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PUTTING PARTY FIRST: SWEDISH MPs AND THEIR CONSTITUENCIES

David Karlsson 

This paper investigates the relationship between Swedish MPs and their constituencies between elections. The main finding is that while most Swedish MPs primarily focus on representing their party and promoting issues of national importance, they are also engaged in constituency service and promoting the interest of their constituency in the Riksdag. The findings also confirm expectations that the incentive structures for re-election tend to make MPs focus their constituency interactions on local party organisations rather than on constituents. Constituency service in the form of individualised casework activities is very rare. MPs who have a marginal, less safe seat (i.e., MPs in smaller constituencies and junior MPs) engage more in constituency work and give less priority to interaction with their local party than MPs with safer seats. The study is based on interviews and on data from surveys conducted among Swedish MPs between 1985 and 2014 (the RDU surveys).

Introduction

In a representative democracy, parliamentarians can undertake *constituency service*, i.e., serving and representing the interests of their constituents, in several ways: They can perform casework on behalf of individual constituents; they can engage in dialogue, supplying constituents with relevant information (*information provision*) or identifying constituency concerns and problems (*outreach*); and they can promote and protect the interest of the constituency on the parliamentary arena (Arter 2017). The traditional way of constituency service consists of personal interaction with local citizens, but in recent years, contacts via Internet have increased remarkably, fundamentally altering the preconditions for constituency interactions (compare O'Leary 2011).

However, the incentives for MPs to undertake constituency service may differ depending on the design of the electoral system. In systems where party organisations control the electoral process, incitements for undertaking constituency service are weak. The question addressed in this paper is how such party dominated electoral systems affect the relationship between MPs and their constituents. Do they even bother to do constituency service? And how do they prioritise between being loyal party representatives and promoting the interests of their constituency? The paper will focus on the case of Sweden.¹

Swedish elections are, to all intents and purposes, party elections (Hermansson 2016; Oscarsson and Holmberg 2016). Voters are presented with lists on which the parties have already selected and ranked their candidates. Although the lists are flexible, preferential votes only change the order on the lists to a marginal degree (Berg and Oscarsson 2015). In practice, it is therefore the party organisations in the constituency that control MPs' chances of re-election. This means it is probably more important for sitting MPs who are aspiring to be re-elected to focus on pleasing the party than pleasing the constituents.

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The aim of this paper is to investigate the relationship between Swedish MPs and their constituencies, and to find out if, and, if so, how the MPs conduct constituency service. Several questions will be addressed: The first focuses on the relative *importance* placed by Swedish MPs on representing the interests and views of their constituents in relation to representing their parties. The second question concerns the *contact frequency* between MPs and actors in their constituency. The third set of questions involves the *nature* of the interactions between MPs and their constituents: do contacts initiated by constituents mainly concern constituency business or other topics? And do MPs prioritise *outreach or information provision* in their interactions with constituents? And to what extent is *social media* used in such interactions? The final set of questions relates to MPs' constituency service in the Riksdag. To explain the findings, there will be a focus throughout the paper on MPs' incentive structures for being re-elected. In particular, hypotheses predicting that the safety of MPs' seats will affect their relationship with their constituents will be tested.

Constituencies and Parties in Sweden

The first impression one gains when observing a plenary meeting in the Swedish Riksdag is that constituencies play a central role in parliamentary work. This is because the seating in the plenary chamber is arranged according to the MPs' electoral districts. The fact that MPs in Sweden (and in Norway) are seated according to constituency rather than party affiliation (as in Denmark and Finland) has been interpreted as indicating that constituencies are a potential basis of a cross-party mode in parliamentary life (Andeweg and Nijzink 1995). However, this first impression is misleading. Party politics is a much more dominating factor than constituency representation in Swedish democracy.

The strong role of parties is underpinned by the electoral system. The ballots in Swedish elections are party lists where candidates are selected and ranked by party organisations in the constituency. In most cases, the nomination process is a relatively closed affair, where incumbents have a good chance to be re-nominated. Five of the eight national parties have some form of internal elections among members, even though the nomination committees regularly overrule the result of such elections when determining the order of candidates (Engström 2014). It is therefore a very important incentive for all candidates aiming to be elected to be viewed favourably by party nomination committees in the constituency.

The party list normally names many more candidates than there are seats to fill. Most candidates on the lists therefore have no expectation of being elected. Being listed as a candidate can be seen rather as a mark of status, reflecting the candidate's prominence in the local party. Listing candidates from different social strata is meant to demonstrate the party's diversity and the groups it claims to represent.

