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Biographies

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Abstract: This paper investigates an area of political discourse that has hitherto existed in an analytic 'black box': the constituency office. We focus on the interactions between ordinary British people as they engage directly in 'political' discussions with their Member of Parliament. While the majority of surgery talk surrounds complaints about services, we focus on sequences of talk in which either citizens or the MP make 'political' topics relevant. Eighty consultations were video-recorded, anonymized and transcribed, and the data analysed using conversation analysis. We found that MP-initiated political comments portray the government as aligned with constituents' needs, whereas constituents use political comments largely to criticize the government. Constituents privilege the interactional contingencies over other issues. Overall, the paper contributes to our understanding of how constituents navigate interactional and political contingencies in interactions with their representative.

Introduction

Political discourse has focused heavily on the public arena, such as political interviews or Parliamentary debates, but one setting for political discourse that has been overlooked: the constituency office. Although discourse analytic work has investigated the 'backstage' of political life (Wodak 2009), and the ways that citizens interact with politicians as large groups (Heritage and Greatbatch 1986; Llewellyn 2005), no one has investigated the way that average citizens 'do politics' in face-to-face encounters with their representatives. Yet it is at the constituency office of a Member of Parliament (MP) that citizens have direct access to their local MP. It is here (and often *only here*) that the representatives and represented of many democratic systems actually meet.

The lack of research into constituency offices, in comparison with 'grander' political sites, is surprising. Many surveys report that political engagement is low (Hansard 2015), and that voters feel politicians are disconnected from the public (Lusoli et al. 2006; Hay 2007). One reason may be that, in recent years, politicians are increasingly treated like celebrities, with politics becoming "a series of spectacles" (Street 2004:441), and citizens nothing more than an audience. The constituency office, on the other hand, is a space where citizens and politicians have the opportunity to mutually converse. At the same time that voter engagement has been reportedly decreasing, constituency casework is at an all-time high (Norton 1994; Gay 2005; Rosenblatt 2006; House of Commons 2007; Korris 2011), and constituents appear to desire significant constituency involvement from politicians (Vivyan and Wagner 2015). UK politicians spend as much as 60% of their working week doing constituency service (Korris 2011), and the UK government budgets at least £81.5 million for constituency-related MP expenses (House of Commons 2011). Given this commitment of time and interest in constituency work, why do constituency office surgery meetings receive so little detailed attention in research?

The research that does examine the constituency office rarely focuses on what actually happens *during* MP surgeries. Constituency office casework has been investigated as a potentially effective method of campaigning and securing re-election (e.g., Yiannakis 1981; Norton and Wood 1993; Butler and Collins 2001; Johnston and Pattie 2009). Researchers are likewise intrigued by what motivates politicians to engage in casework and constituency service, given that the link between service and votes is uncertain (e.g., Cain et al. 1987; Norris 1992; Arter 2011. There are many studies examining whether and how constituencies influence politicians' actions at Parliament (e.g., Miller and Stokes 1963; Ågren et al. 2006; Blidook and Kerby 2011), and some that examine what work MPs and constituency caseworkers do and how they do it (Fenno 1978; Rawlings 1990; Le Lidec 2009) – but there are no studies of how individuals interact with politicians face-to-face (for citizens doing political talk with each other, see Schmitt-Beck and Lup 2013; Ekström 2015). In the conversation analysis literature (the method to be used in this paper), there are many studies of politicians interacting on public media (see Clayman and Heritage 2002; Ekström et al. 2013; Heritage and Clayman 2013; Ekström et al. 2015), but not of politicians interacting with citizens. The closest studies of politician-to-individual-constituent communication focus on the self-promotional value of Twitter and other online media, but do not analyze interaction itself (e.g., Jackson and Lilleker 2011). Although researchers seem endlessly interested in the attitudes that constituents express in surveys (Dalton 2000), there seems to be no interest in how those constituents may or may not express their attitudes, opinions, and ideas *to* their democratic representatives. There have been explicit calls for analyzing the mundane political talk. Eveland et al. (2011) have noted that since much of the research on political conversations has been based on self-report surveys, we have little understanding of what those self-reports mean in situ of a real conversation, and that (1086) "Thus the empirical literature is built on shaky ground." They write,

Ideally, more observational studies of face-to-face and online political conversations would be conducted with an emphasis on understanding how and why individuals engage in political conversations, *what they actually convey during these conversations*, and what implications these conversations have for their social and political lives. (1097, emphasis added)

This paper begins to address Eveland et al.'s call. We suggest that this lack of research impacts our understanding of politics in general – we need to understand how these interactions fit into the political sphere of the democratic system, and how participants navigate the political (or apolitical, as we will see) waters of the surgery setting. We will analyze what participants (constituents, MPs, constituency staff) convey in meetings and telephone calls at the constituency office of a British Member of Parliament. In doing so, we are opening the 'black box' (see Stokoe 2010) of mundane interactions with politicians.

