

French deputies, their assistants and the uses of staff appropriations: A sociology of political work[☆]

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Abstract

This analysis focuses on how members of Parliament in France organize their staff. The way deputies distribute the tasks among their assistants suggests that the organization and division of labor should be understood mainly in relation to the pressures generated by MPs in their home district, since a seat in the National Assembly very much depends on providing services to constituents. The staff under the use of the single member district system is so involved in solving voters' "personal" problems of various sorts that assistants are forced to devise strategies for regulating demand and providing often token responses. Developing relations with constituents even affects their legislative duties. For deputies, it is a way of reducing the "occupational" risks inherent in elective office. They must adapt to a voting system that incites them to adopt a conception of representation closer to that of spokesperson for the residents of their district than of representative of the Nation.

Keywords: Political work; Member of Parliament; Single member district system; Casework; Parliament; Political representation; France

It is generally thought that with the advent of modern politics and the introduction of electoral technologies such as the voting booth, the tendency for legislative officials to provide services to their constituents considerably lost ground (Garrigou, 1992) or even disappeared altogether; the political market is supposedly characterized by an offer of intangible public goods (Gaxie, 1995). In the same vein, it has become a classic stance to consider that by becoming more professional, political activity has put an even greater distance between elected representatives and their voters. And it is true that deputies resemble their electors less and less. The privileged classes are over-represented, as are men compared to women, seniors compared to the young; such are the very

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classical observations proffered by political sociologists to this day (Sineau and Tiberj, 2007). But, though French deputies are ever more dissimilar from the constituents they are supposed to represent, are they also less attentive to their problems, less devoted? That's far from certain. As Bernard Manin reminds us, elected officials' representative capacity is an entirely different thing from being sensitive to their constituents' problems. The former does not guarantee the latter and the latter can exist independently from the former. But, thanks to the fact that re-elections are a regular occurrence, the present system of representation, by providing the motivation to consider voters' feelings by constantly anticipating their needs, guarantees elected officials' sensitivity (Manin, 1996, p. 228).

The institutional approach, however, lays emphasis on the fact that legislative officials' sensitivity to their constituents largely depends on the electoral rules in force (Carey and Shugart, 1995; Heitshusen et al., 2005). The electoral system is essential, for when proportional representation is the case in large constituencies, representatives are not much indebted to the people. Conversely, a single member district system suggests they will be prompted to provide special services to their constituents. The size of the district is therefore important too: the smaller it is, the stronger the motivation for elected officers to provide services, since voters can easily identify and reward such behavior. In this domain, elected officials' sensitivity also depends on how professional they are: the most professional representatives – or those who aspire to be so – are also the ones who most fear the consequences of an electoral defeat (Norton and Wood, 1993). In France, where countless studies have diagnosed a crisis of representation, institutional rules seem at first view to preach in favor of the idea that deputies feel indebted to the people who voted for them: French deputies are elected by a two-round majority vote, their electoral districts are small (*i.e.*, not very densely populated compared to the USA, for example), and, by and large, they are quite professional. But, though the institutional rules applied in France may induce deputies to develop intense courting practices, the ideology of national sovereignty compounded by the rejection of any sort of imperative mandate (written into its Fundamental Law) command them on the contrary to keep clear of such practices.

Given that discrepancy, how do French deputies behave? To what extent do institutional rules shape their conduct? Do they think of themselves first and foremost as representatives of the Nation, free to express their own opinions, or on the contrary act as delegates, interpreters of the interests of the population of their respective districts – *i.e.*, their voters? The tension between universalistic and particularistic conceptions of representation is one of political science's most recurrent theoretical issues. Little empirical data on it is available in France, however (Nay, 2003a; Nay, 2003b; Costa and Kerrouche, 2007).

This article proposes to answer the question in a roundabout way. Analyzing the uses deputies make of staff appropriation means scrutinizing the work of parliamentary assistants. Such a sociological study of political work should allow us to understand more fully what deputies do concretely and to better grasp what representational work in France is all about.

Since 1975, French deputies dispose of monthly allowances with which they can recruit assistants. In the beginning, the allotted amount was modest (Phelippeau, 2005; Canoves, 2006), but successive increments have progressively raised it to 8949 € a month not including social security, retirement and other benefits.¹ That sum is approximately the equivalent of three full-time

¹ In practice, a deputy is quite free to do with that sum what he sees fit: he can hire a member of his family (within the limit of 50% of the total), donate the remainder to his political group or even keep part of it for himself (within the limits of 5958 Euros a year).

positions, meaning that deputies can hire up to five collaborators on private work contracts to “assist them with the personal duties directly connected to a parliamentary mandate”.²

Our aim here is to describe and analyze the organization of parliamentary staffs and the tasks taken on by these private employees, whom deputies hire as they see fit within the limits of the budget the National Assembly reserves for each of them. More precisely, we will be asking where parliamentary assistants are assigned and what they do; what is revealed by the choices of how to use these appropriations; to what extent the activities of their parliamentary assistants reinforce the personal prestige of the deputies and protect them from eventual sanctions in their own parties; and more generally, what impact increasing staff appropriation moneys has had on the stability of political personnel and on the democratic system.

1. The organization of parliamentary staff

1.1. Spatial distribution and organizing staff's work: priority to the constituency

The way deputies' collaborators are distributed is at first somewhat difficult to investigate because, although the National Assembly's financial department administers their salaries and therefore possesses the information, it will not divulge the amounts allotted or the way they are shared out. The only information it agreed to communicate to us is that there are 2100 assistants working for 577 deputies, *i.e.*, an average of 3.6 assistants per deputy. According to our interviews and deputies' websites on the Internet, there seems to be a clear trend among them to assign most of their collaborators to their constituencies.³ It is rare for a deputy to dispose of more than one assistant in Paris—some have none—whereas they often have three or four employees working for them in their district. In Paris, deputies can always count on assistance from the Assembly's 1300 public servants who work as legal experts for the MPs but also ensure administrative work and logistics. In their districts, on the other hand, they can count on no help unless they also simultaneously hold local public office, which may at least come with a secretary. The fact that MPs assign two or three times more collaborators to their home districts than to the Assembly must also be appreciated with an eye to the amount of time put in by the assistants. On this score, our investigation reveals other disparities in favor of the districts. Studying the situation in terms of jobs equivalent to full-time employment shows that assistants assigned to the capital are mostly on part- or half-time contracts compared to district assistants. Over three-quarters of the latter work full-time *vs.* only 50% of the Paris assistants. It is certainly not fortuitous that Paris assistants (17%) are also five times more likely than district assistants (3%) to think that being part of a parliamentary staff is a “student's job” or that 90% of the district assistants *vs.* only 75% in Paris think their job is a “real profession”.

