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EXPLORING THE MOST LIKELY CASE FOR CONSTITUENCY SERVICE: FINNISH MPS AND THE CHANGE TOWARDS PERSONALISED REPRESENTATION

Tapio Raunio and Taru Ruotsalainen

The Finnish open list electoral system provides strong incentives for MPs to cultivate ties with their constituents. There is arguably more competition for seats within than between parties, with election campaigns revolving around individual candidates. Examining how Finnish parliamentarians carry out constituency service, this article argues that such contacts are increasingly non-partisan and geared either towards the 'home turf' or specific policy interests. Cross-partisan cooperation among MPs from the same electoral district is institutionalised in the Eduskunta. There is surprisingly little variation between the 200 MPs regarding the level and types of constituency service, irrespective of district magnitude, the safety of the seat or parliamentary experience. Constituency service is clearly a key element of MPs' work and forms an essential part of their re-election strategies.

Introduction

Around one month ahead of the April 2015 elections to the Eduskunta, the unicameral national legislature of Finland, *Kotiseudun Sanomat*, a small rural newspaper from Pihtipudas in the electoral district of central Finland, ran an editorial titled 'Before elections every opinion counts'. A rather cynical piece, it drew attention to the fact that as elections approach incumbent MPs and parliamentary candidates suddenly become more interested in the views of ordinary citizens. However, the editorial did not just blame the politicians but instead called on the citizens to make sure that MPs do not forget them between elections.¹ Referring to a slogan associated with his party colleague Pertti Salolainen, 'available also between elections' (*tavattavissa vaalien välilläkin*), an MP of the National Coalition Timo Heinonen in turn wrote in a blog on his website three months after the elections how he has throughout his parliamentary career always tried to live by that principle. Heinonen then went on to state that he had *after the elections* toured numerous country fairs and market squares, meeting 'hundreds and hundreds of people'.²

These observations are most interesting given the strongly candidate-centred Finnish electoral system where voters choose between individual candidates from non-ordered party lists. Moreover, the quite stable levels of party support within electoral districts mean that there is in reality often more competition within than between parties: in order to be elected, what matters is how you perform vis-à-vis your fellow candidates from the same party. This implies that certainly in the Nordic context Finland is in many ways a most likely case for active and multi-faceted constituency service. However, scholarly understanding of

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constituency service in Finland is very limited. While there are various studies on the representational focus of Finnish MPs and on descriptive or issue representation (e.g. Bengtsson 2014; Esaiasson and Heidar 2000; von Schoultz and Wass 2016), links between MPs and their voters remain largely unexplored. The only exceptions are recent studies by Arter (2011, 2012) that found little evidence of actual constituency service, at least in the form of surgeries or case-work: 'Despite the electoral incentives of a candidate-based voting system, most Finnish MPs are not regularly "available between elections" and the concept of constituency service is neither familiar to Finns nor does it translate into Finnish' (Arter 2012: 291).

Hence the objective of this article is to analyse whether and how Finnish MPs carry out constituency service. Focusing on intra-party competition, the next section provides necessary contextual information on Finnish elections. Drawing on interviews³ and an extensive data set on the 200 MPs serving in the Eduskunta in the 2015–19 legislative term, the empirical section is divided into three parts. The first examines how 'local' Finnish MPs are in terms of both votes and constituency service. The second part investigates variation among MPs regarding both levels and types of constituency service, with the third part in turn focusing on how parliamentarians promote constituency interests in the Eduskunta. The overall picture emerging from the analysis is that of a legislative culture where constituency service is increasingly non-partisan and geared either towards the 'home turf' or specific functional interests while actual parliamentary work is dominated by political parties. It is also evident that constituency service is a key element of MPs' work and forms an essential part of their re-election strategies.

The Context: Open Lists and Intra-party Competition

As outlined in the introductory article to this Special Issue, preferential voting should create strong incentives for constituency service. Finland certainly has one of the most candidate-centred electoral systems in Europe. The system has also been very stable, with only relatively minor reforms introduced over the decades and no real pressure for change from either the political parties or the voters (Raunio 2005; Ylisalo et al. 2012).

The 200 members of the Eduskunta are elected for a four-year term from one single-member and 12 multi-member electoral districts, with the Åland Islands entitled to one seat. The number of districts was reduced by two for the 2015 elections, with the Southeast Finland and Savo-Karelia districts improving the already relatively high proportionality of the system. Each district is a separate subunit and there are no national adjustment seats, with the d'Hondt method used in allocating seats to parties. Excluding the single-member district, in the 2015 elections district magnitude ranged from 7 (Lapland) to 35 (Uusimaa). Average district magnitude was thus 16.7 when including only the multi-member constituencies. There is no legal threshold, but in the 2015 elections, the 'effective' threshold ranged from 2.8% (Uusimaa) to 12.5% (Lapland) (Nurmi and Nurmi 2015).