Preferential Voting

However, the Swedish electoral system is also built on flexible lists and preferential voting. If a party gains one seat in the constituency, it goes to the candidate at the top of the party list, the second seat goes to the candidate ranked number two, etc. But the ranking can be altered by preferential votes: if 5% (since 2014; 8% 1998–2010) of a party's voters in the constituency mark a candidate, this candidate moves to the top of the list. If several candidates get more than 5%, the candidate with most preferential votes is ranked first. In 2014, 97 of 349 (28%) MPs reached 5% and were classified as elected by preferential

votes. But of these, 80 would have been elected anyway, as they were top-ranked candidates. Only 17 (5% of all MPs) were elected as a result of preferential votes. And the majority of those 17 were in fact also top candidates (ranked second or third) and would have been elected without preferential votes if the party's election results had been slightly stronger.

When Sweden abandoned its closed list systems in 1998, the general expectation was that preferential voting would increase MPs' vote-seeking incentives and thus their responsiveness to their constituents (compare Bowler and Farrell 1993; Crisp et al. 2013). However, as preferential voting only has a marginal effect on the election outcome, there is little incentive to do constituency service to win more preferential votes. Furthermore, most Swedish voters do not even know who the MPs are in their constituency. At the 2014 national election, 73% of the voters could not name a single candidate in their own constituency, and voters' knowledge of candidates has decreased slowly but steadily over a long period of time. The percentage of voters who use their preferential vote has also decreased from 30% in 1998 to 25% in 2014 (Berg and Oscarsson 2015).

However, this lack of a personal relationship between Swedish MPs and their constituents is not a sign of political disinterest or distrust of the democratic system. Compared with other countries, voter turnout is high (86% in 2014) and increasing, and public confidence in the Riksdag is consistently at a satisfactory level, especially in election years (Holmberg and Weibull 2014). But it is not the local MPs who generate this confidence amongst the voters. In fact, Swedes in general have greater confidence and trust in the Riksdag as an institution than they have in the MPs representing their constituency (Brothén 2004).

The Role of Local Government and Multiple Mandates

The relative anonymity of individual MPs is probably one reason for the lack of contact from their constituents. Another reason that discourages Swedes from asking their local MP for help with personal problems is that MPs lack the power and means to make decisions on behalf of constituents. In order to help, they need to refer constituents elsewhere. In fact, the Swedish constitution (the Instrument of Government) explicitly prohibits government ministers and MPs from interfering with national and local administrative authorities in their handling of individual cases (a regulation called the "prohibition of ministerial rule", compare Ruin 2001). This makes individual casework even more challenging for MPs.

In this context, the strong role of local government in Scandinavian politics cannot be underestimated. The Nordic countries have not only some of the most ambitious welfare states in the world but also the most decentralised. Municipal and regional authorities are responsible for public services that affect the daily lives of citizens, such as schools, care services for children, the elderly and disabled persons, health care, public transport, planning, culture, social services etc. (Loughlin et al. 2010). Local politicians are directly responsible for many of the constituents' problems and, in sharp contrast to MPs, they also have the executive power and means to solve them.

Institutionalised forms of citizen dialogues are almost exclusively a local affair. When national commissions on democracy problematise citizen participation between elections, it is a given that such activities are supposed to take place in relation to local democracy (SOU 2012:30, 2016:5). It is consequently far more natural for concerned citizens to turn to their municipal politicians than to their local MPs.

Do Re-election Incentives Matter? The Marginal Seat Hypotheses

It must be expected that the strong roles of local party organisations and local governments in the Swedish political system create a structure that diminishes the incentive for MPs to interact with constituents and do constituency service. It should be noted, however, that interactions between individual MPs and their constituents vary considerably in degree and in kind. One possible explanation for such variation is the incentive structure in relation to their re-election depending on the safety of their seats.

While the rules of the electoral system are the same for everyone, some MPs have seats that are less safe than others, i.e., *marginal seats*. MPs have stronger incentives to make efforts to secure re-election in their constituency when their seats are vulnerable, whereas MPs with safe seats are free to focus on other political endeavours (compare André et al. 2015; Arter 2017; Bowler 2010; Kellermann 2013; Norris 1997). From this follows a general expectation, hereafter referred to as *the marginal seat hypothesis* (H1), that *MPs with marginal seats are more engaged in constituency service activities between elections than MPs with safe seats*.

As the total scope of MPs' constituency activities may vary, there may also be variation in the focus of such activities. If driven by re-election aspirations, MPs' constituency activities could be focused on (1) interactions with *constituents* either to *promote their parties* (and thereby secure their seat by maintaining or increasing their parties' support in future elections) or *promote themselves* (with the hope of being rewarded by preferential votes as candidates in future elections). An MP may also focus constituency activities on (2) interactions with *the local party organisation* with the hope of securing re-nomination in future elections. For an MP with a relatively secure seat, pleasing the local party may be enough for securing re-election, while MPs with marginal seats have much stronger incentives to court the constituents directly. A *specified marginal seat hypothesis* (H2) is therefore that *constituency activities among MPs with marginal seats are relatively more focused on interactions with constituents, while activities among MPs with safer seats are relatively more focused on interactions with local party organisations*.

