/ Algasinger 2001: 514f.). That MPs are reluctant of admitting to the high share of their party work is equally unsurprising in the German political system that has a tradition of contempt towards parties and a recent history of a

\(^{18}\) Observation protocols, anonymous MPs.
strongly declining party base. However, it should not be neglected that the observed MPs have spent more than two thirds of their time (70,0 %) in non-party events, that is: reaching out to a wider population than party elites and party members.

Judging by the events observed it is quite clear, where MPs go if they want to meet the people in their districts: The clear – though relative – majority of events observed were visits to public agencies which make up about a fifth (19,6 %) of all events: meetings with mayors, in schools and kindergardens, military facilities and social insurance agencies and many others. Taken together, the simple answer to the question “where do MPs go to meet the people in their districts?” is: To public and private enterprises – and to their respective parties. And when the time spent in these event types is analyzed, the role of local party affairs becomes more pronounced: During the observations MPs spent 18,4 % of the time in internal party meetings, 16,9 % in visits to public agencies and 12,1 % in political events and rallies.

Looking at the average times per event in the district work, German MPs are neither rushing in and out nor do they sit back and relax: The average duration of the observed events is 1,6 hours and only very few last more than two hours. Meanwhile, there is great variety in the duration according to the type of event\textsuperscript{19}. For example, party events and political events take much longer

\begin{figure}
\centering
\begin{tabular}{|c|c|c|c|c|c|c|c|}
\hline
& < 0:30 & 0:30-1:00 & 1:01-1:30 & 1:31-2:00 & 2:01-2:30 & 2:31-3:00 & > 3:01 \\
\hline
\textbf{Source: CITREP, n = 618} \\
\end{tabular}
\caption{duration of events attended by MPs (in hours)}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{19} This is not shown as a diagram in the present paper.
– on average above two hours – than visits to public and private sector organizations with little over 80 minutes on average.

In short, when in their districts, German MPs spend most of their time reaching out to a broad and diverse audience: often, they visit public agencies and private enterprises, but they also seek direct citizen contact and even offer support for individual questions in their office hours. While they did not readily admit to the importance of party work when interviewed, they do spend a substantial amount of time with party-related activities. MPs usually attribute a substantial amount of each of their events leaving enough room for a substantial exchange and discussion.

3.2 Listening or Leading in the District?

At the core of representation are two elements: leadership and responsiveness. German studies relying on survey research have shown that leadership is acknowledged as a vital duty but that in practice the dimension of responsiveness dominates the district work (Patzelt 1996: 468). Different components of responsiveness have been identified (cf. Mezey 2008: 37), such as policy, service, allocation and symbolic responsiveness (Eulau/ Karps 1977: 242).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure 4: MPs presenting their positions or listening?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

A necessary precondition for responding to the citizens’ wishes and demands is to listen to them. Figure 4 shows that when MPs are in their district, the feature of gathering information was strong or very strong in 60.0 % of the observations while providing leadership was predomi-
nant in only 35.7 % of the events observed (n = 571). In short the observations support that in their districts, MPs are more often listening and taking in information than providing strong leadership and detailing their own opinions.

When asked which of the two was more important, the interviews show a normal distribution that is slightly skewed: 18 MPs said that both are equally important, ten were stressing the importance of leadership; nine said it was more important to collect information. One MP summed it up:

“In my district work I find it not so important to give long speeches and explain how the world – and politics in Berlin – are currently working … but I find it more important to listen.”

Another said:

“It does not work without bringing a basic orientation to the table. To be open to all nonsense is no guarantee for political success.”

But the two dimensions of representation are not easy to separate. The MPs made this clear in their interviews. One MP said:

“To be a representative means both: lead and listen – in order to develop new leadership from there.”

Another MP added:

“You should not always do what is currently popular but try to make popular what you consider to be right.”

Relating his actions to the political majorities one MP said – asking not to be quoted by name:

“If you are in government sometimes you have to lead. … If you are in the opposition you can be much more opportunist.”

This is plausible and it was to be expected that MPs of the majority show more focus on leadership than those from the opposition. But the currently available data reveal no such clear influence: Half of the MPs exhibiting strong leadership during the observation belonged to the major-

---

20 A similar distribution has been found in larger MP surveys, see for example Vogel 2010.
21 Interview with MP Katrin Göring-Eckardt, June 1, 2011.
22 Interview with MP Frank-Walter Steinmeier, September 30, 2011.
23 Interview with anonymous MP.
24 Interview with MP Stephan Thomae, April 4, 2011.
25 Interview with anonymous MP.
ty and half to the minority. Yet in sync with the hypothesis, among those stressing the need to listen, only two out of nine belong to the majority – and within it to the smaller coalition partner.

