CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

RESEARCH ARTICLE/ÉTUDE ORIGINALE

It Takes a Village: The Representative Role of Members of Parliament Staff

Meagan Cloutier

Department of Political Science, University of Calgary, 2500 University Drive N.W. Calgary, Calgary, AB
T2N 1N4, Canada
Email: meagan.cloutier1@ucalgary.ca

Abstract

Using constructivist representation theories, this article presents a framework for understanding how political staff shape representation. Using a survey of 366 parliamentary and constituency staff working for members of Parliament (MPs), I identify four key roles: proxies, liaisons, advisors, and gatekeepers. Proxies embody absent elected officials. Liaisons facilitate communication between elected officials and constituents. Advisors' expertise and experience shape elected officials' actions. Gatekeepers manage people's and ideas' access to elected officials. Constituency staff primarily act as proxies and liaisons, emphasizing local service and constituent connection. Parliamentary staff more often take on advisory and gatekeeping roles, which can influence elected officials' perspectives. This framework provides insight into how staff mediate the representative process between elected officials and constituents. Staff actively shape who is heard and which issues gain attention, ultimately influencing the quality and inclusivity of democratic political representation. Thus, understandings of representation without staff are inherently incomplete.

Résumé

À partir des théories constructivistes de la représentation, cet article présente un cadre permettant de comprendre comment les collaborateurs politiques façonnent la représentation. À partir d'une enquête menée auprès de 366 employés qui travaillent pour des députés dans les bureaux de circonscription et au Parlement, j'identifie quatre rôles clés : les mandataires, les agents de liaison, les conseillers et les gardiens. Les mandataires incarnent les élus absents. Les agents de liaison facilitent la communication entre les élus et leurs électeurs. L'expertise et l'expérience des conseillers influencent les actions des élus. Les gardiens gèrent l'accès des personnes et des idées aux élus. Le personnel de circonscription agit principalement en tant que mandataires et agents de liaison, en mettant l'accent sur le service local et le lien avec les électeurs. Le personnel parlementaire assume plus souvent des rôles de conseil et de gardien, ce qui peut influencer

le point de vue des élus. Ce cadre permet de mieux comprendre comment le personnel intervient dans le processus de représentation entre les élus et les électeurs. Le personnel influence activement qui est entendu et quelles questions retiennent l'attention, ce qui, en fin de compte, influe sur la qualité et l'inclusivité de la représentation politique démocratique. Ainsi, la compréhension de la représentation sans le personnel est intrinsèquement incomplète.

Introduction

Research examining the role of representation in a parliamentary democratic system primarily focuses on elected representatives, such as members of Parliament (MPs), their relationships with voters and activities within a legislature. When trying to understand this relationship, research is often centered on individual representatives' demographic characteristics, political ideology or representational style and focus (Koop et al., 2018; Caplan et al., 2021; Bodet et. al, 2022; Malloy, 2023). Yet, staffers are often the first, if not the only, point of contact constituents have with MPs, in no small part because MPs' work cannot be performed alone (Docherty, 1997, 2005). Why, then, have staff not been considered in representation scholarship, given the sheer infeasibility of MPs being able to meet the workload demands by themselves? This article addresses this paradox by asking: how do staff contribute to an MP's representative function and thus to the quality of representation and democracy?

Drawing on representation theory (Saward, 2006; Dovi, 2018), I develop a novel framework that highlights how staff contribute to the representative function of MPs. By expanding theories of representation to formally include staff, this framework challenges the MP-centric model of political representation, highlighting how staff participate and shape the representative process. Specifically, staff can perform four representative roles: *proxies* are physical embodiments in the representative's stead; *liaisons* are information brokers who connect constituents and representatives; *advisors* use their own experiences and expertise to shape or guide the representative's actions; and *gatekeepers* use their role to decide which people and ideas warrant the representative's attention, acting as a key barrier to accessing the representative.[1]

Expanding theories of representation to include staff, specifically through these roles, allows researchers to better evaluate "how the represented experience the quality of the representative process" (Celis and Childs, 2020: 155). If staffers consciously choose to include or exclude certain voices through their gatekeeper role, amplify certain voices through their liaison role, present their own experiences or perspectives through their advisor role or embody the politician through their proxy role, staff are ultimately *doing* representation (Saward, 2006). While this study is grounded in the Canadian parliamentary context, its insights extend to other representative democracies where staff play an increasingly yet understudied role. The framework of staff as proxies, liaisons, advisors and gatekeepers offers a transferrable analytical tool

for examining how unelected actors shape representation, and recognizing staff as representative agents helps scholars reassess the institutional dynamics that influence who is heard, which issues advance and how representation functions in practice.

On the basis of this framework, I find that constituency staff are more likely to be proxies and liaisons, whereas Parliament Hill staff are more likely to be advisors. Both constituency and Hill staff act as gatekeepers of the MP by controlling access or prioritizing specific ideas. As proxies, staff emphasize the embodiment of the MP, especially when it comes to assisting constituents with local service work. As liaisons, staff discuss how they facilitate the flow of information from constituents to the MP, allowing the MP to understand their riding well. As advisors, staff claim their role is strongly influential: one where staff can change MPs' views or perspectives. As gatekeepers, staff explain how their role directly affects who gets access to the MP, especially through control of an MP's calendar, impacting which ideas and perspectives make it into the process of representation.

This article proceeds in five parts. First, I apply political representation theory to establish staff as distinct representative actors within the formal representative process, emphasizing their role beyond mere facilitators. Second, I develop a novel framework conceptualizing staff as representatives through four distinct roles: proxies, liaisons, advisors and gatekeepers. Third, using a survey of Canadian federal MP staffers, I conduct an inductive thematic analysis of open-ended responses to uncover how staff perceive their influence on their elected representative. Fourth, I demonstrate how these representative roles manifest in the Canadian context, examining variations on the basis of staff location and responsibilities. Finally, I discuss the broader implications of these findings, arguing that any comprehensive analysis of political representation must account for the proxy, liaison, advisor and gatekeeper functions of staffers, as they actively shape the representative process in ways that extend beyond their MPs' direct actions.

Understanding Political Staff: Canadian and Comparative Insights

Canada is a Westminster parliamentary system with single-member districts. MPs hire and then rely on staff to support their constituency and parliamentary duties (Docherty, 1997). Common job titles for staff include constituency assistant and parliamentary/legislative assistant (Cloutier, 2019; Snagovsky and Kerby, 2019). The Board of Internal Economy (BOIE) designates the rules and manages the resources available to support MPs (See Feldman, 2022). For example, the BOIE sets the Member's Office Budget (MOB), allocated annually on April 1. MOBs can cover salaries, service contracts, wireless devices, travel and some training expenses, though they cannot be used to benefit the MP's personal interests or for activities associated with the Electoral District Association (EDA), such as candidate nominations and fundraising. The baseline budget for all MPs for the 2023–2024 fiscal year was $411,300CAD. MPs who represent densely populated or geographically large constituencies receive an additional elector and/or geographic supplement, with the highest budget being $512,820CAD. MPs on average spend $317,681.70CAD on employees' salaries, or 70% of their MOB (see Appendix). The 2023 MP manual sets the maximum salary per employee at $109,500CAD. MPs act as staff employers and thus have more latitude with what happens in their offices than acting in the House of

Commons or in committee work.[2] Unlike parliamentary proceedings, which are governed by formal rules, party discipline and institutional constraints, MPs have more latitude in shaping their office dynamics, including hiring and directing staff and setting priorities and representational strategies. MPs may use their staff and resources in the way that they think best fits their representational style (Koop et al., 2018; Cockram, 2023).