Method

We used conversation analysis (CA) to examine the interactions between the staff, MP and constituents, and to see how and when 'political' sequences arose (see Transcription Key, at end of chapter, for transcription conventions). While discourse analysis as a whole examines how talk constructs and performs social actions and categories, CA focuses on the sequential environments that unfold in interaction, looking at how participants in an interaction design their turns and achieve certain actions, such as offers and complaints (see Sidnell and Stivers 2013; see also Edwards and Potter 1992). Discourse analysts show how micro-scale examples of talk perform or reference macro-scale social discourses, and likewise CA examines micro-scale instances of talk. However, CA is more dogmatic than many discursive approaches about

requiring relatively explicit categorization from the participants themselves. For 'politics' to exist, there must be evidence that both participants orient to and acknowledge each other's occasioning of the political. Instead of coding actions as 'political' or not, CA allows us to examine in detail the way participants do or do not make political topics relevant with their talk. Although approaches such as critical discourse analysis assume and seek out how hierarchies and social categorizations affect talk, the CA approach requires total agnosticism on the presence or absence of power, identity, and political efforts until such time as the participants make them relevant. CA is thus an unusual approach for tackling, head-on, the question of 'doing politics' with an MP. We see this agnosticism as important for analysing the data in way that is faithful to its original context of production. By examining how participants design their turns, pursue certain sequences of talk, and formulate their actions, we can see how participants *made* the talk political. For a full discussion of the conversation analytic method, see Schegloff (2007) and Sidnell (2010).

Although it is tempting to begin with the *a priori* assumption that all interactions at the constituency are (or must be) political because the MP is a politician, this contradicts the conversation analytic and ethnomethodological method for approaching data inductively and without assumptions (Heritage 1984; Garfinkel and Sacks 1986; Sacks 1992; Schegloff 1996, 2007). We have not assumed that political talk will be present, or absent – only that if and when it appears, it will be *achieved* as a members' phenomenon of 'doing' political talk (Garfinkel and Sacks 1986). All interaction rests on intersubjective understanding, so for participants to understand the talk *as* political, it must be done in a way that creates a "witnessable demonstration" (Garfinkel 2002: 211) of 'political.

In selecting portions of data to analyze, we focused our analysis on stretches of conversation where one of the constituent or the Member of Parliament or the constituency office staff made a 'political' topic relevant and engaged in politicizing activity. We used Hay's

(2007, pp.54-81) definition of politicizing, in which an issue can be characterized as political by highlighting the ways in which agency and deliberation were a part of the issue. This was typically done by referencing the role of the government, current policy or recent policy changes, legislation, party leaders and party politics, and the role or job of the MP. As we will show, not all possibly political sequences were achieved as political talk.

One definition of 'political' relies on the goals of the participants; they must have a political goal in their talk for it to be classified as political. Conversation analysis does not assume analysts have access to any mental states such as 'goals'. After all, it may be that *every* constituent that visited the constituency office under examination had some mental goal that was political, that every complaint about bureaucratic red tape was implicitly also a criticism of government policy about benefits. But to claim that there were political goals in the minds of constituents without clearly demonstrating said goals would be unscientific. We can only be certain of a political agenda when it is made evident, just as the participants could only be certain of a political agenda on the part of their interlocutors when such an agenda was made evident in the conversation.

Data

We recorded interactions at the office of a Member of Parliament in the United Kingdom. The MP was a member of a party forming the Government at the time (rather than the Opposition), although whether the constituents were aware of this fact is unknown. Over the span of six months, we recorded telephone calls and surgery meetings that occurred at that surgery. Our data corpus consists of 25 surgery meetings, which range in length from 4 minutes to 24 minutes (mean: 17 minutes), resulting in a data corpus of 7 hours 8 minutes. We also recorded 55 telephone calls (another 4 hours 30 minutes of data). These telephone calls were solely with the caseworkers at the constituency office, not with the MP, and contained no political references. Most were follow-up calls concerning active cases, or calls to other agencies and

institutions by the caseworkers. All participants gave informed consent to be recorded and for the recordings to be analyzed and published.

Concerning other 'contextual' details, such as the gender, age, socio-economic background, tenure (as an MP or as a resident), or any number of other possible population characteristics – these were not analyzed, and for confidentiality purposes will not be published. Such factors are not made relevant in the analysis unless the participants themselves make them relevant. This is the standard (and longstanding) methodological approach in CA (Garfinkel and Sacks 1986; Edwards and Potter 1992; Sacks 1992; Schegloff 2007; Sidnell and Stivers 2013). To do otherwise would be to superimpose an analyst's perspective the information empirically available to the interaction participants.

The extracts were selected to be representative of the variety of ways political talk was achieved. Out of the 80 interactions, only 10 contain sequences that are treated *as* 'political comments'. Of these 10 meetings, it is clear that the political comments arise out of other talk; they are not the purpose for the visit. One cannot conclude from these numbers that political comments are definitely absent from constituency office surgeries in general – the sampling period (8/10 possible surgery days over the course of six months) was not near an election period, and may simply have missed the pertinent meetings. Those with substantial political agendas may have refused to be recorded. This surgery may have been entirely unique in the United Kingdom. However, it seems likely that, at least at this surgery, constituents did not engage in significant amounts of political talk. In looking at the features that surround the political comments that do arise, we can gain insight as to why this may be the case, and how participants achieve 'political' talk.

