The indirectness of political representation: A blessing or a concern? A study of the conceptions of members of the Flemish parliament.

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Abstract
This paper situates itself within on-going scholarly debate on the so-called gap between citizens and government. It, more precisely, posits traditional concerns for the ‘indirectness’ of political representation – i.e. the possibility for citizens’ alienation and exclusion from decision-making – against contemporary accounts that conceive of such ‘indirectness’ as quintessential to democracy; mobilising citizens’ judgment and, potentially, drawing them into the decision-making process and making it more inclusive. Confronting these two theoretical accounts with the practice of representation, this paper researches – based upon 70 semi-structured interviews with members of the Flemish regional parliament – how representatives themselves conceive of representation and deal with its indirectness.

Keywords: political representation • indirectness • democratic representation • inclusion • representative claims • responsibility

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1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, the concept of political representation has received renewed attention from democratic theorists (Urbinati and Warren, 2008: 387; Mansbridge, 2011: 629). At the centre of today’s debates lies a new appreciation for representation’s indirectness – i.e. the spatial and temporal gap between those represented and their representatives. Traditionally, and as may be illustrated by the vast body of literature on participatory democracy (e.g.: Verba, 1972; Verba et al., 1978; Warren, 2002; Zittel and Fuchs, 2007), democratic theorists problematized the indirectness of political representation. The lack of coincidence between the people and those representing them in decision-making bodies was conceived as carrying a sense of alienation in it; defining representative democracy as an imperfect approximation of direct democracy (cf. Mayo, 1960: 95). Today, by contrast, representation’s indirectness is increasingly considered indispensable to the realisation of democracy. The spatial and temporal gap between those represented and their representatives carries a reflexive quality in it: it confronts those represented with their representatives’ judgment – and vice versa – and, within this process, evokes critical reflection on what is at stake for them. Representation, in this regard, has the capacity to mobilise individuals, elicit their judgment, and draw their voices into the representation process; potentially making it more inclusive (e.g.: Plotke, 1997: 19; Young, 2000: 130; Mansbridge, 2003: 515; Urbinati, 2006: 5; Rosanvallon, 2011: 119).

Today’s newly emerging consensus on the ‘democratic potential’ of representation (cf. Disch, 2011: 101) has affected the ways in which scholars conceive of democratic representation – defined by citizens’ empowered inclusion –, and the type of norms associated with it. Emphasising the risk of alienation that resides in representation, traditional accounts have privileged moments of electoral proximity; defining democratic representation by reference to mechanisms of authorisation and accountability. By doing so, traditional accounts have side-lined the tenuous issue of defining how representatives should act – i.e. whether they should be bound by instructions from their constituents (‘delegate’) or should be free to act as seems best to them in the pursuit of their constituents’ welfare (‘trustee’) (Pitkin 1967, 145). Although the succession of electoral moments is deemed to enhance representatives’ responsiveness to their constituents – implying the satisfaction of their wishes, traditional accounts have predominantly defined representatives’ duties in terms of accountability – implying a responsibility to uphold the commitments they have entered into with their constituents (e.g.: Dahl 1971, 1; Page and Shapiro, 1992: 354; Manin et al., 1999: 4; Bartels, 2003: 62). Defined in this manner, representatives’ duties do not preclude the possibility of independent action. Selected on the basis of their electoral programme and personal characteristics, representatives are both expected to keep their electoral promises – ‘a delegate’ conception, or what Mansbridge (2003: 515) defines as ‘promissory’ representation – and to respond to unforeseen challenges in a manner that is similar to their constituents – a ‘trustee’ conception, or what Mansbridge (2003: 515) defines as ‘anticipatory’ representation.

