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Echoes and Barriers: Staff as Key Actors in the Representative Process

Meagan Cloutier

Department of Political Science, University of Calgary, Canada

Correspondence: Meagan Cloutier (meagan.cloutier1@ucalgary.ca)

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Abstract

Political staffers play a central but often overlooked role in shaping the representative relationship between members of parliament (MPs) and constituents. Drawing on constructivist theories of representation and original survey data from 366 Canadian federal MP staffers and 97 MPs, this article argues that staffers act both as "echoes," amplifying constituent concerns, and "barriers," filtering which concerns reach elected officials. Quantitative findings reveal that 78% of MPs trust staff discretion over constituent interactions, and two-thirds of staff report primarily interacting with constituents, often influencing information MPs receive by routinely selecting, synthesizing, and prioritizing constituent concerns. By mediating access, staffers structure the everyday work of representation, showing that representation is not solely an act of elected officials but is co-constructed by staff. This article advances representation theory by demonstrating that democratic representation is a dynamic, mediated process wherein unelected staff play a crucial role.

Keywords

Parliament of Canada; parliamentary democracy; political staff; representation

1. Introduction

The relationship between representative and represented is the heart of democracy. Yet, in practice, this relationship is often mediated (Dittmar, 2021; Hertel-Fernandez et al., 2019; Laube et al., 2020; Moens, 2023; Rosenthal & Bell, 2003). More often than not, staffers meet with constituents rather than the member of parliament (MP) themselves (Cloutier, 2019; Docherty, 2005). Staff engage directly with constituents, interpret their concerns, and relay them to the MP, often shaping how those concerns are ultimately understood and addressed. Thus, staff members are not merely passive administrators or service workers

but instead are central actors in the representative process. This intermediary role grants staff a form of representational power, raising important questions about how constituents' voices are filtered, framed, and prioritized. Moreover, we know little about how this delegation of contact structures the nature and quality of democratic representation. While political staff are not elected, they are embedded in formal political structures through their employment by elected representatives. Their position allows them to contribute meaningfully to the representative process. This article thus asks: How do MPs' staff mediate the representative relationship between constituents and MPs, and how does that mediation affect how we understand representation? Using constructivist theories of representation, I argue that staff actively shape and mediate representation by echoing constituent concerns and acting as barriers between the constituent and the representative. Staff can also frame constituent concerns through selecting and synthesizing which information reaches the representative.

To investigate these dynamics, I apply original data from two national surveys conducted in 2023: a staffer survey ($n = 366$) and an MP survey ($n = 97$). The staffer survey examines how staff interact with constituents, how often staff relay information back to their MPs, and how they decide which information to report. The MP survey explores how MPs perceive their staff's role in mediating constituent interactions and the extent of delegation or trust they place in staff discretion.

The article proceeds as follows: First, I describe the theoretical framework, using constructivist theories of representation to explain how staff can be seen as active agents in the representative process. Second, I explain why studying staff, and specifically staff in Canada's parliamentary democracy, is critical for understanding representation beyond elected officials. Third, I outline the research design, including the data collection methods and the structure of the two surveys. Finally, I present and discuss the results, showing how staff operate both as "echoes," who amplify constituent concerns, and as "barriers," who filter and control access to MPs. By examining how MP staffers filter, frame, and relay constituent concerns, this research challenges traditional, election-centered models that view representation as solely the act of elected agents. It shows that staffers, though unelected, hold representational power: They structure political communication, influence MPs' perceptions of their constituencies, and structure the priorities that guide political action. By integrating political staff into theories of representation, this article expands our understanding of who participates in the representative process and how representation is constructed in practice. In doing so, it highlights the invisible but powerful role that staffers play in sustaining and influencing the quality of democratic representation.

2. Constructivist Theories of Representation

Pitkin's foundational work *The Concept of Representation* describes representation as "the making present of something which is nevertheless not literally present" (Pitkin, 1967, p. 143). For Pitkin, representation also involves "acting in the interests of the represented, in a manner responsive to them" (Pitkin, 1967, p. 209). This understanding influenced the classic principal–agent model of representation, wherein elected officials act as agents of their constituents, legitimized through authorization and held accountable through electoral processes (Dovi, 2018; Pitkin, 1967). While institutional analyses could trace how office structures condition staff roles (Otjes, 2023; Pegan, 2017), and behavioral approaches could examine individual motivations or attitudes staffers have towards work (Egeberg et al., 2013), these frameworks obscure the representational significance of the everyday work through which staff mediate between constituents and MPs (Crewe & Sarra,

2021). In short, they capture important structural or psychological dimensions, but not always the dynamic processes by which representation is enacted by unelected actors.

However, recent scholarship has expanded the lens of representation beyond elected officials to include non-elected political actors (Disch, 2011; Montanaro, 2012; Salkin, 2021; Saward, 2006). Thus, representation emerges not only through institutions and electoral mandates but also through everyday practices and relationships. Feminist scholars further argue that research should shift from who represents to how representation is done: the process of representation (Celis & Childs, 2020; Franceschet & Piscopo, 2008). This includes examining the norms and expectations that determine perceptions of what makes a "good representative" (Dovi, 2012).

Constructivist approaches to political representation are particularly useful for analyzing this phenomenon. Saward's (2006) constructivist theory places *claims-making* at the heart of representation. Rather than focusing solely on policy outcomes or legislative behavior, this approach emphasizes the performative and rhetorical aspects of politics. Representation, in this view, is constituted through the construction and reception of claims to speak or act on behalf of others. As Saward notes, "People construct them, put them forward, make claims for them—make them" (Saward, 2006, p. 301). Legitimacy is not derived purely from institutional position but from whether audiences accept these claims. Constructivist theories of representation view representation not as a fixed relationship but as a dynamic process formed through interpretation, communication, and claims-making.

The constructivist turn thus provides a framework for studying unelected representatives (Disch et al., 2019; Saward, 2006). It recognizes representation as a process, not a status, allowing us to analyze how staffers' work frames both the performance and perception of representation. Dittmar's (2021) research demonstrates how women congressional staffers in the United States mediate representation, using their own personal experiences to influence policy outcomes. For example, women staffers were able to interject their own experiences with accessing medical and family leave, racial profiling, or immigration advocacy to help broaden the representative's views on specific policies. This builds on Franceschet and Piscopo's (2008) differentiation between representation as process and representation as outcome. They contend that even outside of substantive policy change, representational processes—through communication and advocacy—can still fulfill important democratic functions to shape the entire process of representation. While not elected, Dittmar's (2021) research about women congressional staffers shows how proximity to the representative can determine what information the representative hears and considers.

Staffers filter, translate, and shape constituents' concerns, thus influencing both the MP's responses and the broader representative relationship. Through their interactions with constituents, stakeholders, advocacy groups, and lobbyists, staff do more than extend an MP's reach; they actively determine how representation is enacted. Notwithstanding the important contributions of traditional theories of representation, I will use constructivist theories of representation to better understand the representative role of political staffers. This framework broadens the definition of representative. It invites examination into how staff—often behind the scenes—frame public messaging, constituent interactions, and even MPs' public image. Staff are not merely passive "mouthpieces" (Pitkin, 1967, p. 82) but instead active participants in constructing representative claims, often scripting and framing those claims for their elected employers (Fossen, 2019; Saward, 2006; Snagovsky & Kerby, 2019). Bringing staff into the study of representation allows us to

explore how interests, values, and identities are translated into the political sphere. Castiglione and Warren (2019) argue that constituents are not represented as whole persons but through selective aspects of their identities and preferences, which become politically salient through representative claims. These preferences are not static; they are co-constructed in dialogue between constituents and representatives, often mediated by staff (Dittmar, 2021; Snagovsky & Kerby, 2019). Constructivist theories of representation allow us to understand representation as a dynamic, performative process in which political staff play a crucial, if overlooked, role.

