

Representation IN ACTION

Canadian MPs in the Constituencies

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AND KELLY BLIDOOK



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Contents

List of Figures and Tables / *ix*

Acknowledgments / *xi*

Introduction / *3*

1 | Observing Politicians / *15*

2 | Leon Benoit / *35*

3 | Tony Clement / *72*

4 | Megan Leslie / *100*

5 | Influences on Representational Styles / *128*

6 | Five MPs in Their Constituencies / *158*

Conclusion / *197*

Notes / *215*

Works Cited / *219*

Index / *227*

Introduction

IN 2013, WE TRAVELLED with two Members of Parliament (MPs), Leon Benoit and Niki Ashton, in their respective ridings, to learn how they go about representing their constituents. Both MPs came from expansive rural ridings in the West, Benoit in central Alberta and Ashton in northern Manitoba; but whereas Benoit was a long-time Conservative incumbent, Ashton was a comparative newcomer as a New Democratic Party (NDP) MP. A comparison of one day spent with each of these MPs is highly suggestive. A day spent with Benoit included six town hall meetings and other gatherings in which he spoke about and invited feedback on pressing policy issues. In contrast, a day with Ashton was characterized by visiting public events and venues in order to ask constituents if they had any problems she could assist them with.

Both MPs were reaching out to their constituents. Both MPs were undoubtedly engaging in representational activities. But the nuances of their approaches to the task of representation were markedly different: Benoit invested his time engaging constituents on issues of policy, whereas Ashton spent her time both inviting and working on service requests from constituents. These days were not exceptional; rather, they demonstrated a wider pattern of behaviour, and in turn, reflected the choices Benoit and Ashton made about how they represented their constituents.

Representation is a diverse practice. The choices that Benoit, Ashton, and other MPs make over time lead to the development of very different representational styles. MPs' approaches to the task

of representation and, therefore, their own personal definitions of representation differ. And the ways in which these MPs' constituents experience representation, therefore, differ as well.

The fact that observing two MPs produces two very different accounts of representation suggests that exploring this phenomenon through the eyes of the representative should be a useful approach to capturing some of the nuances in the process of representation. We are not the first to note this. While the study of representation has generally been theoretical in nature (e.g., Pitkin 1967), a small number of scholars have stressed the importance of exploring representation by observing how representatives themselves engage in it. These explorations of representation, by trying to perceive how the representatives themselves understand their roles and carry out their representational tasks, are the result of the use of qualitative research methods, including interviews (e.g., Jewell 1982; Searing 1994) and participant observation (e.g., Fenno 1996; 2000; Smith 2003). This latter approach to exploring representation is particularly powerful as it allows researchers to both ask representatives about their roles and to observe the practice of those roles in action.

Accordingly, from 2012 to 2015, we both observed and interviewed eleven Canadian MPs while they were going about their tasks as representatives. First, we shadowed the MPs while they were in their individual constituencies. This took us from Vegreville, Alberta, to Halifax, Nova Scotia; from isolated Thompson, Manitoba, to the dense urban core of Toronto, Ontario; from solidly safe party seats to constituencies that were hotly contested in the next election campaign. We also spent time with MPs while they were in their Ottawa offices fulfilling their parliamentary duties. We observed these MPs in many different situations, from hostile public meetings and episodes of door knocking in their constituencies, to committee meetings and Question Period in Ottawa. In addition to our interviews, we had significant opportunities to speak with and get to know them as individual representatives. While we sought to observe patterns in representational styles (and certainly did so), the primary goal was to describe and conceptualize these MPs as individuals.

Like Michael Smith (2003, 2), we found that MPs do not go about defining representation and their roles as representatives in the same ways academics might: by theorization or hypothesis testing. Instead, MPs learn about being representatives not only from prior perceptions and experiences, but also from practice.

An exploration of representation from the perspective of these MPs themselves provides a deep understanding of both their varying representational styles and the reasons why MPs develop these styles. In this introduction, we situate the ensuing analysis within an overview of both the key concepts employed in the academic study of representation and the state of the literature on the quality and practice of representation in Canada. Our research questions flow from these overviews. We conclude with a discussion of the broad themes that both informed and were shaped by this research.

Representation and Canadian MPs

Hanna Pitkin (1967) distinguishes between *substantive* and *descriptive* representation, where the former is regarded as acting for and the latter as standing for a given electorate. Substantive representation (also termed *policy* representation – see Soroka and Wlezien 2010) involves observable actions that representatives engage in. Pitkin argues that focusing upon the substance of representational activities “supplies us with standards for judging the representative’s action, for deciding whether [she or he] has represented well or ill” (142).

