

Olivier Costa, Tinette Schnatterer, Sylvain Brouard, Eric Kerrouche
Centre Emile Durkheim – Sciences Po Bordeaux

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Workshop: Views on Representation from Citizens and MPs
Section 3 - Organizing representation: contact between MPs and citizens

French MPs: Nation's voice or local interest brokers?

Second draft – please do not quote

Understanding the behaviour of French MPs and their conceptions of representation implies, at first, to underline the very important constraints that applies to parliamentary representation under the Fifth Republic.

A first set of restrictions is linked to the characteristics of the political system itself, since the constitution of 1958 was deliberately designed to weaken the parliament. One of its main objectives was to fight against the governmental instability that characterized the Third and Fourth Republics and the 'partitocracy'. The Constitution has thus limited the legislative and control powers of the parliament and provided a strong rationalization of the French parliamentary regime: concretely, the government was given many tools in order to be able to overcome parliamentary obstruction or fragmentation. Moreover, the Fathers of the new regime have actively promoted the bipolarization of French political life, notably by choosing a majority voting system for legislative elections. The domination of the executive branch and the bipolarization have been reinforced by the direct election of the President (starting in 1962). It has made of the President the major actor of French political life and focused parties, citizens and media on the presidential election. Each citizen was called to define himself as a left-wing or right-wing elector, since the second round of Presidential election usually confront the two main left-wing and right-wing leaders (with the exception of 2002, when the conservative President Jacques Chirac was opposed to the extreme-right leader Jean-Marie Le Pen). The introduction of the *quinquennat* (in 2002) has also contributed to this phenomenon by virtually excluding the situation of "cohabitation" between a President and a legislative

majority coming from different sides (like between 1986 and 1988, 1993 and 1995, and 1997 and 2002). Since 2002, legislative elections are organized immediately after each Presidential election; citizens are thus encouraged to confirm their first vote by giving to the new President a clear majority at the National Assembly. Even if President Nicolas Sarkozy has recently initiated a constitutional reform (2008) aiming at increasing parliament's powers, the French regime seems more presidentialized than ever, with a weak Prime Minister, a docile majority in the National Assembly and a powerless opposition.

The current situation of French MPs is thus paradoxical. On the one hand, the parliament they belong to is considered – by both politicians and scholars – as a weak institution that should be reinforced.¹ But, on the other hand, despite this weakness and the new constraints derived from the European integration and the devolution process, the National Assembly remains the main arena of political debate in France. One can also underline several symptoms of a crisis of representative democracy in France: there a growing lack of confidence of citizens in politicians and French MPs are often criticized for their inability to mirror the population in terms of age, gender, level of education, occupation, and ethnic background (Costa Kerrouche 2007). However, legislative elections still mobilize citizens: they create a strong political competition and a high level of participation. Let's also add that, even if there is an extensive reflection over concepts such as direct and participative democracy and civil dialogue since the beginning of the 2000s, the centrality of the Parliament in the French political system is not challenged. On the contrary, all the main political parties and leaders are calling for a reinforcement of the French parliament or for the dismantlement of several mechanisms of rationalization, that are less necessary with the bipolarization et presidentialization of the French political life.

Parliamentary representation is also paradoxical from the point of view of principles, since there is a very important gap between theory and behaviour. French institutions, political culture and history are favouring a very abstract conception of representation. MPs are supposed to embody collectively the French Nation: from a constitutional and legal point of view, they are not allowed to mention their constituency or to plead for local interest. French National representatives are called to decide collectively, by following their own will and ideas, without taking into account the public opinion trends or specific situations within constituencies. French MPs are trustees, and not delegate, that enjoy a very wide autonomy of

¹ Chandernagor, André, *Un parlement pour quoi faire ?*, Paris, Gallimard, 1967 ; Birnbaum, Pierre, Francis Hamon and Michel Troper, *Réinventer le Parlement*, Paris, Flammarion, 1978 ; Masclet, Jean-Claude, *Le rôle du député et ses attaches institutionnelles sous la v^oRépublique*, Paris, LGDJ, 1979 ; Belorgey, Jean-Michel, *Le Parlement à refaire*, Paris, Gallimard, 1992 ; « Le Parlement », *Revue Pouvoirs*, n° 64, 1993.

behaviour, speech and vote. They are called to give a priority to their own conception of general interest or, to certain extent, to the programme of their political party, and not to echo citizens' wills and demands. The National Assembly leaders and staff are promoting this very "general" view of representation.