Analysis

In the first section, we will analyze how the Member of Parliament raises political topics and makes political comments. The MP's comments are direct references to political activity in government, and show proactive behaviour on the part of the government that is aligned with the constituents' interests. In contrast, constituents' comments, analyzed in the second section, are indirect and vague, full of conversational markers of delicacy. When constituents are critical of the government, they avoid implicating the MP directly, which seems to be a way of avoiding criticizing the MP to his face. When constituents are complimentary, they are instead direct and explicit in their comments.

MP-raised political comments

When constituents present a complaint, the MP can respond with a political comment – the MP can treat that complaint as politically relevant. The MP can raise reports of details about current House of Commons proceedings or plans, for instance. By raising a political topic or issue, the MP treats the prior turn(s) as political and/or politically relevant turn(s). For example, in the first extract, the constituents and MP have been discussing elder care homes in the UK. The constituents' mother was seriously neglected in her care home, and the constituents want their mother's legacy to be preventing further abuse and neglect. The constituents have been suggesting possible problems with the system in the meeting, and are currently expressing concern about the lack of trained care home staff. (See Transcription Key for transcription conventions).

(1) Extract 1 – MP01.Surgery-2CXx_05

```
1  MP: An' they're al:ready saying, (0.2) they can't
2      afford to run, (0.5)
3      [uhm with what they're] doing,
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4  C1: [°But they're paying-°]        They're paying

5      the  minimu[m  wage] °don't they,°=

6  MP:          [I know.]              =Well that's

7      the trouble an' then it-

8  C1: You kno[w:,

9  MP:        [So, (.) they pay the minimum wa:ge,

10     They attract people who are (0.2) only prepared

11     to work for, (.) you know,

12 C1: Yeah,

13 MP: Minimum wage, (0.2) An' therefore th- the- the

14     people say:, th- the care homes will say:, say

15     to- say to me, 'well actually there's no

16     point#, °you know (les-) they- they're-°

17     turnover is- .hhh

18 MP: It's a vicious circle. [An'      it's    a  ]=

19 C2:                        [>You wouldn't want a<]

20 MP: =↑bi:g problem in this count[ry.

21 C2:                             [You wouldn't have

22     somebody- you know a baby in a nursery being

23     looked after somebody (0.5) [like that=

24 MP:                             [No.

25 C2: =then would you.

26 C2: An' it- you know, an' [<↑elder]

27 MP:                      [an'  th]at'[s-

28 C2:                                  [person> is

29     just as vulnera[ble.

30 MP:                [An' that's where we (.) are

31     trying to get to, which [is=

32 C2:                         [Mm,

33 MP: =to a much Better system, [an' the care bill=

34 C1:                           [Mm.
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35 MP: =on Mon- returns to the House of Commons on

36     Monday an' T[uesday,=

37 C1:              [Mm::.

38 MP: =to try an' get a <much (.) better,>

39 C1: °M[m:,°

40 MP:   ['s a more joined up system in the enn aytch

41     es[s, ((NHS))

42 C1:    [Mm[:,

43 C2:       [Mm:.
```

This extract shows how a complaint develops slowly into a politically oriented sequence. The extract starts with the constituents (C1 and C2) resisting the MP's concerns. The MP expresses concern on behalf of the elder care homes (ECHs) that they cannot afford to run. C1 counters (literally proposing an alternative with 'but', Line 4) that the ECHs pay minimum wage. The MP aligns with C1 ('I know', Line 6), and explains the dilemma facing the ECHs (Lines 6-20). The MP concludes her explanation by suggesting that the problem is broader than the concerns of the constituents – that it is 'a ↑bi:g problem in this country' (Lines 18-20), and thus goes beyond the ECH of the constituents' mother. At this point, the MP's explanation has not directly affiliated with the constituents' concerns, but has diverged to address the broader, social-scale difficulties. C2, then, does not respond to these broader implications, and pursues affiliation for the complaint about the lack of training (Lines 19-23) (Jefferson and Lee 1981). This resists the MP's explanation (Hepburn and Potter 2011). C2 complaint more strongly pursues affiliation by formulating the concern as something that anybody would feel ('>you wouldn't want' Line 19; 'you wouldn't have' Line 21). C2 also mobilizes response (Stivers and Rossano 2010) with other strategies, such as the tag-question 'would you' (Line 25), and the extreme case formulation contrast of a baby and an elderly person (Lines 22-29). These kind of complaint-pursuing environments, in which constituents continually pursue affiliation for a certain complaint, or repeat a complaint, can result in political comments from the MP.

The MP now affiliates with the constituents more strongly. First, the MP agrees with them: 'No' (Line 24). Note that the 'No' is an agreement in that it shows the MP to be of a similar opinion, that you *would not* want an untrained person caring for a baby. Second, the MP uses a political comment to demonstrate how he and his government have been proactively engaging with this issue already. On Lines 30-36, the MP mentions that the government is discussing 'the care bill' (Line 33) in a few days time, which shows that they are aware of the issue, are actively trying to find a way to fix the issue, and that they have already been preparing for the bill in the recent past. The MP also designs his turn so that the political activity directly addresses C2's turn: 'An' that's where we (.) are trying to get to' (Line 30-31). The 'An' that' (and) indexes how the utterance arises out of C2's complaint, as if C2 has coincidentally formulated precisely what the government has been doing. In this way, the MP's turn not only fulfills the relevant affiliation with C2, it also shows him to be proactively and independently helping the constituents. As Edwards and Fasulo (2006) have pointed out, demonstrating independence highlights the sincerity of the position.