Another important distinction made in academic studies of representatives is between *trustee* and *delegate* approaches to representation. Edmund Burke’s articulation of the trustee model – telling constituents that a representative’s “unbiased opinion, his mature judgment, his enlightened conscience, he ought not to sacrifice to you” – remains a key point in understanding the link between elected and elector (Stanlis 2003, 224). Burke’s perspective contrasts with that of US founding father Alexander Hamilton, who argued that House of Representatives members “should have an immediate dependence on, and an intimate sympathy with, the

people” (Hamilton et al. 2003, 52). While this distinction is often viewed as artificial in practice, the trustee’s role is conceptualized as that of acting upon judgment and the delegate’s role as one of acting upon the wishes of constituents.

John C. Wahlke et al. (1962) propose two additional dimensions of representation: *focus* and *style*. Focus is best described as the “who” of representation; for example, does the representative focus on a partisan, geographic, or national constituency in choosing who to best represent? Style, in contrast, refers, to the distinction between Burke’s and Hamilton’s conceptions and is best described as the “how” of representation: for example, is the representative a delegate who takes orders or a trustee who acts more independently? Thus, focus and style are two separate (though perhaps related in practice) components of representation. Nevertheless, in thinking of “style” as the manner in which representative practice is carried out, there are more nuances to consider – especially the representative’s connections with the represented, as opposed to simply a unidirectional process of the representative acting on the represented’s behalf in the capital. Richard Fenno’s (1978) *Home Style*, for example, looked at a range of members of the US House of Representatives and sought to more carefully observe and explain the various styles that the individual members used in connecting to their home districts.

Strong party discipline characterizes Canadian federal politics. Within such a context, the individual representational style of MPs is often regarded as that of trustee for his or her constituency, yet as a delegate of his or her party (in UK see Beer 1965). In Canada, party discipline and executive dominance are, therefore, seen as central to the representative relationship (Franks 1987; Docherty 1997; Savoie 1999; Carty, Cross, and Young 2000). Thomas notes that “the Canadian cabinet parliamentary system elevates parties over individual politicians ... and most actions by individuals are, in fact, forms of party behavior” (1985, 43). This suggests that individual MPs will have substantial difficulty representing the interests of their constituents when those interests are not congruent with the interests of their parties. Indeed, MPs must navigate the

sometimes difficult waters of representing a constituency while typically placing primacy on party interests.

Both party discipline and the increasing power of the political executive in Canadian government – particularly in the Prime Minister’s Office – are often identified as two causes of public disenchantment with the representational process in Canada. It is difficult, if not impossible, for MPs to adequately represent the wishes and preferences of their constituents to Parliament if the MPs’ party or leader does not wish them to do so or commands them to behave in ways that are in contrast to the wishes and preferences of their constituents. However, it is important to highlight that while MPs are not particularly independent or powerful in the Canadian system, they are quite clearly independent in the sense that they are not required to remain within any party, vote in a given manner, or propose particular policies (Smith 2007, 87). It is up to the MP to determine how to behave as an elected member, and the institutional structure does facilitate some forms of individual representational behaviour that require better understanding.

David Docherty (1997), in what stands out as the first in-depth look at Canadian MPs themselves, shows that MPs both seek power and higher office and also accept the near minimal role that most MPs play in Parliament. They engage in community service, they help individual constituents access government services, and they maintain an ongoing presence in constituency offices and at local events. However, MPs have highly limited roles as legislators given the institutional structure that they act within. The diversity of MPs is typically more apparent on the margins and in relation to their constituency roles than it is in Ottawa. Indeed, many MPs are limited by their lack of experience and comparably short careers in terms of their overall impact on matters at the federal level (Franks 1987). Those who enter Parliament with a particular eye to affecting policy are more likely to voluntarily resign once they are familiar with the system they face (Kerby and Blidook 2011).

It is this disconnect between voters’ expectations and MPs’ roles and actions in Ottawa that can erode Canadians’ sense that they are effectively represented. This erosion appears to be reflected in

public opinion: there is a high percentage of Canadians who believe MPs lose touch with their constituents upon being elected (Bastedo et al. 2011; Blais and Gidengil 1991; Howe and Northrup 2000; Anderson and Goodyear-Grant 2005; Docherty 2005) and thus neglect the task of representing the needs and wishes of their constituents to Ottawa. In fact, a majority of Canadians (59 percent) are dissatisfied with the way in which their interests are represented in Ottawa, and this unfavourable view extends to their evaluations of MPs generally (LeDuc and Pammett 2014, 34). Loat and MacMillan, for example, highlight a twenty-point decline over the past decade in Canadians' satisfaction with the state of democracy (2014).