² The analyses presented in this article are based on data collected during a joint survey in 2004 directed by Philippe Aldrin, Thierry Barboni, Lucie Bargel, Nancy Canoves, Bastien François, Julien Fretel, Stéphanie Guyon, Ilhame Hajji, Patrick Le Lidec and Julien Meimon. In the joint survey, questions concerning districts were the present author's responsibility. Empirical material includes three main types of sources: a set of semi-directive interviews with parliamentary assistants ($N=90$) of all the political parties; the systematic analysis of personal websites of several hundreds of deputies, presenting their teams, their activities, etc.; and the analysis of responses to a questionnaire ($N=442$).

³ Though the response rate to the questionnaires can be considered satisfactory since one-fifth of the target population answered, our sample cannot be considered representative. Paris assistants are over-represented, since 35% of all of them were assigned to a Paris office ($N=157$), 15% divide their working time between the National Assembly and a district ($N=65$) and 50% were assigned to a district (220); but it should be remembered that Parisian assistants were also more accessible geographically.

As Richard Fenno pointed out in his pioneering survey (Fenno, 1978), parliamentary staffs are not all built on the same model.⁴ Though somewhat sketchy, one might say that two models of organization emerge according to how deputies view the electoral risks in their districts and depending on their position in the division of parliamentary labor and their chances of advancement in their parliamentary career. At one extreme, a small number of deputies see themselves less exposed to electoral risks than others. Their relative self-confidence is often linked to the benefits that come from being invested in a traditional fief and is more frequent among senior MPs. They occupy or expect to occupy a privileged position in the Assembly, possess crucial resources – have had experience in a minister’s cabinet, hold an important position in their Party, enjoy a close relationship with a famous politician – and/or possess some rare professional competence that can be redeemed in Parliament. Less preoccupied by their re-election than by getting ahead in the internal pecking order and accessing a key position (*e.g.*, the post of spokesperson that gives one the visibility necessary to entertain ministerial hopes) or reckoning that obtaining a prestigious position will generate resources for their district, these deputies differ from the others by their “balanced distribution” of staff appropriation and by recruiting more qualified and specialized assistants – experts, press attachés, etc. – than the others. Such deputies are already “in the public eye”, enjoy a certain reputation, feel they have a national calling.

In contrast with this first, statistically tiny group, a mass of rank and file deputies clearly prioritize their district. In their case, climbing up the parliamentary ladder is eclipsed by the odds they will be re-elected, which is less than certain and stirs up much angst. They are less well endowed and also less inspired to invest their resources in Paris. Their voices are not often heard in Parliament and they seem fairly convinced that their career – often for lack of anything better – depends mainly on their constituents. By appointing most – or all – of their collaborators to their constituencies, these deputies are making a rational investment: aware that being re-elected also depends on many external factors (the economic situation, their party’s or coalition’s popularity, their opponents’ personality and resources, the residential dynamics in their district, etc.), they are giving themselves the best chances to limit its intrinsically unpredictable and fickle character.

1.2. An analysis focused on the constituency: what voters say

In what follows, we will be taking off from the experience of parliamentary staffs in the constituencies, which is where the vast majority of deputies’ assistants are sent and also because it is by examining the obstacles encountered in that context that one can best apprehend how these teams function.

Though diverse, the tasks assigned to district collaborators are cognitively structured by the perspective of future elections and underpinned by that major stake: their employer’s re-election. Though we cannot list absolutely all their tasks, we can say they involve helping the district’s inhabitants, companies and local officials solve practical problems, supervising what goes on in the field by paying special attention to what their opponents and “allies” do, showing one’s face where it counts, constantly adjusting their deputy’s agenda, preparing and organizing every move, spotlighting his/her presence and the efforts mustered in favor of voters, promoting the deputy’s

⁴ A parliamentary staff is a political undertaking formed by a deputy and the persons working for and remunerated directly or indirectly by him/her. The team includes the deputy’s parliamentary assistants (men and women) assigned to the constituency and to the Assembly, as well as all other collaborators the deputy may have working with him/her as an elected official in one or more communities or in local or national organizations.

image by organizing communications on the Internet, in the local and national media, and by posting newsletters.

In the midst of all this, three tasks particularly keep the district staff busy: answering mail, welcoming residents and “treating” requests, which mainly implies contacting the right administrations. We asked collaborators to list various items in order of importance according to the amount of time each required. In the districts, 70% of the collaborators put answering constituents’ mail first; it sometimes represents a considerable amount of time and certain interviewees spoke of “bags of mail”, complaining about the “time wasted” sorting out the voluminous correspondence. Second to mail came welcoming the inhabitants: it was listed as the most time-consuming task by 18% of the district collaborators and as second most time-consuming task by 41%. Contacting administrations came third (17% of the assistants said it was the second and 20% said it was the third most time-consuming task). These data concord with other sources of information. As legislative elections approach, deputies’ activity reports (published on the internet) testify that the number of persons received in their offices and the volume of letters posted by their staffs are very large indeed. One deputy up for re-election – though also quite active in Paris – reported that “since his re-election in June 2002 nearly 1000 new cases had been filed in his office and 27,915 letters sent”;⁵ another boasted having opened his office doors 450 times, “received 10,000 persons, signed 30,000 letters to intercede in various administrations and sent out 350,000 information bulletins”.⁶ But though some deputies proudly remember having “processed over 2000 individual files a year”, considering that “processing individual files also means 50 appointments a week on the average which comes to more than 2500 a year”,⁷ others seem satisfied with a more modest performance; thus, deputy Christian Blanc only claimed to have received 200 persons during the year for “personalized interviews” and processed *ca.* 800 files.⁸ Such variations make it difficult to generalize; figures may vary due to a district’s socio-economic characteristics or depending on how deputies ventilate appropriations or whether or not they are renowned for being efficient.