The literature on MPs, their offices and their staff is limited and primarily focuses on MPs themselves (Docherty, 1997, 2005; Koop et al., 2018). However, research underscores the essential role of MP staff in both constituency and parliamentary work, with MPs relying on assistants to efficiently manage constituent concerns (Docherty, 1997). MPs typically employ five staff members on average, though numbers range from 3 to 15 (Cloutier, 2019). Most resources are dedicated to constituency work, positioning staff as "front-line" representatives who interact with constituents daily (Bélanger et al., 2023; Cloutier 2019, 2024). Constituency staff act as intermediaries between MPs and the public, handling casework, especially in areas such as immigration, despite often lacking formal training and institutional support (Cloutier, 2019; Bélanger et al., 2023). Hill staff, in contrast, focus on legislative duties, preparing MPs for Question Periods, committee meetings and caucus discussions (Dickin, 2016). Both types of staff also contribute to outreach and communications, including managing MPs' media and social media presence (Marland and Power, 2020; Marland and Snagovksy, 2023).

Political staffers play a crucial yet often overlooked role in shaping representation. Comparative research shows that staff demographics, experiences and roles—such as gatekeepers (Marland and Esselment, 2019; McKee, 2023) or advisors (Snagovsky et al., 2023)—shape both legislative effectiveness and constituency engagement, though these influences are not always grounded in theories of political representation. Brandsma and Otjes (2024) categorize staffers into various roles—advisors, ghostwriters, compromise facilitators, information brokers and marketeers—demonstrating their structural and functional impact on MPs. However, their analysis does not focus specifically on MPs' personal staff, who, due to their employment context and loyalty to their MP, warrant separate study from nonpartisan parliamentary staff such as librarians or committee aides. Personal staff have greater agency in shaping representation through their perspectives, experiences and priorities. As ghostwriters, for example, they embed their viewpoints into political discourse, consciously or unconsciously (Laube et al., 2020). As Laube and colleagues note, "the staff's work is commonly reduced to mere service for their bosses" (2020: 294), underscoring the need to center staff voices in understanding representation.

Rosenthal and Cohen Bell highlight that congressional representation is "an activity mediated by staff" (2003: 68), with women staffers' descriptive representation becoming substantive only when advocacy, resources and institutional factors enable their influence. Dittmar (2021) expands on this research by defining representational mediation as how women staffers shape policy through agenda-setting, information filtering and advocacy, emphasizing the role of gender and racial diversity in decision making. However, these frameworks often study staff primarily in relation to their politicians, rather than recognizing staff as additional actors in representation. While staff exist in their roles due to being employed by the

MP, this position grants them power to shape the relational work of representation (Crewe and Sarra, 2021). Understanding representation requires moving beyond viewing staff as mere extensions of MPs and instead recognizing their active role in shaping political discourse and decision making.

Representation: Bringing Staff In

A fulsome definition of political representation typically comprises five components: "(1) some party that is representing; (2) some party that is being represented; (3) something that is being represented; (4) a setting within which the activity of representation takes place; (5) something that is being left out" (Dovi, 2018: 2–3). In formal political representation, the first component is typically the elected representative, while the second is the district they were elected to represent (Pitkin, 1967). However, this perspective overlooks the role of staffers, who, while working behind the scenes, directly influence the representative function. Understanding how staffers act as representatives provides insight into the quality and nature of political representation (Dovi, 2007; Celis and Childs, 2020).

Constructivist theories challenge the assumption that only elected officials can be representatives, instead framing representation as a dynamic process shaped by claims and reception (Saward, 2006; Dovi, 2007; Rehfeld, 2011; Disch, 2015, 2019; Fossen, 2019; Salkin, 2021). Political representation, then, is not an automatic or fixed relationship but one constructed through claims to speak or act on behalf of others. As Saward explains, "just as representation is not a mere fact that 'just is,' so representations (depictions, portrayals, encapsulations) of self and others in politics do not just happen. People construct them, put them forward, make claims for them—make them" (2006: 301). This perspective expands the scope of political representation beyond electoral authorization, allowing for an analysis of how staffers shape representative functions: not merely by "standing in for" MPs but by actively mediating relationships between Parliament and constituents.

The constructivist turn in representation shifts the focus from viewing it as exclusive to elected officials to recognizing it as an ongoing, performative process of claim-making. Staffers play a crucial role in this process by actively shaping, reinforcing and legitimizing representative claims. They are not just supporting an MP's public image or acting as "mouthpieces" (Pitkin, 1967: 82); they are both makers and facilitators of representation. Staff interpret, filter and translate constituents' concerns, shaping both the MP's responses and how representation is enacted. Staff's interactions with constituents (and stakeholders, advocacy groups, lobbyists and so forth) mean they do not merely extend the MP's presence but actually shape the representative relationship itself. Here, staff can contribute to representation through informal means. Informal political representation is theorized as "the phenomenon of acting on behalf of others although one has not been elected or selected to do so by means of a systemized election or selection procedure" (Salkin, 2021: 429). While staff themselves are not elected, they are employed and exist in their roles because their employer is elected and therefore can act in manners that contribute to the representative function of politicians. While MPs are authorized through elections and traditionally considered political

representatives, their staff can also contribute to representation, acting in ways that support and extend the MPs' representative capacity.

Elected politicians rely on staff who work behind the scenes to help construct, or "characterize," representative claims (Fossen, 2019: 828). Staffers are not passive intermediaries; they actively shape how representation is performed and perceived, both in their interactions with constituents and in influencing the MP's priorities. As Celis and Childs explain, "not all claims-makers and claims start as equals" (2020: 72), and staff play a crucial role in deciding which people and ideas get portrayed, framed and presented to the representative. Their influence extends beyond administrative support—they filter information, set agendas and sometimes serve as the initial or primary voice advocating for particular issues. For example, Dittmar (2021) illustrates how a United States senator took youth homelessness more seriously after hearing a staffer's firsthand account of being a homeless youth. Because staff have close relationships with MPs, their lived experiences can shape the way issues are framed, providing a personal and compelling lens that can direct an MP's attention to specific policy concerns and potential solutions.

Beyond influencing MPs, staffers themselves are active political actors who shape representation in real time. Consider a constituent visiting an MP's office while the MP is absent: the staffer who greets them is not merely relaying the MP's stance but engaging in discussion, drawing on their own knowledge, beliefs and goals. In this moment, the staffer is not just facilitating representation on behalf of the MP but actively making a representative claim. Their interpretation of the constituent's concerns, the way they frame the issue and the knowledge they bring to the exchange all influence what is being represented and how. Even if the interaction is never relayed to the MP, the constituent still leaves feeling heard and represented—not by the MP directly, but by the staffer, whose authority and role within the office grant them the capacity to shape the representative process. Staffers' close proximity to power enables them to amplify certain voices and shape political priorities, making them integral to how representation is constructed, both inside and outside formal political institutions.

Constructivist theories emphasize that representation is not a static, one-way relationship but a dynamic and performative process (Saward, 2006). In this light, staffers function as both subjects and makers of representation, actively shaping political engagement in ways that formal electoral theories often overlook. Their role extends beyond administrative or support work; they actively co-construct representative claims, influencing both what is represented and how it is perceived. In sum, our understanding of representation should be expanded to include staff, as they perform much of the everyday work of political representation. Staffers contribute to representative claims made on behalf of the MP or constituents, reinforcing (or even contradicting) the MP's or constituents' stated positions. Neither the MP's constituency nor parliamentary work—that is, work all MPs must do—can now be completed by a single person (Docherty, 2005; McCrain, 2018; Otjes, 2023). To assess the quality of representation, "we can ask how representatives do, or do not, define particular societal problems; what questions they do, or do not, raise; what solutions they do, or do not, consider; and what voices they do, or do not, listen to" (Celis and Childs, 2020: 72). Thus, to fully assess the kind of representation constituents receive, we must consider staff's work, not just as facilitators, but also as active participants in the representative process.

Conceptualizing Staff as Representatives

Capturing representation is challenging (See Wolkenstein and Wratil, 2021). Expanding on Dittmar's (2021) concept of representational mediation—where she finds that women congressional staff mediate, agenda set, influence and shape the work of the members of Congress they work for—I develop a framework to investigate how staff act as representatives themselves on the basis of the empirical studies and representational theory outlined above: as proxies, liaisons, advisors and gatekeepers. In conceptualizing staff as representatives through these four roles, summarized in Table 1, I recall Dovi's (2018) definition for political representation above. Staff would be the first component, "some party that is representing" (Dovi, 2018: 2). The fourth component, "a setting within which the activity of representation takes place" (Dovi, 2018: 3), would be anywhere the staffer works, whether in the local district or parliamentary office or at events in the community. In the paragraphs that follow, I connect each of the representative roles and Dovi's second component—"some party that is being represented"—and the third component, "something that is being represented" (2018: 3). I then explain the importance of studying staff as gatekeepers through a representative lens to consider Dovi's fifth component, "something that is being left out" (2018: 3).