Extract 1 shows how a political comment can be slowly developed, from possible-political topics such as the country-wide relevance of an issue, to more specific, overt political topics such as debating bills. The extract also shows how the MP can mobilize a potential political sequence of talk to demonstrate an affiliative, shared position with the constituents – but also that said position is genuine, and independently claimed, since it is based on already-undertaken government activity. This kind of positioning could be very useful for a politician who needs to demonstrate how well they represent constituents and how they are actively assisting constituents, in order to keep their job in the next election.

The MP-initiated political comments all follow the above pattern. Extract 2 demonstrates this. In Extract 2, the constituent (C) has come to the MP to report an incident of legal aid fraud. He and his family have unwittingly been a part of a law firm's fraudulent activity. After

explaining (over eight minutes, from the start of the meeting) how his family came to be involved and how the firm had hid the details from them, the constituent (C) broadens his complaint to a society-wide concern.

(2) Extract 2 – MP01.Surgery-1KZ3_02

```
1  C:   Now, (0.3) What I'm saying is, (.) >a- How
2       many< people are th- doing this towards, They
3       just- e- Sur:ely it's ilLegal.
4            (0.9)
5  C:   If they knew, (0.5) there was a- (.) a problem
6       in the first place, (0.3) I'd a said- "Okay,
7       (.) I'll accept tha[t,"
8  MP:                     [Yeah.
9            (0.4)
10 MP: Yes.=You want to- y- ex[act ly.  ]
11 C:                         [I know wh]at I'll go
12     by the law.
13 MP: ↑Yeah.
14               (0.3)
15 C:  But they carried on w↓ith i',
16 MP: Well, (.) That's why:, as a government, (0.5)
17     we ha- have- (.) Uhm <stopped,> (0.2) <legal
18     aid,> (0.6) for: (0.2) you know,
19     man[y     many  cases.]
20 C:     [There's too- too m]uch <waste.>
21 MP: ↑Yeah. >Well an' lots of people were,< as you
22     say making money, (0.4) [out of the tax=
23 C:                          [Mm.
24 MP: =payer on these things,
```

It is C, here, who first broaches the topic of wider social relevance. On Lines 1-3, he intensifies his concern about the law firm, suggesting that they have not only dealt fraudulently with him, but perhaps with many other people. C neutralizes his own involvement, claiming he would said 'I'll accept that,' (Line 7), before continuing to pursue the complaint (Line 15). C has been pursuing his issue for eight minutes, the last three of which have involved direct complaints about the company. Thus, we are in a similar environment as in Extract 1, where a complaint is being pursued, and the broader social implications have been mentioned. This is a sufficient context for the MP to treat the sequence as politically relevant.

The MP's comment, Lines 16-19, highlights the way that his own government has proactively managed the problem of legal aid fraud, by dramatically reducing it. The MP specifically includes 'as a government (0.5) we' (Lines 16-17), which inserts into his turn both the role of the government, and the MP's role within that government in accomplishing the fix for legal aid fraud. In Hay's (2007) terms, it highlights the politicization of the decision to stop legal aid. The MP goes on to demonstrate a shared knowledge of the problems of the fraud, such as in 'lots of people were,< as you say making money (0.4) out of the tax payer' (Lines 21-24). Including the 'as you say' helps to indicate, as was done in Extract 1, the way the MP shares C's knowledge and opinion, and the way that the political comment arises out of C's own talk. Not only does this show the MP to be on-side with C, it mitigates a possible hearing of this line as preaching or campaigning – taking the opportunity to discuss things not directly in the constituent's realm of concern.

In this section, we have shown how political comments arise out of sequences that involve complaints, particularly pursuit of complaints, and sequences that may have referenced a wider social implication of the constituents' specific concern. The MP takes the opportunity to make the talk politically relevant by demonstrating how he and/or his government have taken action on the issue. The references to government are direct and specific, and portray the

government in a positive light – as aligned with the constituents' interests and concerns. Beyond the overt references to government, it is notable how the government is made an agent in these sequences. Governments are colloquially thought of as non-agents – as an ineffective group of people who usually fail to enact anything at all (Hay, 2007). Highlighting the agency of the government politicizes the government's actions, according to Hay (2007) – suggesting that these sequences involve political action for their politicizing nature, not just their explicit references to mainstream political bodies.

The explicit and positive nature of the MP's political comments shows a marked contrast with the comments from constituents. In the next section, we will analyze constituent-initiated comments, where constituents must carefully manage the interactional challenge of criticizing a co-present person.

Constituents' Political Comments

In this section we will analyze how constituents make political talk relevant. Constituents' comments are quite different from the MP's, in that they mostly speak vaguely and with markers of delicacy such as hesitations (see Silverman and Peräkylä 1990). However, as we will demonstrate, this only holds when constituents are making comments that could be interpreted to criticize the MP. When constituents compliment the MP, or discuss the political with respect to other people, they do not have markers of delicacy, and speak specifically.