It will be tested later whether others factors such as holding high offices, having long time parliamentary experience or age have an influence on this important part of role orientation in the district. But based on impressions from the observations and interviews the focus might also just be a trait more adequately understood by personality and previous (work) experience than any of the systematic variables.

If ex-ante leadership is of no huge importance for the district work, it might be ex-post accountability: MPs explaining their past behavior to the citizens. However, during the observations, in only 26,9 % of all events the MPs were justifying their own behavior or that of their party or politicians generally (n = 618) – this played no role in 73,1 % of all events. It could be hypothesized that MPs of the governing majority spend more time explaining – because “in power” they have more explaining to do. The data point in that direction but a clear division is not visible: 30,0 % of coalition MPs and 24,3 % of opposition MPs are justifying and explaining their own behavior during the observations (n = 618). Accountability seems to work more implicitly.

### Figure 5: Whose judgment to follow in case of differences?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>0%</th>
<th>10%</th>
<th>20%</th>
<th>30%</th>
<th>40%</th>
<th>50%</th>
<th>60%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Always voters' opinion</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Usually voters' opinion</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sometimes own, sometimes voters' opinion</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Usually own opinion</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Always own opinion</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: CITREP, n = 64, closed interview questions to MP.

Leadership is however seen as important in times of conflict by MPs. When they disagree with the citizens in their district, the overwhelming majority said that MPs should follow their own
judgment (figure 5). In the words of Edmund Burke this means to act independently as a trustee rather than a delegate which is according to the free mandate guaranteed by Art. 38 of the German constitution.

What could hardly be seen in the German case is a distancing of MPs from their own party (in 4.0 % of the observations witnessed often and very often, n = 443) or from parliament as a whole (in 1.0 % of the cases, n = 442). Among U.S.-Congressman to run against “The Hill” is known as a typical strategy. Congressmen “often seek support and trust for themselves by encouraging a lack of support and trust in the Congress” (Fenno 1977: 917).

All in all the first examination of the data supports the notion that MPs are strongly stressing – in words and deeds – the need to listen in their district, but leadership also plays a role. They also spend little time explaining their own – or their parties – behavior in Berlin. In times of conflict with public opinion, MPs uphold the free mandate. And MPs rarely run “against Berlin” and hardly ever position themselves against their own party when in their district.

3.3 Are MPs Generalists or Specialists?

It is often assumed that German MPs today have two distinct faces: Their work in parliament is highly specialized as mirrored by their committee memberships, while in the district they are acting as generalists speaking on many issues (see Ismayr 2001: 45). Based on his interviews with MPs, Werner Patzelt (1995: 49) has developed a visual model that integrates those various perspectives and also includes the important intermediary role of party work and public relations. Jürgen von Oertzen (2006: 254) has formulated that ordinary MPs are “input-specialists”. He argues that their networks in the districts serve to bring important information and impulses on all issues into the parliament.

Asked about the importance of their work in the districts for their parliamentary activities, many MPs used metaphors and images. One MP stated:

“In Berlin you are in this spaceship and do not experience real life. Real life is here [in the district].” 26

One MP said that district work was “grounding” him (“Erdung”) and provided contacts and information which could not be seen from Berlin based on the files (“nach Aktenlage”)27, another used the term “grounding to reality” and added: “because this is where I get first-hand-impressions and information”28.

These positions match the model devised by Patzelt where district work serves to inform political decision makers. In the terms of David Easton (1965: 26f.) this could be described as the “input

26 Interview with anonymous MP.
27 Interview with MP Carsten Schneider, April 20, 2011.
28 Interview with MP Lutz Knopek, June 22, 2011.
function” of district work. One MP said that “district work is very important [because] here we can see what consequences our political work in Berlin actually has” – in the words of Easton (ibid.) it serves to take in feedback and evaluate policies. But a number of MPs also mentioned less concrete purposes of their district work. One senior MP and high office holder told us: “The district work gives me new energy – this is where I can relax” – mirroring the feelings of U.S.-Senator Tom Daschle about his constituency contacts: “It energizes me” (quoted in Fenno 2007: 48). And one MP differentiated the type of work very clearly:

“In parliament we are working on political processes and making laws. That is something different from solving a practical problem in the district.”

From those few examples, four distinct functions of the district work can be distilled: input, feedback, personal (for MP) and no direct meaning (see Schindler/ Siefken 2011: 18).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure 6: meaning of district work for work in parliament</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>reality check</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>get information / knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>grounding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>checking with mood of the people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>get ideas / impulses</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: CITREP, interviews with MPs, n = 39, MPs could give more than one answer.