Staff can be representatives by being a *proxy* for the parliamentarian. In this representational role, staff stand in for and represent the elected official to constituents. Proxies extend the capacity of legislators, standing in for legislators when they have competing priorities and allow the legislators to fulfil other roles and tasks as they see fit. A proxy is conceptualized as a representative insofar as they embody the politician they represent to exercise the powers and perform duties assigned to them. The party being represented by the staffer is the elected official; this representation includes the staffer embodying the elected representative's positions, interests and ideas. Proxies are key to the responsive function of elected officials. For example, the demand for a politician's presence at multiple events might mean that the politician sends a staff member on their behalf to represent their presence at an event. Politicians can also use their staff as proxies to respond to constituent emails. Politicians delegate authority to a staff member to respond on their behalf as if the politician themselves were responding.

Liaisons facilitate the representative relationship between a representative and the represented. Staff are delegated by the representative to gather information from constituents as well as share information about the representative's work among constituents. Staff have some agency in selecting and synthesizing information about constituent concerns to allow for the most relevant information to be passed along accessibly. Unlike proxies, liaisons do not stand in for the parliamentarian; they act primarily as information gatherers and intermediaries. A liaison is conceptualized as a representative because while liaisons may not have decision-making authority, they are in a position to communicate the elected official's positions or interests to the constituency, while also ensuring that the messages and concerns of constituents are passed along to the elected representative. In the liaison role, the party being represented by the staffer is either the elected representative or the constituents, including portraying the "opinions, perspectives, interests" of both sides (Dovi, 2018: 3).

Table 1. Staff Representative Roles

Role	Definition
Proxy	**Physical embodiment** of the elected official in their stead
Liaison	**Information broker** (Brandsma and Otjes, 2024) who supports the facilitation of the representative relationship between constituents and their elected official
Advisor	Shapes, guides, directs or **influences the actions** of an elected official on the basis of advice they give from their own personal experiences or expertise
Gatekeeper	Decides to either **include or exclude people or ideas to** the elected official

While proxies and liaisons take on the role of an extension of the representatives, advisors and gatekeepers can have a more active and influential role. *Advisors* have the ability to shape, guide, direct and/or influence the actions of an elected official on the basis of their personal experiences or expertise. Advisors themselves can act like trustee representatives, where they "follow their own understanding of the best action to pursue" (Dovi, 2018: 4) and use their proximity to the elected official to influence them to act as the advisor sees fit. While the elected official may not use their advice, the goal of the advisor is to shape the elected official's ideas about an issue or position on the basis of the advisor's own personal understanding of the topic. An advisor is conceptualized as a representative because they use their own personal expertise to help shape politicians' views and ideas about decisions. In the advisor role, the party being represented is the staffer themselves, and the party being represented to is the elected official. Advisors use their own independent judgement, guided by their own expertise or understanding of acting in the best interest of the politician they work for, rather than simply carrying out direct instructions from the politician.

While advisors provide their input to the elected official regardless of their direct interaction with constituents, *gatekeepers* directly interact with constituents, enabling or restricting access to the elected official. Gatekeeping allows an individual to decide who is included and who is excluded in the representative process. Gatekeepers have decision-making power about who gets access to people, power or information within an organization (Shoemaker and Vos, 2009; Albaugh, 2022). Staff, in their role as gatekeepers, use their judgements to decide whether an encounter is worth the representative's time. Gatekeeping is used to control participation in accessing elected officials (Barzilai-Nahon, 2009).

As gatekeepers, staff can "limit or even deny political access and influence democratic institutions" (Dovi, 2009: 1173). This role is crucial to understanding Dovi's fifth component for political representation, which is "something that is being left out" (2018: 3). When staff choose who gets a meeting with an elected representative, they directly influence the representative process. If a gatekeeper chooses group A over group B, they are impacting group B's chance to participate in the political process. Whether or not the elected official instructs the gatekeeper to make these decisions through informal rules (Shoemaker and Vos, 2009), the gatekeeper still has agency to decide who gets access to the representative. A gatekeeper is conceptualized as a representative because, through their control over who has access to the elected official, they have agency in deciding which

people or ideas get through to the politician and when, on the basis of their best judgement. Assessing the quality of representation between elected officials and constituents then requires evaluation of staff's power over access to the elected official.

Staff act as gatekeepers for ideas as well as people. Staff provide information to the elected representative about specific policy topics. Gatekeeping ideas is parallel to Brandsma and Otjes' (2024) role of a ghostwriter, where elected officials are the only ones who can do some specific tasks, such as delivering speeches in legislatures or voting on legislation, but as ghostwriters, staff can help with the preparation of those jobs. If we use a gatekeeper lens to understand how staff select which ideas to include or exclude to the elected official on the basis of the staff's own perception of the elected official's position or interests, the preparations are shaped by the staff's interpretations and biases. Brandsma and Otjes (2024) acknowledge staff biases in selecting information, which is a key gatekeeping function. Shoemaker and Vos (2009) emphasize the active role of gatekeepers, using heuristics to help select and decide which information is important to prioritize. Gatekeepers interpret messages, "resolve ambiguities, make educated guesses about things that they have not observed directly, and form inferences about relationships" (Shoemaker and Vos, 2009: 38). Gatekeepers can also act as gate-openers, using their power to advocate for a group to access their elected official that may have not been considered if they were not in that role. Understanding how staff act as gate-openers aligns with Dovi's conceptualization of the virtue of fair-mindedness, where "[g]ood democratic representatives should preserve the access of fellow citizens to government officials" (2007: 119). Who the gatekeepers are matter, since they are deciding what ideas and people are included or excluded in the representative process.

The four representative roles—proxies, liaisons, advisors and gatekeepers—are not mutually exclusive, and one staffer can take on multiple roles throughout their day or tenure as a staffer. In isolating each role, however, we can understand how staff at all levels contribute to the representative relationship between elected officials and constituents. Investigating staff through these roles allows us to better understand where and how representation can occur.

Data and Methods

To explore these representational dynamics in practice, this study employs a data-driven approach to examine how staffers working in both constituency and parliamentary offices navigate their representative functions and influence MPs' work. Staffers, rather than their MPs, provide a more direct and unfiltered perspective on their own role, offering insights that might otherwise be minimized or downplayed by elected officials. MPs have a vested interest in portraying themselves as the central figures in representation, which may lead them to downplay the role and influence of their staffers. A survey of staffers allows for a broader and more systematic collection of perspectives across different offices. In addition, surveying staff can be difficult (Moens, 2022), as they can have demanding workloads (Cloutier, 2019) and are sometimes hesitant to respond to academic research requests (Campbell and Bolet, 2022; Marland and Esselment, 2019). Additionally, while interviews with staffers could provide richer qualitative insights,

the anonymity of a survey makes space for staff to provide candid responses about their roles and influence. Staffers are also wary of upsetting the politicians they work for, though this is mitigated somewhat through anonymous surveys. To avoid deductive disclosure, results are only reported if responses are gathered from at least five individuals, ensuring no single respondent or the politician they work for can be inferred. Since staff work across the country, an online survey also provides a more feasible method for capturing their experiences across the country.

While surveys allow for a broad assessment of staffers' roles, they do not capture the full complexity of interactions between MPs and their staff, nor between staff and constituents. Because the findings rely on self-reported data from staffers, there is a risk that respondents may overstate their influence or focus on specific aspects of their work that are most visible to them. However, by centering staffers' experiences, this research highlights staffers' often-overlooked contributions to political representation.