As several North-American studies show, the number and sorts of demands received partly depend on the local population’s socio-economic status: calls for help are traditionally more numerous among underprivileged populations (Jewell, 1982; Serra, 1995). Our survey confirms this: we observed that one of the deputies in a chic Parisian neighborhood received infinitely fewer demands than some of her colleagues officiating in the more “plebeian” suburbs or in the North of France. Requests also vary considerably depending on the characteristics of the residents. When there are many demands, a deputy may be obliged to recruit more collaborators. The profiles and number of assistants assigned to a district depend in part on socio-economic features: for example, it takes more effort for deputies elected in little-populated districts that cover several hundred communities to make themselves available to their constituents. In general, they choose to organize office hours in each of the main townships of their constituency in turn or even open several offices.

Though in part dictated by factors beyond their control, the volume of affairs processed by a parliamentary staff nevertheless largely depends on the deputies themselves (Fenno, 1978). Some MPs seek to enlarge their potential “clientele” by deliberately stimulating demand and eliciting business-like attitudes. Wishing to establish contacts and remain accessible to the public takes the shape of a marked inclination to attend every local event, accept all and sundry invitations,

⁵ Deputy André Vallini’s website, January 2007.

⁶ Deputy Claude Birraux’s website, January 2007.

⁷ Deputy Édouard Courtial’s website in 2007.

⁸ Deputy Christian Blanc’s website in 2007.

organize their own publicity by sending Newsletters to all their constituents or creating personal websites to say their office is open to the public, indicating their hours, describing their staff, etc. With an eye to boosting demands (Adler et al., 1998), deputies' websites proliferated during the last parliamentary term in France. As already observed in the United States (Loomis, 1979; Ellickson and Whistler, 2001), the more MPs consider their integration tenuous, the more they assign collaborators to their district and instruct them to open their door to the greatest possible number of citizens. An open attitude on the part of the deputy, being easy to access and assigning a large number of collaborators to the home district (often the case with freshman MPs and/or MPs elected in districts where the opposition is strong) are all factors that tend to stimulate demand (Mayhew, 1974; Fiorina, 1977; Yannakis, 1981; Cain et al., 1984; Cain et al., 1987).

Different ways of reacting to demand translate into two different sorts of parliamentary offices open to the public: the first resembles a salon, very welcoming to the outside world, a sociable place where people can exchange informally. No need to make an appointment, just walk in to talk, have a drink, have a cracker, read the paper, even Xerox for free. Sometimes, as elections approach, a mini-nursery is organized on the premises. At such times, the office stays open five days a week, usually during office hours (from nine to six), with a break for lunch. The deputy's office then resembles a café as much as a foyer or a campaign headquarters, where the "boss" and his/her staff do all they can to create a convivial atmosphere that will encourage individuals to make a commitment and join their party. At the other extreme, MPs who are more confident in their re-election are also often more conservative: they keep their office hours down to a few half-days a week or even give them up entirely and receive citizens by appointment instead, a pattern closer to a doctor's office. Limiting opening-hours lifts some of the weight off their shoulders and gives them more time to "treat" demands.

1.3. "Treating" demands in a district: regulation strategies

In the course of receiving the public, all the problems of human existence (or almost all) are liable to be broached by the people who telephone, come to see or contact their deputy by letter or E-mail. Classically, complaining about bureaucracy is the primary reason that causes people to contact a legislative official (Moon et al., 1993). Next to parents' requests for permission to register their child in a school outside their sector,⁹ civil servants applying for transfers or tenure, people wanting to receive a decoration, future retirees unhappy with the way their pension was calculated, citizens protesting about public services shutting down (maternity wards, schools, classes, etc.); next to applications for a construction permit, next to financial problems (being over their head in debt, tax penalties, inheriting) and family affairs (divorce, adoption); next to asking the deputy to "cancel a fine", to make sure they obtain a passing grade on an exam, regularize an "illegal immigrant" or prolong a residence permit, there are also strictly private subjects such as personal troubles of a moral or material nature, neighborhood conflicts, even sexual relations.

In the hit-parade of difficulties, lodgings and employment come first, before problems connected to bureaucracy. Treating these demands occupies the main part of a staff's working time. Far from the idealized image of the distant National representative, keeping aloof from his/her electors, parliamentary staffs are inundated by problems of all sorts and the number of requests

⁹ Families in France are required to register their children in the school of their sector but some try to find a way to place them in a "better" school (Translator's note).

received is so great that assistants confess their surprise at how incongruous some of them appear. Public and private issues mix together but individual problems demanding individual attention make up the bulk of the requests received.

“From a purely legal point of view, three-quarters of our fellow-citizens’ requests for an appointment could easily be turned down, because they’re not at all up the deputy’s line. But the deputy is considered the proximity official”.¹⁰

Both elected officers and the “citizens” who come to consult them largely ignore the official texts setting the limits of public action, as well as the supposed universality of rules and impersonality of social relations; the public good is never mentioned. Past studies that emphasized the overwhelming predominance of appeals for personal assistance in the letters received by MPs (Lancelot, 1962) can still be considered valid. Only a small minority of letters reveal some “disinterested reason for writing and tend to communicate the author’s feelings and opinions” (Masclet, 1979).

To control the flow of requests they receive, parliamentary staffs elaborate regulatory strategies. To regulate the flow one must first of all sort out the mail geographically: usually, requests not emanating directly from district residents are immediately eliminated.

“The deputy only wants people from the district. The others are filed away. Those with a xeroxed signature or ‘*monsieur le député*’ go straight into the wastepaper basket”.

“A good part of the work really concerns secretarial work, we’re swamped with paperwork. Everyday we get around 300 letters and as many E-mails. We pick out, throw out a lot of what really doesn’t concern us, I mean everything that doesn’t really concern the deputy or the district. We get letters from everywhere, for instance, dental technicians from Lille. . . if they’re dental technicians [from our district] we’ll consider it somewhat differently. . . So there’s a good part of the day wasted, I mean dedicated (Freudian slip!) to things of that sort”.

The address of the person making the request has become the major criterion for the selection (Courty and Havel, 2006). Assistants must also make sure the physical person actually exists and eliminate the form letters sent by national organizations that do not have a local branch or a significant number of members in the district. The staff’s activity is largely dependent on the borders of the electoral districts and structured by the fact legislative elections come around periodically. They must see to it that the deputy has the maximum chances of being re-elected.