By investigating representation as a process rather than solely an outcome, a constructivist lens provides the conceptual tools needed to understand how unelected staffers contribute to the construction and mediation of political representation. Staffers' roles can be conceptualized as acting as both "echoes" and "barriers." As echoes, staff alleviate MPs' information overload by screening, filtering, and synthesizing constituent communication (Busby & Belkacem, 2013; Otjes, 2023). Constructivism highlights that echoing goes beyond relaying information. When staff decide how to filter and present constituent concerns, they are actively making claims about which issues matter, which can then determine the agenda that MPs carry into both constituency work and parliamentary debates. As barriers, staff serve as gatekeepers, controlling constituents' access to MPs through correspondence management and scheduling (Marland & Esselment, 2019; McKee, 2023). This discretion can bias which information reaches the MP, shaping their understanding and decision-making (Dittmar, 2021; Hertel-Fernandez et al., 2019). Such gatekeeping practices illustrate the constructivist point that representation is not a fixed relationship but an ongoing process. Staff exercise discretion not only over access but also over which voices are heard, effectively constructing the boundaries of representation in practice. Thus, staff play a critical, often underappreciated role in mediating the representative process. This theoretical lens therefore enhances our understanding of how routine staff practices help produce the everyday work of political representation, revealing that representation is an ongoing process.

3. Why Staff?

Most Canadian and international scholarship on political staff focuses on ministerial or executive-level advisors, who are often politically appointed and funded from departmental budgets (Benoit, 2006; Wilson, 2015). Ministerial staff are shown to broker between ministers, the public service, and political parties, influencing decision-making and often reinforcing centralized authority in cabinet and the prime minister's office (Brodie, 2012, 2018; Craft, 2016; Robson, 2015; Savoie, 1999). Internationally, Westminster research also emphasizes ministerial staffers' influence, focusing on institutionalization, accountability, policy advice, and agenda-setting (Bakvis, 1997; Connaughton, 2010; Eichbaum & Shaw, 2007, 2011; Maley, 2011, 2015; Moens, 2023). However, this literature largely overlooks staff working directly with elected representatives outside the executive. In Canada, MPs' personal and constituency staff remain underexamined, despite their public engagement and everyday representational work.

In parliamentary democracies, MPs serve as "the vehicles of representation" between constituents and Parliament (Malloy, 2023b, p. 7). Since the 1970s, Canadian MPs have had formal resources to hire staff, who help manage the overwhelming demands of the role (Docherty, 1997; Malloy, 2023a). This necessitates delegation of some of their responsibilities to their staff, such as meeting with members of the public, answering emails, and helping constituents solve their problems. Docherty explains that one MP admitted

that "it would be inefficient to come to me with every or most problems," for their assistants would know how to identify and solve most issues constituents raise with their MP (Docherty, 1997, p. 174). MPs must delegate representational responsibilities to staff, since MPs cannot oversee every interaction or decision. While MPs frequently describe this in terms of "trust," analytically it reflects a broader process of devolving decision-making discretion to staff who cannot check with the MP before every decision. As such, staff have a degree of independence from the MPs, which allows them to exercise their discretion to make "assessments, practices, judgements and decisions" (Tomkinson, 2020, p. 675). Staff not only handle the bulk of constituent engagement but also shape how MPs perceive their communities, as access and interaction are often mediated through staff (Henderson et al., 2023; McCrain, 2018; Peters, 2021; Willems et al., 2024).

Constituency service has become central to how representation is enacted (Koop et al., 2018). A recent scoping review of 198 studies by Sanches et al. (2024) shows that research on constituency service has grown over the past decade in both scope and methodological diversity. Most of this work conceptualizes constituency service as either "casework," assisting with government services or solving individual problems, or "homestyles," cultivating local presence and connections (Fenno, 1978; Sanches et al., 2024). Constituency service provides tangible support and allows for representatives to gather feedback on how policies affect their communities, creating a connection between citizens and parliament (Blidook & Koop, 2022). Yet, staff are often treated as background resources, rather than active participants in service delivery.

In practice, staff are the front-line service workers for MPs (Cloutier, 2019). They manage the bulk of casework and correspondence (Cloutier, 2019; Docherty, 1997) and crucially exercise discretion over which concerns are escalated to the MP. Here, the MP staffer differs from bureaucratic caseworkers. As Gidengil explains, "The caseworker has a good deal of discretionary power over clients, including the ability to terminate their benefits" (Gidengil, 2020, p. 9). MP staff lack such formal authority; they cannot grant or revoke services. Instead, their discretion lies in whether to pass along constituent concerns, how to frame them, and how to prioritize demands on MPs' limited time. This more subtle but pervasive form of discretion impacts which voices are amplified and which remain unheard.

As Cloutier (2019) shows, this dynamic is perhaps most visible in casework with federal departments. Staff frequently report that they dislike "dealing with bureaucracy" and with the "wheels of government" when attempting to assist constituents (Cloutier, 2019, p. 67). This frustration stems from two related factors: First, staff cannot always secure the help constituents need, and second, constituency offices are often the last resort for those in need. As a result, many constituents arrive already agitated, or hostile, while others are highly emotional, particularly when seeking help with immigration or visas for relatives abroad. In addition, when constituents are angry, either over substantive political issues or because they cannot obtain the assistance they need, staff often bear the brunt of the verbal abuse (Cloutier, 2024).

4. Why Canada?

Canada offers a compelling case for studying the dynamics between MPs and their personal staff. Canada's institutional setting, a parliamentary democracy with a single-member plurality (SMP) electoral system, makes it broadly applicable to similar contexts, such as the United Kingdom and Ireland. Canada's system is

party-centered (Cross et al., 2022) and candidate-centered (Cheng & Tavits, 2011; Pruysers & Cross, 2016), with a clear representative in each district: the fundamental unit of representation (Bodet et al., 2022). The SMP system ensures a clear representative–constituent link, making it easier to isolate the specific role of the MP in constituency representation (Koop et al., 2018), and by extension, the function of their staff.

MPs employ staff who are directly accountable to them, rather than to parliament as an institution (Board of Internal Economy, 2024). The organization and hiring of staff are subject to limitations imposed by the financial resources allocated to MPs. Each MP receives the same baseline budget for their office(s) and staff, set at $411,300 for the 2023–2024 fiscal year. To account for disparities among constituencies, additional funding is available for larger ridings, densely populated ridings, and ridings with restricted access to transportation and communications infrastructure.