Ideally, indicators for marginal seats, such as voting records, placement on the party list and number of preferential votes, would be used in testing these hypotheses. Unfortunately, however, it is not possible to integrate such information with the survey material used in this paper. Instead, three other factors will be used for determining the safety of MPs' seats: constituency size, party size and seniority.

A seat in a particular party in a particular constituency is safer when the party has many seats, especially as party size tends to be consistent over time. Only the last seat is vulnerable, the others are probably not. In an electoral system with multi-member constituencies, *constituency size* determines the number of the party's seats and thereby the safety of a particular seat. Furthermore, preferential votes may sometimes make a candidate surpass the top-ranked candidates of a party, but it is very rare that more than one top candidate is replaced. Intra-party competition is therefore potentially more detrimental to incumbents in small constituencies, where parties have fewer seats.

Earlier findings from studies of closed list systems indicate that as constituency size increases, the incentive for MPs to engage in constituency efforts declines (compare Carey and Shugart 1995). Sweden has a moderately but not very flexible list system and these findings may very well be applicable. However, in a party-centred system with limited flexibility, as in Sweden, constituency magnitude's negative effect on constituency effort may grow weaker among MPs who are electorally vulnerable (compare André et al. 2015). Seniority and party size

are therefore potentially important factors that should be accounted for along with constituency size. The re-election rate among Swedish MPs is relatively high (on average 71% since 1985), and *seniority* normally gives MPs a top ranking on future party lists and thus a safer seat. Senior MPs have had plenty of time to nurture strong positions in their local party organisations. Ousting a well-established representative is controversial.

Furthermore, in multi-member constituencies, *party size* may affect the safety of MPs' seats (compare Arter 2017). A large party is likely to win several seats in most constituencies while a small party is lucky to keep a seat in a normal-sized constituency. A minor reduction of voter support may jeopardise the future of the incumbent in a small party, and he or she may be ousted by a challenger who succeeds in gathering preferential votes. The unpredictable distribution of levelling seats among constituencies also increases the uncertainties for MPs in smaller parties.

To summarise: Using this indicator for marginal seats, H1 predicts that, MPs in smaller constituencies as well as junior MPs and MPs in smaller parties are more likely to be more engaged in constituency service activities between elections. Furthermore, in accordance with H2, these marginal seat MPs are likely to be more focused on interactions with constituents, and relatively less on interactions with local party organisations.

Data and Methods

Students of parliamentary affairs in Sweden are privileged to have a rich data source in *The Swedish National Parliament Surveys* (The RDU surveys) which have been conducted by the University of Gothenburg ten times between 1969 and 2014. All of the RDU surveys have a response rate of approximately 90%. (For an overview, see Karlsson and Nordin 2015) The data used in this paper mainly derive from the most recent RDUs (2006, 2010 and 2014). Wherever possible, comparisons with results in earlier surveys are made. To complement the survey data, nine interviews have been conducted with MPs representing seven parties.²

For each question in the RDU surveys about MPs' relationships with their constituencies, a multiple regression analysis is made where constituency size, party size and seniority are included in the model as the main independent variables. The gender, age and education level of the MPs and the year of the survey are also included in the models as control variables.

The 349 members of the Swedish Riksdag represent 29 multi-member constituencies. The constituencies vary in size from Stockholm County (892,592 eligible voters and 38 fixed seats in 2014) to Gotland (46,348 eligible voters and 2 fixed seats).³ The median constituency has 216,712 voters and 9 fixed seats. A useful grouping of *constituency size* is *large* (>300,000 voters: four constituencies—32% of all voters and fixed seats), *medium* (150,000–300,000 voters, i.e., the median size $\pm 30\%$: 20 constituencies—61% of voters) and *small* (<150,000 voters: 5 constituencies—7% of voters). The medium-sized constituencies will be used as a control group in the analyses.

The indicator for *party size* is based on the fact that two Swedish parties are considerably larger than the others and are classified as larger parties in this study. They are the Social Democrats and the Moderates (Conservatives). Since 1985, The Social Democrats have won an average of 4.5 seats per constituency and The Moderates 2.6 seats. All other parties average about 1 seat or less per constituency, and all these parties are classified as small parties. *Senior MPs* are defined as those who are re-elected, while *junior* MPs are serving their first term. (Unfortunately, data on seniority beyond freshman/non-freshman are not available in the RDU data set). During the period 1985–2014, 29% of MPs could be classified as a

junior. Since 2006, the percentage of junior MPs has increased over time. Overall, 11% of all MPs 1985–2014 could be classified as “very safe” (senior MPs representing large parties in large constituencies) while 13% are “very unsafe” (junior MPs representing smaller parties in small or medium-sized constituencies). The relative safety of an average seat has slowly decreased since 1985, mainly due to the increasing share of juniors and the decreasing size of the two main parties.