“We must ask ourselves if we’re doing right by them, if we’ve made the right choice, if we’re doing what’s expected. When answering mail, for instance, what’s the best way to answer Monsieur X, to be of service to him and at the same time have it pay off politically, I mean in the election – there’s no point hiding that”.

From that point of view, the ever-larger avalanche of E-mails disrupts the filing system and forces staffs to give up their individualistic habits. The proliferation of electronic correspondence makes it difficult to identify their authors and precludes any automatic selection: “when in doubt, one must answer” so as not to risk neglecting a resident living in the district. The use of E-mails thus means an increase in the workload.

¹⁰ The citations in the rest of the article are taken from interviews with parliamentary assistants.

While electoral logic is decisive, being registered to vote in the district or being a resident is not an absolute criterion. Having family in the district, or working there but living elsewhere suffice for a request to be considered legitimate. Certain staffs accept geographic overlapping with contiguous or nearby districts, because ignoring requests emanating from people who live close by but do not vote in the district could ruin the deputy's reputation of devotion to the population. The desire to appear coherent with their public declarations also forces some deputies to receive people who are not their constituents. MPs can also accept to make an exception to the rule of residence when the object of the request has something to do with their special competence.

Regulating requests also implies selecting acceptable objects. Too much tolerance is considered risky. When a staff accepts to back a certain type of public or a case rejected by others, it leaves itself open to the public's adaptive behavior. Word of mouth plays an important role, as other research has shown (Yannakis, 1981): knowing someone who already benefited from an MP's intervention seems to be the most powerful stimulus for filing a request. Parliamentary teams offering much sought-after services must beware of inflation. Showing particular generosity towards "illegal immigrants" may, for example, provoke an influx of corresponding demands. According to certain assistants, it gets to be a "drag": "if you let yourself go, 90% of the job is illegal immigrants". Offering certain scarce competences free of charge also provokes an inflationist spiral which in the long-term can get out of hand, as was the case example of a parliamentary assistant who previously worked as a lawyer. The word rapidly got around and she had to deal with the "tidal wave" that ensued: a great number of people asked for appointments during office hours to take advantage of her generous advice.

Beyond the somewhat tricky management of a proliferation of requests, selection also supposes being especially cautious, for every file accepted by a parliamentary staff may become jurisprudential. Caution when accepting a case is part of the know-how required to be a parliamentary assistant. They must be able to identify the "professional grubbers", always ready to try their luck, and draw the frontiers of acceptable demands. Any intervention therefore first supposes having obtained the maximum amount of information on a case in order to detect the "doubtful" or "risky" ones: the credit of a parliamentary staff depends on it.

"There are two or three large domains in which we absolutely don't want to intervene. Let's say three. Uh – anything concerning fines. The law's the same for everybody. . . nine times out of ten, we tell the person – very straightforwardly, mind you – we tell them 'You write to the Prefect or the Attorney General, and ask for a reprieve. We can't do it for you'. . . we've made it a rule not to interfere. Anything that concerns justice – separation of powers – we don't budge. . . if you interfere in something like that, it gets around very fast. And then it goes too far, and the deputy's credibility and everything he does gets a beating".

Refusing to intervene in affairs of justice is often mentioned by the assistants and appears to be a permanent feature that has never become obsolete (Lancelot, 1962).

1.4. The congressional office, not a bureau like any other

The walls plastered with posters glorifying the deputy remind the visitor that his/her office is not an ordinary clerk's "window". Though there are many visitors and despite the number of "cases" and bureaucratic problems it handles, a deputy's office is clearly different in several respects from those of other administrations. First of all, the relationship between the "window" and the citizen is less asymmetrical than elsewhere. Far from being placed in a position of inferiority *viz* the clerk, the "clients" coming to an MP's office find themselves if not in conquered territory at least feeling

they hold a relatively valuable trump card. Applicants sometimes try to profit from their position as voters and twist the relationship to their own advantage. Others explicitly try bargaining: they propose to vote for the deputy who consents to help them solve their problem, offering to join the party if the intervention is successful, giving their vote in exchange for the service rendered: “if it works, I’ll join up”. Some don’t balk at expressing veiled threats: they let on they have an appointment with the other candidate, the opponent of the deputy whose office they’ve come to. They try to negotiate, to put pressure on the parliamentarian.

“People who come to see us are fully conscious of the electoral aspect of the situation, since I’ve often heard them say: ‘I’ll vote for you,’ and so on. It gets on my nerves. So I try to tell them that it doesn’t matter to me if they vote for the Left or the Right, extreme Left or extreme Right, I don’t want to know [. . .]. People often think that if they say they belong to our party they’re going to be helped more. So then if they’re not happy and we tell them that’s not the way it works, that it’s not because you belong to a Party that you’ve got privileges, uh, . . . they’ll say: ‘well, I won’t vote for you then,’ well. . . most of the people who come, uh, they’re people who. . . who. . . who try to blackmail you, it’s a little bit of blackmail”.

It’s probably not accidental that some citizens come with “special cases”, trying to modify the rules or even very consciously to obtain a favor allowing them to bypass the law:

“It’s very funny because people come to see the deputy, they scream. . . bloody murder that they’re all rotten, that they dodge the law, etc., that it’s evil, but in 80% of the cases, they come to see us to do that very thing, to ask us to ignore the law for their benefit. It’s pretty paradoxical. That’s what it is. There are people who ask us for unbelievable things, people who were sentenced for embezzlement, etc., for tax evasion, and who ask us to step in to reduce their sentence or even annul it”.

Awareness that they as electors have power exists and is not alien to such behavior. In practice, parliamentary staffs admit that voters have power since they cannot, for example, treat applicants with the condescension and detachment that some civil servants behind official windows show their clients. Receiving citizens is thus an extremely important political activity and 47% of the assistants working in a district place it first on the list, well ahead of the second item—dealing with correspondence—that only 13% of them mention as most important.

2. Answering requests: role-playing

Answering citizens’ requests is very akin to role-playing. Parliamentary staffs often mention the gap that exists between the way constituents imagine their elected officials and the latter’s actual prerogatives. Confronted with residents’ demands they do naturally come up with solutions; but very often their job consists in handling tensions by showing compassion, going through the motions of being kind and considerate, acting purely symbolically. A large part of legislative activity is born of that tension: to deserve voters’ gratitude, it is above all necessary to let them see that things are being done for them, even if it means pretending.