MP staff may be located either in constituency offices or on Parliament Hill. Their responsibilities are largely determined by the MP's strategic priorities and preferences. Constituency staff generally manage casework related to federal services (such as immigration and employment insurance), respond to public inquiries, prepare local communications, and coordinate events and meetings within the riding. Conversely, staff working on Parliament Hill tend to support legislative and political functions, including preparing materials for Question Period and committee meetings, managing the MP's schedule while in the capital, and overseeing communications with the media, stakeholders, and constituents. In both contexts, staff frequently serve as the primary—or only—point of contact between constituents and their elected representative. With an average of five staff members per MP (Cloutier, 2019), these small teams foster close, trust-based working relationships, distinct from non-partisan legislative staff (Malloy, 2023a). While international studies are beginning to develop frameworks for categorizing staff roles (Brandsma & Otjes, 2024; Otjes, 2023), Canada presents an opportunity to examine personal staff specifically, in a system where their proximity to and dependence on the MP are especially apparent.

Despite their critical function, staff in Canada remain understudied. Much of the academic literature on Canadian political representation focuses on MPs themselves, with relatively little attention to how MPs manage their staff or how staff contribute to representative work (Docherty, 1997, 2005; Koop et al., 2018; Malloy, 2023b). MPs widely recognize the importance of constituency service, often noting that staff are more efficient at and knowledgeable about this work, which includes connecting citizens to government services and offering guidance about accessing federal programs (Docherty, 1997). Given the importance of constituency work to Canadian MPs' roles (Koop et al., 2018), understanding how staff support and structure this work is essential to a complete picture of political representation (Cloutier, 2025). My research offers a novel contribution by situating political staff into broader theories of representation.

5. Data and Methods

Given the limited attention to staff in theories of representation, this study employs an exploratory, inductive approach to examine how MP staffers facilitate representation. I survey both federal MP staffers (n = 366) and MPs (n = 97) to assess how staff interact with constituents and how MPs use staff to support their representative roles. Following Stebbins (2001), exploratory methods are used when knowledge about a group or process is limited but holds potential for meaningful discovery. This study uses inductive online surveys combining open- and closed-ended questions to explore MP and staffers' experiences and

perspectives (Albrecht & Archibold, 2023; Braun et al., 2021). Inductive surveys are especially useful for uncovering patterns in new research areas (Albrecht & Archibold, 2023), offering both broad quantitative trends and deeper qualitative insights into how staff mediate the representative process. Administering the survey online allowed broader geographic reach and anonymity, reducing participation barriers and encouraging candid responses (Hwang, 2023). Rather than aiming for generalizability, this approach prioritizes transferability, providing rich descriptions that illuminate staffers' roles in mediating the relationship between MPs and the public, thereby contributing to the study and functioning of representation.

The staff survey targeted individuals employed by a sitting MP at the time of data collection. I compiled the sample using the Government Electronic Directory Services, which, as of August 2023, listed 1,926 staff members working for 332 MPs. All listed staff, regardless of job title, were invited to complete the survey anonymously, given staffers' general hesitancy to participate in academic research (Campbell & Bolet, 2022). The survey opened on August 25, 2024, when the House of Commons was not in session, maximizing staff availability. Out-of-office replies often identified replacements or additional staffers, who were also invited to participate to ensure broader coverage. The staff survey remained open until October 5, 2023. In total, 366 staff members completed the survey, yielding a response rate of 20%. This response rate aligns with previous studies of Canadian political staffers (Cloutier, 2019; Snagovsky & Kerby, 2019; Wilson, 2020). As well, at least one staffer responded across 213 MP offices, for an office coverage rate of 64%. Staff working for Conservative MPs were the least likely to complete the survey, with a higher share reporting no completes compared to other parties. Staff working for men MPs were also less likely to complete the survey compared to staff working for women MPs. Response rates are explored more fully in Table 1 in the Supplementary File. For MPs, 97 completed the survey, for a response rate of approximately 30%. This is greater than other recent surveys of Canadian MPs (Varone & Helfer, 2022; Walgrave et al., 2024).

The responding MPs were broadly representative of the House of Commons in terms of gender (36% of respondents were women, compared to 31% of all MPs) and region (e.g., 34% of respondents from Ontario compared to 36% of MPs overall). Party representation among respondents also closely reflected the chamber's composition, with 47% Liberal, 35% Conservative, 9% Bloc Québécois, and 8% New Democratic Party. Staff respondents were also broadly representative: 54% of staff respondents were women, and most staff respondents work for men MPs (66%). Most staff respondents are employed in a constituency office (64%) while a smaller proportion work on Parliament Hill (29%). A "both" option was provided for those working in and around the capital region, as staff could feasibly work in a constituency or parliamentary capacity. This distribution aligns with existing research, which suggests that MPs typically employ more staff in their constituency offices than in their parliamentary offices, and that more women work as staffers than men (Cloutier, 2019). The MPs who staff work for and the MPs who responded to the survey are overall reflective of the composition of the House of Commons, and the full set of descriptive statistics for staff and MP survey respondents compared to the composition of the House of Commons is available in Table 2 in the Supplementary File.

Both surveys focused on influence, discretion, and engagement with constituents. MPs were asked about the importance of staff accessibility to the public, how often they expect reports from staff about constituent interactions, and when they instruct staff to use discretion rather than report every encounter. Staff were asked about the groups they interact with the most, the frequency of public contact, how often they engage with policy advocates, and how frequently they report interactions back to MPs. They also

identified reasons for withholding information from MPs. By examining the frequency and nature of engagements between staff and constituents and staff perceptions of their own effectiveness and reporting practices, I can assess how staff influence the flow of information and influence the MP's connection with constituents. These questions provide valuable insight into the staff's function as both a point of access for the public and a filter through which constituent concerns reach the MP. Staff and MPs were permitted to skip any question or select "prefer not to answer," and results are only reported where five or more individuals responded, preventing deductive disclosure.

Close-ended survey questions were complemented with two open-ended staff survey questions. Staff were asked whether and how they influence their MP's representational work, and to share any additional thoughts about their role. These responses provide valuable qualitative elaboration, revealing how staff understand their roles as echoes and barriers in representation. Responses in French were translated into English for analysis. Two-sample *t*-tests were conducted where appropriate to determine statistically significant differences between constituency staff and Parliament Hill staff. This mixed methods approach, combining structured survey items with qualitative responses, provides a more nuanced understanding of staff's role in the representational process. It captures both the frequency and character of constituent interactions, as well as staffers' self-perceptions of their influence on MPs' representational practices. By integrating the perspective of both MPs and staff, the study sheds light on the relational, constructed nature of representation in parliamentary democracy.

6. Results

Recall that the study's main question is "How do MPs' staff mediate the representative relationship between constituents and the MP, and how does that mediation affect how we understand representation?" When the House is in session and MPs are therefore predominantly in Ottawa, they delegate their constituency duties to their staff. Through this delegation, most MPs ($n = 95$; 86%) agree with the statement that they trust their staff to make some decisions on their behalf. Almost all MPs think it is important (33%) or very important (66%) that their staff are accessible for meetings with members of the public. An overwhelming majority of MPs (82%) think it is important that their staff are accessible to meet with individuals or groups wishing to voice legislative initiatives.

When MPs were asked how often they ask their staff members to inform them about interactions with members of the public, most said daily (29%) or weekly (64%). Yet, when asked to provide the reasons why they might tell their staff to not inform them about interactions with members of the public, an overwhelming majority of MPs (78%) reported they trust staff members to use their discretion. One MP explained, "I trust them to contact me when needed." MPs reported they tell their staff not to inform them about interactions with members of the public when it was a "routine" interaction (53%). One MP explained how "regular case work only needs my attention if my staff determine that I need to get involved which is rare." Another MP explained how they ask "for issue summaries, so every/routine interactions are aggregated." This suggests most MPs trust their staff to take on a representative role on their behalf.