Candidate selection is very decentralised. Parties are legally required to use primaries in constituencies where the number of aspirant candidates exceeds the official upper limit of candidates the party has the right to nominate. The district party executive has the right to replace up to one quarter of the aspirant candidates who gained enough votes in the primary to win a place on the list (one-fifth in the Social Democratic Party). While list manipulation by the district party executive does occur in most districts, it is normally not a conflictual element in the process and is primarily explained either by candidate refusals or the need to form a more balanced list by correcting, for example, the geographical or occupational bias of the candidates. The goal is therefore to produce a list that is geographically, socio-economically,

demographically and ideologically as representative as possible. The national party leadership has only limited possibilities to influence candidate selection at the district level, and perhaps beyond involvement in recruiting some potential vote-winners to run for a seat, party central offices and leaders respect the autonomy of the district branches (Kuitunen 2002).

Voters choose between individual candidates that appear on party lists in alphabetical order. The combination of an 'open list' and the decentralised candidate selection means that the whole system is very local or district-based—and this is clearly reflected in both campaigning and voting behaviour. Regarding the latter, citizens have been asked in post-election surveys which one, the candidate or the party, was more important in guiding their voting behaviour ('After all, which do you think was more important in your voting, the party or the candidate?'). There is rather little change over time, with around half seeing the candidate as more important (Karvonen 2014: 127–33).

Campaigns revolve around individual candidates. According to Arter (2016: 139–42) who presents a model of an ideal type of personalised candidate campaign, Finland displays in the Nordic region clearly strongest evidence of personalised campaigns in all three dimensions—substantive (campaign agenda), organisational (campaign organisation and funding) and communicative (communication with prospective voters)—of campaigns. Obviously, the role of the party central office and leadership is important, with party chairs leading the national campaigns and representing their parties in key TV debates. Inside the electoral districts, in turn, individual candidates are left to run their own campaigns without any interference from the national-level party organisation. Individual candidates have their own agenda and campaign organisation, with 'support groups' important in attracting donations, distributing information and rallying support for the candidate. The increasing importance of support groups is related to decline in both party memberships and local party branches, with support groups—that often contain non-party members—essentially taking on the functions of party activists in campaign work (Arter 2009; Ruostetsaari and Mattila 2002).

There is arguably more competition within than between parties, with the share of intra-party defeats confirming that incumbents need to take such competition seriously. Turnover of MPs is rather stable: around 170 of the 200 MPs try to renew their seats and roughly 40 fail to do so. Around 55–60% of these lose their seat to an intra-party competitor while the others fail to get re-elected due to losses to other parties (Karvonen 2014: 67–8; Paloheimo 2007: 334; Villodres 2003). Candidates also often focus their campaign effort on their own locality within the district: incumbents 'will guard their "home turf" (their primary vote catchment) assiduously and co-partisans who venture there are likely to receive a frosty "welcome"' (Arter 2016: 133). High level of intra-party competition can also boost the electoral success of parties (Arter 2013).

Finland thus stands out among the Nordic countries with its strong preferential voting system, but, as indicated in the introductory article to this Special Issue, equally interesting are potential differences between types of MPs. In open list systems higher district magnitude should facilitate personal vote cultivation (Carey and Shugart 1995), but intra-party competition seems to have stronger explanatory value—the more competition for seats, the higher the incentives to carry out personalised campaigns, maintain links with constituency or undertake various forms of constituency service (André and Depauw 2013; André et al. 2014, 2015; Cain et al. 1987; Crisp et al. 2007; Selb and Lutz 2015). In the Finnish context, we are particularly interested in what André et al. (2015) termed 'electoral vulnerability'. Measuring constituency effort with time spent in the district, they found support for their claim 'legislators in closely contested races will maximize their re-election effort and pay

more attention to constituents; legislators who need not fear being defeated are not similarly constrained' (André et al. 2015: 467). Examining the constituency focus of MPs in six countries, Heitshusen et al. (2005) found that electoral safety reduced the importance attached to the constituency. Or as Selb and Lutz (2015: 335) conclude on their study of campaigns in Swiss elections: 'it rather seems to be closeness to winning or losing a seat that makes candidates invest in their personal campaigns'. While there are no absolutely safe seats in the Eduskunta, senior party figures such as ministers or MPs that have won their seat with a comfortable margin should have fewer incentives for cultivating ties with constituents than marginal incumbents that have barely made it to the legislature.

Local MPs and the Importance of 'Home Turfs'

Let us first examine the distribution of MPs' votes within constituencies in the 2015 elections. We explore whether Finnish MPs receive votes across the constituency or whether their votes concentrate on 'home turfs' inside the electoral districts. This way we can investigate how 'local' the MPs are in terms of votes and also analyse whether the level of 'localness' is reflected in their constituency service. We employed three different measurements. First, we counted how large share of the MP's vote came from a certain municipality. This indicator is not unproblematic given the varying sizes of municipalities: obviously, the MP's vote share is likely to be bigger in larger municipalities. To avoid this kind of distortion, our primary indicator describes the percentage of votes each MP got from the municipality compared with the number of enfranchised people in that municipality. We also included a third indicator in order to assess the MP's popularity among her party's voters; it tells us the percentage an MP got from her party's overall vote in every municipality in the electoral district.