2.1. “A connection for people who don’t have any”: being an in-between

Though three-quarters of the collaborators dedicate part of their working time to contacting the various administrations, it is difficult to evaluate with precision the proportion of affairs that

have had satisfactory outcomes thanks to them, as seems to be the case of only a few. Receiving a favorable response depends both on what was requested and on the resources the team was able to muster. Some staffs are better equipped than others, have more extended networks, contacts within the services, valuable personal resources. Cumulating a parliamentary mandate with a local executive function is a priceless advantage to help unravel an inextricable situation rapidly: for instance, the assistants of a deputy-mayor or deputy-councilor can intervene “privately” in the appropriate administration and transmit the file to the appropriate service. When housed in the municipal precincts, certain teams can deposit and follow up a dossier in real time, improving its chances of receiving a favorable answer:

“The Town Hall has its own E-mail system for everybody who works there and we’re part of it . . . that means we can communicate with the municipal services, the Mayor’s cabinet, and it’s very convenient to send out all sorts of information with attachments”.

Even when they can’t intervene directly, the teams dispose of a range of solutions. Many demands don’t require actually intervening officially: a piece of information or advice may suffice, or help with filling in a form to obtain certain entitlements – registering for social security, old-age minimum wage or the RMI,¹¹ compensation for a handicap, a family allowance. . . . The case may be more complex and require getting in touch with public or private organizations – mayor’s or prefect’s offices, General or Regional Councils, low-rent housing authorities, social services, real-estate agencies, company directors, etc. One of the assistants’ jobs is to create networks by rounding up individuals in the administrations or private organizations. They must also produce a substantial quantity of correspondence. Writing the necessary letters is described as their most time-consuming activity, along with receiving the public and sorting the mail. Deputies thus palm off onto their assistants the most thankless and repetitive chores, nevertheless indispensable to build up their symbolic capital. Applying the categories elaborated by Pierre Grémion (1976), one might say the functions of a Notable are therefore being delegated. The team of assistants tries to make up for the lengthy periods of waiting and administrative errors, to put an end to abuse of power, to help underprivileged populations come by their rights, intercede in favor of residents, appeal to the Ombudsman, show that a rule can be interpreted differently, even obtain an exceptional – if somewhat unorthodox – favor. So that, though there are usually fewer of the latter and more of the former, their work may consist in intervening to “humanize” the application of a law, or go even further. There are a vast range of intermediate situations between respecting the law and obtaining a favor (Lascoumes and Le Bourhis, 1996). However it is called, the undertaking is most often part of the general function of supervision-correction of bureaucratic action that MPs have taken upon themselves (Johannes, 1979): being a last resort in contacts with the administration, the deputy becomes “the contact for people who don’t have any”. Indispensable to solve certain problems, a rapid intervention in a ministry may be effective:

“We know a family who lives in the district and whose children went to spend a week-end in Poland. They were beaten up by a gang of youths, we had to intervene on the spot, ask the *Quai d’Orsay* [Department of Foreign Affairs] how to locate them and bring them back to France. . . . Of course, the family came to see the girls working as district assistants for help. Afterwards, we [the Paris assistants] had to find a way of working with the *Quai d’Orsay*, for example”.

¹¹ *Revenu Minimum d’Insertion* (RMI): law of November 30, 1988 originally meant to “cover” 200,000 or 300,000 persons over 25; today, over 1.25 million recipients (Translator’s note).

But there is no guarantee their intervention will be effective:

“In actual fact, the deputy doesn’t have a lot of power, except to file a case with the competent authorities. We regularly send case files to the Ombudsman since individuals can’t appeal to him by themselves, they have to go through their deputy. So we do that quite regularly, without saying what we think of the case, that’s not our role. As soon as someone writes they have a problem with such and such an institution, we transmit the file. . . The deputy’s like a main switch. I mean, the dossiers go through him, after that they’re pointed in the right direction, but we can’t say we treat it, there are few things we treat directly. On the whole, we don’t have much power in the district”.

Though efficient in settling certain administrative problems—obtaining residence permits, regularizing a situation, being decorated, etc.—or in obtaining subventions from the community—especially when the deputies or their assistants sit on local assemblies—parliamentary staffs hit up against obvious limitations especially when it is a question of obtaining rare goods such as housing or employment.

“Oh, employment, well, we can—when we know there’s a company hiring in the district and a person comes to ask for work, well, we can make the connection by recommending them, sending in their CV. But we can’t do much else”.

The disproportion between the demands they receive and the resources available can be very great. There is a striking disparity between what citizens imagine deputies can accomplish and the actual goods the latter can deliver.

2.2. *Forced to get results: a wealth of symbolic actions*

For lack of being able to provide intrinsic solutions to all the problems laid at their feet, deputies and their assistants nonetheless try to show they are being active and doing their best to serve their constituents’ interests. In certain cases, assistants are satisfied to just lend an ear, according to the well-worn piece of wisdom: “holding electoral office means listening to complaints and drying tears, even if there are a few impostors here and there” (Debré, 1984, p. 109). A considerable amount of assistants’ work consists in relieving the deputy of the traditional task of listening to people’s woes. Like many administrations open to the public (Dubois, 1999; Siblot, 2006), parliamentary staffs are vested with the mission of providing moral comfort and consideration. But assistants’ work is also different in certain respects: they cannot simply be a Wailing Wall but must take action, even when they know the solution is out of reach.

Even if, as is often the case, the answer is negative, each response implies respecting certain forms. The cardinal values are courtesy, kindness and compassion. The parliamentary staff must always be “ready to be of service” and show regard for the voter.

“It’s important [for an assistant] not to kick people out, though it’s true sometimes you feel like doing it, because sometimes you get. . . sometimes I think I could write a pretty funny book because there are people who come with demands, who behave very peculiarly, and sometimes you really have to make an effort to stay polite, to tell them: “Of course, we’ll see what we can do, etc., etc.” because sometimes it gets unbearable and even aggressive, sometimes it’s pretty hard to deal with”.