Coding the interviews led to five groups (see figure 6) the biggest of which has to do with feedback (71.8 % of MPs) which can be separated in a temporal perspective: To perform a “reality check” stresses ex-post testing whether a decision or debate actually has an influence on the people, as on MP described:

29 Interview with MP Josip Juratovic, February 16, 2011.
30 Interview with anonymous MP.
“District work is indispensable, because it provides the easiest check whether our debates, positions, suggestions actually have an impact with the people.\(^{32}\)

“Checking with the mood of the people” is also a feedback function that is relevant ex-ante. It means to get a feeling for what is possible. One MP said: “This is very important in order to see which direction the wind blows.”\(^{33}\)

Almost half of the MPs (48.7%) stress the importance of the input function, with mentions of receiving information and knowledge while some stress new ideas and impulses:

“Through the many discussions led in the district I get new impressions, experience and knowledge – I get smarter.”\(^{34}\)

In all, MPs in their districts are best described as specialists for feedback and input. While at first, this might seem like a minor addition to von Oertzen (2006) it is worth noting that input and feedback are related to different parliamentary functions: Input has to do with legislation, feedback with communication (see Siefken / Schüttemeyer 2012).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure 7: meaning of district work for parliamentary and vice versa</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>strong</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>strong</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: CITREP, interviews with MPs, n = 39.

\(^{32}\) Interview with MP Frank-Walter Steinmeier, September 30, 2011.

\(^{33}\) German: “Um die Zeichen der Zeit zu erkennen”, interview with MP Franz Obermeier, March 14, 2012.

\(^{34}\) Interview with anonymous MP.
MPs do not want to miss the district work (figure 7): When asked, how important it is for the work in parliament, 61.5% of MPs classified it as very important, 28.2% said it was less important and only 10.3% said it was not all that important (figure 7, n = 39). The follow-up question about the reverse direction of influence (“How does your expertise in parliament influence your district activities?”) was answered ambiguously and shows a bipolar pattern: 37.8% replied that their specialization in parliament has a strong influence on their district work, 32.4% said it has little influence and 27.0% mentioned a medium influence (n = 37). Of those reporting a strong influence, most were making a direct connection: A member of the budget committee explained: “Everything has to do with money and that interests the people”\textsuperscript{35}, the chair of the traffic committee said:

“What I do has very direct consequences. Building or not building a road is concrete, supporting public transport is concrete.”\textsuperscript{36}

And a member of the defense committee stressed that his district has big military barracks and military technology, so “for my district it is of importance that I am member of the defense committee”\textsuperscript{37}.

MPs saying that the specialization had little influence argued:

“The focus in parliament has relatively little to do with my district work … these are two pairs of shoes.”\textsuperscript{38}

Some referred to the lack of interest or understanding of citizens: “The work I do in the foreign policy area people in my district find somewhat exciting but it is quite far away [from their immediate concerns]”\textsuperscript{39}, “legal policy is a topic that is overarching and abstract”\textsuperscript{40}. Further analyses will check if the answer to this question depends on the policy issues.

Another question to follow is whether members of big parties deal with their district work differently than those from small parties. A first look at the data and some interviews hinted at interesting developments (Schindler/ Siefken 2011: 20): The smaller parties in Germany (Green, FDP, Left Party) seemed to be moving their district work in the direction of an expert-based division of labor which might be a clear necessity because the small parties have to cover all committees in parliament, too – thus MPs have more double memberships there. One logical consequence could be to limit district work by extending the specialization to the district. One MP of the Green party said about the relationship between her parliamentary and district work:

\textsuperscript{35} Interview with MP Carsten Schneider, April 20, 2011.
\textsuperscript{36} Interview with MP Anton Hofreiter, July 19, 2011.
\textsuperscript{37} Interview with anonymous MP.
\textsuperscript{38} Interview with MP Dieter Wiefelspütz, March 3, 2011.
\textsuperscript{39} Interview with MP Stefan Liebich, March 13, 2011.
\textsuperscript{40} Interview with MP Stephan Thomae, April 4, 2011.
“Of course it has an influence because those are the topics I mostly deal with. Notwithstanding, I am also confronted with other issues on which I practice good cooperation with other experts in my party. But we have to be honest: I do not pretend to know very precisely about social policy issues.”\(^\text{41}\)

In fact, some MPs told us that they cover the whole state or even the whole country on matters of their special field of interest. One MP from a small party even mentioned an internal regulation that stops local MPs to speak on local issues:

“... if there is a problem that concerns a certain area, the local MP must or should not speak on the topic because we do not want to localize our fundamental political positions”\(^\text{42}\).