The following results draw directly from the staffer survey, highlighting how staff actively mediate the representative role between constituents and MPs. In their job, staff often serve as the first point of contact for constituents, representing the MP in the community and ensuring that local voices are heard. As one

constituency staffer described: "Being the first point of contact for constituents at the office, we represent the people of the riding and report back to the MP ensuring their voice is heard and their concerns are relayed."

All staff were asked to select which members of the public they mostly interact with, depicted in Table 1. Most staff selected constituents (66%), followed by community stakeholders (15%), elected representatives (7%), registered lobbyists (6%), and business stakeholders (2%). Only 4% of staff indicate that they do not interact with members of the public. Not surprisingly, constituency staff were most likely to meet with constituents (83%), followed by community stakeholders (13%). After meeting with constituents (32%), Parliament Hill staff were equally likely to indicate that they meet with community stakeholders (17%), registered lobbyists (17%), and other elected representatives (17%).

Table 1. Members of the public staff most frequently interact with (n = 332).

	Constituency Staff (n = 229)		Parliament Hill Staff (n = 103)		Total (n = 332)	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Constituents	189	83%	33	32%	222	67%
Community Stakeholders	29	13%	18	17%	47	14%
Elected Representatives	5	2%	17	17%	22	7%
Registered Lobbyists	< 5	—	18	17%	19	6%
Business Stakeholders	< 5	—	7	7%	8	2%
Rarely Interacts	< 5	—	10	10%	14	4%
Total	229	100%	103	100%	332	100%

Staff were asked how frequently they provide people with information about federal government policies, shown in Figure 1. Overall, staff indicated they provide people with information about the government's position at least once a day (43%) or a few times a week (40%). Constituency staff (44%) were more likely than Parliament Hill staff (22%) to indicate they provide people with information about the government's position on a daily basis. A two-sample t-test was conducted to examine the differences in staff interactions. Constituency staff report more frequent interactions with members of the public about federal government policies (M = 4.11, SD = 1.00) than Parliament Hill staff (M = 3.69, SD = 1.06), $t(334) = 3.4467$, $p < 0.001$. These findings highlight the crucial role constituency staff play in directly engaging with the public and providing information about federal government policies. Their frequent interactions with constituents demonstrate their function as both service providers and communicators of government positions. The higher frequency of information-sharing among constituency staff compared to Parliament Hill staff suggests that local offices serve as critical access points for public engagement with federal policies.

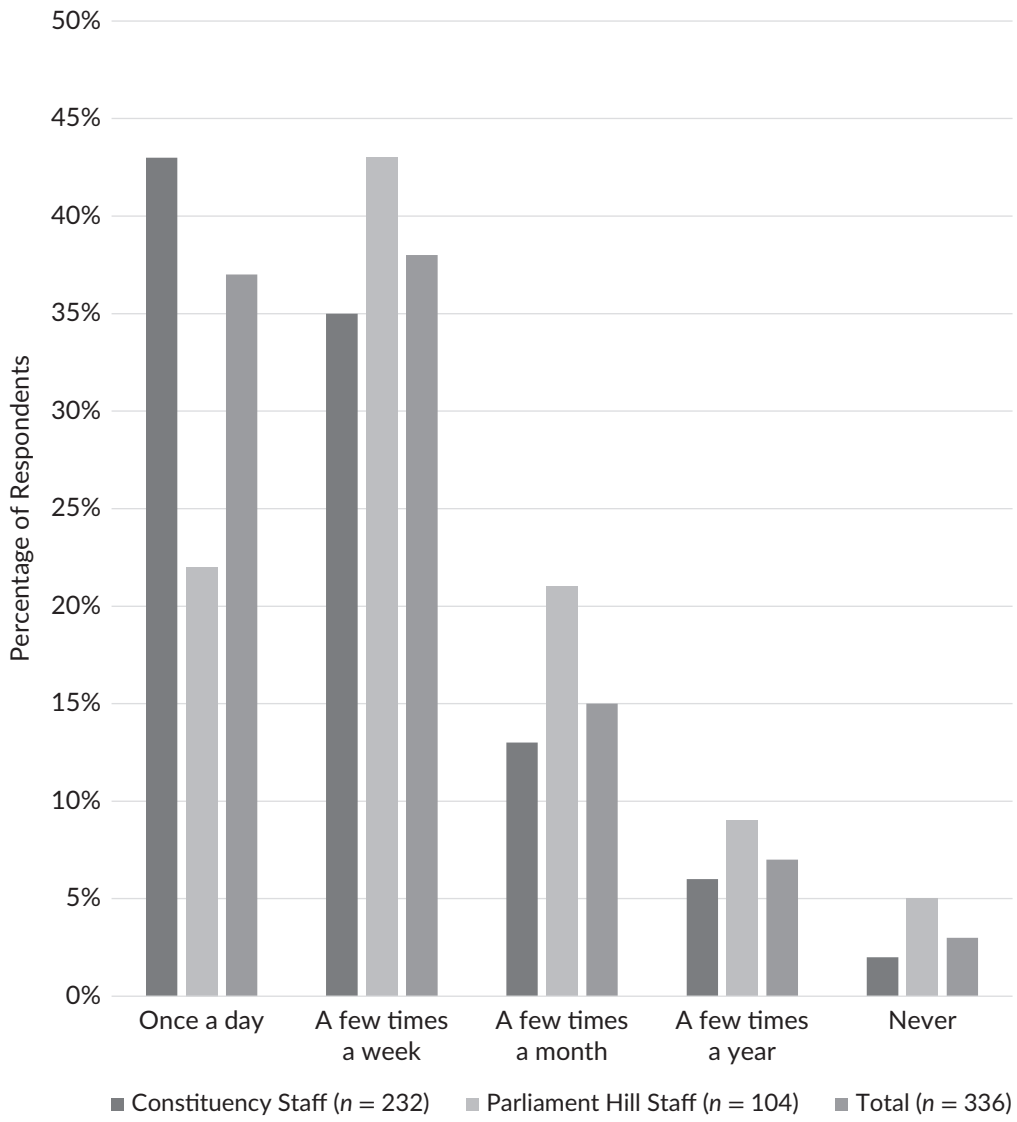

Figure 1. Frequency of staffers providing people with information about federal government policies ($n = 366$).

Staff are also important for relaying constituents' views back to their MPs, shown in Figure 2. Overall, staff report responding to people advocating for a specific policy position at least once a day (23%) or a few times a week (38%), while Parliament Hill staff (28%, $M = 3.81$, $SD = 1.08$) were more likely than constituency staff (20%, $M = 3.46$, $SD = 1.25$), $t(329) = 2.6754$, $p < 0.004$, for daily interactions with people advocating for a specific policy position. These frequent interactions make staff crucial liaisons for constituent voices, setting the stage for how they act as "echoes" through amplifying or selecting the information that reaches MPs.