Contemporary accounts, by contrast, have opened up the spatial and temporal gap between citizens and their representatives; conceiving of representation as a process of conversational turn-taking (e.g.: Saward, 2006: 302; Rehfeld, 2006: 4; Severs, 2012: 171), and defining democratic representation by citizens’ empowered inclusion within that process (cf. Warren and Castiglione, 2004: 4; Mansbridge, 2003: 518). Contrary to ‘traditional’ accounts that conceived of representatives’ constituents as relatively stable units – defined and delineated by the electoral system –
from with representatives can readily draw information, contemporary accounts have problematized the stability and ready knowability of representatives’ ‘constituents’ and their interests. Building from the notion that political reality is not objectively given but requires interpretation, contemporary theorists (e.g.: Mansbridge, 2003: 518; Saward 2006: 306; Runciman, 2007: 95; Disch, 2011: 109) have argued that representatives’ claims about political reality help constitute what they apparently appear to be describing only. Because it is logically impossible to justify social practices – such as representation – by making reference to the groups and preferences they have helped to produce (cf. Sunstein 1991, 8), scholars have increasingly defined democratic representation by reference to people’s capacity for control within – as opposed to over – the representation process. Rather than locate power unequivocally with a prior group – i.e. the electorate – contemporary accounts suggest that power should remain “empty”; permanently shared between those represented – i.e. the groups invoked in the representation process – and their representatives (cf. Ankersmit, 1996: 49-50; see also Pitkin, 1967: 155). Illustrative of their procedural take on democratic representation, scholars (e.g.: Runciman, 2007: 99; Disch, 2011: 112) no longer conceive of temporal disagreements between those represented and their representatives as by default ‘undemocratic’ or illegitimate. Key to power-sharing is not so much the instantaneous and unmediated satisfaction of the represented’s preferences but, rather, representatives’ recognition that the latter’s judgment matters to the determination of what is at stake for them, and representatives’ willingness to reconsider their stances in light thereof (cf. Warren and Castiglione, 2004: 5; Severs, 2010: 416-7; see also Pitkin, 1967: 155).

Building from this notion of reflexivity, contemporary theorists have introduced a shift from static notions of authorisation and accountability – invoking single moments of proximity) to an active form of ‘account-giving’ (see Table 1). Because those represented are likely to not always agree with the claims formulated on their behalf, this kind of ‘account-giving’ ideally has a deliberative character; suggesting that those represented and their representatives engage a two-way communication (Mansbridge, 2009: 370). This notion of ‘deliberative’ account-giving invokes both ideals of democratic listening – implying that representatives take the claims of those represented seriously (cf. Bickford, 1996) – and responsiveness – implying that representatives formulate a reply to them (cf. Severs, 2010). The underlying assumption is that the spatial and temporal gap opened up by representation may function democratically only when it is filled up with speech. When the representation process takes on the form of an extended conversation – including turn-taking between those represented and their representatives – it will buttress the kind of trust, control and accountability typical of democratic relationships (cf. Urbinati, 2000: 760; Young 2000: 23; Severs et al., 2013).

### Table 1: Traditional and contemporary conceptions of democratic representation

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<tr>
<th>Defined as:</th>
<th>Traditional conceptions</th>
<th>Contemporary conceptions</th>
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<tr>
<td>Democratic constituents</td>
<td>Electoral moments of authorisation and accountability</td>
<td>A process of conversational turn-taking</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(electoral constituents, the voters)</td>
<td>Constituted bodies (‘those represented’, ‘the people’)</td>
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<td>Representational dilemma</td>
<td>Trustee (anticipatory) – Delegate (promissory)</td>
<td>Mobilisation (anticipatory, future-oriented)</td>
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<td>Empowered inclusion</td>
<td>Citizens’ control over the representation process (sanctions)</td>
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<td>Representational norms</td>
<td>Accountability (responsiveness)</td>
<td>Deliberative ‘account-giving’ (reflexivity)</td>
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Within this paper, we aim to confront both theoretical accounts with the manner in which members of parliament (MPs) themselves conceive of political representation and how they deal with its indirectness. Building from 70 semi-structured, in-depth interviews with members of the Flemish regional parliament, we aim to generate insights into both the praxis of political representation – complementing existing research on representatives’ role conceptions (Converse and Pierce 1979; Esaiasson 2000; Malesky and Schuler 2010) – and the so-called gap between citizens and government. Contemporary accounts of representation offer a novel approach to this gap. By problematizing the notion of representation in itself, traditional accounts have mainly defined solutions to the gap between citizens and parliament in terms of institutional reform; evoking mechanisms of participatory democracy such as citizens’ juries and referenda (e.g.: Warren, 2002; Zittel and Fuchs, 2007). Contemporary accounts have, by contrast, problematized the manner in which representation is undertaken, linking solutions to citizens’ dissatisfaction to representatives’ conduct. While these accounts allow us to conceive how citizens’ lowering trust levels (cf. Pharr and Putnam 2000; Dalton 2004) may be countered, the norm of deliberative account-giving is highly demanding and may, in practice, prove unrealisable. The requirement of critical (self-)reflection may be at odds with party-electoral competition, and the need to act in accordance to party beliefs positions. In politics, moreover, MPs’ expressions of self-doubt are not seldom conceived as evidence of their lack of long-term visions or consistency. Their willingness to reconsider their positions may similarly be interpreted as evidence of partisan politics – privileging minority views – and may make it more difficult for citizens to identify their MPs with a particular societal view. These restraints make it interesting to research how MPs define political representation themselves, how they deal with its indirectness, and which kind of normative duties they set themselves.