These overall negative views of Canadian democracy, however, contain a notable paradox: Canadians, while dissatisfied with MPs as a group, are generally pleased with their own individual MPs, with only 29 percent of those surveyed expressing dissatisfaction (LeDuc and Pammett 2014, 34). This rather substantial gap – noted as a paradox in the United States by Fenno (1978) – may exist because citizens see the MP on the ground level; they have direct contact with their MP in the community and at their door and see local news about the MP speaking to local concerns. In most cases, MPs are community members long before their election to Parliament. Despite the limitations that Ottawa places upon them in their support for given policies, MPs remain in touch with their own communities. Furthermore, this finding dovetails with the long recognized incumbency advantage in Canadian elections: in general, incumbents tend to do better in Canadian elections than challengers (e.g., Kendall and Rekkas 2012).

The distinction between low overall ratings for MPs but relatively high ratings for citizens' own MPs raises the possibility that MPs may be taking individual action to appeal to their constituents, and that doing so may play a role in boosting their own personal approval ratings with their constituents. There are various factors driving the representative behaviours of elected members, but a key factor is in the electoral connection (Mayhew 1974) that MPs must foster. In an effort to build trust, members need to exhibit

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accountability (Canes-Wrone, Brady, and Cogan 2002, Carey 2009) to those who elect them. This is why – even as matters of national politics dominate much of the work that is done in Ottawa – the work of MPs, and indeed their parties, is often most significant at the local level (Carty and Eagles 2005). Beyond each party’s interest in maintaining electoral dominance in ridings they hold (and building support in those they do not), the elected member typically also cultivates support and recognition – a personal vote – separate from the party (Cain, Ferejohn, and Fiorina 1987; Blais et al. 2003).

The Canadian structure, in which the MP is the single elected member in a geographic region, tends to generate a strong focus on constituencies (Heitshusen, Young, and Wood 2005). Constituency work, noted as a significant component of the Canadian MP’s job (Docherty 1997, Smith 2007), has also taken on increased significance in similar single-member settings (e.g., Norton 1994, Studlar and McAllister 1996). There is, accordingly, also evidence that MPs are perhaps less constrained by party discipline in how they can represent their constituents than previously thought (e.g., Aiken 1974). Christopher Kam (2009), John Carey (2009), and Jonathan Malloy (2003) all demonstrate that MPs do engage in independent action, from voting against the party line to openly criticizing party leaders. MPs also retain strong links to their constituencies while in Ottawa: most continue to live in their constituencies and regularly return home on weekends (Koop, Farney, and Loat 2013). Further, MPs remain psychologically committed to representing the wishes of their constituents to Ottawa, as Docherty (1997, 143–46) finds evidence of a strong delegate orientation among MPs. Indeed, those MPs surveyed felt obligated to act upon constituents’ wishes.

In addition, in recent years we have seen the development of an academic literature in Canada that suggests MPs not only listen to their constituents but also act on what they hear from their constituents while in Ottawa. This occurs across a range of parliamentary venues. Kelly Blidook (2012), for example, finds evidence of both generalized and specific interest representation in the private members’ business that MPs introduce in the House of Commons.

Further, Royce Koop and Peter Loewen (2010) find that 27 percent of the bills introduced by MPs in the 38th and 39th Parliaments addressed local constituency interests. MPs are clearly using the opportunity to introduce bills and motions in the House of Commons to represent the interests of their constituents to that institution.

There is similar evidence that MPs use opportunities to speak about their constituents' preferences to the House of Commons. Stuart Soroka, Erin Penner, and Kelly Blidook (2009) find evidence of local representation in the questions MPs ask in Question Period. Similarly, Munroe Eagles (2013) finds evidence of MPs' constituency preferences guiding their votes on socially conservative issues. This suggests the presence of a healthier representational relationship between MPs and their constituents than was previously thought, despite the obstacles constituted by strong party leadership and party discipline in building such relationships. In addition, research by Loewen et al. (2014) demonstrates that MPs' constituents are seemingly paying attention to and rewarding MPs for the legislative activities they engage in while in Ottawa.

These studies demonstrate that it would be a mistake to dismiss MPs as trained seals who are unable, given the pressures of party discipline and strong leadership, to act as representatives for their constituents. Indeed, these recent analytical revelations concerning the representational activities of MPs in the House of Commons invite a new, more comprehensive exploration of MPs' roles as representatives, one that focuses on their overall approaches to the task of representation rather than on more narrow aspects of the representational process such as expressing constituents' preferences through private members' business or votes in Parliament.

This discussion leads to the two research questions that guide our analysis. First, what *representational styles* do MPs develop and employ in order to represent their constituents? We more fully expand on this term in Chapter 1, but here it suffices to say that MPs make choices about – and, therefore, develop different habits regarding and different approaches to – the task of representation. In this book, we develop a framework to assist us in conceptualizing MPs' representational behaviours and apply that framework to

our analysis of MPs in order to better understand their individual representational styles.

Diversity in representational styles leads to our second research question: Why do MPs develop the representational styles they do? What can account for differences in the representational styles MPs develop? We draw on both the relevant literature and our own observations to address this question, and we apply our resulting framework to better understand the causal processes underlying MPs' patterns of representation.