Findings supporting H1 would be either a significant positive effect of “small constituency”, or a negative effect of “large constituency” (or both) on variables indicating the priority or scope of constituency services. Positive effects on such variables of being a member of a small party or being a junior MP would also support H1. The same effects on variables indicating the scope of interactions with local constituents in relation to interactions of the local party organisation would support H2.

MPs’ Priorities: Party or Constituency?

In international comparison, there is an overwhelming tendency among Swedish political representatives (as well as citizens) to value party-based representative democracy over participatory democracy between elections (Karlsson 2013). Representatives are not unsupportive of citizen dialogues, referenda, petitions, etc., but such forms of democracy are generally seen as secondary to party democracy and elections. Furthermore, in parliamentary work, Swedish political representatives are primarily party loyalists. In the classical choice of representation styles, between being a *delegate* (who votes according to the will of the voters/constituents), a *trustee* (who votes according to their own opinions) (compare Wahlke et al. 1962) or a *party soldier* (who votes according to the will of the party) (compare Converse and Pierce 1986; Holmberg 1974), 73% of Swedish MPs in 2014 classified themselves as party soldiers; 25% as trustees and only 2% as delegates. The inclination towards the party-soldier style is not exclusive to MPs. It is the most common style among political representatives in all tiers of government and its popularity in relation to the other two has increased over the years (Gilljam, Karlsson and Sundell 2010; Karlsson and Gilljam 2014).

However, the styles are not necessarily mutually exclusive, and when the choices are not posed as opposites, the priorities of Swedish MPs are still apparent. According to the RDU surveys, most MPs say that promoting party policies is more important than promoting their own views, individual voters or the interests of their constituency. And the perceived importance of being a party representative has increased over the years. The perceived importance of supporting individual voters, which is regarded as far less important, has steadily decreased over time. Even though the survey-question does not specify whether the hypothetical individuals are constituents or not, the declining priority of individual casework could be interpreted as a distancing away from a key activity of traditional constituency service. In a comparison of individual MPs’ opinions on the importance of promoting party policies and promoting constituencies in 1985–2006, about 42% put their party first, most MPs—50%—gave both equal importance and only 8% put their constituency before their party. A slight but statistically significant increase in the perceived importance of promoting constituencies during 1998–2006 could possibly be tied to the preferential voting reform in 1998.

There is firm evidence in Table 1 that promoting the interests and views of the constituency is seen as more important among MPs in smaller constituencies and less important in larger constituencies. Individual casework is also less prioritised in larger constituencies. Junior MPs find promoting the constituency more important than senior MPs. All these

TABLE 1
How important are the following responsibilities for you personally, as an MP? (OLS regression, *B*-values)

	Working with problems brought forward by individuals/ voters	Promote views you personally consider important	Promote the policies of your own party	Promote the interests/views of your own constituency	Index: constituency over the party
Constant	73****	73****	88****	72****	-17****
Large constituency	-5****	0	+1	-6****	-8****
Small constituency	+1	-3*	0	+5***	+4*
Party: Large	+2**	0	-1**	+7****	+8****
Seniority: re-elected	+2	+1	+1	-3***	-4****
Gender: women	+2***	-2*	+4****	+6****	+1
Age (continuous)	+8***	-2	+5***	+9***	+4
Education: high	-1	+5****	-2****	-4****	-2**
Year (continuous)	-10****	+1	+3****	+4**	+4*
Adj <i>R</i> ²	0.04	0.01	0.03	0.07	0.05
<i>N</i>	2824	2833	2854	2250	2247
Years included	1985–2014	1985–2014	1985–2014	1985–2006	1985–2006

Notes: The question was: “How important are the following responsibilities for you personally, as an MP?” The response alternatives were “very important” (100), “rather important” (67), “rather unimportant” (33) and “very unimportant” (0). The index used as a dependent variable in model five is constructed by subtracting “Promote the policies of your own party” from the response to “promote the interest/views of your own constituency”, i.e., higher values indicate that constituency matters are relatively more important.

P-values: ****<.001; ***<.01; **<.05; *<.10.

Source: RDU 1985–2014.

findings support H1. However, contrary to H1, MPs in larger parties seem to find it more important to promote their constituency than MPs in smaller parties.