The paper continues as following. First, we elaborate upon the data gathered and the methods applied in this study. We explain and contextualise our choice to interrogate MPs of the Flemish regional parliament. Next, a presentation and discussion of the main findings is offered. Our analysis revealed that MPs invoke both ‘traditional’ and ‘contemporary’ conceptions of representation; merging them in a unique yet non-arbitrary manner. We found that MPs greatly problematize the ‘invisibility’ of their voters. While MPs attempt to compensate this invisibility by an enhanced visibility of their actions – defining the core of their activities in an explicitly ‘contemporary’ manner –, their normative beliefs are closely tied up to ‘traditional’ conceptions of democratic representation. Specifying their normative duties in terms of the agreements which they entered in with their electorate, MPs simultaneously expressed their commitment to the only constituency that revealed itself to them in a democratic fashion, and freed themselves of the burden of responsiveness within the representation process. We conclude by means of a discussion of this duality and its implication for the so-called gap between citizens and parliament.

2. Studying MPs’ conceptions: data and methods

From an institutional perspective, the Flemish regional parliament offers an interesting case for researching MPs’ conceptions of political representation. The transition from the Belgian unitary state to a federal system with regional parliaments1 was accompanied by an important reflection on the political system and the ethics involved. The 1990s were marked by numerous financial and political scandals (e.g.: party financing scandals, the Agusta helicopter

1 The current form and powers of the Flemish parliament derive from the 1993 reform of the Belgian state and its transformation from a unitary into a federal state. Along with an important transfer of policy-making powers, the 1993 reform made it possible to organise separate elections for the Flemish parliament. It now holds legislative competencies over the geographic region of Flanders and the cultural community of the Dutch-speaking community in Belgium (i.e. Flanders and Brussels).
scandal, the murder of socialist politician André Cools, the resignation of Willy Claes from NATO, the Dutroux paedophilia affair, pig pestilence, etc.). These scandals fed into discussions on the so-called gap between citizens and the state. Throughout these discussions, a consensus emerged on the need to do away with ‘traditional’ political attitudes and embrace a ‘new political culture’ of transparency, efficiency and honesty; articulating a commitment to de-politicise the state’s apparatus (cf. Suetens and Walgrave, 2001; Celis and Woodward, 2003). In the margins of these debates, the issue of gender-equality was advanced, and since 1994 gender quota apply to the composition of party lists. Contrary to American or British ‘first past the post’ systems, the Flemish electoral system combines proportional representation (PR-system) with multi-member districts. MPs are elected from party lists but the effect of party positioning is weakened through the introduction of personal votes. Because political parties organise at the level of linguistic communities – i.e. the Francophone and Dutch-speaking communities – members of the Flemish Parliament showcase an important institutional mobility; alternating federal and regional mandates and combining their parliamentary mandate with a local one. These elements suggest that Flemish MPs may have been confronted with representational dilemma’s in the past; shaping their understanding of political representation, and the challenges related to it.