As part of a larger investigation on the work of political staff, this survey of staffers investigates their roles and responsibilities through a mix of open-ended and closed-ended questions. It begins by identifying whether staff primarily work in a constituency office on Parliament Hill, or both—acknowledging that MPs representing ridings near Ottawa may have staff in both locations. Staff were asked whether they work full time (more than 35 hours per work) or part time (less than 35 hours per week), about tenure with their current MP, about prior experience with other MPs and about expected duration in their current role. Additionally, the survey captures language use and demographic information about the staffer and the MP they work for.

To be included in the sample, a respondent had to have been employed by a current MP when the survey was in the field. The staff sample was compiled using the Government Electronic Directory Services (GEDS), which included 1,926 staff members working for 332 MPs.[3] I provide details in Appendix A about collecting staff's email addresses. All staff, regardless of their job title on GEDS, were invited to complete the survey anonymously. The survey was available in English and French, programmed in Qualtrics, and sent out on August 25, 2023. The summer months are thought to be slower for staffers because the House of Commons is not in session. This scheduling choice allowed staff to dedicate more time to responding to open-ended and close-ended survey questions. Many staffers' out-of-office emails indicated they were on vacation, with some being away from work until the House returned. Some staff had autoreplies for their email saying they no longer worked for an MP, often including their replacement's email address. Staff also replied with names of other staff members to invite to the survey. These staff members were all invited to take the survey to survey as many current staffers as possible. The survey remained open until October 5, 2023. In total, 1,871 email invitations were sent to staff, resulting in 366 completed surveys, for a response rate of 20%. This is comparable to other surveys of staffers in Canada (Cloutier, 2019; Snagovsky and Kerby, 2019; Wilson, 2020).

Across the country, 64% of MP offices had at least one staff member complete the survey.[4] The majority of staff respondents work in constituency offices (64%) compared with Parliament Hill (29%), mirroring the population of staff on the basis of estimates in the literature, where more staff in general work in MPs' constituency

offices than on Parliament Hill (Cloutier, 2019).[5] In constituency offices, 62% of respondents are women. This percentage is reversed for Hill staff, where 60% of respondents are men. Almost 70% of staff respondents working on Parliament Hill are under 35 years old, compared with 40% of staff working in constituency offices.[6] Staff respondents are overwhelmingly white (76%) and have completed a university-level degree (68%). Most respondents work full time (82%), for an average of 43 hours a week.[7] The MP employers of respondents are reflective of the composition of the House of Commons by gender, party affiliation and region. Staff respondents are more likely to work for a man MP (62%). They are most likely to work for a Liberal MP (42%), followed by a Conservative MP (26%) and Bloc Québécois MPs (12%) and New Democrat MPs (12%). Staff work for Ontario MPs the most (35%), followed by MPs in the West (25%), Québec MPs (24%) and Atlantic MPs (9%). Specific wording of the survey questions are provided in the Appendix.

I use thematic analysis to inductively identify distinct representative roles for staffers, drawing from an open-ended question. Coding these responses allows me to identify and explain patterns in the data (Bazeley, 2012). The goal of this analysis is not to emphasize the strength of staffer influence but rather to explore political staffers as representative actors. While staff may exaggerate their importance or influence, and politicians may not always factor staffers' work into their decision making, elected officials inevitably delegate tasks due to their demanding workloads. This delegation inherently grants staff some degree of power over decisions, even if minor. Therefore, any investigation into politicians' representative work remains incomplete without also considering staffers' perspectives.

Using staff's perception of their influence on their MP as a measure of their contribution to representation captures the dynamic and multifaceted impact an individual working closely with a politician can have. Influence encompasses the ability to shape decisions, guide policy and affect outcomes through expertise, communication and relationship-building. It reflects the effectiveness and reach of a staff member's contribution to political advocacy (Dovi, 2007). To capture these dynamics, I used an open-ended survey question: "Do you think you influence how the MP does their job as an elected representative? If so, how?"[8] This approach allows staff to articulate their own perception of their influence on the elected official. The responses yielded a sample of 302 answers, ranging from a single word to 261 words in length, with an average of 34 words per response.

To analyze these perspectives, I first coded responses as a binary: whether staff influence the MP as an elected official. Using thematic analysis, I then generated four categories of representative roles, as presented in Table 1. I approach thematic coding as "the process of reading the data, discerning meanings potentially relevant to your research question, and tagging these meaning-relevant segments of data with a code label" (Braun and Clarke, 2023: 393). My analysis primarily relies on latent coding, which captures underlying ideas rather than explicit meanings (Braun and Clarke, 2023). Codes were inductively developed from the open-ended responses (Neunendorf, 2018), with a focus on how staffers may add to, disrupt, facilitate or shift the representative relationship between politicians and their constituencies.

To mitigate potential biases from single-researcher coding, I prioritized consistency over time, coding the responses twice to ensure reliability in

categorizing the four representative roles outlined in Table 1 (Elliott, 2018; Braun and Clarke, 2023).[9] I began coding in January 2024, tagging responses to develop themes, then refining them into the four representative roles, discarding those unrelated to representation.[10] I completed the first coding round in March 2024 and the second in May 2024, achieving a reliability score (Kappa) of 0.93. All qualitative coding was conducted using NVivo 14, followed by quantitative analyses in STATA 14.

Responses were first dichotomously coded as either "influences" or "does not influence."[11] Recall that the question first asked staff whether they thought they influenced how the MP they work for did their job as a representative. The goal was then to be able to determine whether staffers perceive their work to be influential, and then to determine *how* their work could be considered representative. There were 264 "influences" responses, covering 87% of the 302 open-ended responses. These responses were on average 38 words long, ranging from 1 word to 261 words. To be coded as "influences," staff had to agree that they had some degree of influence on their MP's job. While some staff were wary to state the extent of their influence on the MP, all responses that indicated any degree of influence were coded as "influences." The majority of the responses provided justification as to how the staff perceive their influence on the MP, with only three not providing any explanation for their perceived influence. The remaining 38 responses were that staff member did *not* influence their MP. These responses averaged 10 words, with a range of 1 word to 59 words. Most responded with a simple "no," though 10 responses included more explanation as to why they do not view themselves as influential. For example, one constituency staffer wrote, "The MP influences how I do my job, not the other way around!" A parliamentary staffer wrote, "Not at all unfortunately . . . the member takes no advice on any subject from any member of our team."

Responses could contain all four representative roles and are reported as frequency of mentions. Staff were coded as *proxies* if they performed tasks an MP would have done themselves, such as case work for constituents, effectively extending the MP's capacity. They were coded as *liaisons* if they facilitated communication between the MP and constituents, ensuring feedback and concerns were relayed. Survey responses were coded as *advisor* if staff themselves were identified as the source of expertise on the basis of their own knowledge or experiences, and as *gatekeepers* if they controlled access to the MP's schedule, information or constituent interactions. The thematic coding process outlined above establishes four roles through which staff operate as representatives—proxies, liaisons, advisors and gatekeepers—and a detailed coding scheme for each of these categories is provided in Appendix A.

Analysis

Of the 302 open-ended responses, 264 (87%) staff indicated they influenced their MP in some way. Table 2 presents how patterns of self-reported influence break down across several dimensions. Those who influence the MP were more likely to work on Parliament Hill (90%) compared with those in the constituency office (85%). Both men staffers (87%) and women staffers (87%) were equal in their

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of Staff Perceptions of MP Influence