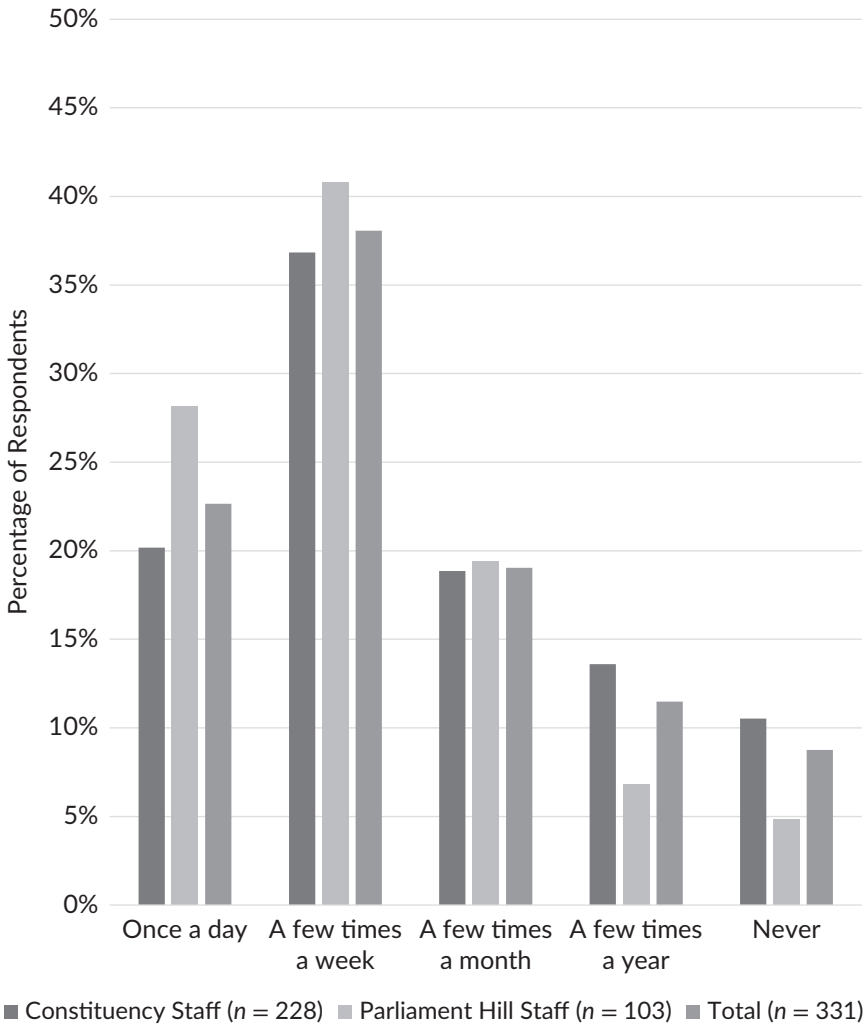

Figure 2. How frequently staff indicate they respond to people advocating for a specific policy position ($n = 331$).

6.1. Staff as Echoes

Staff play a crucial role in relaying, or echoing, constituents' views back to their MPs. One staffer describes the role of a staffer as being "an echo of what's said in the constituency." Staff report how they collect information to report back to the MP, ensuring the most important concerns are relayed and reported to the MP. For example, one constituency staffer explains how they pass information from constituents to the MP, including "their concerns about upcoming bills." As another constituency staffer emphasizes:

> Because we're in direct contact with citizens while the MP is in Ottawa, we have a reality on the ground that we're able to share. The MP can then intervene at committee meetings based on the situations experienced in their riding.

While the MP cannot be in more than one place at once, their staffers act as stand-ins and bridge the gap between the riding and Ottawa.

One constituency staffer explains how constituent interactions can be "emotionally more difficult," such as helping with immigration files. Another staffer explains how their interactions with constituents are predominantly about their difficulties. These interactions can be "very taxing for employees." One staffer explains how their MP requires the constituency staffers to have a social work degree. This could be because neither MPs nor their staff receive adequate training on how to navigate difficult conversations (Cloutier, 2024; Cockram, 2023).

Beyond offering a listening ear, staff are also key intermediaries between the public and the MP. One staffer notes that by handling calls from constituents, they often gain access to valuable information that may be useful to the MP. Another constituency staffer describes their role as both a "sounding board" and an "information collector," emphasizing that while MPs tend to focus on high-profile issues, staff may detect emerging concerns before they reach the MP's attention. Through their front-line interactions and discretion in relaying information, staff play a pivotal role in amplifying emergent issues and determining the flow of constituent concerns that inform MPs' priorities.

6.2. Staff as Barriers

Staff's responses also emphasize a barrier role, acting as gatekeepers to MPs. Staff use their discretion to control, interpret, and manage the flow of information, determining which constituent interactions or information is deemed worthy of the MP's attention. A staffer explains how they are "often the information barrier between various stakeholders and [constituents] and the MP." While this engagement enables staff to bring forward individual experiences and broader constituency concerns, it also demonstrates their influential position in determining the MP's awareness and priorities. Another constituency staffer writes the following:

> I think that through our interactions with the public, community organizations, private businesses and other groups, I'm able to guide the prioritization of issues to work on, positions to think more about, actions to take to represent our fellow citizens well, and initiatives to take.

This quotation highlights how staff help decide the MP's agenda by prioritizing information. Determining when (and if) the representative gets to hear about an issue is a gatekeeping function, reflecting staff's discretionary power to decide what warrants the MP's attention.

Staff regularly brief the MP, highlighting key trends and urgent matters. One constituency staffer explains:

> We provide feedback to the MP on a weekly basis about the issues and cases that [come] to our office. Many cases the MP will advocate for and bring to Ottawa [are] based on what also happens in her constituency office.

Another constituency staffer highlights how their regular interactions with the public help frame the MP's political priorities:

> I interact with constituents on a very regular basis. I have a feel for the salient issues within the community and report back to the MP about what issues are important for them to focus on in their

> communications to riding residents and in caucus meetings, as well as which projects to put their political support behind.

As another constituency staffer explains:

> We keep him informed of everything that is happening in his constituency, be it wishes, discontents, problems of residents and organizations, events to celebrate, etc. In this way, the MP can maintain a privileged relationship with his community and better represent the interests of residents.

This regular flow of information not only supports the MP's representative role, but also, through staff, MPs are able to reinforce their responsiveness in the riding. In this way, staff become what they call the MP's "eyes and ears," helping the MP stay connected with community needs.

Staff were asked how often they give their MP a direct report about what happened in meetings with members of the public on a scale of 0–100%, with 0% being "never" and 100% being "always." Figure 3 shows the distribution of responses by staffers working in the constituency offices and on Parliament Hill. On average, staff say they report back to their MP more often than not, although there is substantial variability in responses, with a standard deviation of 30%. The most common response was 100%, with approximately 20% of staff indicating they always report back to their MP. The distribution of responses is left-skewed, meaning staff are generally more likely to report back at higher percentages. When comparing job locations, a statistically