The study draws on in-depth, semi-structured, interviews with members of the Flemish regional parliament conducted Spring 2012. The interviews were conducted in Spring 2012; halfway through the current legislature (2009-2014). All 124 sitting members of the Flemish regional parliament were invited to participate in the study. 70 of them agreed to a face to face interview (response rate 56.5%). The participating MPs were a representative sample with regard to a range of characteristics; including gender, political ideology – reflecting the Flemish-nationalist and Christian-democratic governing coalition –, and age (for details on response rate: see the appendix). The interviews were semi-structured and set out to uncover MPs’ conceptions on political representation, their understanding of its indirectness and their ways of dealing with it. Our topic guide consisted of questions related to the general character and nature of political representation, such as: ‘how would you describe representation?’ or ‘which kind of actions does representation require?’, and questions related specifically to their relation to those represented, such as: ‘what does it mean, for you, to represent others?’, ‘how do you decide what needs representing?’ or ‘what if those represented do not agree with you?’. The interviews were conducted by students within the framework of a third bachelor research seminar on political representation. In order to ensure the quality and uniformity of interviews, we provided extensive training prior to the interviews – including the collective creation of a topic guide – and organised ‘learning sessions’; allowing students to exchange experiences and receive our feedback.

The participating MPs generally conceived of the interview as a welcome opportunity to reflect upon the meaning of political representation. Many of them indicated that, prior to the interview, they had seldom to never discussed the nature and conditions of political representation. One MP stated:

‘If we were to conduct this interview again in half a year from now, I would probably give you a different answer (…) I have thought about things I have never thought about before. What does it mean, in fact, to be a “representative of the people”? I’ve never before been asked that question…And we do call ourselves that.’

2 Due to a series of law reforms (1994; 2002), now a ‘double gender quota’ applies to all Belgian – including Flemish – party lists. Besides gender parity, electoral list positions equally need to alternate male and female candidates (cf. Meier, 2004).

3 The interviews lasted approximately one hour, were tape-recorded and anonymity was guaranteed. The interviews took place at MPs’ office (in parliament or city hall), party headquarters and, in a single case, an MP’s house.

4 Interview 18; also interviews 2, 19, 32, 38.
Although MPs appreciated being interviewed on the matter, more than one MP stated to find the interview difficult. While this finding seems to challenge our assumptions regarding Flemish MPs’ capacity for self-reflexivity, we believe that the expressed ‘difficulty’ mainly derives from our study’s explicit appeal to MPs’ capacity for abstract thinking. Although MPs were encouraged to substantiate their views on the basis of their experiences, we refrained from framing our questions in terms of factual parliamentary dossiers or debates. Such framing would not only have elicited political reactions – pro or contra the debate –, it equally carried the risk of downplaying the broader issue of political representation. Moreover, and as a means to lower social desirability bias, participants were never directly asked to judge the moral appropriateness of their actions. Indirect questions, including projective questions such as ‘How do you believe other MPs react to these challenges?’ or ‘Would you consider your view on political representation unique in any kind?’, were used for this purpose (Kvale, 1996: 134).

The method of analysis applied to this study was directed content analysis (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005: 1281; Burnham et al., 2004: 236). Directed in the sense that our analysis build from our understanding of theory on political representation, and the representational norms specified in ‘traditional’ and ‘contemporary’ conceptions of democratic representation (see supra). Through an iterative and in-depth reading of the interview transcripts, we set out to organise the main elements in MPs’ accounts and reconstruct their conceptions of political representation. Our analysis was aided by our knowledge of Belgian and Flemish politics, and our appreciation of parties’ ideological foundations and tenets (Childs, Webb and Marthaler, 2010: 206). We found that MPs merged elements from the previously outlined theoretical conceptions in a unique manner. In the remainder of this paper, we will demonstrate how MPs’ accounts relate to ‘traditional’ respectively ‘contemporary’ conceptions of representation and offer a discussion of the implications of MPs’ two-folded accounts.