		Influences (n = 264)		Does not influence (n = 38)		Total (n = 302)	
		n	%	*n*	%	*n*	%
Job location (n = 302)	Constituency	168	85%	29	15%	197	65%
	Parliament Hill	75	90%	8	10%	83	27%
	Both	21	95%	1	5%	22	7%
	Total	264	88%	38	12%	302	100%
MP party (n = 302)	Bloc Québécois	34	89%	4	11%	38	13%
	Conservative	65	83%	13	17%	78	26%
	Liberal	106	90%	12	10%	118	39%
	New Democratic Party	32	89%	4	11%	36	12%
	Other	27	84%	5	16%	32	11%
	Total	264	88%	38	12%	302	100%
MP gender (n = 288)	Woman MP	86	91%	9	9%	95	33%
	Man MP	167	87%	26	13%	193	67%
	Total	253	88%	35	12%	288	100%
MP position (n = 283)	Minister	24	86%	4	14%	28	10%
	Backbencher	223	87%	32	13%	255	90%
	Total	247	88%	36	12%	283	100%
Region (n = 278)	West	68	90%	8	10%	76	27%
	Ontario	87	87%	13	13%	100	36%
	Quebec	62	83%	13	17%	75	27%
	Atlantic	25	93%	2	7%	27	10%
	Total	245	87%	36	13%	278	100%
Staff gender (n = 293)	Woman	136	87%	19	13%	156	53%
	Man	115	87%	17	13%	132	45%
	Non-binary	5	100%	0	0%	5	2%
	Total	256	87%	37	13%	293	100%
Staff age (n = 286)	19–25 years old	39	80%	10	20%	49	17%
	26–35 years old	79	95%	4	5%	83	29%
	36–45 years old	38	81%	9	19%	47	16%
	46–55 years old	35	85%	6	15%	41	14%
	56–65 years old	39	87%	6	13%	45	16%
	66 years old or older	20	95%	1	5%	21	7%
	Total	250	87%	36	13%	286	100%

perceptions of influence of the MP's work. Staff working for a woman MP were slightly more likely to report being influential (91%) than those working for a man MP (87%). By party, staff with the highest reported rates of influence worked for Liberal MPs (90%), Bloc MPs (89%) or NDP MPs (89%), followed by Conservative MPs (83%). Staff working for a backbencher (87%) were slightly more likely than staff working for a minister (86%) to indicate their influence on the MP, but ministers also have exempt staff to help fulfil their ministerial role, which is separate from their local district representation.

Table 3. Staff Representative Roles by Location

	Constituency (n = 197)		Parliament Hill (n = 83)		Both (n = 22)		Total (n = 302)	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Proxy	42	21%	7	8%	2	9%	50	16%
Liaison	71	36%	11	13%	9	41%	92	30%
Advisor	41	21%	47	57%	15	68%	103	34%
Gatekeeper	23	12%	14	17%	2	9%	38	13%

There are certain tasks that only an MP can do that monopolize an MP's time and attention. Thus, as one constituency staffer puts it, the MP has "to delegate everything else," as the MP cannot perform all duties expected of them.[12] The delegation of duties, including those that affect how the MP conducts representation, must also come with a level of trust in the staffers' agency and discretion to make decisions. A staffer explains:

> [If an MP] wants to keep competent, autonomous people on [their] team, [they] must also give them a certain amount of discretion so they can carry out their tasks without constantly disrupting [the MP]. Members who try to control everything end up with dysfunctional teams. Consequently, a healthy team leaves a lot of decision-making power to the employees, which affects how the MP will be perceived, positively or negatively, in his or her constituency.

Staff emphasize the importance of trust in their relationship with their elected official because, as one constituency staffer explains, they are acting as the "representative of the MP." Because staff are doing the MP's work in their stead, they are contributing to representation, just as the elected official does.

Table 3 presents that staff were most likely to contribute to representation through an advisor role (34%), followed by liaisons (30%), proxies (16%) and gatekeepers (13%). Table 3 also presents the frequency of mentions for each representative role by staff type (constituency or parliamentary).

Staff as proxies

Constituency staff (21%) were more likely to describe a *proxy* role than Hill staff (8%). Constituency staff often explain that their role is to support the MP at "home" when they are in Ottawa, especially since one individual MP "can't be everywhere at once." Several different constituency staff described how they are the MPs' "eyes and ears" in the riding for the MP.[13] Constituency staff emphasize how they act as extensions of the MPs. One constituency staffer explains that they "represent him at certain events that he can't attend because of his parliamentary duties in Ottawa."[14]

When the House of Commons is in session, the MP is often required to be in Ottawa, away from their riding. The MP's staff are left to interact directly with

citizens in the MP's constituency, in effect embodying the act of representation for their MP. By sending staff as their proxy to events in the riding, MPs are able to fulfil their outreach capacity in their constituency. Another constituency staffer explains how being a proxy benefits MPs who have large ridings: "Our large riding relies on the ability to travel to remote communities, and [a] staffer's ability to travel directly influences the outreach capabilities [of] the MP."

One of the key representative functions of MPs in the constituency is to help constituents with federal government programs, even though it may not provide them with a personal vote at the next election (Docherty, 1997). Docherty (1997; 2005) discusses how Canadian legislators emphasize constituency service as one of the most important aspects of being an elected representative. Docherty explains why MPs dedicate time and staff resources to helping constituents: "The conventional wisdom of Canadian constituency service is simple: while good constituency service is no guarantee of re-election, bad constituency service almost assures defeat" (2005: 81). This service work is often done by staff. Some staff explain how constituency service is "nitty gritty everyday work" and having staff who perform this work lets the MP focus on their other duties. Another constituency staffer writes, "my role provides service for constituents on behalf of the member which frees her up to attend to other matters such as policy work." A constituency staffer expresses that they "provide the MP with the peace of mind that constituents' problems are resolved without the MP having to step in."

The service work that staff do as proxies is reflected back onto the MP's reputation. Staff mention approachability and representing the MP in their constituency office. One constituency staffer wrote: "I am the front facing person that constituents interact with when they come to our office, so being approachable is necessary to reflect my MP." Another constituency staffer explains, "My time is spent entirely in the constituency as the senior representative of the MP. I am the face of his service to his constituents." Giving good constituency service also is "transferred to the MP," as one constituency staffer explains the way staff treat constituents as a representative of the MP matters for the MP's reputation.

Staff as proxies are often the ones that manage constituents' emotions, especially those who are angry and upset (Cloutier, 2024). While staff as proxies can extend the MP's representative reach, staff also therefore act as an insulation for MPs from some of the more emotional aspects of the job. By using staff as proxies, staff are then conducting the labour of ensuring that constituents feel heard, or that their problems are taken seriously.

Staff as liaisons

Constituency staff (36%) are more likely to be liaisons compared with Hill staff (13%). As liaisons, staff help synthesize and filter information up toward the MP. One constituency staffer explains they act as an "interface" between the MP and constituents. This information selection is crucial to ensuring that MPs understand their constituency and the constituent concerns. One constituency staffer explains that she gives the MP "all the pertinent information she needs to make decisions." Another constituency staffer writes: "While the final decisions rest with [the MP], my job entails gauging public sentiment, understanding community needs, and

bringing forward issues and concerns from our constituents. This feedback can certainly inform the MP's decision-making processes and help ensure he's accurately representing the needs and wishes of those he serves." One constituency assistant explains the need to have a feel "for the salient issues within the community and report back to the MP about what issues are important for them to focus on in their communications to riding residents and in caucus meetings and which projects to put their political support behind."

Even though staff may fulfill a liaison role between constituents and the MP, staff still have some agency in this position. MPs can instruct staff on what constituent issues and concerns to bring to them, though as one parliamentary staffer explains, this understanding is developed over time: "Staffers filter information that eventually gets to the MP. However, informed filtering is based on knowledge of the MP's preferences, interests, and availability. A rapport between staffer and MP is built up over time, often through trial and error, that leads to an effective and efficient flow of information." As one constituency staffer summarizes, "I draw up a portrait of situations relevant to her role as MP."

Given institutional norms and strong party discipline in Canada (Kam, 2009; Marland, 2020; Godbout, 2020), and the individual ability to structure their offices as they see fit, MPs have more latitude with what happens in their offices than they do acting in the House of Commons or in committee work. However, MP loyalty to the party can be frustrating to staff, who explain how constituents' views sometimes differ from the MP's party. Staff often frame the MP's role as being a delegate representative to the House of Commons, often recommending the MP to focus on representing the constituents who elected them first and foremost. This could be because staffers on the frontline hear constituents' perspectives and the stories of how policies affect them. As one staffer explains, "sharing what people tell me about their difficulties, their opinions on government measures and their needs is necessary for the MP to be able to defend or vote on new legislation."