However, French MPs prove to be very active in their respective constituency, where they are considered as key-actors and powerful political entrepreneurs. This strange situation derives from a whole range of factors. The first one is the relative weakness of the National Assembly, which does not motivate MPs to participate in parliamentary work. The second factor is the *cumul des mandats*. Despite two laws, that have limited the possibilities for an MP to accumulate elected positions, more than 90% of French deputies are doing so, at local or regional levels. Holding several mandates, in most cases inside their constituency or at a scale including it, allow MPs to secure their political career: it gives them a security net in case they are not re-elected; it also helps them to satisfy their constituents, by allowing them to mix several kind of political resources; it finally helps them to weaken their opponents (even in their own party), by trusting a maximum of political resources at local level (Costa Kerrouche 2007). Finally, the electoral rules and the very high number of constituencies (577) - and thus their limited average size - encourage and allow MPs to develop a whole range of networks on the ground with various categories of actors: local political leaders, citizens, civil society representatives, socio-economic actors, media people... Concretely, when we examine MPs' behaviour (i.e. time devoted to constituency service, number of assistants employed at local level, level of "*cumul des mandats*", means of communication in the constituency...), their local investment appears to be very important and to contradict the principle of National Sovereignty.

Surprisingly, the tension between the national and local dimensions of the parliamentary mandate in France has not been much addressed by scholars. This is certainly due to a lack of systematic data on MPs activities and perception. In order to highlight this important topic and to understand how French MPs manage the national and local dimensions of their mandate, we will mobilize the data produced by three sets of interviews with MPs. In the framework of the research project LEGIPAR² over 230 deputies of the French Parliament answered in face-to-face interviews to a detailed questionnaire between September 2009 and February 2011 (at the time writing, 227 interviews were accessible). I was not necessary to

² LEGIPAR (Parliamentary legitimization and democratic government in France and in the European Union) is a research project funded by the French National Research Agency (2009-2011). It includes a survey of over 250 National Assembly members conducted in 2010 and 2011 (face-to-face interviews). www.legipar.sciencespobordeaux.fr

weight the data as the proportion of sex, political orientation and experience of the MPs, as well as concerning the question of multiple office holding reflected very well the whole population of MPs. A comparison over time is made possible by the existence of the comparable research realised by Olivier Costa and Eric Kerrouche in 2006 and 2007 amongst 85 MPs and from Colette Ysmal, Roland Cayrol and Jean-Luc Parodi who, in 1969 and 1970, interviewed 318 French MPs (1971, 1975).

I. MPS REMARKABLY STABLE ROLE AS NATIONAL TRUSTEE

I.1. MPs priorities in the exercise of their mandate

To measure how the MPs position themselves between the French doctrine of National sovereignty mentioned before and the local dimension of their work in the constituencies we first looked at who the MPs consider to represent and what they consider to be their most important task. Several questions included in the different surveys with French members of the National assembly allow us to analyze these dimensions.

At the occasion of the face-to-face survey in 2010-2011 we have asked MPs to attribute a number from 1 “I absolutely disagree” to 5 “I totally agree” to each of the following statements:

1. The deputy represents before all his constituency and his region
2. The deputy represents before all his voters
3. The deputy represents before all the whole French population
4. The deputy represents before all his party.

The “whole French population” reached the highest score with 68.4% of the MPs who agreed to that statement. MPs views are thus congruent with the French doctrine of National sovereignty and of the “generality” of the parliamentary mandate. The MPs mention in second “the constituency” (which enlightens their local involvement) with 41.2% and “their voters” with 36.8%. The party gets the weakest score (13.2%).