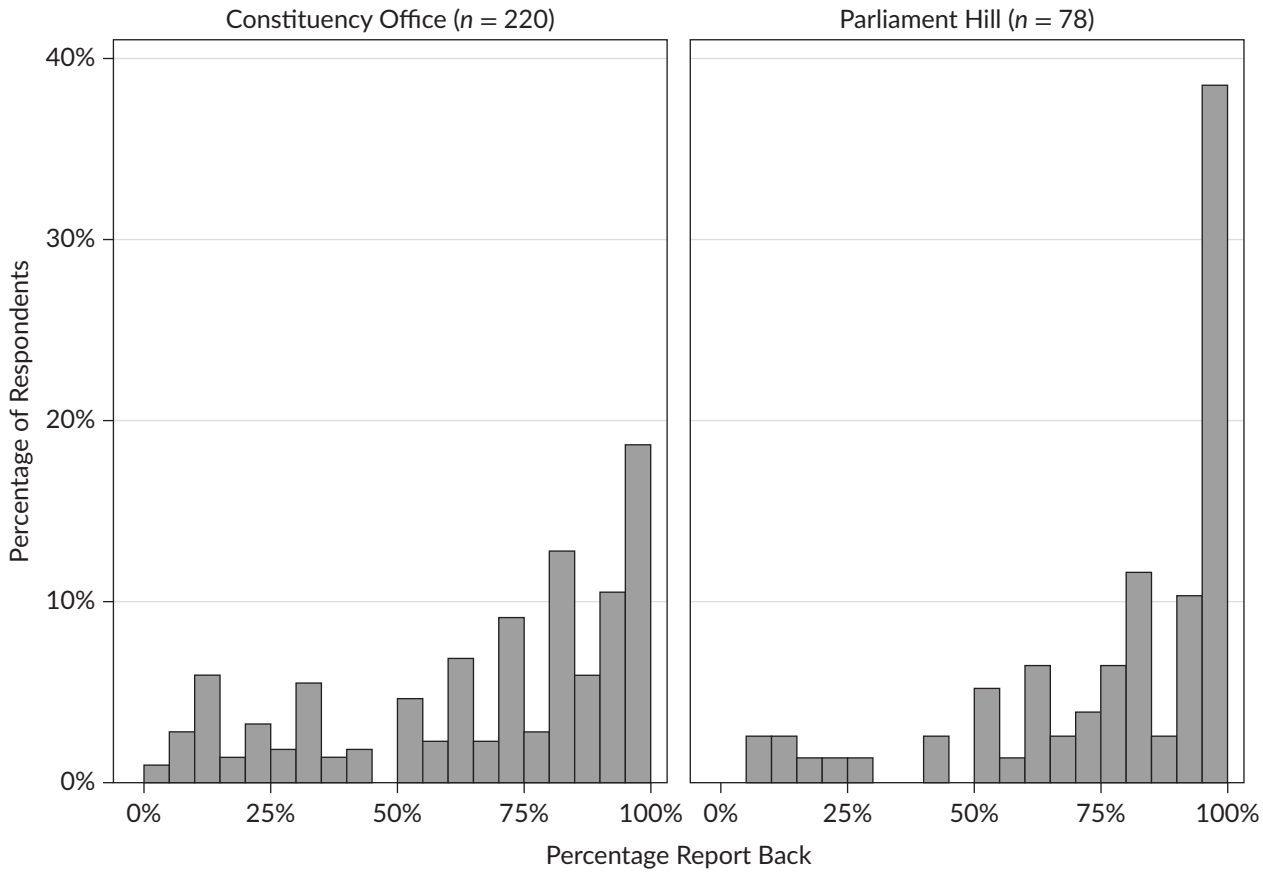

Figure 3. How often staff report back to MP, by job location ($n = 298$).

significant difference emerges. Staff located on Parliament Hill ($M = 77.62$, $SD = 26.25$) are significantly more likely to report back to their MP compared to staff working in constituency offices ($M = 66.00$, $SD = 29.65$), $t(296) = 3.0612$, $p > 0.001$.

While the results in Figure 3 suggest a high rate of communication, it may not fully capture the nuances of what gets communicated and why. Staff working in constituencies are more likely to use their discretion about when to report back to the MP about interactions with members of the public. I asked staff to select all answers that apply to why they would not tell their MP about their interactions with members of the public, shown in Table 2. Staff were also invited to provide additional information if a reason was not provided, adding greater explanation and candor behind the decision-making process of not informing their MP about interactions with members of the public.

Table 2. Reasons staff do not inform MP about interactions with the public ($n = 337$).

	Constituency Office ($n = 232$)		Parliament Hill ($n = 105$)		Total responses selected ($n = 337$)	
	n	%	*n*	%	*n*	%
It was a routine interaction	172	74%	229	68%	57	54%
Didn't think it was relevant for the MP to know about	137	59%	192	57%	55	52%
It's something they already talked about	73	31%	113	34%	40	38%
Didn't want to bother the MP with the interaction	39	17%	56	17%	17	16%
It's something the MP has told staff that they didn't want to know about	17	7%	25	7%	8	8%
Another staff member told staff not to tell the MP	11	5%	16	5%	5	5%
It would be hurtful for the MP to know	10	4%	19	6%	9	9%

The primary reasons staff chose not to inform MPs about their interactions with members of the public were the routine nature of interactions and perceived irrelevance, shown in Table 2. The majority of respondents indicated that their interactions were routine (68%), with a statistically significant higher percentage for staff working in constituency offices (74%, $M = 0.74$, $SD = 0.44$) compared to staff working on Parliament Hill (54%, $M = 0.54$, $SD = 0\ .50$), $t(335) = 3.6782$, $p > 0.0001$. Similarly, staff did not inform MPs about their interactions because they believed the information was irrelevant (57%), with consistency observed between constituency staff (59%) and Parliament Hill staff (52%). Specifically, a constituency staffer explains that they do not inform their MP when it involves other service requests, such as cases that require the "intervention of CRA officials, Service Canada, Phoenix, Passports, or others." Another constituency staffer explains that it is unnecessary to inform the MP "when it is a problem that concerns another level of government." One constituency staffer writes, "You'd be surprised how many people state the obvious but treat it as new news. I don't share that with the MP." Throughout this, staff are able to select what information is relevant for the MP to know. One constituency staffer explains how they "track calls, visits, and emails" to present interactions "as 'big picture'", meaning they can synthesize incoming issues and report back to distill the most relevant aspects of what is happening in the riding to the MP.

Approximately one-third (34%) of staff stated that they do not report back to MPs when it was something they had previously discussed with the MP, slightly higher for those working on Parliament Hill (38%) than for constituency staff (31%). A smaller proportion of staffers (17%) indicated reluctance to "bother the MP," with nearly identical responses from constituency and parliament offices. An explanation from a constituency staffer clarifies more nuanced decision-making processes. The staffer states they might withhold information if they believe the MP "would not understand the issue (optimal use of our time)" or if the matter "goes against party lines (pick your battles)." This illustrates how political judgment and strategic communication impact staff decisions. In this case, withholding information is not about lack of transparency, but rather about prioritization and efficiency. Additionally, the strong party discipline in Canada (Godbout, 2020; Marland, 2020) reinforces the need for staff to manage communications in ways that align with broader party objectives. Staff must balance responsiveness to their constituents with the reality that MPs operate within a structured partisan environment. Staff are not simply messengers; they are interpreters, strategists, and filters who shape the flow of information to MPs in ways they perceive to be most effective or pragmatic.