With the vote share of the big parties decreasing in Germany this new mode of representation might also be adapted by the (formerly) big parties in the future. But it would change the logic of representation by moving away from a retail to a wholesale model: Phasing out the specialist for input and feedback and replacing them with policy specialists might have severe consequences on representative democracy. It is worth noting that a first analysis of the CITREP general population survey in Germany has shown clearly that “citizens having made positive experience with the way the local representative deals with their concerns are far more convinced of his responsiveness” which in turn generates political trust (Gabriel et al. 2011: 19).

The currently available data show no strong relationship: Half the MPs talking of a strong influence of the parliamentary specialization on their district work are from big parties, half from small ones. And seven of the 12 who state a small influence are from big parties while five are from smaller ones. More detailed investigation will be performed.

In comparing what MPs say about their work to what they actually did during the observations it is worth noting that most of the communication in the district deals with local issues (48,7% of the observations had a large or very large share of them) followed by federal affairs (31,3%) (see Figure 8). The policy issues discussed were clearly focused on social affairs, finance, the economy and education (see Figure 9).

\(^{41}\) Interview with MP Valerie Wilms, February 16, 2011.
\(^{42}\) Interview with MP Michael Goldmann, August 25, 2011.
It is not yet possible to statistically match policy issues and policy specialization of the MPs but at first glance it is interesting: One hypothesis to test for MP as specialist in the district is: An MP talks mostly about the issues of his own committee membership. 36 MPs could be analyzed so far. 29 of them had an above average share of discussion in their own field of expertise\textsuperscript{43}. But a share well-above the average was only achieved by twelve MPs\textsuperscript{44}. Half of those were members of big parties, the other half of small parties. Interestingly the three top scores are all reached by members of the small parties who talked about their committee issues in 85 to 100 % of the events. But all in all, this first glance does not seem to support the formulated hypothesis: Most MPs do not seem to limit themselves in their district work but cover a broad range of policy issues.

\textsuperscript{43} The average share of discussion for all policy issues is 11.2 %.

\textsuperscript{44} Well-above was defined as more than 200 % above the average. This number is somewhat arbitrary, for further research the value will be determined by a statistical analysis.
Our preliminary conclusion, which we already formulated based on a smaller number of interviews (Schindler/ Siefken 2011: 18), will have to be investigated further: MPs do indeed exhibit the two faces of generalists in the district and specialists in parliament, but the district work serves as an important means for input from and feedback to outside the "glass house".

4 Conclusion

A first look at the data has shown that German MPs are involved with a variety of people and organizations in their districts, most importantly their own parties, public agencies and private enterprises. Events in the districts are usually long enough for a substantial discussion. Surprisingly high is the involvement of MPs in local politics and their focus on individual case work.

In their district work, most MPs focus on gathering information rather than presenting their own political position. Surprisingly low is the share of events in which MPs justified themselves or explained their behavior. It seems to be adequate to describe MPs in their district as specialists on feedback and input.

In the opinion of MPs, district work is of high importance for their parliamentary work, while the influence of parliamentary specialization on the district work is weaker. However, some of the observations suggest that MPs seem to be moving their approach to a stronger separation of

Source: CITREP, n = 615; the figure shows the share of events in which the policy issues were mentioned and those in which they had a very large share.
labor in the districts, too. This is a development worth noting and pondering about considering its potential consequences for the logic of representative democracy.

With regard to research methods it is possible to say that interview statements and observation results rarely contradicted each other but serve as helpful complements to shed lights on the questions at hand. Indeed, the observations in the districts have confirmed many of the findings previously formulated based on MP surveys and interviews. One exception is the role of parties which is strong in the observation results but hardly mentioned in the conducted interviews.

Of course, MPs are different from each other. Up to now – with data consolidation still ongoing – no systematic differentiation could be performed. A few first analyses showed much blurriness. But it will be tested which influence factors such as party ideology, belonging to majority or opposition, seniority, the type of mandate (see Schindler 2012) and many others have.

Generally, the style in the district might be more strongly influenced by individual personal traits of the MP with socialization effects much more limited there than in parliament. For further analysis once the data are complete special focus will thus be put on developing a typology of MPs in their district. Quite a few typologies have been suggested from time to time, some based on role orientation, some on actual behavior.

For now, what can be said is that in Germany MPs are mostly taking their district work serious by tending to the roots of representative democracy. If they succeed in it, what turns out to be a good practice of district work and how they adjust to quicksands under these roots is not only relevant for political scientist – but crucial for democratic governance in today’s societies.

5 References