When the Riksdag is in session, constituency issues compete with issues of national importance for the attention of the MPs. In 2010, the MPs were asked whether they believed they should spend most of their time attending to the needs of their constituents, making laws for the country or checking the government. The findings show that that a majority of MPs (51%) believe they should spend more time on national matters (either lawmaking or checking government—or both), about a third (31%) believe spending time on the needs of constituents is of equal importance as spending time on national matters and only a fifth (18%) think constituents’ needs should be prioritised. The findings shown in Table 2 indicate that constituency size and seniority are negatively correlated with prioritising constituency matters over general political matters (relatively speaking). These results support H1. Party size does not seem to matter.

On-the-Ground Presence: Contacts with Constituents and the Local Party

The Riksdag is in session from September to June. In the summer months and a few weeks spread throughout the rest of the year, MPs are free to engage in constituency work and other duties not confined to the capital. During the year, Mondays are also designated for constituency duties while Tuesday to Friday is usually spent in Stockholm.

TABLE 2

MPs' time priority in the Riksdag: index: priority of constituency issues in relation to general political issues (OLS regression and *B*-values)

Constant	+2
Large constituency	-10**
Small constituency	+5
Party: large	+1
Seniority: re-elected	-9**
Gender: women	+6*
Age (continuous)	+14
Education: high	+9**
Year (continuous)	NI
Adj R^2	0.05
<i>N</i>	287
Years included	2010

Notes: The question was: "Tell me whether you agree or disagree with the following statements on the role of Members of Parliament? (Note that one cannot spend most of the time on all three): A member of Parliament should spend most of his/her time and energy seeing to the needs of his/her constituents; A member of Parliament is a law maker and should spend most of his/her time and energy making laws for the country; A member of Parliament should spend most of his/her time and energy checking how the government is acting, and how it spends funds." The willingness to promote national political issues (measured as the mean value of the responses to the question on law making and checking the government) is subtracted from the answer to the question on constituency representation. The variable was then recoded to a 0 (exclusively general issues) -100 scale (exclusively constituency representation).

P-values: ****<.001; ***<.01; **<.05; *<.10.

Source: RDU 2010.

MPs confirm in the interviews that they do their best to keep in touch with the constituency between elections. Several MPs specifically mention their contacts with local and regional politicians as a way of keeping informed about local activities, further underscoring the strong bonds between national and local politics. All of them assume that constituency service affects their re-election possibilities, but they have differing views on its importance. Some believe it to be a significant but not the most important factor, while one MP in a small constituency considers it to be crucial.

A couple of MPs have taken it upon themselves to provide detailed accounts of their political work throughout the year, including constituency efforts. One of them estimates that about a quarter of his time is spent on constituency related work. Unfortunately, there are no specific data on how much time MPs in general engage in constituency related work. However, the RDU surveys from 1985 to 2010 included a question on how often MPs are in touch with their local/regional party organisation. The findings are quite stable over the years: between two thirds and three quarters of MPs are in contact with the party in their constituency at least once a week, and the rest at least once or twice a month. Only a handful of MPs have less frequent contact with their local party.

Table 3 shows that MPs in small constituencies definitely have less contact with local party organisations and that senior MPs have more contact with local party organisations. Both of these findings support H2. However, MPs in larger parties have less contact with the local party and this finding is contrary to H2. All these effects are mirrored in a parallel question regarding contacts with party organisations outside the constituency (not presented in the table). This indicates that these effects are not specific to constituency contacts but rather to intra-party contacts in general.⁴

TABLE 3
Contact frequency between MPs and different actors

	Party organisations in the constituency	Politicians in own municipality: Political discussions	Citizens: Political discussions	Index: Citizen contacts over local political contacts	Citizen contacts via social media
Constant	54****	15***	34****	20****	51****
Large constituency	+2	+1	-1	-2	-15**
Small constituency	-8***	-4	+6	+11	-3
Party: Large	-8****	+6**	+2	-5	-2
Seniority: re-elected	+5****	+2	-2	-4	+15**
Gender: women	-4***	-2	0	-2	+13**
Age (continuous)	-24****	-8	-10	-3	-35**
Education: high	+1	+1	+11**	+10**	+10
Local office	NI	+9***	0	-8*	-7
Year (continuous)	+1	NI	NI	NI	NI
Adj R^2	0.04	0.05	0.01	0.02	0.04
N	1922	276	277	274	280
Years included	1985–2010	2014	2014	2014	2014

Notes: The question constituting the dependent variables in model 1 was: “This question deals with your contacts as a politician with various organizations, groups and authorities in the past year. Disregarding how the contact was taken, how often have you in the past year, personally or by letter, been in touch with the organizations, groups or authorities below: Local/regional party organizations in your constituency.” The dependent variables in models 2–5 are based on responses to the question “How often do you have contact with people in the following categories for discussing political issues?” In model 4, the dependent variable was an index where the number of local political contacts were subtracted from the number of citizen contacts. For model 5, the dependent variable was the question “How often have you in your role as a politician been in contact with the following groups via social media (for example Facebook, Twitter, Instagram)? The response alternative for all questions was ‘times per year’, which are recoded here into a 0–100 scale.”