We notice a difference between the answers of left wing and right wing deputies: while only 10.3% of the right wing deputies agreed in the statement that a deputy represents above all his party, 18.8% of the left MPs agreed. This result is quite coherent with the organizational and ideological specificities of political parties in France regarding the selection of candidates.

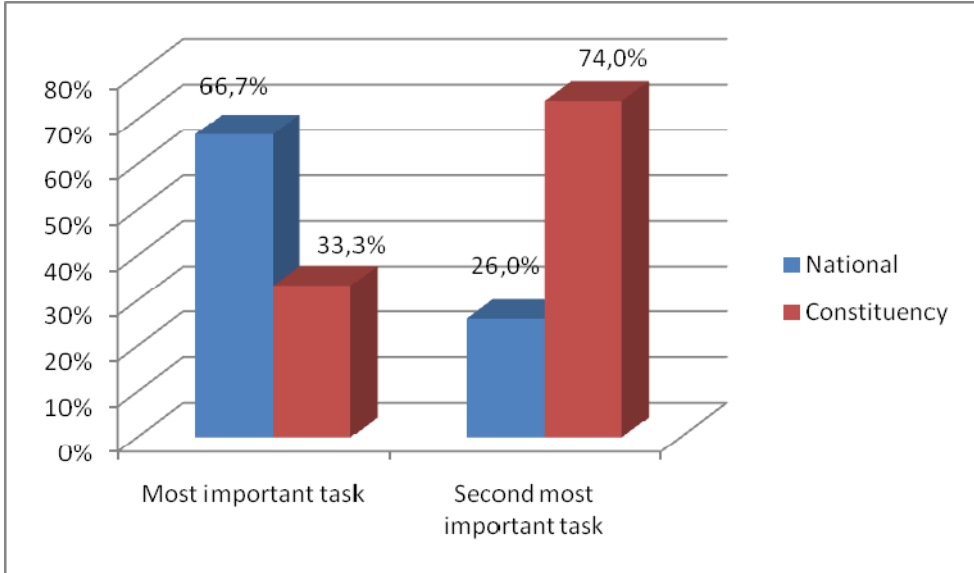
While the left wing parties are giving a strong priority to militants that have always been loyal to their party and to its ideas, and that have gained power step by step in the party organization, the right wing parties also take into account the personal resources of candidates. A “notable” that has solid professional and social networks and a strong leadership in the constituency may be selected by a right wing party even if his involvement in the party is quite recent or not very intense.

When MPs are asked about the most important task of a deputy, they also underline the national dimension of their mandate.³ We have asked them to choose two activities in a list of five:

1. to influence governmental action
2. to help their constituents that have problems with the administration
3. to participate in the parliamentary work
4. to defend their constituency interests in the Parliament
5. to solve problems in their constituency.

We consider that the first and third answers are indicating a “national” vision of the mandate, and that the other are showing a “local” approach. A vast majority of MPs have chosen a “national” activity in first row, even if this concern only two answers over five.