The first example of constituent-initiated political talk is seen in Extract 3 Within the past few years of the time of recording, the government had implemented two policies. First, it had implemented a system for assessing benefit claimants to determine their eligibility, which was controversial (Litchfield 2014). In this extract, the constituent (C1) has multiple sclerosis, and has been told he is ineligible for benefits. C1 appealed this assessment, but the appeal kept being delayed and C1's benefits had been cancelled anyway, so C1 and his wife (C2) have

come to see the MP for aid. The second government policy was to increase the age at which one could receive state pension (see Department of Work and Pensions 2014). A pension would have allowed the constituents more financial flexibility in the face of the benefits cancellation, and so the lack of pension is a complainable and frustrating matter (Holt and Drew 1988). C2 complains about this second change to the caseworker (CW) and the MP on lines 9 and 10.

(3) Extract 3 – MP01.Surgery-13KO_01

```
1  C2: I've had to go back to working five days,

2  CW: R:ight o[kay.      Yea:h.          Yeah.

3  C2:         [Ahheh heh ba(h)si(h)c'ly cause °I

4      haven't got money coming° [in   an:'    er:  ]

5  CW:                            [Yeah o'course yeah]

6  C2: °°You know:,°°  '[mean I'm s]ixty,

7  CW:                  [<M  k a y ]

8            (0.4)

9  C2: Nearly, an' (.) obviously our pension's been

10     ↑moved [↑↑now hasn't it, (h)eh(h)eh

11 MP:        [Yeah:,  I know::,  I know:.

12 C2: [hhhhhahhh     ]

13 MP: [I know- Well::] >unfortunately< [as you kn]ow=

14 C2:                                  [You know,]

15 MP: =everyone's- having ta- you know,

16 C2: Mm,

17                 (0.3)

18 MP: We're trying to sort out er:, you know the big

19     black hole, an:d everybody's °°impacting on

20     (          )°°

21 C2: Yeah

22 MP: °°(     ) Enough.°° [So,

23 C2:                     [That's right. Yeah.
```

```
24 MP: °An:' you know and er but basically, (0.4)
25      Difficult- difficult choices.
26 C2: Yea[h.
27 MP:     [An' pensions has been- has been one of
28             them,
29 C2: Mm.
30 MP: So, er:m,
31 C2: But I say this is just
```

Lines 9-10, 'Obviously our pension's been ↑moved ↑↑now hasn't it', transforms C2's complaint about having to work extra hours into a political issue. It makes the recent policy change about pensions relevant to the discussion, and creates a potential space for the MP to respond to it *as* a political comment (which he does, see below). C2's comment is built up as a pursuit of a complaint, as we have seen before, giving additional evidence (having to go back to work longer, Line 1, being too old, Line 6) for why the constituents' situation is difficult and in need of assistance. This is similar to Extracts 1 and 2. However, C2 also builds markers of delicacy into her talk. The role of the government is left entirely implicit – the pensions have 'been ↑moved' (Lines 9-10), and the agent who did the moving is left unspoken (remember: the agent who did the moving was the MP's political party). There are laughter particles managing the problematic nature of not having sufficient funds (Lines 3-4, see Potter and Hepburn 2010), as well as post-completion laughter particles (Line 10, see Shaw et al. 2013) managing the implied criticism of the MP. There are also significant pitch changes (Line 10) and low volume sections (Line 6), which also mark delicacy (Silverman and Peräkylä 1990). Finally, the criticism is delayed to the end of the account of why the constituents are struggling. These indicators of a delicate situation, used to manage the potentially problematic interpretations that may be available to the participants. In other words, C2 designs her turns that culminate in a political comment with speech markers that are regularly reported to manage

interpersonally sensitive topics and actions. This suggests that C2 is careful, when making such a comment, to mitigate risks associated with doing such an action. In complaining about a situation brought about by the very party to which the MP belongs, C2 risks criticizing the MP directly. As a result, C2 takes steps to reduce this implication, while simultaneously indicating that she is aware of it.

It is worth noting that the complaint is displaced (Edwards 2005) – it is tangential to the main complaint, the issue of the appeal about benefits. C2 would not be trouble-free even if the pension had not been moved. The comment provides another account for why the constituents are in need of the MP's aid. What it *does as an action* in the conversation is both the giving of an account, and the complaining about a policy. The political nature of the account makes it all the more relevant for the MP to provide aid – the MP's government was the source of the some of the difficulty, and so it is appropriate that the MP likewise fixes the problem.

The MP treats the complaint as deserving a political account, which proves that however subtle the comment may appear to analysts, the MP interprets it as politically oriented. The MP, by treating it as a political statement, acknowledges the way that C2 has politicized (as per Hay 2007) the policy decision on pensions. The MP responds to this politicization with a depoliticization – making the decision appear as less of a decision, and more of a forced result. The MP accounts for the pension moving as part of an effort to fill the 'big black hole' (Lines 18-19), which refers to the lack of government finances and the UK deficit. She mentions that the change has been impacting on 'everybody' (Line 19), which neutralizes the constituent's particular claim to complainability about the pension move. Lastly, she characterizes the change as part of 'difficult choices' (Line 25) that the government has made. Although the MP includes herself in the active effort of 'we're trying to sort out…the big black hole' (Lines 18-19), she leaves an agent out of 'difficult choices', letting it remain ambiguous as to who actually made the difficult choices (and thus who actually has the blame of moving pensions). The MP

also makes efforts to be 'on side' with C2, empathizing with three repeats of 'I know::' (Lines 11-13) and prefacing her account with 'unfortunately' (Line 13).