Staff as advisors

Parliament Hill staff (57%) overwhelmingly described their role as an advisor compared with constituency staff (21%). Hill staff are often hired to help the MP with legislative research and with the MP's communication in the House of Commons and with media (Dickin, 2016). When the MP is in Ottawa, their Hill staff spend a great deal of time closely working with them. Because of their close proximity, Hill staff emphasize their ability to shape an MP's thoughts on certain issues. One Hill staffer wrote, "The MP I work for regularly seeks my advice, and frequently changes position or direction based on my advice."

Staff emphasize their advisor role as one in which they present other points of view and perspectives and are a member of the MP's team: "We work as a team and the MP regularly asks for our opinion and I can see that he really takes what we say into consideration in his decision." However, there are varying degrees of influence from staffers to the MP they work for. One Hill staffer emphasizes their importance to the MP's decision-making processes: "The MP hired me because she wanted my feedback and perspective on different issues. When we discuss bills, local initiatives or strategy, she relies heavily on my perspectives before making a decision." It could

be that staff exaggerate their influence, though another constituency staffer explains that their advice "can help an MP avoid mistakes and maximize positive outcomes." No matter the degree to which the staffer influences the MP, their proximity and relationship to the MP has the potential to shape the MP's thinking and actions.

The MP's team can be extended depending on which staff the MP surrounds themself with. For example, one constituency staffer wrote, "I'm a First Nations person in a riding that has a very large Indigenous population. My MP is not Indigenous, and will consistently look to me for advice on how to proceed with First Nations issues." Another constituency staffer explains, "We come from differing backgrounds, therefore I can advise on issues that I am more familiar with." These responses suggest that the identities of staff who are present can be critical for the substantive representation of different groups, and that staff can help fill descriptive and substantive representational gaps (Phillips, 1998; Celis and Childs, 2008; Dittmar, 2021).

One of the challenges of being an advisor is providing research or advice to the MP that goes against the MP's party's position. One Hill staffer explains how providing advice is "often difficult to navigate when the party has different views, and you have to toe the line." Another Hill staffer illustrates why they try to give the MP the best possible advice, even if it goes against the MP's political party's position:

> I provide policy advice and strive to present both sides of the issue as best as I can research-even if it means acknowledging there are good points that the opposition is making which the government is either brushing over or not thinking about. MPs deserve to have a diverse picture of an issue, particularly when it is complex and has mixed support in the riding. An MP needs to be able to explain that nuance to their constituents and a staffer—a good one—must support this and fearlessly support doing so, even when it means pushing against the party line and recommending the MP do so.

Staff as advisors can be representatives when their advice is solicited by MPs because staff can have a clear understanding of both the political party's positions and the constituency. In Parliament, according to one Hill staffer, advice includes providing "the MP with direction on how to [communicate] positions and policies, information to help them [decide] where they should or should not support a PMB/amendment/bill, and draft communications material that they will say or will be shared under their draft." Advisors share their ideas, which MPs can then implement "in their work in Parliament and in the community." This can be influential because MPs are the ones sitting in caucus meetings and helping shape political party platforms (Cross et al., 2022). However, when staff assess that constituents' views are at odds with the political party's positions, staff often encourage the MP to act as a delegate of their constituency rather than someone who follows what the party dictates. Staff then could be seen as a check on unfettered party discipline in Canada, which is important to representation in a highly disciplined system (Marland, 2020; Godbout, 2020). Ultimately, many staff acknowledge that the final decision is with the MP, providing advice, and one parliamentary staffer explains, "with the understanding that they are the one elected, not you."

Staff as gatekeepers

Staff in both the constituency (12%) and on the Hill (17%) play a *gatekeeper* role, which influences who the MP meets, which perspectives they hear and ultimately how the MP does their job as an elected official. One Hill staffer explains, "political staffers at the MP level are gatekeepers. Want to meet with the MP, you go through the staffer first. If we don't think something is relevant or of interest to the MP, it's a 'no'."

Schedule management can be seen as an administrative task, which is often omitted from studies of representation since it does not directly relate to policy or legislative work. However, control of the MP's schedule determines who gets access and determines which voices the MP hears. A constituency staffer summarizes the gatekeeper role of the MP: "I help determine his schedule which impacts the conversations he has, the perspectives he listens to, and the people he meets." Gatekeepers have decision-making capabilities: ones that decide who and what matters and is thus worthy of being represented.

Political staff use their discretion to determine whether an interaction is worth the MPs' time, which has a direct impact on who participates in the representative relationship between elected officials and constituents. One constituency staffer explains that different community groups request the MP's time and presence, yet MPs "can't do everything so what they're able to make it to affects the voices they hear." Staff influence the representative function of MPs by selecting which events the MPs should attend, which meetings to prioritize, and which constituents they should call back. A parliamentary staffer describes the impact of their gatekeeper role:

> Staff play a significant role in shaping how the MP responds to unexpected "day to day" parliamentary events, and serve as "gatekeepers" over the MP's schedule. Given the volume of requests for an MP's time—often from groups advocating for policy issues outside the MPs core interests—staffers exercise significant discretion by[:] deciding which organizations get meetings with the MP; which political events, receptions, lunches, etc. the MP attends; which asks from advocacy groups/constituents are followed up on (and how aggressively), and which local stakeholder groups are prioritized when planning local events such as visits by government ministers.

A constituency staffer explains, "We influence what constituents the MP should call back directly. We also influence whether the MP should reconsider attending certain events or meetings with particular stakeholder groups." However, as one constituency staffer explains, this gatekeeping process can be for the MP's own safety, including whether constituent meetings "should be a phone call." Staff, especially women staff, increasingly experience harassment at work from constituents, and simultaneously play an important gatekeeper role to protect politicians from constituent harassment and abuse (Cloutier, 2024).

Discussion and Future Research

This article has identified four key roles that MP staff play in the representative process: proxies, liaisons, advisors and gatekeepers. Proxies extend MPs'

representative capacity by standing in for them at events or managing constituency casework. Liaisons facilitate communication between MPs and constituents, shaping which concerns and perspectives reach the MP. Advisors provide expertise and strategic guidance that can directly influence MPs' decision making. Gatekeepers control access to the MP, determining which voices and issues gain attention.

In practice, the representative roles often overlap, but by distinguishing them, we can identify specific moments where representation is constructed. For example, a single staffer who manages an MP's social media presence may simultaneously act as a proxy (posting content and engaging with constituents on behalf of the MP), a liaison (relaying constituent feedback and ensuring MPs' messages are communicated effectively), an advisor (crafting engagement strategies to align with the MP's goals) and a gatekeeper (moderating and determining which interactions reach the MP). This framework provides a structured approach to analyzing how MP staff contribute to the representative process beyond their individual job descriptions.

The degree of agency and deference staff exercise in these roles varies considerably depending on the individual relationship between the MP and the staffer. MPs have the flexibility to manage their staff and offices in ways that best align with their leadership style, representational approach and strategic objectives. Some MPs may grant staff considerable autonomy to act on their behalf, trusting them to interpret priorities and make independent decisions, while others may exert closer oversight, ensuring that all decisions align strictly with their directives. Staffers, therefore, operate within a spectrum of autonomy, making interpretive decisions on the basis of the expectations set by their MP. While they filter and prioritize information, ultimately shaping representation, their level of discretion is shaped by the MP's managerial approach and preferred delegation of responsibilities. This article demonstrates, however, that any understanding of representation is only ever partial if the work of staffers is not taken into account, as their influence is embedded in the everyday processes of representation.

Findings show that staff location influences how these roles are enacted. Constituency staff are more likely to function as proxies and liaisons, engaging in direct constituent interactions and representing MPs in their local communities. Parliament Hill staff are more likely to act as advisors and gatekeepers, shaping legislative priorities and controlling access to information and stakeholders. However, representation is not solely structured by geography—staff identity and lived experience also influence how they interpret their role. For example, Indigenous or racialized staffers may guide MPs on issues relevant to their communities, shaping the substantive representation of marginalized groups.