Employing the three indicators for each MP (with the exception of the sole representative of the Åland Islands), we can see that the 'local' MPs come primarily from smaller towns and rural municipalities (see also Arter 2011: 134–7). Observing the sample of 38 most local MPs, two or three representatives per constituency, we notice that MPs who had the highest percentage of votes in relation to the number of municipality's enfranchised inhabitants, still came from the smallest municipalities. For example, Peter Östman, a Christian Democrat from Larsmo, a small, strongly religious municipality in Vaasa constituency, won 36.8% of votes up for grabs in Larsmo. Actually, 31 of the 38 MPs come from municipalities with under 20 000 inhabitants.

The majority of the most local MPs represent the Centre Party (24/38) that gets most of its votes from the more rural constituencies. Parliamentary experience or holding a safe seat has no impact and local MPs are found in every constituency, regardless of district magnitude (see André and Depauw 2018). Even some MPs elected from the Helsinki constituency (which comprises just the capital municipality), for example, Jaana Pelkonen from the National Coalition, can be considered as a local MP as most of her votes come from the voting areas in southern Helsinki. There is thus clearly a strong 'home turf' element in Finnish parliamentary representation, and—as explained above—political parties want to put together candidate lists that cover at least the main towns inside each constituency. There are also invisible barbed wire fences inside electoral districts across which votes will not travel. For example, in the Satakunta constituency there is always-not-so-friendly animosity between the cities of Pori and Rauma, and not surprisingly the MPs from the former do not really win votes in Rauma and vice versa. Another similar example is the cities of Hämeenlinna and Lahti in the Häme constituency.⁴

But the constituency where ‘home turfs’ are perhaps most strongly present is Southeast Finland, an electoral district formed before the 2015 elections from the merger of the smaller South Savo and Kymi constituencies. The constituency brings together three administrative provinces with their own geographically distinct residential centres. In the 2015 elections, the Centre won 5 and the Social Democrats 4 out of the total of 17 seats in the district. All Centre Party MPs come from different municipalities. Their vote percentage is high in their home town and in nearby municipalities, but the vote percentage drops significantly when moving to other cities in the constituency: Jari Leppä is popular in Mikkeli, Hanna Kosonen in Savonlinna, Kimmo Tiilikainen in Imatra, Ari Torniainen in Lappeenranta and Markku Pakkanen in Kouvola. The same pattern emerges among Social Democratic MPs.

The ‘localness’ of MPs’ vote share is reflected in the geographical focus of their constituency service. The interviewed representatives consistently acknowledged the importance of their home municipality and the surrounding areas. That is where MPs normally reside when not in Helsinki and where they have strong connections to various citizens’ associations, companies and the local party branches. Hence when they are invited to speak at various events or visit schools or firms, this happens ‘naturally’ mainly in their home town or nearby areas. One MP admitted that he had ‘carefully calculated’ how many votes he needs to be elected, and when realising that votes from his home town area were probably enough, he decided to focus in his constituency service on his home municipality and to a certain extent on the main residential centre in the constituency. Other parts of the district, he continued, he did not need to bother with nor did he feel particularly welcome there. Another good example is the geographically large Vaasa constituency, where the Centre is the strongest party with five MPs. They draw their votes from different residential centres, and this is clearly reflected in their constituency service. One of them, elected from the southern parts of the district, explained how he is basically never contacted by constituents beyond his own home turf.

Nonetheless, most of the MPs were also quick to point out that they do travel widely within their constituencies, a finding confirmed by examining the online calendars of the MPs. Here electoral strength is an important variable: if the party has only one or two MPs in the district, as for example is the case with the Greens in several districts, then these representatives attend events across the constituency whereas when a party has several MPs from the district—such as the example of the Centre Party in Southeast Finland referred to above—they focus more on their ‘home turf’, with an implicit geographical division of labour among the party’s MPs inside the constituency. There is also cross-partisan cooperation among constituency MPs in the *Eduskunta* that bring together all MPs from the same electoral district.

Meeting and Interacting with Constituents

The second empirical part examines the core of the ‘how’ question by zooming in on the various types or channels of constituency service. In line with the introductory article in this Special Issue, we differentiate between casework, information provision and outreach. The analysis proceeds in two stages. We first coded manually data from the websites and social media accounts of all 200 MPs in January 2016 to examine to what extent MPs interact with their constituents either through conventional (websites, blogs, newsletters, calendars) or modern (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram) forms of digital communication.⁵ This analysis was done because according to previous research various online communication has increasingly replaced traditional forms of communication (letters, phone calls, newspaper advertisements)

between MPs and constituents, and our interviewees also confirmed that digital communication, especially social media, is used by MPs particularly for information provision: informing the voters of particular events or of the activities of their parties, and spreading important news items or their own views on particular topical issues. MPs also pointed out that utilising the social media is often much more cost-effective for reaching people than other forms of communication. Drawing primarily on the interviews, we follow that up in the second stage with exploring the actual contacts MPs have with various constituents.