3. A ‘traditional’ take with a twist: privileging responsibility over responsiveness

When asked to specify the meaning of political representation, MPs intuitively invoke a highly normative language. One that is greatly linked up with the electoral system. MPs define political representation in terms of their contributions to the betterment of society, such as the solution of societal problems, the enhancement of people’s welfare, and the facilitation of communal living and compromise. They set their activities apart from other instances of ‘acting for’ – such as lobbying or civil society advocacy – by making reference to their democratic mandate and legislative powers. MPs describe parliament as the ‘institution that makes things possible’. Although they acknowledge the fact that legislation is increasingly prepared and initiated via governmental cabinets – implying a shared power between the institutions –, they conceive of parliament as the place where policy changes are effectuated, binding decisions are made, and society’s course is mapped out. To MPs, political representation essentially comprises of the promotion of their societal views. MPs are cognisant of the contestable and partial character of their views, and locate themselves within on-going socio-political struggles over the determination of society’s proper course. They legitimate their important capacity to shape society’s future by invoking their electoral mandate. In MPs accounts, the ballot serves a dual purpose. As a reference point in time at which citizens confided their trust to them, it features both as a source of legitimacy and a perpetual reminder of the provisional base of their decision-making powers.

5 Interview 1; also interviews 10, 33, 36.
6 MPs’ evaluations of the interviews’ difficulty did not correlate with incumbency.
This particular combination – the legitimate but provisional character of their powers – forms the basis of MPs’ normative considerations. ‘The task, and the powers that I have,’ one MP states, ‘have been entrusted to me. They are not my own but they are mine temporarily’. Conceiving of themselves as nothing more but temporal custodians of sovereign power, MPs define their relationship with the citizens in terms of a privilege; implying gratitude for the task entrusted them but also care, honesty, and responsibility. This notion of responsibility not only implies that MPs take the potential impact of their actions on people’s everyday lives into consideration⁷. It equally implies that they step up and assume responsibility where the people is incapable or unwilling to do so, that they get their hands dirty and make difficult decisions on their behalf. This two-folded understanding of responsibility carries an important appreciation for MPs’ representative autonomy in it. When asked about the nature of their relationship with those represented and how they determined what to do and how to act, MPs invariably reject the notion of acting ‘directly’ on the basis of – electoral or other – constituents’ interests. As one MP (emphasis added) puts it:

‘I do not conceive of it [representation] as a direct link. You know, it does not imply that you should render acts nor that you should, in a populist manner, become the spokesperson of a particular grouping. Neither does it imply that there should be any direct linkage to a societal pillar as is the case within certain parties nor that you should, all of the sudden, start to say whatever you believe your voters, ohm, …may want you to say. I believe that it’s something more loosely connected. In a sense, yes, people have…you know, expressed their trust in you…I believe the link needs to be conceived as something more supple.’

The described ‘indirectness’ of representation suggests that MPs not only have the right to make decisions that bind citizens but that they equally have the right to decide whose judgment matters to the policy problem at hand. Although this conception does not rule out the possibility that MPs will follow citizens’ preferences, it defines the choice to do so – or not – as their prerogative (cf. Rehfeld, 2009: 215-6).

MPs legitimate their representative autonomy in a two-folded manner; combining formal arguments – invoking their appointment as representative – and functional arguments – invoking the quality of their representative actions. MPs, first, emphasise the fact that they are elected following a highly competitive and formalised process during which citizens are able to form their judgment of candidates and select – on the basis of their programme, style, personality or other – the candidates most likely to promote their interests. To MPs, their election bears evidence of citizens’ trust in them. Following their election, MPs ask that citizens act in consistence with their vote, extent their trust in them, and judge MPs’ actions only at the subsequent ballot. Rather than commit themselves to their constituents, MPs suggest that their constituents should commit themselves to them and the views they have authorised at the ballot. Legitimating this line of thinking, one MP says: ‘Citizens know: I vote for this person, I give him or her my trust. And if he or she, or the party, does not do well, then, at the next election, I will take back my vote’⁸. By arguing that the logic of the electoral system – comprising of a dual process whereby citizens, first, select the person they want to enter in a representative relationship with and, second, have the possibility to sanction that person – is generally accepted, MPs not only seek