This study lays the groundwork for explaining how and why political staff shape representation. Scholars of parliamentary democracy have become increasingly attentive to the representational roles performed by unelected officials (Snagovsky and Kerby, 2019; Dittmar 2021; Moens, 2022; McKee, 2023), and this research provides the grounds for understanding the motivations behind why staff are doing the task and how their work contributes to representation. Future research about constituency service should consider the proxy role that staff fill, and how their work contributes to the representational roles of MPs. Additionally, research on Canada's

strong party discipline should investigate whether staff reinforce or challenge party loyalty in shaping MPs' decisions. These avenues will enhance understanding of staff's role in the representative process.

Ultimately, political representation does not occur in isolation—it is co-constructed by elected officials and the staffers who support them. In understanding how representation happens, Saward writes: "We need in a sense to liberate the politician as artist, as a maker of representations, and as a portrayer of the represented" (2010: 16). However, if we are considering how politicians represent their constituents, we must understand how staff help facilitate that work and shape representation. Politicians may have their names on the painting, but behind the scenes, liaisons buy the supplies, stretch the canvas and clean the brushes; advisors direct the politician toward an appropriate subject so they know what they are painting in the first place; gatekeepers decide the invitation list for the painting's exhibition; and proxies host the exhibition themselves when the politician has another commitment. To better evaluate the quality of representation done by elected officials, we must consider how staff shape and support the representative work of MPs. This study demonstrates that MP staff play a crucial yet overlooked role in shaping representation through their work as proxies, liaisons, advisors and gatekeepers. Recognizing staff as active participants in shaping representation complicates traditional models that treat MPs as the sole representatives of their constituents. While grounded in the Canadian context, this framework offers a tool for analyzing how staff influence representation in other systems, whether staff are mediating access to elected officials, shaping policy priorities, acting as stand-ins or facilitating communication with the public. These functions are not unique to Canada and are increasingly relevant in democracies where elected officials rely heavily on staff to manage growing representational demands. To fully assess the quality of political representation, we must move beyond MP-centered analyses and consider how staff decisions shape which voices are heard, which issues gain attention and ultimately, how representation is enacted.

Supplementary material. For supplementary material accompanying this article visit https://doi.org/10.1017/S0008423925100620

Notes

1 I have excluded politicos (Studlar and McAllistar, 1996), where a representative acts in the best interests of the political party. Thus while staff could (and probably do) act as politicos, for the purposes of determining how staff can act as representatives, I conceptualize the politicians (and their electoral district) and the constituents within it as the representational unit.

2 Staffers fall into different categories (Wilson, 2020): Senate staff, ministerial staff and MP staff, each governed by distinct rules and budgets. Senators typically have two to four staffers (Knoefel, 2021), employed by the Senate rather than individual senators, with funding from the Internal Economy Committee for parliamentary duties. Ministerial staff, or exempt staff, work for ministers' offices (Benoit, 2006; Wilson, 2015; Craft, 2015) under separate rules and budgets from MP staff, assisting in executive functions. Since ministers are also MPs, they have staff for their legislative roles as well.

3 The four MPs elected in June 2023 did not have their staff listed on GEDS before the survey was fielded. Two other MPs did not have any staff listed on GEDS. GEDS is the best publicly available source of staff names and positions (Wilson, 2020).

4 There was a 20% average response rate per office. One office had 100% of their staff complete the survey.

5 A "both" option was available for staff who work equally on the Hill and in the constituency, which 7% of respondents selected.

6 The average age for constituency office staff is 43 years old (median 41 years old); the average age for Hill staff is 34 years old (median 29 years old).

7 Part-time staff (18% of respondents) work 22 hours a week on average.

8 The French translation of this question was fielded as: « Pensez-vous que vous avez une influence sur la manière dont votre député s'acquitte de ses responsabilités de représentant élu ? Dans l'affirmative, veuillez expliquer. » Responses in French ($n = 75$) were first translated into English and then coded for staff's influence in the representative process.

9 My ethics clearance only permits me to handle and analyze the survey data.

10 These initial themes included: "Advocacy," "Advisors," "Case Work," "Communication," "Correspondence," "Final Decision is MP," "Conduit," "Gatekeeping," "Identity," "Make MP Job Easier," "Office Management," "Planning," "Proxy," "Service Work," "Staffer's Opinion," "Team," "Trust," "Knowledge," "Motivations Behind Work," and "Partisanship."

11 Two responses were coded as missing, as the answers were not related to the open-ended question.

12 Author's translation from original French response.

13 Author's translation from original French response.

14 Author's translation from original French response.

References

Albaugh, Quinn M. 2022. "Gatekeeping by Central and Local Party Actors: Theory and Evidence from a Field Study of New Brunswick Nominations, 2017–2018." *Canadian Journal of Political Science* **55**: 561–82. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0008423922000385.

Barzilai-Nahon, Karine. 2009. "Gatekeeping: A Critical Review." *Annual Review of Information Science and Technology* **43**: 1–79. https://doi.org/10.1002/aris.2009.1440430117.

Bazeley, Pat. 2012. "Integrative Analysis Strategies for Mixed Data Sources." *American Behavioral Scientist* **56**: 814–28. https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764211426330.

Bélanger, Danièle, Laurance Simard-Gagnon, Adèle Garnier and Gabriel Bergevin-Estable. 2023. "Les salles d'urgence de l'immigration: Les bureaux et les adjoints de circonscription comme première ligne de l'immigration au Canada." *Report of the Canada Research Chair in Global Migration Processes*. https://dynamiques-migratoires.chaire.ulaval.ca/wp/wpcontent/uploads/2023/06/EN-Research-report-FNL-SPREADS.pdf.

Benoit, Liane E. 2006. "Ministerial Staff: The Life and Times of Statutory Orphans." *Commission of Inquiry into the Sponsorship Program and Advertising Activities*. Restoring Accountability, Research Studies, Volume **1**: Parliament, Ministers and Deputy Ministers. Canada: Public Works and Government Services Canada.

Blidook, Kelly and Royce Koop. 2022. "'We Can Help and It Doesn't Cost You a Cracker': The Multidimensionality of Service Representation in Australia and New Zealand." *Political Science* **74**: 75–93.

Bodet, Marc André, Joanie Bouchard, Melanee Thomas and Charles Tessier. 2022. "How Much of Electoral Politics Is in the District? Measuring District Effects on Party Support." *Canadian Journal of Political Science* **55**: 150–70. https://doi.org/10.1017/S000842392100086X.

Brandsma, Gijs Jan and Simon Otjes. 2024. "Gauging the Roles of Parliamentary Staff." *Parliamentary Affairs* **77**: 537–557. https://doi.org/10.1093/pa/gsae001.

Braun, Virginia and Victoria Clarke. 2023. "Thematic Analysis." In *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research, 6th edition*, ed. K. Denzin Norman, S. Lincoln Yvonna, D. Giardina Michael, and S. Cannella Gaile. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications. 385–402.

Campbell, Rosie. and Diane Bolet. 2022. "Measuring MP's Responsiveness: How to do it and stay out of trouble." *Political Studies Review* **20**: 175–183.

Caplan, Michelle, Nicole McMahon and Christopher Alcantara. 2021. "Representing the Constituency: Institutional Design and Legislative Behaviour." *Representation* **57**: 459–74.

Celis, Karen and Sarah Childs. 2008. "Introduction: The Descriptive and Substantive Representation of Women: New Directions." *Parliamentary Affairs* **61**: 419–25. https://doi.org/10.1093/pa/gsn006.

Celis, Karen and Sarah Childs. 2018. "Good Representatives and Good Representation." *PS: Political Science & Politics* **51**: 314–17. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096517002426.

Celis, Karen, and Sarah Childs. 2020. Feminist Democratic Representation. *Oxford:* Oxford University Press.

Cloutier, Meagan. 2019. "Women in the Office: MP Staff in Canada." (Unpublished master's thesis) Master's thesis, University of Calgary, Calgary, AB. https://doi.org/10.11575/PRISM/36903.

Cloutier, Meagan. 2024. "The Dark Side of Working in Politics: A Study of MP Staff in Canada." In *Gender-Based Violence in Canadian Politics in the #MeToo Era*, ed. Tracey Raney and N. Collier Cheryl. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 188–207.