C2 treats the MP's account as sufficient, by giving continuing tokens (16, 21, 26, 29) and then C2 herself moves the conversation back to the main issue of the appeals tribunal. The conversation never returns to the issue of pensions or the government in the remainder of the surgery.

Extract 3 is the prototypical example of a constituent-initiated political comment, wherein the constituent shows efforts to mitigate the potential delicacy of the comment. The comment is typically a criticism, and, by virtue of being part of the political party that created the problem in question, the MP is implicated in the same criticism. Criticizing another person to their face is a highly problematic action to do in conversations (Edwards 2005; Stokoe and Hepburn 2005; Heinemann 2009; Traverso 2009). Constituents may need to express their criticism, as it supports their case for needing the MP's assistance, but they need to manage the interactional difficulties as well.

The MP can also choose to respond to possible political comments without addressing the political nature. This does more than depoliticize the issue – it treats the political nature as irrelevant. In Extract 4, the constituent (C) is attempting to sponsor an immigrating family to the UK. But he missed the UK Border Agency's (UKBA – the UK immigration services) phone call to him, in which he was supposed to provide sponsorship information. There is no way for an average citizen to contact the UKBA and no helpline available, so the constituent has no way of communicating with the UKBA to rectify the misunderstanding. If he cannot complete his role in the process, the immigration application will fail. He has come to the MP to ask for them to contact the UKBA for him.

(4) Extract 4: MP01.Surgery-13KO_05

```
1  C:   But ag<u>ai</u>n there was <u>no</u> email an' no ↑telephone
2       number.
```

3   (0.3)

4 CW: No. As it happens that's <where I call,> so,

5 C: Oh I s[ee.

6 CW: [Don't worry about [that.

7 C: [>Brilliant,< But-

8   (0.3) °it's (a) frust<u>ra</u>ting.°

9 MP: Mm.

10 C: There's <<u>go</u>t to be:,> at least, you know, All

11   er- All I woulda <u>done</u> was, (0.2) an' hour or

12   two <u>later</u>, (0.2) °picked up the° <u>pho:ne</u>, (0.4)

13   an' even if there was an <<u>A</u>nswer phone.>

14   (0.6)

15 C: to say:, .hhh "This is such an' such, you <u>rang</u>

16   me two hours ago, Please give me a <u>ring</u>:, with

17   reference <u>to</u>."

18 CW: Yes.

19 MP: Ye[ah.

20 C: [(B- Uhm an' th<u>a</u>t's, (0.3) that's #eh-

21   #=°yeahhh,=It's° something that's <u>wor</u>:th, (0.2)

22   perhaps making a point but (that is/at least)

23   there is some w<u>ay</u>,

24   (0.6)

25 C: [<of:>   getting in-=

26 MP: [For you to get in touch=

27 C: =[<in   ] ↑c<u>o</u>[ntact.>]

28 MP: =[with th<u>em</u>,]   [Yeah.] W- Yeah.

29 CW: Mm,

30 C: >You know i- w- It's< an ↑<u>E</u>[mail.

31 MP: [>We can< expl<u>ai</u>n it

32   an' then when A[nn ca:lls,

33 CW: [Yes,

```
34 MP: Y- We'[ll explain what's] happened,
35 CW:      [Yes    I'll  ex- ]
36 C1: Mm.
```

On Lines 1-2, C is accounting for why he needed to contact the MP's office for assistance, rather than managing the issue himself. He is demonstrating his efforts at self-help (Edwards and Stokoe 2007). This is the third separate time he has mentioned that there was no way to contact the UKBA, meaning that this is once again an environment that is simultaneously accounting for the desperation of a constituent's situation, as well as pursuing a complaint. The caseworker (CW) does not take up the possible-complaint in her response on Line 4 – but instead reassures C that she will call precisely at the UKBA office he has tried to contact. C accepts this reassurance, but again remounts his complaint on Lines 7-8 – 'But- (0.3) °it's (a) frust<u>ra</u>ting.°' In continuing to explain his complaint, C starts with an insistence that 'There's <<u>got</u> to be:,>' (Line 10), before self-repairing, and moving away from that trajectory of sequence. Instead, C repairs to a more neutral, less insistent proposal, in which he minimizes the effort it would take to make the UKBA contactable (Lines 10-17).

The MP and CW still do not do more than a minimal acceptance of C's complaint – instead of the more relevant affiliation and demonstration of an independently agreed stance. As a result, C does one more pursuit of the complaint, this time making the political potentially relevant. C says, 'It's° something that's w<u>or</u>:th, (0.2) perhaps making a point' (Lines 21-22), suggesting that it may be worth making a bigger point about the contactability of the UKBA. C does not specify who should make the point – whether it is himself to the MP, or the MP or CW to the UKBA – but does broaden the impact of his issue. As seen in Extracts 1-3, this can make the political relevant. C can be seen to be politicizing the choice of the government and/or UKBA to keep the public from contacting the organization, by suggesting it is better to *allow* contact.