Figure 1: Most important task of a deputy: First and second choice

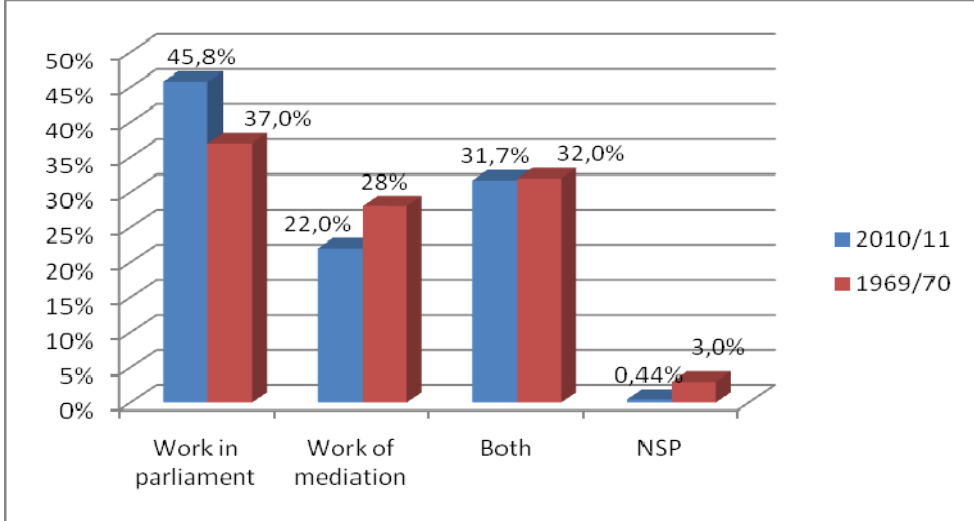


³ The exact question was: « Among the five following propositions, which one, is in your eyes the most important task for a MP? And which one is in your eyes the second most important?»

We also see that there is kind of a balance between the national and local dimensions of the mandate: a vast majority of MPs indicate in second row a “local” activity. Only 10.6% of them have chosen two national activities in first and second choice.

This approach of representation does not change through time, and seems deeply rooted in the French political and constitutional system. The same question “What is most important in your work as a deputy: work in parliament, work of mediation between constituents and administration or both?” has been asked to MPs in 1969/70 and in 2010/11. This allows us to examine whether the deputies’ perception of their work has changed since. In 1969/70 “both” has been chosen by one third of the deputies, even more so by the left wing MPs: 42% of the Socialists and 40% of the Communists. Only the members of one party, the P.D.M. (*Progrès et démocratie moderne*), preferred the work in the parliament (52%), for all the others the parliamentary work obtained between 30 and 37% (with the exception of the Communists, 16%) (Ysmal et al., 1975). Today, the number of deputies who answered “work of mediation between constituents and administration” is, with 22 %, a bit lower and the work in parliament gained in importance.

Figure 2: Most important in the work as an MP: Comparison over time



The growing importance given by MPs to parliamentary work is probably linked to the context of institutional reform and reflection about the role of parliament under the Fifth Republic. Today, because of a complex set of factors (presidentialism, decline of the Prime ministerial function, European integration, devolution...), MPs are quite preoccupied by the balance of powers, more than in 1969. The political context is also very different than 40 years ago regarding both the status of the opposition (in 1969 the left parties had no

experience of power under the Fifth Republic) and the internal discipline of groups, which is stronger today.

Let's also add that MPs answers are influenced by the research protocol. Since deputies were interviewed (both in 1969/1970 and 2010/11) in their office at the National Assembly, there were encouraged to answer "as MPs", and thus to focus on their activities in the Parliament. It is obvious that the numerous MPs that are holding multiple offices (more than 90% today) may give different answers if they were interviewed in their constituency, where they certainly pay more attention to their local mandates.

The main evolution across time concerns the left wing MPs. They are giving far more importance to parliamentary work today than in 1969. While in 1969/70 only 23.5% of them considered the parliamentary work as most important, 53.1% of them share this opinion today, outranking even the right-wing MPs. Symmetrically, the percentage of left wing deputies who were giving priority to mediation work went down from 31.5% to 15.3%. This evolution is probably linked to two factors. The first one is the increase of the number of socialists among the left wing MPs, since the communists were and still are less attached to parliamentary work than socialists. The second is the fact that, back to 1969, socialists were behaving like opponents that had little chance to win the majority. In the 1980s, the Fifth Republic has become a regime of alternation: today, socialists MPs are expecting to be back to power in 2012 and need to be credible for that as policy makers and actors of scrutiny.