One hundred and ninety-eight out of 200 Finnish MPs has an own website (in addition to the standard webpage on the home page of the Eduskunta), with both exceptions being older, rural male representatives of the Finns Party. Eighty-five per cent of the MPs have their own blog. The most active bloggers are younger, female urban representatives. Only 19% send newsletters. Again the youngest age category of MPs, under 30 years, is most likely to do so. Around half of the MPs have a calendar online. Whereas 65% of Centre Party MPs have a calendar, the corresponding figure for MPs from the Finns Party is only 32%.

A simple logistic regression of these conventional communication methods essentially confirms the findings of the descriptive analysis. We merged website, blog, newsletter and calendar into one dummy variable. The first category of 'basic users' includes MPs who use zero to two forms of communication and the second category, which is comprised of those MPs who use three or four forms of communication, is called 'active users'. The division into these two categories was made because most MPs use at least two conventional forms of communication. Since the logistic regression and the later multinomial logit model are sensitive to missing information and blank cells, variables were coded as categorical variables and dummies were used to improve the estimation precision of the parameters. The predictors in the model are gender, age (<39, 40–49, 50–59 and over 60-year-old MPs), party, constituency,⁶ home town (under 20,000, 20,000–50,000, 50,000–100,000, 100,000–200,000 and over 200,000 inhabitants), safe seat⁷ and years of experience.⁸ As the minor legislative parties have only small number of MPs, the party predictor was recoded into six wider categories on a loosely ideological basis. The four biggest parties, the Centre, the Finns, the National Coalition and the Social Democrats formed their own categories, but we merged the Green League with the Left Alliance to a 'red-green' category. The Swedish People's Party and the Christian Democrats were merged into 'minor parties' due to their low number of MPs. Examining the results, only the party variable matters (Table 1). If the MP represents the Centre Party (OR = 5490) or the Social Democrats (OR = 5982), the likelihood of being an active user of conventional communication forms increases almost sixfold compared to being a Finns Party deputy. All other variables failed to attain statistical significance.

Turning to social media, 193 out of 200 MPs has a Facebook account, either a personal or a politician page. Only 39 MPs do not utilise Twitter. Youngest MPs and those from the Green League are most active users of Instagram. Overall, younger and female MPs use social media more than their male colleagues—a finding that applies also to candidates in recent Eduskunta elections, also regarding overall online presence (Strandberg 2016). Green League MPs are clearly the most active social media users. Differences between parties are not big, but the Finns Party stands out as the least active regarding every social media platform. The change has been rapid: in 2010 one-third of Finnish MPs communicated with constituents through newsletters, Twitter or Facebook (Arter 2011: 140).

A multinomial logit model was employed to probe deeper into factors affecting social media activity (Table 2). The three different social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram) were grouped into one sum variable with three new categories. 'Marginal users'

TABLE 1
Finnish MPs' utilisation of conventional communication forms (0 = 'basic user', 1 = 'active user')

Gender (ref. Man)	
Female	1.338
	Agegroup (ref. >60 yrs)
<39 yrs	2.566
40–49 yrs	3.188
50–59 yrs	0.921
	Party (ref. The Finns Party)
Centre	5.490**
National Coalition	1.730
Social Democrats	5.982**
'Red-Greens'	2.150
'minor parties'	2.951
	Electoral district (ref. Lapland)
Helsinki	5.465
Uusimaa+Ahvenanmaa	3.076
Varsinais-Suomi	1.594
Satakunta	0.464
Häme	1.070
Pirkanmaa	5.963
Southeast Finland	0.901
Savo-Karelia	6.305
Vaasa	1.525
Central Finland	0.630
Oulu	1.959
	Home town (ref. <20,000 inhabitants)
20,000–50,000 inhabitants	0.608
50,000–100,000 inhabitants	0.942
100,000–200,000 inhabitants	1.223
>200,000 inhabitants	0.211
'Safe seat' (ref. Not a safe seat)	
Yes	0.691
Uncertain	0.606
Years of experience (ref. >14 yrs)	
0–1 yrs	1.210
2–5 yrs	1.934
6–9 yrs	1.640
10–13 yrs	1.847
Nagelkerke R^2	0.269
N	199

Note: Logistic regression (OR).

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

comprise those MPs that do not use social media at all or only have one social media account. Marginal users are also the reference category. 'Basic users' are MPs with two social media accounts and 'active users' are MPs with all three social media accounts.

The analysis confirms the impact of age and party while other predictors were not statistically significant. The overall model fit is over 0.60 (Nagelkerke R^2) which is very convincing considering the number of variables. The younger the MP the bigger the likelihood to be a basic or an active user of social media compared to a marginal user. Deputies below the age of 39 were significantly more likely to be active social media users (OR = 468,450) than

TABLE 2

Social media use by Finnish MPs: the probability of being a 'basic' or an 'active user' over a 'marginal user' (ref)