Less frequently cited reasons include staff receiving explicit instruction from the MP not to inform them (7%) or that they received advice from another staff member to not tell the MP (5%). Staff also infrequently selected that they would not report back an interaction with members of the public when it could be hurtful for the MP to know (6%). However, Parliament Hill staff (9%) were more likely than constituency staff (4%) to select this option. One constituency staffer explains: "It was a violent email[,] not necessary to report every time." This reflects the broader reality that both MPs and their staff are frequent targets of harassment, which can influence how staff decide what incidents to relay (Cloutier, 2024). One Parliament Hill staffer writes, "The only time I wouldn't tell them something was if it was a rude comment or hate someone made about them." Another constituency staffer explains how the information can be completely irrelevant to the work of the MP because it is targeted to be hurtful:

> Sometimes we receive feedback and [because] of the public role of the MP a constituent might feel comfortable discussing [the MP's] weight gain or "health" since assuming the role. In my opinion this is not a relevant part of the conversation, the constituent has no right to pass that judgement or make that comment and I will not relay that to the MP because there is no benefit to anyone sharing that comment. Outside of that type of comment I would not withhold any comment that might be hurtful…if it needs to be known.

These examples emphasize how staff often serve as protective buffers for MPs, especially in an increasingly hostile political climate. Their decisions about what to filter reflect not only professional judgment but also a growing need to manage the emotional and psychological toll associated with political office today (Krook, 2020; Raney & Collier, 2024).

Interpersonal communication between an MP's office and constituents is a constant and varied part of daily operations. MPs emphasize the importance of responsiveness, though this is done via their staff. MPs receive constant contact from constituents, though staff often manage their email accounts as part of their duties. One staffer mentioned how, every day, the number of emails they receive is in the "high hundreds." Over two-thirds of MPs surveyed stated that it was important or very important for staffers to respond to every letter or email from members of the public, even if they aren't from the MP's riding. As Figure 4 shows, staff are frequently contacted not only about political matters but also about deeply personal concerns, sometimes

simply because people need someone to talk to. These interactions happen regularly, with staff reporting daily (42%) or weekly (39%) contact of this nature. Constituency staff emphasize the importance of active listening and creating a non-judgmental space, recognizing that many constituents simply want to feel heard. As one constituency staffer explains:

> Listening is a very important skill when dealing with the public and being non-judgmental. Sometimes people just need to vent and get things off their chests. We must remember to thank them for their opinions and let them know they have been heard.

This underscores a broader theme of constituency work: The MP's office often serves as an accessible, human point of contact between the government and the public.

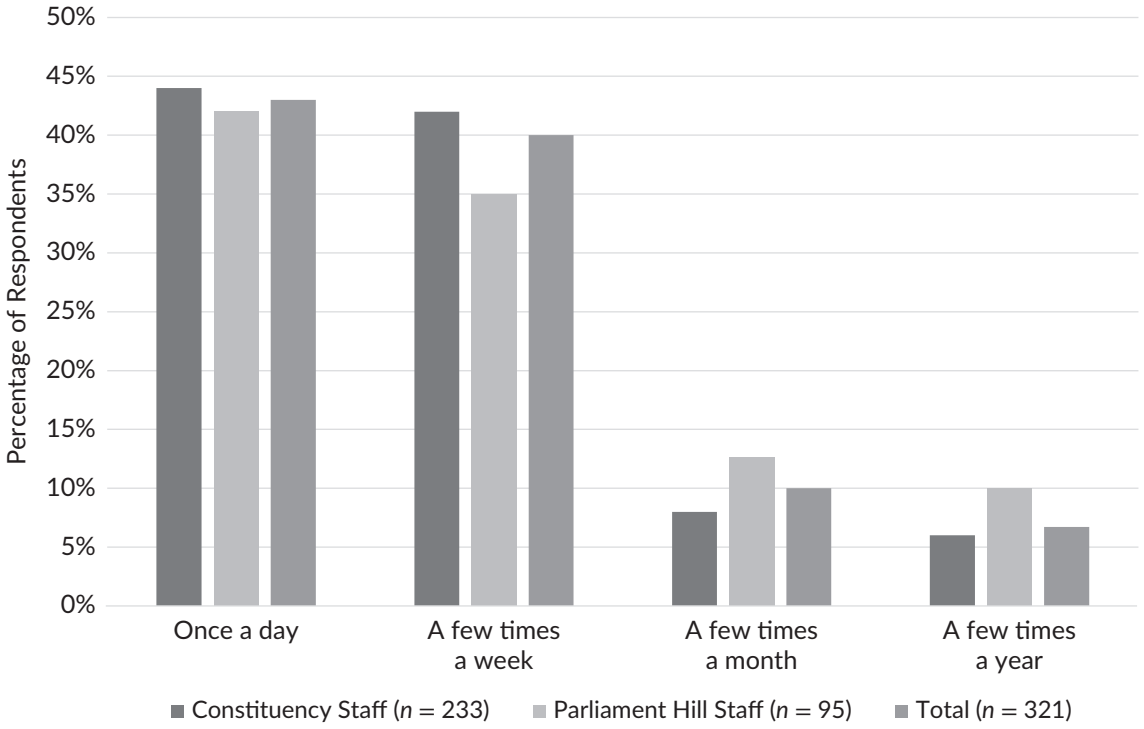

Figure 4. How frequently people contact the MP's office just to talk (n = 321).

Importantly, staff also view themselves as advocates as well as intermediaries. Several highlighted how they help the MP represent their constituents more effectively in Ottawa by sharing real-life stories and concrete examples. One staffer explains, "I inform the MP about situations that the citizens of the riding are experiencing in relation to the government," adding that they provide "a concrete example of the reality of the people who live these problems." Another staffer notes:

> Our jobs as political staffers have a direct impact on an MP's job as an elected representative. We do our very best to pass on any messages that the public (whether they be constituents or not) [passes] directly to the MP to ensure their voices are heard. Our abilities to advocate for the public on behalf of our MP has a direct correlation with their job as an elected representative.

This is an integral role in the representative process, creating greater connection between the community and the MP. This demonstrates how much staff seriously dedicate themselves to their positions. One constituency staffer even explains how, though it is not mandatory, they network and attend social events because "it is crucial to make connections and friends at other MP offices or other levels of government. It helps to refer constituents to the right person to help solve their problem, if not me or my office."

Parliamentary and constituency staff play a crucial role in mediating the flow of information that reaches MPs, which informs an MP's decision-making, both on Parliament Hill and within the riding. One Parliament Hill staffer highlights the weight of sharing information, stating that staff must be mindful of how their decisions to pass on or withhold certain information can influence an MP's decision-making. They emphasize the importance of avoiding personal biases that could impair the MP's options, underscoring that "this is perhaps the most important responsibility" of staffers.

Emphasizing the importance of managing the flow of communication between constituents and MPs, one staffer explains that they do not want to overwhelm the MP with "consistent feedback or interruptions." This suggests that staff can filter and strategically present constituent correspondence, thereby determining what the MP comes to know about their riding. Another constituency staffer makes this role explicit: "We have a reality on the ground that we're able to share, and the MP can then intervene at committee meetings on the situations in his riding." Similarly, another staffer reflected:

> There are so many issues in society, and we focus on the big ones, but sometimes there's a big one either under the surface or about to become big, and I may hear about it five or six times before it hits the Member's radar.

These accounts suggest that staff are not simply passing along information, but decide which issues warrant attention and when they should be escalated. In doing so, staff can create the informational frameworks that affect MPs' priorities and timing. As one staffer elaborates:

> I influence how the MP [builds] connections to the government when they want to raise an issue, need help, coordinate meetings, etc. Staffers who keep on top of community communications, needs, and requests help the MP better represent and address the needs of their riding. MPs have so much work; any tasks we can pick up help them focus on the jobs we all need them to accomplish.