I.2. MPs' views on representation in case of conflicts of interests

Another classical way to explore MPs' conception of their mandate is to ask them about their behaviour in case of divergence between their views, the one of their party and the one of their constituents or voters. In both surveys (1969/70 and 2010/2011), the following question was asked to deputies: « If at the Assemblée nationale you have the intention to take a certain position but you feel that the majority of your voters would like you to take the contrary position, what would you do? Would you follow your own conscience, your voters or your party? ». The results are in both cases very close, even if in 2010/2011 we did not include "your party" as a possible answer. Globally, French MPs feel very free to give priority to their own point of view over the one of their voters. This is coherent with the French Rousseauist conception of representation (MP as trustees, and not delegate), and with the idea that MPs collectively incarnate the Nation in an independent way.

Table 1: Conflict between MPs consciousness and voters: Comparison over time

	1969/70	2010/11
His voters	7%	8%
His consciousness	74%	81%
His party (not asked in 2010)	8%	0%
NSP/Others	11%	11%

We have also asked the MPs the following question: « If at the Assemblée nationale you have the impression that the majority of your voters would like you to take a certain position which is opposed to the one taken by your political formation, what would you do? Follow your voters, your party, your conscience (not proposed in 2010/11) ? » Again, here, the two surveys are not completely alike, since the possible answers are not the same. However, we see that in both cases the MPs pay little attention to the position of their voters: they have the feeling that they are quite free.

Table 2: Conflict between party and voters: Comparison over time

	1969/70	2010/11
His voters	9%	26 %
His consciousness (not asked in 2010)	37%	0 %
His party	34%	43 %
NSP/Others	20%	30 %

Thanks to nearly identical questions, the results are coherent. In 40 years, there has been nearly no change in the attitude of MPs towards their party. In the case of a conflict of interest between the deputy and his party, a majority of MPs would give the priority to their own conception, even if French political parties and parliamentary groups have means of pressure on their members (positions in the National Assembly, re-selection...). As Ysmal, Cayrol and Parodi stated in 1975, “for the most, MPs are choosing either their party [...] or the arbitration of their personal conscience”⁴

A more precise analyse shows that the party has lost importance for the left wing deputies and gained importance for the right wing deputies. 56.3% of the leftwing MPs answered that they would go with their party in case of a conflict between parti and voters opinion while only 35.5% of the right-wing MPs did. The same observation applies when it comes to a conflict

⁴ « Pour l’essentiel on le voit, les députés choisissent soit le parti [...] soit le recours à l’arbitrage de leur conscience personnelle », Ysmal et al., 1975, p. 8.

between the party and the MP's consciousness: 45.9% of the left-wing but only 19.6% of the right-wing MPs would be prepared to set aside their own opinion for the benefit of the party position.

II. MPS PREFERENCE FOR THE LOCAL ACTIVITY

II.1. MPs satisfied "at home"

As we have seen, French MPs' vision of their mandate is quite in line with the Rousseauist political culture that shapes French institutions and political life. However, one must also notice that the rhetoric of "National sovereignty" is a very useful folding-screen allowing French MPs to behave in a way that has little to do with the very abstract conception of representation they promote. In other words: French MPs are no less than their UK or American counterparts involved in constituency work, even if they are not supposed to. We can account for that by analysing deputies' answers to questions dealing not with principles, but with their true activities as MPs.

During our two rounds of face-to-face interviews (2006/07 and 2010/11), we have asked MPs the following question: "where does your MP mandate gives you more satisfaction: in Paris or in your constituency?" MPs were asked to give a mark (from 1 to 5) for each answer.

Table 3: Satisfaction in Paris and constituency

Where does your MP mandate gives you more satisfaction....? (2010/2011)	
More satisfaction in Paris	18.30%
Satisfaction is the same	35.71%
More satisfaction in constituency	45.98%
Total	100%

Globally, it appears that MPs are more satisfied by exerting their mandate at local level than in the National Assembly. The comparison with the answers given in 2006/07 shows that this preference is stable in time. In 2006/07 the average mark attributed to the satisfaction in the constituency was 4.2 (4.1 in 2010/11), while for the satisfaction at the National Assembly the average grade was 3.3 (3.6 in 2010/11).