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⁷ Interview 46.
⁸ Several MPs (Interviews 9, 25, 55, 67) referred to the ‘burden of responsibility’; describing the feeling of ‘being at loss’ at the onset of their mandate. One MP (interview 65) stated to prefer the term ‘parliamentarian’ over that of ‘representative of the people’; deeming the latter ‘too heavily loaded’.
⁹ Interview 55.
¹⁰ Interview 6.
to legitimate their representative autonomy within the representation process. They equally seek to extend (part of the) responsibility over its outcomes to their electorate.

MPs, second, argue that their representative autonomy makes it more easier for them to promote the general good. It allows them to rise above the calls of the ‘hoi polloi’, prevents them from being swayed by the issues of the day, and allows them to introduce necessary policy measures at times when the people fail to acknowledge the need thereof. MPs, at this point, praise their representative autonomy; suggesting that it allows them to breach taboos, and give voice to social groups that are often not listened to or that lack the possibilities of voice themselves11. MPs repeatedly express the need to act as the representative of all people – not only their electoral – or other – constituents. Although MPs pride themselves upon their regular contacts with civil society actors, such as labour unions, professional associations and NGOs, they firmly oppose the notion that they should give priority to these actors’ claims. Linking his representative autonomy to the promotion of the general good, one MP states:

‘No, I do not let that one person or those dozens of people that voted for me define my conception of the general good…Because then you become, in fact, the lackey of a set of people that are capable of organising themselves…And what about the silent majority?’12

As representatives of the people, elected by that people, MPs’ task consists in complementing organised voices in society; ensuring that those less capable of organising themselves are also included in the representation process13. To MPs, their autonomy equally implies that they should be willing to face up to their electorate. Alluding to the popular idiom ‘only dead fish swim with the current’, one MP14 argues that progress is not served by a politics of appeasement in which conflict is avoided at any cost. While discussing the possibility of disagreement or outright conflict with their constituents, no less than half of the MPs (34 out of 70) explicitly stated not to fear electoral sanctions15. The possibility of being held to account – and potentially being voted out of office – is considered part and parcel of the electoral system. Repudiating the notion of ‘chasing after the electorate’, MPs emphasise the importance of ‘remaining true’ to themselves and their beliefs16. While doing so, they define their normative duties narrowly in terms of a commitment to the societal views for which they have previously gained electoral support.

The significance of these findings cannot be underscored. MPs’ (self-reported) relative insensitivity to electoral sanctions along with their important emphasis on their representative autonomy reveals an important retreat from the notion of responsiveness that underpinned ‘traditional’ conceptions of democratic representation (cf. Pitkin, 1967: 155; Dahl, 1971: 1). While legitimating their legislative powers, MPs remain largely silent on the norms that (should) guide their actions in between electoral moments. The underlying rationale of MPs’ emphasis on moments of popular control appears to be the following: by calling the division of labour between citizens and their representatives into mind, MPs avert part of their responsibility over the outcome of the legislature to their electorate. At election time, citizens assume power and take responsibility over deciding who should enter – or stay – in parliament. In between electoral moments, MPs act as temporal custodians of sovereign power; executing the

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11 Interviews 7, 10, 11, 28, 47, 70.
12 Interview 30; also interviews 1, 13, 45, 46, 55, 61.
13 Interviews 3, 53, 55, 59.
14 Interview 70.
15 MPs belonging to the governing coalition were more sensitive to electoral sanctions than their counterparts in the opposition.
16 Interviews 7, 30, 48, 50, 70.
programme they presented to the voter and acting in consistence with the beliefs they stand for. In keeping with this conception, MPs define their moral obligations in terms of a narrow and formalised sense of responsibility: they act prudently – cognisant of the implications of their decision on citizens’ lives – and commit themselves to the agreement – i.e. the execution of their social views – they have entered into with their voters. MPs’ ‘contract’-like understanding of moral duties allows them to distance themselves from their electorate and to act independently in between electoral moments; downplaying the need for responsiveness in between electoral moments (cf. Mair 2009, 11-5).