Gender (ref. Man)	Female	'basic user'	2.614
		'active user'	3.047
Agegroup (ref. >60 yrs)	<39 yrs	'basic user'	6.246
		'active user'	468.450***
	40–49 yrs	'basic user'	10.854*
		'active user'	214.584***
	50–59 yrs	'basic user'	6.129*
		'active user'	33.652*
Party (ref. the Finns Party)	Centre	'basic user'	7.707 *
		'active user'	15.808**
	National Coalition	'basic user'	3.445
		'active user'	34.518***
	Social Democrats	'basic user'	3.141
		'active user'	11.999*
	'Red-Greens'	'basic user'	1.507
		'active user'	42.122**
	'minor parties'	'basic user'	38.999*
		'active user'	24.56
Electoral district (ref. Lapland)	Helsinki	'basic user'	0.204
		'active user'	0.383
	Uusimaa + Åland	'basic user'	0.244
		'active user'	1.453
	Varsinais-Suomi	'basic user'	0.443
		'active user'	0.829
	Satakunta	'basic user'	0.137
		'active user'	0.274
	Häme	'basic user'	0.518
		'active user'	3.042
	Pirkanmaa	'basic user'	0.571
		'active user'	3.792
	Southeast Finland	'basic user'	2.112
		'active user'	2.021
	Savo-Karjala	'basic user'	0.375
		'active user'	0.575
	Vaasa	'basic user'	0.213
		'active user'	1.752
	Central Finland	'basic user'	0.135
		'active user'	0.281
Oulu	'basic user'	4.915	
	'active user'	3.486	
Home town (ref. <20,000 inhabitants)	20,000–50,000 inhabitants	'basic user'	9.534
		'active user'	6.074
	50,000–100,000 inhabitants	'basic user'	1.279
		'active user'	1.174
	100,000–200,000 inhabitants	'basic user'	1.174
		'active user'	2.051
>200,000 inhabitants	'basic user'	3.616	
	'active user'	6.955	
Safe seat (ref. Not a safe seat)	Yes	'basic user'	1.061
		'active user'	1.725
	Uncertain	'basic user'	0.543
		'active user'	0.884

Years of experience (ref. >14 yrs)	0–1 yrs	'basic user'	0.514
		'active user'	1.426
	2–5 yrs	'basic user'	0.255
		'active user'	0.47
	6–9 yrs	'basic user'	0.122
		'active user'	0.256
	10–13 yrs	'basic user'	0.152
		'active user'	0.496
Nagelkerke R^2			0.624
N			199

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

being marginal users. In party-political terms, being a Centre MP—in contrast to representing the Finns Party—increased significantly the likelihood of being a basic or an active social media user compared to be a marginal social media user (OR = 7707–15,808). There was also an almost 40-fold likelihood to be a basic social media user compared to being marginal user for MPs from the minor parties compared to Finns party legislators. The likelihood of being an active social media user also increased if the MP represents the National Coalition (OR = 34,518), Social Democrats (OR = 11,999) or 'red-green' parties (OR = 42,122). From this, we can deduce that compared to Finns Party MPs, 'minor party' MPs are most likely to be basic social media users over marginal users and that 'red-greens' are most likely to be active users of social media over marginal users.

Comparing the two different regressions, the party variable emerges in both as a statistical explainer. It thus appears that more centrist established parties with older MPs use 'older' communication methods, and new parties with younger MPs use 'newer' communication methods. Age thus has the expected effect, whereas district magnitude or electoral vulnerability had no effect on either conventional or modern forms of communication. This is noteworthy as previous studies have shown that electoral vulnerability leads to more active communication via both conventional and more modern online channels (e.g. Jackson and Lilleker 2011; Obholzer and Daniel 2016; Peterson 2012; Scherpereel et al. 2017; Umit 2017; Zittel 2015).

In their blogs, MPs mainly write about topical or constituency issues or about matters important to them via their civil profession. For example, Kristiina Salonen (Social Democrat), a nurse and one of the interviewed MPs, likes to write about social and health services. Many MPs use social media as their own, personal sites, with basically nothing indicating that they are parliamentarians. They share pictures and commentary of their own, everyday lives, and these messages can be very personal. On the other hand, some MPs, mainly the younger ones, have separated their personal lives from their politician lives. These MPs have two Facebook accounts, a personal profile for their friends and public, and a politician profile for their electorate and followers. Much of the communication consists of MPs informing the people—through newsletters, calendars or social media—of various topical and constituency-related issues and of local events they will be attending.

Particularly younger citizens increasingly contact MPs via social media, but email is the dominant mode of contact. MPs receive a lot of emails, but most of it consists of 'junk' (*roska-posti* was the Finnish term used by the MPs) that is often sent to all deputies and that MPs or their assistants delete quickly. According to two MPs, there can be 'up to a hundred or more' such emails per day. If we exclude such junk emails, according to the interviewed

parliamentarians the majority or at least half of emails, phone calls, social media contacts and traditional letters (mainly sent by older people) come from the constituency: from individual citizens, companies, regional or municipal administrations, local party branches or interest groups. There is nonetheless a difference between ordinary backbenchers and ‘front bench’ MPs. The share of contacts from the constituency is significantly lower for ministers, party group and committee chairs or some individual MPs known as champions of a particular cause: instead, they are mainly contacted by national-level actors such as interest groups and more often by individual voters from other constituencies.