P-values: **** <.001; *** <.01; ** <.05; * <.10.

Source: RDU 1985–2014.

In 2014, MPs were asked how often they have contact with citizens, local politicians in their municipality and other stakeholders to discuss political issues. Swedish MPs discuss politics most often with fellow party members, almost twice as much as with citizens. If we add political opponents and political representatives in other tiers of government, the findings indicate that Swedish MPs’ political discussions overwhelmingly take place within the political arena. Discussions with local politicians in the MP’s home municipality are quite frequent—more so than discussions with, for example, interest groups.

Contact with local politicians is correlated with MPs having multiple mandates (Karlsson 2016). In 2014, 38% of MPs held a local or regional office in parallel with their national office, most of whom (35%) were local councillors. Another 52% have held such sub-national offices before. Multiple mandates create important channels of communication between the tiers and generate inter-level political trust (Karlsson 2017).

MPs’ contact with citizens tends to correlate negatively with constituency size (see Table 3). There is also a negative correlation between constituency size and seniority and the tendency to prioritise citizen contacts over local political contacts. These findings support H1

and, in combination with the findings that party contacts are more common in larger constituencies, they support H2. In an interview, one MP mentions that the media situation may explain this finding. Local newspapers focus far more on local MPs in rural areas, while big city papers are less interested. Perhaps in small constituencies, where MPs are fewer and gain more media attention, they are more likely to be targeted by constituents' contacts than their more anonymous colleagues in cities.

The contacts between constituents and MPs have never been restricted to constituency visits, as letters and telephone have been an option at least since universal suffrage was established. But electronic communication and social media have transformed political discussions around the globe since the 1990s, and Swedish MPs are part of this digital revolution (Brommesson et al. 2014). One MP mentions that he gets 10 postal letters and 100 e-mails on a normal working day.

In 2014, the MPs were asked how often, in their role as a politician, they had been in contact with citizens through social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter and Instagram). A majority, 51%, claimed to have been in contact with citizens via social media on a daily basis, while 29% said "several times a week". This specific kind of citizen-contact frequency is higher than the one discussed above from the same survey. However, the former question was restricted to political discussions, which may explain the discrepancy. It may also be that MPs do not immediately recognise all contacts through social media as proper citizen contacts. The findings in Table 2 show that MPs in the largest constituencies report much fewer citizen contacts via social media, which is in line with H1. Less expected, contrary to H1, is the finding that senior MPs have more social media contacts than junior MPs. Could it be that senior MPs are more known to voters and therefore more targeted with e-messages? Party size has no significant effect on social media contacts.

Nature of Contacts Initiated by Constituents

One option for citizens who wish to contact an MP is to turn to their locally elected MP. Other options are to contact an MP in their preferred party (which is not necessarily represented in their constituency) or an MP who specialises in that person's particular concern, such as members of a particular Riksdag committee or a party spokesperson. For example, an MP who is a member of the agriculture committee and responsible for fishery issues mentions in an interview that he is often contacted by non-constituents on issues relating to fishing. He also mentions that one kind of contact, threats and hate messages, tend to come from all over the country and that such messages do not necessarily target specific MPs.

In 1985 and 2002, the MPs were asked how often they were contacted by voters living within and outside their constituency. In 1985, MPs reported 12 contacts per month from constituents and 7 from non-constituents. In 2002, the results were 20 times by constituents and 26 times by non-constituents. From these findings, we learn that the number of voter-initiated contacts had more than doubled over these 17 years, which is probably due to the introduction of the Internet and e-mail. But more remarkably, contacts from non-constituents had increased even more, exceeding the number of contacts from constituents in 2002. Unfortunately, there are no more current data on this topic and we cannot say if this trend has continued.

The RDU survey of 2010 included a question regarding the nature of the contacts initiated by the MPs' own constituents. The MPs were asked how many out of 20 contacts from constituents that concerned nine types of issues (see Esaiasson and Lindberg 2014).

The findings show that more than half of the reported contacts (55%) concerned general political issues that were not specifically related to constituency affairs, while 42% related to constituency specific issues. Only 3% of all contacts could be described as requests for casework on behalf of individual constituents.