“You have to be socially alert, able to listen, because people come to talk to you about their problems, you have to know how to lend an ear”.

But their solicitude must be carefully gauged to avoid raising false hopes. The influx of people coming to ask for public housing is impossible to satisfy and assistants have to “explain that it’s the mayor’s office that deals with housing, not us. And when they get upset, you explain it’s not the same political party, and so on, and all as diplomatically as possible”. Instructed to keep their cool and stay mannerly, certain assistants sometimes find it difficult to fill their role. Some upper-class assistants feel degraded by having to do a “social worker’s job”. But finding it hard to adjust to their role is relatively infrequent. Compared to those working in Paris, district assistants usually have lower-level diplomas, come from more modest social milieus and tend to belong to the deputy’s constituency as residents and as elected local officials.¹² In a position that calls for a sense of public relations and familiarity with the local population their roots are a great help; even if somewhat superficial, that familiarity is very useful when having to deal with disappointed claimants who risk getting unruly in the office. In fact, assistants sometimes have to know how to stand up under insults and face the anger of individuals who, despite all the appointments, letters signed by the deputy, sometimes even by a minister, find themselves in the same position as before. Some become aggressive, even in cases when steps made in their favor were successful.

“Lately, I fought like a lion. I spoke up for a guy who had a fiscal problem, a whopper [. . .]. I fought for him with the deputy. Letters, interventions, phone calls, to try to save him some money. We managed to get the rectification reduced. . . cancelled, etc. So we saved him. Well that guy [. . .] it was a month and a half before the first round of elections. Between each round we always go to the Prefecture, you know. . . to see who didn’t vote. He hadn’t even voted, either in the first or in the second election. Six months later he came to the office and shouted at us: ‘I’m a citizen, I vote, etc., etc.’. I was obliged to pull out the register [xeroxed lists showing the signatures of people who voted] and said to him: Look at this, you voted?. . . who do you think you’re kidding!”

The upshot is that even when they succeed, parliamentary staffs are never sure a voter will be grateful.

Knowing there is little hope of reaching a positive conclusion – when it comes to employment or housing – the teams force themselves to be extremely careful. Their political work implies not to promise too much at first so as to limit the risk of future disappointment. They are therefore always very clear with the claimants, warning them that it is far from sure their demands will obtain satisfaction or the steps taken by the parliamentary staff pay off. Yet, it is crucial that citizens should not interpret that message as a sign the deputy has lost interest in their problem. So assistants often apply a two-pronged strategy that consists in first dousing the claimant’s enthusiasm by recalling the limits of the deputy’s power, then adding they’re “going to try to do something” anyway.

“People often come to the deputy for inappropriate reasons, so you have to be both pedagogical, sometimes you’d really think you’re their teacher . . . to teach them social studies, explain the deputy’s role, explain that to get what they want there are official hurdles, things they never even imagined. You have to tell them that and at the same time show them the deputy is interested in their case, so we usually offer to write a letter which probably won’t do any good, to show them the deputy cares”.

¹² See in this sense the forthcoming book *Les assistants parlementaires* (in press, *Economica*, 2008)/**actualiser référence?/**.

Staging the team's solicitude for the claimant is vital. Deputies and their assistants thus do not hesitate telephoning in front of the interested party, writing letters to the competent authorities with a copy to the voter. Given the obligation to stage their solicitude, the teams multiply their "intercessions", even when they know they'll be fruitless.

"In Paris, applications for housing must be 70% of the case files, so we can already say there are about 70% of the people we can't do anything for [...] we try to explain how it works, that they have to write in so their file gets a number [...] But] we tell them to come back to see us anyway – that's the paradoxical part and I often tell them: OK, listen, I told you we can't do much but we'll try. The deputy wants, uh, wants to try to help you, but you know, he only just submitted your application and we don't. . . we don't know what kind of answer he'll get".

Procedures implemented in France as early as the start of the Third Republic (1870) are still completely valid: "a good deputy who receives a voter's letter must immediately write three: first, an accompanying letter to the appropriate administration. Then a second one to the voter, informing him his request was transmitted. And a third to the claimant again, along with the administration's response" (Jouvenel de, 1914, p. 23–24). The ritual of "acknowledging receipt" also remains intact, "indicating the deputy's interest in the question at hand", even to declare the deputy "will not fail to draw the minister's attention to the importance of the problem" (Buron, 1963; Williams, 1971; Masclet, 1979; Mattina, 2003). If the latter answers, so much the better, if not, too bad. The main thing is to give the claimant written proof of what the deputy did in his favor.

"When people come to see us in the district, whether we succeed or fail it's imperative to act. Besides, for some time already, as soon as we act on a case, we send the claimant a copy of our intervention, especially if it's a letter to the Prefect or to a Minister. When the answer arrives, we also send him a copy".

A "phony" letter of recommendation is better than nothing.

"Even if we know the intervention is not going to work, we go through the motions, they went out of their way, we listened, we did something, even if we knew it'd be negative, at least they got a letter from us saying what we did and then the answer from the official source. We answer every letter, we answer all E-mails, we answer everything. It's 60% of the job, we answer everything, every invitation, every letter, even if often they're meaningless".

Doubtful "interventions" aim for two sorts of results. First, to show that the deputy is living up to people's expectations: they may not always obtain a positive result but they prove the deputy is devoted, can put him/herself in their shoes, is ready to be of service, considerate, indefatigable, a person deserving of trust. Even if ineffective, a letter signed by a minister is proof of his/her devotion: "we went as far as we could". Staging the deputy's good will may also (in a few cases) allow him/her to be given credit for positive results totally unconnected to the intervention. For example, a family who figures on the list of applicants for public housing and is granted an apartment after a two-year wait, will be convinced they owe it to the deputy, whereas no favor was in fact involved. Asymmetrical information can be a boon for the deputy, and the parliamentary staff takes advantage of citizens' ignorance. Most of the claimants who come to a deputy's office credit him/her with a power he/she doesn't possess. It may happen that constituents attribute to their MPs a positive result in fact completely beyond their control.

“It’s very paradoxical because at the same time we tell them that coming to the deputy with their request is not the thing to do, that it would be better to go see the administration, to go the normal way, like any ordinary citizen, and at the same time we keep up their belief by writing letters even when we know they won’t do any good since they should just go through the normal procedures. So, you see. . . it’s the paradox of the whole situation, that I . . . uh. . . I mean, people have beliefs and expectations, even fantasies, about politicians, uh. . . a sort of all-powerful force that can solve everything. . .”.