As earlier noted, we address these research questions using a methodology that is quite distinctive in the study of Canadian politics: participant observation. From 2012 to 2015, we engaged in participant observation research with eleven Canadian MPs as they went about their jobs as representatives both in their constituencies and in Ottawa. This research methodology has been described by Fenno as "drop in/drop out, tag along/hang around kind of research" (1996, 4). Participant observation has been used to great effect in studies of US senators and representatives by both Fenno and a small number of younger scholars (e.g., Grimmer 2013), with the result that there is a rich literature on the practice of representation in that country. Despite this record, participant observation has not been employed in the study of Canadian politics. Participant observation is uniquely suited to addressing our research questions because of its ability to more deeply identify and understand behavioural differences; we apply this methodology to produce unique insights about MPs and representation in Canada.

Our analysis of MPs and their representational styles is developed and explained across the five analytical chapters following Chapter 1, which presents and defends both our framework of analysis and the methodology employed in this research. Effective organization and presentation is key to communicating the results of qualitative research (Chenail 1995). Thus, the flow of the analysis in this book has been consciously designed to progress from an emphasis on depth to breadth. Accordingly, Chapters 2, 3, and 4 provide deep, rich case studies of three individual MPs: Leon

Benoit, Tony Clement, and Megan Leslie. The goal in these chapters is to provide in-depth accounts of these MPs' representational styles, including contextual details that are essential to understanding how they do their jobs as representatives. Chapter 5 expands the breadth of analysis, analyzing three other MPs with a particular focus on the factors that shape the representational styles these MPs employ. Finally, Chapter 6 is a broadly comparative chapter, exploring the representational styles of five additional MPs and drawing out new themes related to representation from that exploration. The organization of *Representation in Action* is, therefore, designed to exploit both the richness and the wide scope of our qualitative data in order to best understand MPs and their representational styles.

Two Themes

In closing this introduction, we wish to illuminate two themes that arise throughout our analysis of the practice of representation by Canadian MPs.

The first theme is that of *diversity*. Broadly speaking, MPs engage in representation in the same manner: by both building and strengthening connections over time with their constituents. But the ways in which they do so – the representational styles MPs employ – differ substantially. Some MPs, for example, spend significant time learning about the policy preferences of their constituents and subsequently working to enact these preferences in Parliament. Other MPs may focus on providing excellent service to their constituents by acting as ombudspersons, encouraging constituents to bring their problems forward and subsequently working to address those problems. Still others may focus on building personal connections with their constituents, expending effort in ensuring that residents feel like their MP is “one of them.” These different representational activities are products of the different choices and, subsequently, the different styles employed by MPs.

Representation as a concept cannot be understood without consideration of its diversity in practice. We argue that much of the

academic and general literature on Canadian MPs as representatives fails to account for the differences in the ways in which MPs go about their tasks as representatives. The same can be said of other democracies characterized by electoral systems that, like Canada, employ geographically defined units of representation. One goal of *Representation in Action* is to illuminate this diversity and account for it within a broader theoretical framework. The result, we argue, is an account of representation that adds nuance to our understanding of the concept of representation and, therefore, enriches ongoing debates about the quality and substance of both representation and democracy in Canada.

The second theme is *agency and adaptability*. The study of Canadian politics is characterized by a strong focus on institutions and their role in structuring and shaping the behaviours of individual political actors. The influence of the institutionalist approach in studying Parliament and MPs – particularly the implication of party discipline – has been to downplay the agency of individual MPs. Often, they are portrayed as weak actors, even trained seals, who can do little other than what the party whip tells them to, and who can also do little to help themselves or pursue their goals as individuals. Our story is not inconsistent with this literature, but it attempts to fill in key gaps that have emerged within it; primarily, this literature tends to neglect the MP's role due to a lack of apparent power. Indeed, institutions shape the roles and behaviours of MPs, yet MPs remain the fundamental democratic link within the political structure. A key question, then, is how does the MP play a representative role given the institutional structure each must act within?

Our study illuminates the agency of individual MPs in making choices about representation and how they will go about their representational tasks. In this respect, *Representation in Action* stands in stark contrast to most academic examinations of MPs, which rightly depict the influence of institutions as very strong but typically pay scant attention to the role of the individual MP. And just as MPs exercise agency in making choices about how they will behave as representatives, so too are they adaptable in making those

choices: MPs make ongoing choices about what types of representatives they will be in response to changing circumstances that incentivize certain decisions over others.

The result is a book on representation that is unique within the Canadian context: in its conception of representation, in its appreciation of MPs as individuals with substantial agency to make choices about what types of representatives they will be, and in its methodology that aims to capture the richness and diversity of the representational process.