Qualitative interviews provide much explanation for that. The satisfaction at local level is linked to the very specific role played by MPs in France in constituencies. There are key actors on many respects, for political life, but also for socio-economic life. Many MPs are acting like political entrepreneurs, working together with regional and local authorities, state representatives, administrations, business actors, etc. and are involved in all important decisions and projects. Also, they are privileged interlocutors for citizens that call them to solve personal problems (work, housing, conflict with administration...), and are encouraged to behave like social workers. Many MPs thus feel efficient and useful at local level. On the contrary, because of French institutional design and balance of powers, many MPs have the feeling that their parliamentary work in the National Assembly is not very useful and has little impact on policy-making. Only a minority of MPs, that have a strong expertise of policy-making or powerful networks in the central administration, think they are efficient in the parliamentary work.

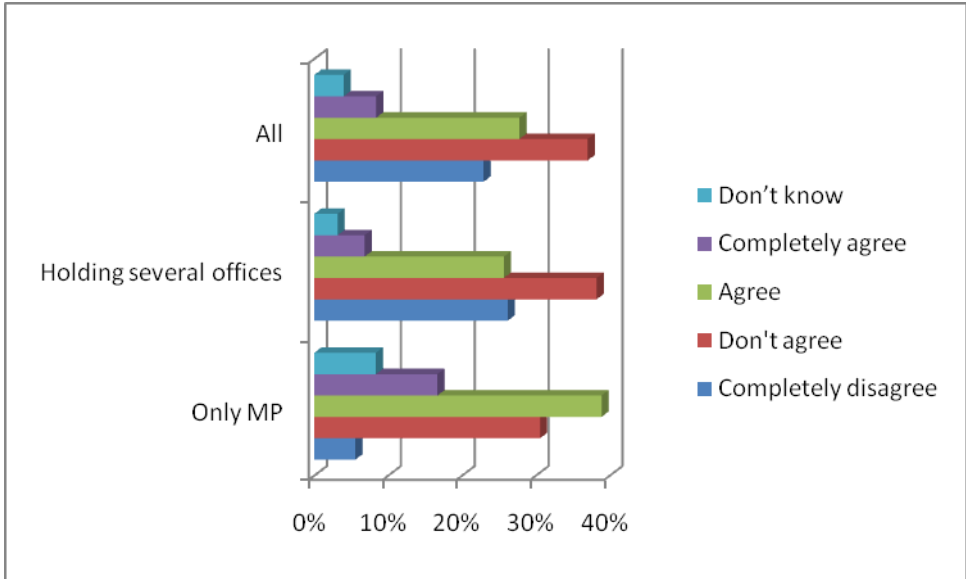
Even if there are some variations (MPs that have exerted several mandates in the National Assembly are less satisfied with their work in Paris than the newly elected), nearly all MPs say that they are satisfied to exert their mandate in their constituency. Very often – and more often than people would think – MPs really feel at home in their constituency and have personal, familial or professional links with it: the number of truly parachuted MPs is, in fact, very low. To certain extent, the high degree of satisfaction expressed by MPs in their constituency is however a result of some political correctness. During qualitative interviews, a few MPs have admitted, off the records, that they dislike losing time in their constituency to shake hands on markets, meet constituents and participate in school inaugurations.

Apart of the degree of satisfaction when working in Paris or in the constituency and their perception of representation, we applied another indicator to measure the work priorities of MPs. We asked them to tell us how much time per week they consider an MP should spend in Paris. This is an important indicator for MPs priorities, as Costa and Kerrouche (2007) show that MPs generally complain about the lack of time and the impossibility to perform all task in connection with their mandate. Globally, MPs answers are very coherent, with a mean of 2.6 days a week and a very low standard deviation. This proves that all MPs, whatever is their link with the constituency, think that a deputy should share its working time between Paris and the constituency. This also shows that MPs are quite satisfied with the actual situation at the National Assembly, 2.5 days a week being the average time they *really* spend in Paris.