Individual citizens approach MPs regarding especially topical issues—such as same-sex marriages, the refugee crisis, or the reorganisation of social and health services—or their personal concerns, for example regarding local schools, health services, social security or unemployment benefits, or road construction. When citizens have specific questions or requests regarding their personal situation or problems, MPs typically refer them to the authorities responsible for the delivery of such public services—local or regional administrations or public sector agencies. Here it can be difficult to separate whether the citizens contacted the MPs in their capacity as parliamentarians or local politicians as the overwhelming majority of MPs sit in municipal councils. Various citizens’ associations, schools and higher institutions of education, companies, regional and municipal authorities and local party cells invite MPs to give talks and to visit them or have specific concerns about new legislation or the annual state budget. It thus appears that the rapid development of online communication has not reduced actual face-to-face contacts with constituents.

All of the interviewed MPs indicated that much of the contacts from constituents are about ‘casework’, not just requests from individuals but also from various organised interests such as occupational groups, companies, school boards, regional authorities and so on. At the same time, it is difficult to separate between casework, information provision and outreach, as exchanges via email or social media, face-to-face contacts with citizens, businesses or other constituents, and even municipal council meetings are used to both obtain and provide information. Many MPs indeed emphasised how meetings enable them to learn about local issues and to develop a better understanding of the challenges facing companies, schools and universities or the social and health services, whilst simultaneously informing them about developments in the *Eduskunta*.

To be sure, there is no tradition of ‘surgeries’ in Finland (Arter 2011). Only one MP had in early 2016 a regular surgery with his electorate. Ville Skinnari, a Social Democrat from Häme constituency, had an open meeting in a café in his home town Lahti on the first Monday of every month. Nor do the MPs have constituency offices, with their personal assistants also mainly living in Helsinki and working in the *Eduskunta*’s premises. However, otherwise, MPs certainly are ‘available between the elections’ and strongly present in the constituency or their home turf. In fact, both the interviews and the analysis of MPs’ online calendars indicate that there is surprisingly little variation among the legislators, regardless of the safety of their seats, size of the district, gender, parliamentary experience, age or other variables.

The overwhelming majority of MPs appear regularly in their constituencies, speaking at or attending various events and seminars and visiting schools, workplaces and companies. Clearly, a smaller share of such activities are organised by or directly linked to MPs’ political parties, a development explained largely by the steady decline of local party branches. Again we see clear variation depending on the strength of the party in the electoral district: if the party continues to have an active network of local branches, then the party connection

is stronger. Some MPs, perhaps mainly those with weaker resources or less developed connections to other organisations, are overall more reliant on their parties and appear regularly in meetings of local party branches. Overall, the share of events organised by parties tends to increase as elections approach.

Instead, MPs often appear in events organised by their sectoral constituencies, with rural deputies attending farmers' fairs, right-leaning MPs visiting companies or economically liberal think-tanks, left-wing MPs attending events of trade unions or social and health policy organisations and so on. Much of this activity is explained by the MP's professional background, good examples being Ilmari Nurminen and Kristiina Salonen, Social Democratic MPs with a special interest in social and health services who are regularly contacted regarding such matters and remain locally active in the relevant social and health organisations. Mirja Vehkaperä, a Centre MP from Oulu, is contacted about education as she is a teacher. MPs also often take the initiative themselves: setting up events with citizens' associations, companies, schools or local party branches. Despite the strong intra-party competition, MPs elected from the same constituency on the same party label do sometimes appear together, but often an MP will advertise events where she will be joined by a senior party figure such as the party chair or a minister. During summer months MPs attend various summer fairs and markets. As the parliamentary week runs normally from Tuesday to Friday, the meetings in the constituency take place over the weekends and on Mondays and when the Eduskunta is not in session.

Indeed, Mondays are Eduskunta-free days as the plenaries of municipal councils meet typically on Monday evenings. In Finland there is the tradition of MPs, ministers included, serving simultaneously as members of their municipal councils (Arter 2011). However, the frequency of municipal council meetings varies between municipalities, with many convening less than once a month. In early 2016, 79.5% of MPs belonged to municipal councils.⁹ In most cases, the local party branch will ask the MP to stand in the municipal election as a vote-puller, but at the same time this boosts the name recognition of the representative and ensures that she is more in touch with both local politics and with her local party. Hence there is an element of 'party service' and of channelling the 'local mood' to the Eduskunta, but it arguably also improves the re-election prospects of the incumbents. Moreover, it must be emphasised that MPs are in Helsinki when the preparatory committees of municipal councils meet. As a result, unless parliamentarians are strongly committed to wielding influence in municipal politics, they are effectively sidelined from actual decision-making.

Finnish MPs are thus 'available between elections', but at least most of their more long-term contacts are with organised interests, not with individual citizens. A partial explanation for this might lie in the expansion of the public sector, as voters can or indeed have to approach municipal authorities or public sector agencies (such as those related to social and health services, education or environmental issues) with their problems. In addition, MPs invite their sectoral audiences or people from their constituency for visits to Eduskunta. Constituency service is arguably increasingly non-partisan and driven by personal re-election incentives, but elements of party service are nonetheless detectable. As the next section argues, the party factor in turn is much more important for how MPs pursue constituency or local interests in the Eduskunta.