We found, in addition, that MPs’ sense of responsibility places them in complex relationships of accountability (cf. Strom et al., 2003: 60). The realisation that they share in their parties’ success and demise fuels MPs’ responsibility and make them act in compliance with prevailing party consensus17. Similarly, MPs express the need to uphold inter-party governing agreements. ‘At elections, the voters state their mind,’ one MP18 says, ‘This translates into electoral results. Then a government agreement is made, and that agreement serves as the bible for the next five years’. Although such statements were more recurrent among MPs belonging to the ruling coalition, opposition members expressed a similar commitment to the government agreement; declaring it a chief instrument to controlling government. ‘You do not need to agree with it,’ one MP19 states, ‘but you need to help exercise control over it’. These multi-tier responsibilities tie MPs increasingly to governmental institutions and thereby infringe upon the opportunities for spontaneity – and responsiveness – in their contacts with citizens.

At this point, MPs’ accounts reveal an important ambiguity. On the one hand, and consistent with ‘traditional’ accounts of democratic representation, MPs consider ‘the people’ as clearly knowable – defined by the electoral process – and treat their interests as static givens. This conception allows them to define their normative duties narrowly in terms of the commitments they entered into with their electorate. On the other hand, however, MPs’ accounts give evidence of a ‘contemporary’ understanding of the dynamics of political representation. While discussing the need to cater the interests of unorganised groups and wed their interests into pre-existing conceptions of the ‘general good’, MPs both recognise the variable and changing character of the ‘general good’ and their part in its constitution. As their accounts move beyond the ‘being of representatives’ and consider the ‘doing of representation’ (cf. Rehfeld, 2006: 17-8), they seem to embrace a more contemporary conception of political representation. In the following section, we will elaborate further on these elements in MPs’ accounts and how they speak to MPs’ electorally defined sense of responsibility.

4. A ‘contemporary’ take: compensating invisibility with visibility

MPs’ commitment to the ‘general good’ and their attempts at legitimating their actions by invoking their electoral mandate appear to spring, at least partially, from their difficulty of ‘reading’ their voters (cf. Saward, 2006: 306). When asked about the kind of people they believe to represent, MPs intuitively made reference to their electorate yet simultaneously state not to know who their voters precisely are. ‘But who is your voter?’, one MP20 questions, ‘I know that my mother votes for me. I know that. But who is my voter? Yes, that’s my mother, that’s someone who lives in X [a Flemish city].

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17 Interviews 14, 50, 68.
18 Interview 19, also interviews 7, 15, 19, 39, 41, 50, 56, 67, 68.
19 Interview 35.
20 Interview 69.
and who thinks it’s okay for me to talk big’. Because of the secrecy of the ballot, MPs do not know precisely with which part of the electorate they have entered into an agreement. They can only make assumptions about the kind of people they are accountable to. Because their voters remain largely ‘invisible’ to them, MPs consider it best to orient their actions towards the general public. Testifying about the difficulty of ‘reading’ their constituents’ interests, one MP states:

‘Your voter…but because you don’t know who your voter is, it can be just about anyone and is in fact everyone. (...) I find it difficult to perceive and interpret the interests of my voters. In general, you only know that your voter wants that society improves and welfare increases’

When asked to specify how they set about determining what is in the interest of this ‘invisible’ people, MPs often refer to their party programmes and state that their understanding of the people and their interests is shaped by party meetings. Some MPs make reference to their past professional experiences or social commitments. Others, then again, stated that the meaning of the general good was determined within parliament only and took form from the confrontation of democratically elected party-positions. At this point, MPs’ conceptions of political representation closely resemble contemporary theories (e.g.: Mansbridge 2003, 515; Saward 2006, 306; Rehfeld, 2009: 5; Disch, 2011: 108) that locate the origin of representative relationships within MPs’ representative claims – i.e. their interpretations of political reality.