Cockram, Louise. 2023. "A Process, Not Just an Event: MP Orientation and Representational Styles and Focus in Canada and the UK." Doctor of Philosophy, Ottawa, Ontario: Carleton University. https://doi.org/10.22215/etd/2023-15794.

Craft, Jonathan. 2015. "Conceptualizing the Policy Work of Partisan Advisers." *Policy Sciences* **48**: 135–58. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11077-015-9212-2.

Crewe, Emma and Nicholas Sarra. 2021. "Constituency Performances: The Heart of Democratic Politics." In *The Oxford Handbook of Politics and Performance*, ed. Shirin Rai, Milija Gluhovic, Silvija Jestrovic, and Michael Saward, 1st ed.,. Oxford University Press. 637–52.

Cross, William P., Scott Pruysers and Rob Currie-Wood. 2022. *The Political Party in Canada*. Vancouver: UBC Press.

Dickin, Daniel. 2016. "Demystifying the Role of Parliamentary Staffers." Policy Options, July 15, 2016. https://policyoptions.irpp.org/2016/07/demystifying-the-role-of-parliamentary-staffers/.

Disch, Lisa. 2015. "The 'Constructivist Turn' in Democratic Representation: A Normative Dead-End?" *Constellations* **22**: 487–99. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8675.12201.

Disch, Lisa. 2019. Constructivist Turn in Political Representation. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Dittmar, Kelly. 2021. "Invisible Forces: Gender, Race, and Congressional Staff." *Politics, Groups, and Identities* **11**: 1–17. https://doi.org/10.1080/21565503.2021.1908370.

Docherty, David. 1997. *Mr. Smith Goes to Ottawa: Life in the House of Commons*. Vancouver: UBC Press.

Docherty, David. 2005. Legislatures. Vancouver: UBC Press.

Dovi, Suzanne. 2007. *The Good Representative*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

Dovi, Suzanne. 2009. "In Praise of Exclusion." *The Journal of Politics* **71**: 1172–86.

Dovi, Suzanne. 2018. "Political Representation." In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. N. Zalta Edward, Fall 2018 Edition. Stanford: The Metaphysics Research Lab. https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2018/entries/political-representation/.

Elliott, Victoria. 2018. "Thinking about the Coding Process in Qualitative Data Analysis." *The Qualitative Report* **23**: 2850–62.

Feldman, Charles. 2022. "Aborder Le Harcèlement Sexuel Dans Les Législatures : Description d'un Lieu de Travail « unique »." In *Legislatures in Evolution/Les Législatures En Transformation*, ed. Charles Feldman, David Groves and Geneviève Tellier,. University of Ottawa Press. 39–67.

Fossen, Thomas. 2019. "Constructivism and the Logic of Political Representation." *American Political Science Review* **113**: 824–37. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055419000273.

Franks, C. E. S. 2007. "Members and Constituency Roles in the Canadian Federal System." *Regional & Federal Studies* **17**: 23–45. https://doi.org/10.1080/13597560701189602.

Godbout, Jean-François. 2020. *Lost on Division: Party Unity in the Canadian Parliament*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Government Electronic Directory Services. 2024. Accessed May 1, 2024. https://geds-sage.gc.ca/en/GEDS/.

House of Commons. Board of Internal Economy. 2023. "Members' Allowances and Services." PDF.

House of Commons. Board of Internal Economy. 2024. "Members – Summary of Expenditures." https://www.ourcommons.ca/proactivedisclosure/en/members/2024/1.

Kam, Christopher J. 2009. *Party Discipline and Parliamentary Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Knoefel, Arianna. 2021. "The Life of a Senate Staffer." Institute for Research on Public Policy, January 5, 2021. https://policyoptions.irpp.org/magazines/january-2021/the-life-of-a-senate-staffer/.

Koop, Royce, Heather Bastedo and Kelly Blidook. 2018. *Representation in Action: Canadian MPs in the Constituencies*. Vancouver: UBC Press.

Laube, Stefan, Jan Schank and Thomas Scheffer. 2020. "Constitutive Invisibility: Exploring the Work of Staff Advisers in Political Position-Making." *Social Studies of Science* **50**: 292–316. https://doi.org/10.1177/0306312720911715.

Malloy, Jonathan. 2023. *The Paradox of Parliament*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Marland, Alex. 2020. *Whipped: Party Discipline in Canada*. Vancouver: UBC Press.

Marland, Alex, and Anna Lennox Esselment. 2019. "Negotiating with Gatekeepers to Get Interviews with Politicians: Qualitative Research Recruitment in a Digital Media Environment." *Qualitative Research* **19**: 685–702.

Marland, Alex and Stephen Power. 2020. "Digital Representation: The Normalization of Social Media in Political Offices." In *Digital Politics in Canada: Promises and Realities*, ed. Tamara Small and Harold Jansen,. University of Toronto Press. 23–45.

Marland, Alex and Feodor Snagovsky. 2023. "Representation and Partisanship: What Determines the Topics That Parliament Prioritize in Communications with Their Constituents?" *Canadian Journal of Political Science* **56**: 848–70. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0008423923000641.

McCrain, Joshua. 2018. "Revolving Door Lobbyists and the Value of Congressional Staff Connections." *The Journal of Politics* **80**: 1369–83. https://doi.org/10.1086/698931.

McKee, Rebecca. 2023. "*MPs' Staff, The Unsung Heroes: An Examination of Who They Are and What They Do*." University College London: The Constitution Unit.

Moens, Pieter. 2022. "Professional Activists? Party Activism among Political Staffers in Parliamentary Democracies." *Party Politics* **28**: 903–15. https://doi.org/10.1177/13540688211027317.

Neuendorf, Kimberly A. 2018. "Content Analysis and Thematic Analysis." In *Advanced Research Methods for Applied Psychology*, ed. Paula Brough. London: Routledge, 211–223.

Otjes, Simon. 2023. "What Explains the Size of Parliamentary Staff?" *West European Politics* **46**: 374–400. https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2022.2049068.

Phillips, Anne. 1998. *The Politics of Presence*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Pitkin, Hanna F. 1967. *The Concept of Representation*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Rehfeld, Andrew. 2011. "The Concepts of Representation." *American Political Science Review* **105**: 631–41.

Rosenthal, Cindy Simon and Lauren Cohen Bell. 2003. "From Passive to Active Representation: The Case of Women Congressional Staff." *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* **13**: 65–82. https://doi.org/10.1093/jopart/mug008.

Salkin, Wendy. 2021. "The Conscription of Informal Political Representatives." *Journal of Political Philosophy* **29**: 429–55. https://doi.org/10.1111/jopp.12246.

Saward, Michael. 2006. "The Representative Claim." *Contemporary Political Theory* **5**: 297–318. https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.cpt.9300234.

Saward, Michael. 2010. *The Representative Claim*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Shoemaker, Pamela J. and Timothy Vos. 2009. *Gatekeeping Theory*. 1st ed. New York: Taylor & Francis Group.

Snagovsky, Feodor and Matthew Kerby. 2019. "Political Staff and the Gendered Division of Political Labour in Canada." *Parliamentary Affairs* **72**: 616–37. https://doi.org/10.1093/pa/gsy032.

Snagovsky, Feodor, Marija Taflaga and Matthew Kerby. 2023. "Responsive to Whom? Political Advising and Elected Careers in Institutionalized Democracies." *Party Politics* **29**: 435–47. https://doi.org/10.1177/13540688221079299.

Studlar, Donley T. and Ian McAllister. 1996. "Constituency Activity and Representational Roles among Australian Legislators." *The Journal of Politics* **58**: 69–90. https://doi.org/10.2307/2960349.

Wilson, R. Paul. 2015. "Research Note: A Profile of Ministerial Policy Staff in the Government of Canada." *Canadian Journal of Political Science* **48**: 455–71. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0008423915000293.

Wilson, R. Paul. 2020. "The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Canadian Parliamentary Staffers." *Canadian Parliamentary Review* **43**: 20–32.

Wolkenstein, Fabio and Christopher Wratil. 2021. "Multidimensional Representation." *American Journal of Political Science* **65**: 862–76. https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12563.