Even so there is nearly no difference in the answers of deputies according to the number of offices they hold, turning to the qualitative interviews, MPs have quite contrasted views on the degree of implication needed in Paris according to the number of offices they hold. The MPs that are not cumulating underline the lack of time for parliamentary debates and the need for deputies to be more present in Paris. The MPs that hold several offices are, logically, less concerned by this problem.

The question of “*cumul des mandats*” and of the lack of involvement of many MPs in parliamentary work is a very sensitive issue in the National Assembly, as it contributes both to the institution weakness and poor public image. More generally, it is also one of the main arguments of the anti-establishment and anti-parliamentary movements, which denounce the fact that a minority of politicians are trusting elected position and are unable to fulfill their commitments. MPs positions on that topic are thus very cautious, and conditioned by some political correctness. We can measure that by looking at the answers MPs give to the statement « Multiple office holding should be abolished ». ⁵

Figure 3. “Multiple office holding should be abolished »



We could have expected MPs holding only one office to agree more to that statement since many of them blamed in qualitative interviews multiple office holders to be responsible for their lack of involvement in parliamentary work. Instead they take moderate positions. Party affiliation appears to have a greater impact on MPs’ positions on this question. Left-wing MPs

⁵ MP s were asked to answer by ‘completely agree’, ‘agree’, ‘don’t agree ‘ or ‘completely disagree’ to the statement ‘Multiple office holding should be abolished ‘

are significantly more in favor of the abolishing than their right-wing colleagues (Cramer's V 0.352). To understand this, it is important to recall that in July 2010, in the middle of our survey, a text has been voted by the Socialist party stating that "Every person elected in a parliamentary election will abandon his local executive mandates". Even so the implementation of this position by socialist MPs is still open it is likely that respondents took the position of their party on an issue being lively debated at the same moment.

II.2. MPs' perceived freedom and autonomy towards principals and institution

One of the reasons for the lack of satisfaction of MPs in the parliamentary work might be the respective degree of freedom they feel in Paris and at local level. We asked the deputies to indicate on a scale from 1 "lack of freedom" to 5 "complete freedom" their perceived degree of freedom in relation with the functioning of the National Assembly, their political group, their voters and, for the members of the majority, the government. Deputies reported to feel a very important freedom regarding their voters, with a mean value of 3.6 on 5 (which is coherent with their conception of representation), and regarding their political group, with a mean of 3.4 (which is also coherent with their answers on a potential conflict of interests). However, they feel much constrained when it comes to the *Assemblée Nationale* (2.7); 48.4% of the MPs state to have no freedom in relation to the institution. It is thus quite logical that they express little pleasure to work there.

	Freedom / Assembly	Freedom / political group	Freedom / voters	Freedom / gouvernement (maj. MPs only)
Lack of freedom	48,5%	17,3%	8,1%	17,0%
50:50	27,6%	33,8%	21,5%	28,6%
Freedom	24,0%	48,9%	70,4%	54,4%
Mean on 5	2,7	3,4	3,9	3,6

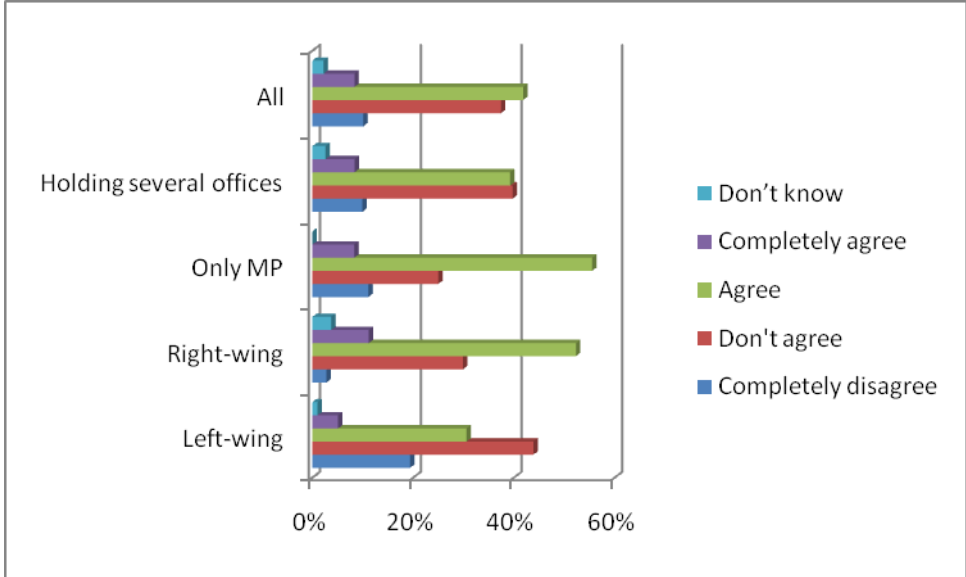
To measure deputies' attachment to their constituency we also asked them whether they think that their activity should find expression in additional resources for their constituency.⁶