Defending Constituency Interests in the Eduskunta

While the electoral process is very decentralised and candidate-centred, the opposite applies to parliamentary work in the Eduskunta. To be sure, the electoral system does leave

its mark on how MPs behave as re-election seeking representatives need to cultivate support among their constituents. However, the Eduskunta is a party-dominated legislature—and has become more so since the 1990s as a result of constitutional reforms that have strengthened the roles of the government and the parliament (Raunio and Wiberg 2014). Eduskunta decision-making is based on the interaction between party groups and committees, and these two actors are also crucial in terms of advancing constituency concerns.

Essentially nothing moves in the Eduskunta without the support of the MP's own party. Committee assignments are important, with representatives seeking places in committees whose jurisdictions cover the interests of their geographical and/or sectoral constituencies. Political parties are gate-keepers in the assignment process, and hence incumbents have an incentive not to contradict party policy. It must be emphasised that the nature of items on the agenda of the Eduskunta points in the direction of MPs focusing in their work more on sectoral constituencies. Obviously, some of the agenda items are more directly related to the 'home turfs' and the geographical constituencies of MPs, with good examples being transport policy or forestry legislation that have relevance especially for rural MPs. While the Eduskunta committees do amend initiatives for new laws, influencing governmental proposals really requires that (governing party) MPs seek support for their positions within their parties or that (primarily opposition) representatives utilise direct contacts with actors involved in drafting new policy proposals.

There are naturally the usual tools available for individual MPs from written and oral questions to legislative bills, budget motions and petitionary motions. Only 1% of private member's bills are successful. Interestingly, Solvak and Pajala (2015) nonetheless show that the smaller the vote share of MPs in their district, the more likely they are to sponsor private member's bills in Finland.¹⁰ Parliamentary questions are often about constituency matters, with MPs either informing the government of local grievances or demanding the cabinet to take action to address local problems. Among issues often raised are the impacts of factory closures, environmental damage or poor state of local infrastructure. Particularly the latter type feature often in budgetary motions that are tabled in the fall during the annual processing of the state budget. The majority of roll-call votes have in recent years also dealt with the annual state budget, which suggests that representatives and their parties can use these recorded votes to show how they voted and defended the interests of their voters (Pajala 2013, 2014).

According to Arter (2011), the budgetary motions represent the purest form of constituency service in the Eduskunta. This can certainly be true, as MPs in their motions ask for money for improving local roads, harbours, schools or hospitals. While nearly all fail and the instrument can be seen as a low-cost credit-claiming exercise, the simple fact that MPs keep on tabling them indicates that they are not just publicity stunts by re-election motivated legislators. Some of them are successful, and perhaps more likely, many can influence subsequent governmental funding decisions. Often these motions have multiple signatories from the MPs in the same electoral district. Obviously, MPs are often happy to publicise their motions through their websites, blogs, newsletters or social media accounts. However, it is nonetheless clear that if MPs want to achieve any more major 'victories' for their constituencies, both in terms of funding or legislation, this requires the support of their parties or even of the parliamentary majority.

There is also institutionalised cross-party cooperation among MPs elected from the same district. One MP is designated as the chair or 'contact person' of the constituency's representatives, and the MPs from the constituency meet regularly various constituents as a group,

both in Helsinki and in the electoral district. For example, in the Oulu district, the MPs have convened together with representatives of the city of Oulu, the university or the chamber of commerce, while in Satakunta the constituency MPs have met with regional authorities. The MPs from the same constituency can also table written questions or budgetary motions together. As one expressed it: 'we are allowed to disagree in the constituency, but we should stand together in Helsinki'. Cross-party cooperation reaches its peak in the fall during the processing of the annual state budget, when also the regional authorities from the constituency are active and 'send their list' regarding important budgetary items.

The importance of such cross-partisan constituency cooperation is difficult to measure, but it is clearly a routine part of the legislative culture, although it appears that the level of cooperation varies between constituencies. Some interviewed MPs clearly valued such cross-party cooperation, but most saw it as less relevant or even as 'cosmetic' in terms of actual policy influence. What counts more is access to government: constituency interests are on average better safeguarded when a minister comes from the district and/or when a governing party is strong in the constituency. The interviewed MPs nonetheless again emphasised the role of information—with the MPs receiving up-to-date views about current problems whilst simultaneously having the chance to put questions to the delegations from the constituency.

Concluding Reflections

In Finland, there may not be constituency service in the sense found in Canada, France, the United Kingdom or the United States, but Finnish MPs are nonetheless strongly 'available between the elections'. The overall picture emerging from this article is that of considerable similarity between Finnish MPs in how they undertake constituency service.¹¹ Parliamentarians make increasing use of social media and the Internet to communicate with the citizens, they are contacted both by individual citizens and organised interests, perform various type of casework and they sit in municipal councils which keeps them connected to local politics. MPs concentrate often on their 'home turfs', especially when their parties have more MPs in the electoral district. Quite clearly constituency service is a key dimension of the job of the Finnish MP.