However, the MP does not respond politically. Following a series of collaborative completions, which help to show the MP is aligned with C, the MP says they will explain the issue to the UKBA (Lines 31-34). This implies that C's central concern was expressing his own worries about being unable to contact the UKBA, rather than wider worries about the very contactability of the UKBA as an organization. With this turn, the MP retroactively ascribes C's meaning to be about his personal concern, rather than a politically relevant wider concern. In this way, the MP removes the relevance of a politically oriented answer, and removes any need to make a statement about his own position, or the government's position on the matter – but without overtly refusing to answer (Ekström 2009).

Extract 4 shows how it is necessary for both parties to collaborate in the creation of a sequence as political. It cannot be achieved by one person alone (the organization of the chapter as MP- or constituent-initiated is for convenience – in both sections it can be seen that the interlocutor needs to accept the political aspect and collaborate in its role in the sequence). This further shows how 'the political' is the product of interactional work by conversation participants, not by extrinsic or analyst's labels. Individual participants can initiate the possible relevance of the political, but both parties must engage in political implications in order to continue a sequence of turns that discuss political topics.

Finally, we need to show another deviant case. All extracts until now have involved potential criticisms of the government and the party to which the MP belongs. The final extract, Extract 5, involves constituents complimenting the MP and his party. Unlike the previous extracts, the constituents here are explicit and specific in their comments, suggesting that the action of complimenting raises different interactional contingencies than criticizing.

The constituents (C1 and C2, partners) are visiting the surgery for a series of concerns, most of which are critical of local government and police. However, at one point, they begin to discuss the available national parties and their thoughts in the previous election.

(5) Extract 5: MP01.Surgery-2BG_03

```
1  C2: Eh- (0.4) The La̲bour guy:s, (0.2) I think the

2      La̲bour leader is, (0.2) °ay grade Ay prat¿° (.)

3      I'll be hon[est with you,=

4  CW:            [u h ↑ (h)uh,

5  C2: =[I  <re̲ally   do̲,>=

6  MP:  [°(h)eh(h)eh↑(h)eh°

7  C1: =KHHhhhhh(h)eh

8  C2: You̲ w- Obviously kno̲w 'im¿ (0.2) an'- an' 'ave

9      e- Will have me̲t 'im an[:',

10 MP:                        [I've- well $I've

11     S[EE:N 'im,$=

12 C2: [Yea:h,

13 MP: =$I Wouldn't say [I    ↑KNOW: 'IM,=YEa[h.$

14 C2:                  [Yeah,              [But,

15             (1.5)

16 C2: No̲ time for him at'a̲ll,

    ((6 lines omitted, discussing Liberal Democrats negatively))

23 MP: >What do you think of< ↓David Cameron, come

24     on,=Tell me,

25 C2: I'll be honest with ya,=I think he's an

26     °<absolute gem.>°

27                (0.5)

28 MP: ↑DO ↑y[ou:,

29 C2:       [That's an opinion of- of my [own,

30 MP:                                     [s-  (.) >I

31     shouldn't [sound  s]urPRIsed< should I,=

32 C2:           [I think,]

33 MP: =but I'M deLIGHT ed to- Yeah:,=That's great.=
```

In this extract, C2 explicitly assesses other party leaders – the leaders opposing the MP are assessed negatively, while the MP's party leader is assessed positively. The assessments are not mild or neutral – '°a grade Ay prat¿°' (Line 2) is strongly negative, and likewise 'an °<absolute gem.>°' (Line 26) is strongly positive. He twice uses honesty phrases (Lines 3 and 25; Edwards and Fasulo 2006), which both portray him as sharing a thought that is usually held privately, and independently his own. He also appends 'I <really do,>' (Line 5) and 'That's an opinion of- of my own,' (Line 29), which respectively underscore the strength of his stance, and the independently held nature of his stance. C2 needs to be at pains to show how genuine his assessments are: the MP expresses surprise at his positive assessment, and although he certainly needs to get the MP's assistance with his troubles, it is socially inappropriate to compliment merely to receive the MP's aid. The MP, though, may be expressing surprise in order to mitigate the possible interpretation of accepting a compliment for oneself; since he is associated with the positively assessed leader, to immediately accept the compliment would be to also accept a compliment for oneself. Usually, speakers self-deprecate and deny compliments (Pomerantz 1984).

Overall, Extract 5 shows how compliments can be treated much more overly than criticisms. This is likely because compliments (despite often being denied by the recipient) are preferred actions and more socially acceptable. Criticizing a person directly is unusual and requires very careful management. Complimenting requires different management – the demonstration of sincerity. Criticizing a mutually disliked party can also be a source of affiliation and social solidarity (Clayman 2002; Clark et al. 2003; Edwards 2005). Extract 5, although showing different features, proves a rule – that constituents are highly concerned with managing the interactional contingencies inherent in speaking to the MP. These contingencies apply across complaints and situations, and across the small sample of population

characteristics. The central fact remains: dealing with criticisms must be delicately managed due to the interactional issues related to social norms, such as not criticizing a person directly.