The fact that individual casework is very uncommon and not prioritised among Swedish MPs is confirmed in all the interviews. MPs mention that they sometimes help citizens to get in contact with the right authorities and explain how the system works, but that they have limited means for helping them further. A single example of a casework-like situation mentioned by one MP was her engagement in the situation of an individual refugee.

MPs may have incentives to make themselves available for different kinds of contacts and the findings (not presented in a table in this paper) show that MPs in smaller constituencies are contacted relatively more often about local political issues than general issues, which is in line with H1. However, the findings on party size are contrary to H1: MPs are approached more about constituency issues in larger parties. Seniority does not seem to matter here.

Contacts Instigated by MPs: Outreach and Information Provision

Contacts between MPs and constituents instigated by the former generally have two purposes: outreach or information provision (Arter 2017). *Outreach* is a pro-active endeavour, which entails seeking inputs from constituents, identifying problems, etc. *Information provision* entails supplying constituents with relevant information about the views/actions of the party or the representative. Swedish MPs were asked about their views on the importance of outreach and information provision in RDU 2006 and 2010. The findings show that most MPs believe that both outreach and information provision are important. Most MPs (51% in 2010) find both equally important while 45% put outreach first. Very few (4%) think “to inform” is more important than “to be informed” (compare Brothén and Gilljam 2006).

The findings in Table 4 show that the rare inclination to prioritise information provision over outreach is considerably stronger in larger constituencies, supporting H1. However, MPs in larger parties give greater priority to outreach than MPs in smaller parties. This finding is contrary to H1.

Representing the Constituency in the Riksdag

One way for MPs to promote the interests of the constituency in the Riksdag is to introduce motions. Several thousand motions are introduced by MPs every year, but very few are accepted and turned into law by the Riksdag. Almost no motions are accepted in times of a majority government, while 1–2% are accepted in times of a minority government. The motivation for introducing motions is therefore not primarily to actually change the laws, but rather to make a position known. Introducing a motion which relates the constituency is, in this context, a way of making local issues known in the capital and, perhaps more importantly, to give people back home the impression of substantive representation on their behalf. Findings from the 1980s indicate that most MPs introduced a motion promoting local interests at least once a year, and the number of local motions was higher in the year before an election (Esaïsson and Holmberg 1996).

A study was conducted on motions introduced by MPs in five constituencies during the election periods of 1991–94 and 1998–2002 (Lindgren 2007). It is possible to deduce from the

TABLE 4

Content MP initiated citizen contacts: Importance of outreach and information provision (OLS regression and *B*-values, Logistic regression and $\text{Exp}(B)$)

	To be informed about the problems in your constituency (0–100) (Outreach)	To inform about the ongoing work in the Riksdag (0–100) (Information provision)	Information provision more important than outreach (0–1) ($\text{Exp}(B)$)
Constant	88****	89****	0.53
Large constituency	–3**	+1	3.65***
Small constituency	0	0	1.22
Party: large	+3***	+2	0.41**
Seniority: re-elected	0	–3**	1.33
Gender: women	+2**	+2	0.34**
Age (continuous)	+4	+2	0.12
Education: high	+1	+1	0.64
Year (continuous)	+4	–8	0.47
Adj R^2 / Nagelkerke R^2	0.02	0.00	0.11
<i>N</i>	632	632	632
Years included	2006–10	2006–10	2006–10

Notes: The question constituting the dependent variable was “How important do you consider the following undertaking when you meet people in your constituency?” (The terms outreach and information provision were not mentioned in the question.) The dependent variable in model 4 is dichotomous, where MPs who think information provision is more important than outreach have the value 1, others 0.

P-values: **** <.001; ***<.01; **<.05; *<.10.

Source: RDU 2006–10.

data that about 17% of the motions related to constituency issues. The number of constituency related motions declined significantly during the 1990s, from 25% in 1991–94 to 12% in 1998–2002. Only a handful of these thousands of motions were approved by the Riksdag. The results also show that constituency related motions were more common in smaller constituencies, in line with the expectations of H1.

MPs confirm in interviews that introducing motions is indeed a way for them to promote constituency interests. They also put local issues on the agenda in other ways by participating in the public debate. Helping a local university and questions relating to defence and infrastructure are specifically mentioned, along with issues relating to organised crimes and drug policies of special relevancy for the constituency. However, cross-party cooperation on constituency matters is rare, especially between MPs in different party blocs. Several MPs claim that they have never heard of such cooperation. But some MPs have recollections of collaboration relating to fishing or local infrastructure. One MP mentions study visits in the constituency as a kind of cross-party cooperation. Another example that was mentioned is a debate article co-written with a political opponent.