Together, these reflections suggest that staff operate as facilitators and curators of constituent information. While MPs have the authority as elected representatives to represent their riding in parliament, their capacity to respond effectively to both legislative and local demands can be contingent on the informational frameworks constructed by their staff.

Within constituency offices, staff's work in filtering constituent concerns and translating local issues into parliamentary priorities is central to the representational work of MPs. One staffer notes that constituent input often informs a wide range of political communications, stating that "regularly sharing concerns raised by individuals and community groups in the riding could be seen as influencing the text drafted for speeches, Question period, social media, op eds, etc." Staff are mindful that MPs are the elected representatives and staff acknowledge the MP's "vision and voice" must remain central. This reflects the dual representational

burden placed on staff: to convey local concerns and constituent voices while aligning them with the MP's broader political perspective.

Constituency staffers can wield substantial discretion in determining representational priorities, with the power to influence which communities gain political access and which are marginalized. One constituency staffer states:

> Through my dealings with the community I get a gauge of how each ethnic community views us, the work we do and our party as a whole. From that I inform him what communities to prioritize and which ones we should push more to the side.

This comment illustrates how staffers exercise judgment in ways that may be informed by their own perspectives or biases about different communities within a constituency. In some cases, such judgments may operate through a combination of echoing certain voices while blocking others, thereby impacting which groups appear more or less salient to the MP. This dynamic points to a potential, though not necessarily typical, influence of staff on representational politics, highlighting that questions of access and exclusion merit further, more systematic investigation.

7. Discussion

This study examines how MP staffers mediate the representative relationship between constituents and their elected officials. The findings reveal that staff are not merely administrative support but are integral actors who influence the representational process. Staff facilitate representation by echoing constituent concerns, yet they also mediate and filter these concerns through discretionary practices, determining what information reaches MPs and how it is framed. Constructivist theories remind us that such discretion is not a neutral filter, but a form of claims-making, as staff determine, implicitly or explicitly, which concerns are worthy of being relayed to the MP. The capacity of staffers to exercise judgment over the content, timing, and relevance of information emphasizes the substantial, albeit often invisible, role they play in shaping the quality and character of democratic representation.

Constructivist theories of representation offer the best framework for understanding these findings, emphasizing that representation is not a static relationship based solely on electoral authorization, but rather an ongoing process constituted through claims-making, and communication (Disch, 2011; Saward, 2006). In this framework, the question is not simply who is authorized to represent, but how representation is enacted through everyday practices. By filtering constituent concerns, amplifying certain voices, and curating the information that reaches MPs, staffers become integral actors in the construction of political claims. If representation is framed through these everyday acts of mediation, then the role of staff must be recognized as central to the representative process.

Concerns about democratic quality and inclusion also resonate through these findings. Following Dovi's (2012) argument that good representation requires attentiveness to whose voices are included or excluded, this study highlights how staff exercise influence over the inclusiveness of the representative relationship. Staffers' selective engagement with particular constituent groups, seen in the example of a staffer prioritizing outreach to certain ethnic communities while minimizing contact with others, demonstrates the political

weight of staff discretion. This discretionary power means that staff play a pivotal role in determining which communities gain political attention and which are left at the margins. Thus, staffers are not merely extending MPs' reach; they are actively constructing the boundaries of political representation itself.

These findings resonate with broader research on front-line staff in other domains. As Gidengil (2020) explains, people's interactions with front-line staff matter because the way they are treated, whether with courtesy or neglect, impacts not only the person's immediate experiences but also their overall evaluations of the institution. Similarly, in MPs' offices, staff are often the first and most consistent point of contact for constituents, meaning that their conduct and discretion can profoundly impact how representation is experienced on the ground. Future research could examine how the treatment that constituents receive from staff influences their broader evaluations of MPs and democratic institutions as a whole.

Other patterns emerging from the data further highlight the protective role staff play in insulating MPs from harmful or emotionally taxing interactions with constituents. Constituents who have to go to their MP for help often do so as a last resort (Cloutier, 2024; Hofstetter & Stokoe, 2018). As a result, constituents may have trouble communicating their issues to their MPs or staff when emotions run high. While this work may feel "routine" for staff and their MPs, these interactions are very important to constituents, especially when dealing with issues such as family reunification and financial concerns. While staff act as intermediaries and buffers can contribute to the sustainability of MPs' work under conditions of emotional and psychological strain, staff then have to manage constituents' emotions in these situations (Cloutier, 2024). This role is increasingly vital given the rise of hostility directed toward public officials (De Angelis, 2024; Raney & Collier, 2024).

Recognizing the limitations of this study is important for future research to address. Staffing arrangements across MPs' offices are highly decentralized, creating variation in how much discretion individual staffers exercise and how they manage constituent interactions. While the survey captures the occurrence of mediation activities, it does not fully reflect the content, depth, or timing of communication between staff and MPs. Future work should examine the decision-making processes staffers use to prioritize or withhold information, the relational dynamics within MP offices, and the extent to which staff perceive themselves as extensions of their MPs' political identities. Another possible consideration is that, in parliamentary democracies like Canada, individual MPs have limited authority, constrained by strong party discipline (Godbout, 2020; Marland, 2020), and the executive maintains control over the legislative agenda (Malloy, 2014). This raises questions about the relevance of studying staff mediation. Yet, constituency representation remains a core democratic function and a vital site of political engagement (Koop et al., 2018). Regardless of formal constraints, MPs' interactions with constituents, mediated by staff, critically shape how representation is constructed and experienced. These limitations reinforce the value of constructivist approaches, which direct attention not just to the institutional structures or electoral mandates of representation, but to the routine, everyday practices through which representation is performed by unelected actors (Crewe & Sarra, 2021).

8. Conclusion

This research demonstrates that MP staffers influence the representative relationship between constituents and MPs. Most MPs trust their staff to make some decisions on their behalf, and most instruct staff to use discretion in routine interactions. Staffers act both as "echoes," ensuring constituent voices are heard, and as

"barriers," managing access and shielding MPs from harmful comments. Through these practices, staff help construct the everyday act of representation, shaping MPs' perceptions of their communities and the issues they bring forward in parliament. Constituents are the primary group that staff engage with, and constituency staff report daily engagement about government policies at significantly higher rates than Parliament Hill staff. Conversely, Parliament Hill staff are more likely to interact daily with policy advocates. While staff generally report constituent concerns back to MPs frequently, they exercise considerable judgment over what to communicate. Routine or perceived irrelevance were the most common reasons for withholding information, with constituency staff especially likely to filter routine interactions, a crucial finding given that constituency staff, who interact most directly with the public, are not often considered in studies of representation. Staff also perform critical emotional work, regularly serving as listeners for constituents seeking just to talk to someone. These practices highlight how representation is not solely performed by elected officials, but is a dynamic process co-produced with their staff. By shifting the focus beyond elected officials, this study expands theories of representation to account for the critical role of staff. Future research should explore how staff discretion varies across institutional and partisan contexts and examine how staff–MP dynamics influence the broader representative process. This study highlights that representation is not only performed by those elected to office but is co-constructed by the staffers who stand between MPs and the public. Staffers' discretion, judgment, and everyday practices makes them crucial parts of the representative process.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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About the Author

Meagan Cloutier completed her PhD in the Department of Political Science at the University of Calgary. Her research focuses on representation and staff working for members of parliament in Canada.