But keeping up a certain ambiguity may pay off from an electoral point of view.

“Sometimes people call to say: “I got the apartment, thanks” and that also is the paradoxical side of things, because we’re not going to tell them it’s not the deputy who’s responsible for housing and that if they got the apartment we had nothing to do with it. They call to thank the deputy because [they think] it’s thanks to him, so it’s very paradoxical, but at the same time it’s good for his image they should think a problem was solved thanks to him”.

2.3. *Back in Parliament: the district as the focal point of deputies’ work*

Since they feel obliged to “do something” – even if only symbolic – for the voters who come to see them, parliamentary staffs do not only produce impressive quantities of correspondence, they also put the manual of parliamentary law to abundant use to answer demands. The pressure the constituents bring to bear in their district thus plays a fundamental role in the activism manifested by many teams in the arena of the National Assembly. True, all legislative work is not only the continuation or the treatment of a request made in the district but a large part of the political work accomplished in Parliament is linked to it and generated by the contacts established with the local population (Nay, 2003a; Nay, 2003b). To respond to the pressures of demand, law proposals, amendments, oral or written questions make up the repertoire into which the teams can delve. But certain repertoires are easier to implement than others.

Though the number of laws proposed by an MP during a legislature is unlimited, the system is not very practical: writing up a proposal is not something just any assistant can do. It’s always possible to propose a law and if a parliamentary team decides to do so they can count on the help of the Assembly’s administrative personnel and the experts of their own group. It is the sort of job that requires previous training and writing ability, which not all teams possess. Some of the female assistants, however, well accustomed to the exercise, can use law proposals as a tool to deal with a problem encountered in their district. It does not matter that only a dozen such proposals are actually adopted each year; for a deputy to “exist”, what counts is signing a few.

“Ninety-eight percent of the law proposals are illegal, *i.e.*, they depend on the executive not the legislator. But there are deputies who, as soon as you talk to them about something in their district, they translate it into a law proposal so they can write the claimant ‘OK, I’ve done my bit, I drew up a law proposal to solve your case’. That law proposal will never even come up for examination”.

“Law proposals have practically no chance. But you have to make a few because that’s all the public sees”.

Placing a law proposal on the agenda and having it accepted in fact requires a great deal of support from the parliamentary group as well as from the Executive.

Resorting to oral questions is more difficult still and supposes the same sort of support for their number is limited. For an MP to have the right to ask a question largely depends on the number of deputies in his/her political group and on his/her influence within it. "If a deputy manages to put one or two questions to the government during a session, it's not bad, not bad at all". In fact, during the last session, there were only 1782 oral questions without debate and 3237 questions put to the government.

Depositing an amendment naturally seems simpler, since their number is unlimited. The members of the parliamentary staffs assigned to the districts do their best to transfer the complaints to the Paris assistant in charge of turning them into amendment proposals:

"[The female assistants in the districts] for instance receive parents of handicapped children who explain the problems they have finding them work. It so happens the project for the law on equal opportunity is on the agenda, so they organized meetings in their district to examine all the points of the law that don't seem well thought out or not thoroughly enough, etc. Then we transfer it all so that amendments can be proposed according to what the handicapped people's associations in our district had to say about the project".

The information that filters first upwards then down again between district and Paris assistants has an essential part to play, because district assistants will later provide the "technical service" to the groups and associations who came to them for help in the first place.

"We co-signed an amendment to set VAT at 5.5%, then wrote all the restaurant owners to tell them well, that's the [deputy's] position, we write them about the amendment we proposed; then we write them again to tell them how it went during the session and what the government thought of it. Things like that".

But considering the problems districts must deal with, depositing an amendment is not the appropriate tool: it is not flexible enough because using it is tightly restricted by the object of the text being examined.

Written questions, on the other hand, which are supposed to be one of the ways Parliament controls the Executive, are often diverted from their original purpose into becoming a loudspeaker for the district. Being unlimited in number, they are mainly used by MPs to show their consideration for their constituents. Drafting up a written question can go quite quickly; the technique is easy to grasp. Many assistants, whether in the Assembly or in the constituency, dedicate a considerable amount of their working time to framing written questions based on their residents' demands.

"Written questions also mean doing public relations with different groups because, generally, when you file a question, you're using the letters and the demands people sent in, the unions, or individuals who ask us things, who want the government to be put on the spot, that we should act on such and such a subject. . . Letters are often indignant, people aren't happy with what the government is doing. In those cases, we address the government directly".

It is quite easy to reword complaints emanating from the districts in a written question and it offers the advantage of giving the MP visibility:

"When you read the *Parliamentary Minutes (Journal Officiel)* or about the deputy's work on the website, what strikes you first? Written questions. They're an absolutely must if you want voters to see what the deputy is doing: he's got to have some written questions published. . . It's not demagogical, you need a minimum amount of publicity. . . Written questions are a way of showing voters we care about them, that the deputy is taking action".

“They’re local problems raised by institutions as much as by a community or individuals. When we don’t have the answer, well, we ask the government. But we use them sensibly, I’d say”.

From this point of view, a difference exists between majority and opposition MPs. The first are more prone to limit their use of written questions, since the obligation to answer represents a considerable amount of work for the Ministries and monopolizes part of the civil servants in the central administrations¹³ and Ministry cabinets. But, even in the majority, some MPs turn out to be “maniacs of the written question”.

“There were a lot of written questions on retirement, for example [...] People called in: ‘*Bonjour*, uh. . . after the new law on retirement, I had the problem with so and so, etc., do you think the deputy can do something about it?’ So I drafted a written question for the Ministry concerned in the Assembly”.

Not surprisingly, during the last Session, 117,971 written questions were put and 92,682 answers received.