Discussion

The main findings of this paper were anticipated in light of the incentive structure for MPs' re-election provided by the Swedish electoral system. As party organisations (and not constituents) have the greatest influence over MPs' re-nomination processes, it is natural that sitting Swedish MPs have strong bonds with the local party and engage less in non-partisan interactions with local constituents.

Furthermore, the *marginal seat hypothesis* (H1)—that MPs with marginal seats are more likely to be engaged in constituency service between elections—was generally supported throughout the paper in relation to constituency size and seniority. MPs in smaller constituencies, whose seats are less safe, believe that promoting constituency interests is more important than MPs in larger constituencies do, while working with individual cases is considered less important in larger constituencies. Prioritising constituency representation over national matters in parliamentary work is also negatively correlated with constituency size. There is a general tendency for citizen interactions to be more frequent in smaller constituencies, especially via social media. Furthermore, citizen-initiated contacts tend to focus on general issues in larger constituencies and are more related to the constituency and personal issues in smaller constituencies. Additionally, junior MPs, who are more electorally vulnerable than senior MPs, believe constituency work to be more important, and they give greater priority to constituency representation than national matters in parliamentary work.

The *specified marginal seat hypothesis* (H2), which predicted that constituency activities among MPs with marginal seats are likely to be relatively more focused on interactions with constituents *while activities among MPs with safer seats are relatively more focused on interactions with local party organisations*, was also supported. Relatively speaking, MPs in smaller constituencies and junior MPs tend to prioritise citizen contacts over contacts with local politicians, and the frequency of contacts with local party organisations generally correlates positively with constituency size.

However, the effects of party size do not follow the expectations of the marginal seat hypotheses, based on the assumption that MPs in larger parties are less electorally vulnerable. In many of the questions that were analysed, the effect of party size even goes against the expectations of H1 and H2. One explanation for these unexpected results may relate to the time available to MPs. The large parties have more "backbenchers" with less prominent roles in parliamentary work and hence more time on their hands which could be devoted to constituency efforts (compare Arter 2017; Norris 1997). In smaller parties, almost all MPs are committee members and spokespersons for important issues, and their time may be more limited. Another explanation mentioned in the interviews may be that larger parties have more resources for facilitating MP-constituency relations, such as specialised constituency assistants. Maybe such resources counterbalance any negative effects of party size relating to the safety of MPs' seats? One could also speculate that the results reflect that the two larger parties, The Social Democrats and The Moderates, share some traits of party culture unrelated to the size that distinguish them from other parties.

The findings also show that the constituency service of Swedish MPs tends to focus on issues of interest to the whole locality rather than on individual constituents. Casework activities in the Anglo-American plurality system tradition are very rare in Sweden. But this should not be surprising considering the key role of local governments in Scandinavia. The strong bonds between the tiers of government, strengthened by multiple mandates, the common election day and the fact that the same parties are active in all tiers (Bäck 2010), further

underline the role of local governments as first responders for citizens seeking help. If a citizen has an issue of personal, local or national importance, it is therefore likely to be more effective to contact a local politician than an MP. This was repeatedly confirmed in the interviews in which MPs said they referred concerned constituents to local authorities. Only when issues of potential general importance emerge locally, they may be redirected to the national level. Local party organisation may thusly become an intermediate between citizens and their MPs. Whenever MPs tend to focus their constituency activities on party interactions rather than constituency service and direct interactions with citizens, this may not just be a result of a re-election strategy but also a pragmatic way of representing the constituency in a political system built on strong local self-governance.

Above all, the findings of this paper confirm that Swedish MPs are party loyalists. Most MPs consider it more important to promote party policies and general political issues than the constituency, and MPs' relationship with the constituency is often channelled through party contacts. However, this does not mean that Swedish MPs believe that constituency service is *unimportant*—almost all MPs interact regularly with their constituents. Constituency matters are definitely high on the MPs' agenda. They are just merely putting their party first.

NOTES

1. This paper is one of six contributions to a special issue on constituency service in the Nordic countries. This paper provides the Swedish case. In an introductory paper (Arter 2017), the concept of constituency service is problematized and the main questions and comparative approach are introduced.
2. The short interviews were conducted via telephone and e-mail in 2016–17. The MPs were asked open-ended questions on if and how they undertake constituency service; how their party values MPs' constituency service and if such efforts affect their re-nomination; and finally, whether they have any experience of constituency representation efforts across party lines.
3. The Riksdag consists of 310 fixed seats and 39 levelling seats which are intended to ensure that each party's share of the total seats is proportional to the parties' overall shares of votes at the national level.
4. It should be noted that for junior MPs, this question partly refers to a period when they were not yet elected (the period before the election during the previous year which was an election year). However, a control analysis shows that the effects of constituency size and party size among senior and junior MPs do not differ significantly from the results presented here.

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