In this section, we have seen that constituents raise politically relevant comments by highlighting the potential choice involved in making a policy – in other words, by politicizing certain actions taken by government. When criticizing these actions, the constituents are indirect and vague, showing markers of delicacy. When complimenting, constituents are more explicit. Finally, both constituents and the constituency office staff necessarily must engage in a topic as political for it to be fully developed as such.

Discussion and conclusion

In this paper, we have shown how Members of Parliament and their constituents raise political topics in constituency office surgery interaction. Although the data come from a small sample, consistent patterns were found across the data set. Political topics tend to arise when complaints are pursued, and often repeated, by constituents. The political aspect of a topic is made relevant turn-by-turn, reminiscent of the stepwise topic transition described by Jefferson (1984). Both parties (constituents, and constituency office staff) must participate in the building of the topic as political – otherwise the topic remains only possibly politically implicative, and is not formulated *as* political. When the political nature of the setting is invoked and made relevant by the MP, it portrays the government as a proactive organization with the same interests and values as the constituent. When constituents make politics relevant, it is often to criticize the government. However, making a criticism directly to a member of the criticized organization is interactionally problematic, and constituents design their turns carefully to manage the delicacy of the situation. When constituents are complimenting the MP or the MP's party or government, they are able to be much more explicit.

We conclude that constituents privilege the interactional and relational nature of the meeting over any potential grievances or possible political agendas. Constituents' concerns must take a back seat to the interactional contingencies of speaking to the MP. This supports research that has found that interactional contingencies are always of critical importance to analyzing interactive talk. In order to explain how the conversation unfolds, it is necessary to understand how interactional rules influence participants' turn design and actions – otherwise most of the carefully designed detail would be lost.

Arguably, in each surgery meeting the MP is working to win a vote (see, e.g. Norris 1997; Butler and Collins 2001), and likewise to stay employed. Yet constituents do not leverage this fact; they do not bargain for their vote or threaten to influence other constituents for or against the MP. Given constituents' orientation to the way the MP is connected to larger political entities, we can conclude that constituents are aware of the MP's political role, and it is indeed relevant for the interactions at the constituency office. However, constituents treat the MP's role as interlocutor as more salient than their role as a politician or representative.

Many of MP's comments presented in this paper could be evaluated as 'evasive' (see Bull 2008). For example, in Extract 1, when the MP says that they are dealing with elder care home problems in the House of Commons, rather than promising to fix the issue. But while many researchers have investigated how politicians are evasive or 'slippery' (Bavelas et al. 1990; Hamilton & Mineo 1998), no one has ever investigated whether and how constituents *themselves* are evasive when making the political relevant. While politicians and political media interviewers have license in debates and broadcasts to be aggressive about their points (Clayman and Heritage 2002; Clayman 2010; Romaniuk 2013; Ekström et al. 2013; Ekström et al. 2015), average citizens and MPs at a constituency office are engaged in a comparatively everyday style interaction, and do not have license to act in such an adversarial way.

In this paper, most of the talk reported portrays the MP as being relatively direct and the constituents as relatively indirect when raising political issues – all of which is done to manage the achievement of certain conversational actions. This demonstrates why it is so crucial to investigate politics in its everyday setting, and why detailed examination of actual interactions is necessary for understanding what people actually do when discussing politics with their MP. We cannot rely on how MPs act in Parliament or media to see how they act when engaging constituents directly. If we want to better understand the role of politics in the life of the citizen, we need to understand how politics gets talked into being, and the interactional contingencies facing citizens when they raise political issues with their representatives.

Acknowledgements

Transcription Key

`t[alk`	Square brackets mark the start and end of overlapping speech.
`  [Yeah,`	They are aligned to mark the precise position of overlap.
↑ ↓	Vertical arrows precede marked pitch movement, over and above normal rhythms of speech. They are used for notable changes in pitch beyond those represented by stops, commas and question marks.
`Underlining`	Indicates emphasis; the extent of underlining within individual words locates emphasis and also indicates how heavy it is.
`CAPITALS`	Mark speech that is hearably louder than surrounding speech. This is beyond the increase in volume indicated by underlines.

°I̲ know it,°	'Degree' signs enclose hearably quieter speech.
(0.4)	Numbers in round brackets measure pauses in seconds (in this case, 4 tenths of a second).
(.)	A micropause, hearable but too short to measure.
((stoccato))	Additional comments from the transcriber, e.g. about features of context or delivery.
she wa::nted	Colons show degrees of elongation of the prior sound; the more colons, the more elongation.
hhh	Aspiration (out-breaths); proportionally as for colons.
.hhh	Inspiration (in-breaths); proportionally as for colons.
Yeh,	Comma: 'Continuation' marker, speaker has not finished; marked by weak rising intonation, as when delivering a list.
y'know?	Question mark: strong rise in intonation, *irrespective of grammar*.
Yeh.	Full stop: marks falling, stopping intonation ('final contour'), *irrespective of grammar*, not necessarily followed by a pause.
bu- u-	Hyphens mark a cut-off of the preceding sound.
>he said<	'Greater than' and 'lesser than' signs enclose speeded-up talk. Occasionally they are used the other way round for slower talk.
solid.=	'Equals' signs mark the immediate 'latching' of successive talk,
=We had	whether of one or more speakers, with no interval.
sto(h)p i(h)t	Laughter within speech is signalled by h's in round brackets.

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