⁶ MP s were asked to answer by 'completely agree', 'agree', 'don't agree' or 'completely disagree' to the statement 'It is natural for an MP' during his activity to benefit his constituency '

Unsurprisingly, right-wing MPs tend significantly more to agree than left-wing MPs (Cramer’s V of 0.352). What could be more logical is that MPs who doesn’t hold multiple offices show a higher agreement to that statement than MPs holding multiple offices (Cramer’s V of 0.328). We could imagine that MPs who hold also a local or regional mandate could have a higher identification with their constituency, since many multiple office holders argued during qualitative interviews that they use their national mandate to enable projects they design as local politicians.

However, the constituency is also very important for MPs without a second mandate. There were no significant differences between MPs holding several offices or not concerning the questions on MPs priorities or representation. So we can argue, that while MPs holding multiple offices can play an important role in their constituency via their local or regional mandate, MPs who don’t have a second mandate can do so only by using their national mandate in favor of their constituency. In this sense, it seems logic that they agree more to the statement that their national mandate should benefit their constituency, since they have no other mean to please their constituents.

Figure 4: “MPs’ activities should find expression in additional resources for their constituency”



Conclusion

In 2009, we have proposed an analysis of representative roles of French deputies based on an inclusive conception of representation focusing on deputies' activities at both local and national levels (Costa and Kerrouche, 2009a). To overcome the tension between the two main conceptions of representative roles, neither of which fitted with our data and observations, we explored the opportunity of creating a double typology. In this typology (based on variables such as political and social capital; ambition; expertise; and conception of general interest) each deputy is playing two main roles: one at local level and one at national level. This approach seemed to us the only solution to take into account several important features of deputies' activities and behaviour in France.

However, the data presented in this paper show that, below the very various behaviors of MPs at both local and national levels, there are common trends in their perception of parliamentary representation. All French MPs are dealing quite easily with what appears to be a paradox: the French doctrine of national sovereignty on the one hand, and a deep involvement and high satisfaction in constituency work on the other. Also, even if France is supposed to be a very centralized country and if MPs can be described as a very well educated elite, highly connected to political parties and high administration (Costa and Kerrouche, 2009b), deputies globally express more satisfaction with constituency work than parliamentary work. Multiple office holders are obliged to be very present at local level and the few non-cumulating MPs also need to do so, in order to compensate their structural handicap and to develop and maintain the networks necessary for their reelection.

This constituency-focus comes at a cost: MPs are not very active in parliamentary work, especially in committees. The National Assembly thus remains a quite weak institution, which is not able to maximize its constitutional powers that are structurally limited under the Fifth Republic. Most MPs are aware of this situation; paradoxically, many of them refer to the institution weakness to justify their lack of interest for parliamentary work. The French National Assembly is thus suffering from a very solid vicious circle: it has not been broken by the last constitutional reform that was supposed to reinforce the Assembly's powers and influence. It seems that only a new law on the *cumul des mandats*, forbidding completely this French tradition, could provoke a change in MPs' behavior.

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