2.4. *Standardizing, professionalism and regulating political work*

The increase in staff appropriations and the use of Information Technologies have considerably contributed to standardizing the procedures used by MPs to address their constituents’ problems: gone are the days a deputy pretended to while away the time by writing letters during a Session. The artisan of yesteryear has been replaced by the industrialist with a few decades’ difference in the procedures employed in France compared to the United-States (*e.g.*, Loomis, 1979). Each parliamentary staff disposes of a wide range of models of form letters more or less adjusted to the real cases and problems. In that sense, the political group constitutes a good resource center, putting form-letters, campaign blurbs, technical information or models for drafting a written question at the MPs’ disposal (Treille, 2006). The various facilities offered to MPs – personal collaborators, the use of “resource centers”, computers – explain the explosion of the number of written questions (Henry, 1993).¹⁴ Their activism also takes place in a new context, in which a multitude of name files are put to use by the teams of assistants to capitalize politically on past services rendered. An important part of their working time goes into managing those files and more generally to controlling the local organs of the political parties. Managing party relations is mentioned by 15% of the district assistants as being among their three most time-consuming tasks.

“You’ve got to be organized in a certain way. We’ve got our own file of UMP¹⁵ members and sympathizers on our PC, that’s how we work. . . it’s true it’s a lot of work because we’re on it everyday, bringing the files up to date is really heavy because when we send out an

¹³ According to a study carried out in a Ministry, answering requests for information emanating from the cabinets and answering parliamentary questions occupy between 3 and 11% of the civil servants working in the various departments. Tax Inspection – Inspection générale des affaires sociales – Inspection générale de l’administration, *Rapport sur l’impact de la décentralisation sur les administrations d’État*, mission d’audit de modernisation, janvier 2007, pp. 24–25.

¹⁴ From approximately 3700 written questions filed in 1959, the number rose to 12,000 in 1994 and 27,700 in 2005, a curve that parallels the staff appropriations made available to deputies over the same period.

¹⁵ *Union pour un Mouvement Populaire* (UMP), the majority party in the French Parliament, to which the President of the Republic also belongs (Translator’s note).

invitation and 20 letters come back ‘no longer lives here’, well you have to bring it up to date. We have to ask the person responsible for the borough, systematically, because that’s how it works. There are borough chiefs and 10 boroughs, you know [...] so the name file takes up a lot of time”.

“Of course we’ve got files. For the UMP, we have the list of all the militants in the region. We also have a ‘sympathizers’ file [...]. It’s fairly complete. We’ve also got our ‘Interventions’ file: when we receive somebody, we ask them their names and address to be able to contact them by mail or by phone [...]. So we do have a filing system of sorts”.

Nourished by constant interventions, the files are then used to keep the political networks alive by sending out greeting cards, the *Lettre du député* and the deputy’s activity reports, press cuttings, invitations to various manifestations (cultural, sportive, festive, etc.), and meetings.

“At first, it was the people who helped with elections, then the associations, organizations, legislative officials, new UMP members, and all the people we’d done something for; we ask them if they want to be kept abreast of the deputy’s activities, if they want to know what goes on locally and nationally at the UMP, they fill out a little index card if they agree. The file’s been growing for three years, we’re up to 1800 names”.

Certain teams dispose of very elaborate classifying systems with multiple entries: alphabetical, geographical (boroughs, municipalities, voting booths, etc.), professional, thematic. Thematic files permit targeting specific publics to give resonance in the district to the deputy’s initiatives – mail sent to ministers or Prefects, written questions, amendments, law proposals, interventions during full sessions, etc. – in favor of a particular category of constituents.

“Every time anything good and positive is done for the district, we immediately send a communiqué to the press and spread the news, even if the deputy didn’t get his way in the end”.¹⁶

Every initiative is publicized and must add to the deputy’s fame. To capitalize on their own reputation, many deputies (of every political leaning) have encouraged the creation of voluntary associations (“Friends of Deputy So-and-So”) bearing their name, first name and/or the territorial base of their legislative district.¹⁷ These associations generally dispose of their own mailbox in the parliamentarian’s office and are run by collaborators who manage the various intervention “files”.¹⁸ All these files – of interventions, of the Friends of the Deputy’s Association, of members of the political party to which he/she “belongs” – are thus often managed by the same individual, part of an extra personnel that the deputy can dismiss at will.

¹⁶ Union pour la Démocratie Française (UDF, 1978–2007), a Center-Right party (Translator’s note).

¹⁷ The vocation of such associations is to “federate the inhabitants of X who do not want to join a political party but wish to contribute, with their deputy, to the development of their territory”. For an example concerning the UDF, see [Fretel \(2004\)](#).

¹⁸ Assistants do not give only of their time to these tasks. They also feel the work has particular political significance: questioned about what they consider to be their most important tasks politically speaking, 12% of the assistants working in a district say managing party relations comes first, 17% put it in second place and 27% in third.

3. Conclusion

Analyzing the uses to which staff appropriations and parliamentary assistants are put allows us to provide an empirically informed answer to the classical question about the role that deputies play. They seem to behave more as *delegates* than as *trustees*. Contrary to common sense opinions, the fact that French deputies do not really represent the French population as regards their social origins does not imply they are not attentive to their constituents. Very much to the contrary, it turns out that French deputies are particularly sensitive to demand. Of the three types of roles traditionally filled by MPs – law-making, controlling the executive and servicing voters – it is the last which in practice carries it off over the other two. The behavior of parliamentary staffs seems to point to the model of representative of the district rather than of the Nation as a whole. Scrutinizing their assistants' activities makes deputies appear above all as true *caseworkers*. Courting special interests is a way of responding to the intrinsically unstable nature of the political profession: people in office have the opportunity to build up a huge personal clientele (Mattina, 2003). The uninominal majority electoral system in force has a powerful effect on French deputies: it incites them to put contact with their constituents and service activities in first place and neglect the other aspects of their office. Though that sort of electoral system implies obligations, it is also a source of freedom for deputies, whose professional careers are more secure and their independence greater vis-à-vis the political parties (Cain et al., 1984; Cain et al., 1987). The electoral system and adjustment strategies that it produces among MPs enhance their chances of obtaining powerful local support and being reinvested by their party. That is the reasons why deputies are so passionately attached to the system and hostile to the idea it might be replaced by the proportional voting system. The force of that electoral rule is such that one can imagine that, were cumulating parliamentary and local mandates to be prohibited, French deputies would nevertheless not be transformed into representatives “disconnected from the realities of the field”. At most, a potential prohibition of that nature would make them more disposed to fill their other functions of law-making and control, on condition the prerogatives of Parliament were simultaneously reinforced.

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