While lack of longitudinal data makes it difficult to evaluate how constituency service has evolved over time, it appears that constituency service is increasingly non-partisan, with deputies in direct contact with voters, companies, municipal and regional bureaucracy, or various citizens' associations. It is hence plausible to argue that we are witnessing a move towards 'personalised representation' among Finnish parliamentarians (Arter 2012). This development is probably explained by two factors. The rapid development of communication technology has clearly altered the way in which MPs stay in touch with people. Digital communication, not least social media, enables instant communication with constituents. MPs, that have had personal assistants since the late 1990s, are simply less dependent on their parties. Such communication is also beyond party control: party leaders only take notice when MPs' activity causes problems as has been the case several times in recent years for the Finns Party whose more anti-immigration MPs have made news headlines through their social media updates or blog texts.

Secondly, the consistent decline of local party branches means that the on-the-ground presence of Finnish political parties is substantially weaker than before. MPs thus rely more on their support groups and other personal networks, often those related to their professional

backgrounds. At the same time it must be emphasised that MPs do also perform ‘party service’ and, importantly, they have incentives not to speak against their parties. The Eduskunta is a party-dominated legislature, and support from one’s own party or a parliamentary committee is usually a prerequisite for defending constituency interests. It is also plausible to argue that this trend towards more personalised representation will continue as younger MPs are more likely to make active use of social media and the Internet and parties experience considerable difficulties in attracting new members.

Between-the-elections constituency service is linked to re-election strategies. While we found no direct evidence of electoral vulnerability explaining the level of constituency service, the interviews and monitoring of MPs’ websites do at least suggest that legislators with less safe seats invest more effort into cultivating contacts with constituents. In a nutshell, vote-seeking MPs, and particularly those that are electorally more vulnerable, cannot afford to neglect constituency service. This suggests two avenues for further research. The first involves distinguishing between constituency service and electoral campaigns, with marginal MPs expected to shift to actual ‘campaign mode’ earlier and to just in general ‘fight harder’ for their seats. Another interesting question is whether weak incumbents, or perhaps in general MPs with less experience or weaker resources, prioritise contacts with organised interests as they can generate more votes (André and Depauw 2013).

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

NOTES

1. Heikki Jämsen, ‘Vaalien alla jokainen mielipide on arvokas’, *Kotiseudun Sanomat* 18.3.2015.
2. <http://timoheinonen.fi/tavattavissa-vaalien-valillakin-tanaan-turkhaudan-miinan-markkinat/>. Emphasis added.
3. A total of 11 semi-structured interviews were carried out in January and February 2017. The interviewed MPs were Touko Aalto (Green League, Central Finland constituency), Toimi Kaanniemi (The Finns Party, Central Finland), Krista Mikkonen (Green League, Savo-Karelia), Sari Multala (National Coalition, Uusimaa), Riitta Myller (Social Democrat, Savo-Karelia), Ilmari Nurminen (Social Democrat, Satakunta), Kristiina Salonen (Social Democrat, Satakunta), Hanna Sarkkinen (Left Alliance, Oulu), Mikko Savola (Centre Party, Vaasa), Mirja Vehkaperä (Centre Party, Oulu), Sofia Vikman (National Coalition, Satakunta).
4. Interestingly, Saarimaa and Tukiainen (2016: 44) show that there is a demand for localness also in Finnish municipality elections. Examining the effect of municipality mergers, they find that

voters in merging municipalities concentrate their votes to strong local candidates compared to voters in municipalities that did not merge. Moreover, the concentration effect is clearly stronger in municipalities that were less likely to gain local representation in the post-merger councils based on counterfactual election calculations.
5. According to Arter (2012: 288–90) in summer 2010, 10% of all MPs had at least three of the following four on their websites: a regular newsletter to subscribers, updated calendar, a message board and a mechanism for joining the support group. We excluded the final indicator, as often such support groups exist or are active only during the election campaign.

6. All other constituencies as their own, but the single-member Åland district is combined with Uusimaa.
7. MPs elected among the first third in every constituency are in the category 'safe seat'. For example, in the Pirkanmaa district, 14 MPs were elected. Four MPs with the highest comparison figure are in the safe seat category, six in the uncertain category and the final four in the not a safe seat category. If the division to categories did not work exactly, the remaining MPs were assigned to the uncertain category.
8. The first category includes first-term MPs; the second those who have already been in the Eduskunta before this term, but not more than one term; third category includes MPs who have served in Eduskunta for six to nine years (maximum of two terms); fourth category is 10–13 years and the last category is more than 14 years.
9. According to the comparative study by André et al. (2014) that included Finland higher district magnitude and stronger intra-party competition increased the probability of MPs holding local office.
10. Further step would be to analyse whether such initiatives by individual MPs boost incumbents' electoral performance, as, for example, Däubler et al. (2016) found was the case in Belgium.
11. MPs are clearly socialised into existing 'ways of doing things'. A specific interview question asked the MPs about whether they had received any instructions or guidelines from the Eduskunta, their party or party group about constituency service. All MPs indicated that they have learned from their peers and especially from more experienced colleagues, following what they do and receiving advice from them. Party groups nonetheless advise MPs 'to be active' in the constituency, with parties often providing, if requested, various types of assistance from allocating money for information distribution (such as newspaper advertisements) or handing out material about the party and informing the MPs about salient issues for the party and/or the constituency.

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