Acknowledging the partiality and selectivity of their representative claims, MPs emphasise the importance of recognition. In order to be conceived as meaningful – i.e. as standing for something or someone -, their claims need to be recognised by others. Elaborating on the tension between representing people (who have a mind of their own and are capable of objecting) and representing ideas (who do not) (cf. Pitkin, 1967: 155), one MP states: ‘But it does, indeed, entail the two aspects: You represent an idea – to me this comes first – and then you also represent whomever supports that idea’. This statement showcases that, when discussing the real-life practicalities of political representation, MPs are highly conscious of the need to mobilise people and incite them to link up with their ideas. Recognising their part in constituting a meaningful relationship with the audiences they speak for, various MPs elaborate upon the importance of creating, at an ideational level, ‘a connection between their representative acts and those represented’. To MPs, this practice essentially boils down to enhancing their proper visibility; giving an account of their actions, and crafting an easily identifiable public persona which citizens can identify with.

Recurrent within the interviews was the understanding of political representation as a ‘public performance’. Absent from the public’s eye, MPs argue, their representative acts lack meaning or, more accurately, lack being seen to exist. ‘You should compare it to doing justice,’ one MP argues, ‘it is not only important that you strive after justice but people equally need to see that justice is being done’. The element of visibility features most prominently in MPs comments on the public broadcasting programme ‘Vila Politica’. Since 2002, the programme airs parliamentary question time. Many MPs discuss the importance of the programme, and testify about the manners in which the presence of camera crews in

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21 Interview 70.
22 Interviews 13, 41, 64.
23 Interview 47, also interview 48.
24 Interview 48.
25 Interviews 34, 48, 50
26 Interview 10.
parliament had impacted upon their representational strategies. As shows from the following statement, MPs’ accounts give expression of a heightened awareness of the need to ‘be seen’ at work:

‘I always try to be present [in the parliamentary assembly] during the two hours when Vila Politica is shooting because I know that it matters to people’s perception. “Those slackers, where are they?” people ask themselves. (…) How often haven’t I heard “yes, we saw you on TV because we know your seat, we know where you’re seated”? People are watching “is she there or not”? So, even when I have more urgent matters to attend to, I sit there for at least half an hour. To make sure that people at home have seen me at work.

MPs conceive of political representation in competitive terms and testify about the efforts it took them to gain recognition as the people’s representative. In order to gain the upper hand in competition over the right to speak for the people, they had needed to craft a public persona that allowed people to identify with them. Crucial to this process was MPs’ specialisation in certain policy domains. Such specialisation not only facilitates their visibility among journalists and practitioners, it equally allows them to reach out to citizens who can conceive of MPs as ‘caring about their issues’. MPs’ tenacity – i.e. their commitment to particular policy issues and stances – similarly serves to draw citizens closer to them. Even when their proposition stands little chance of being recognised, MPs – especially those in the opposition – consider it important to communicate to their ‘constituents’ that they will not budge on certain core principles.

Similarly important is MPs’ local ‘authenticity’ (cf. Saward, 2009). Elected within local districts and not seldom combining their parliamentary mandate with that of municipal councillor, MPs emphasise the need of being perceived ‘similar to’ citizens; sharing a mode of living – and the worries associated with it. Such authenticity not only requires that MPs participate in ‘everyday’ events, such as soccer games and weekly markets, but equally that they abstain from high-sounding language in their contacts with citizens, and appear humble and willing to take up their suggestions. MPs’ ‘account-giving’, in this sense, give substance to their authenticity; showcasing their willingness to confront their voters and explain to them why a certain commitment could not be upheld. To MPs, being ‘out there’ in society not only serves strategic purposes. It equally enhances their attentiveness to society’s needs. MPs, in this context, speak out critically on MPs who retreat into the ‘ivory tower’ of parliament and hid under its ‘bell-jar’. ‘You may never bed yourself down in parliament, where society is only artificially present and you only hear about problems through committee reports and the like,’ one MP argues. Testifying about the risk of alienation, another MP states: ‘MPs who are only hanging around here in Brussels [location of the Flemish Parliament]…in the end, they do not know how much a loaf of bread costs anymore’. MPs’ usage of social media networks, such as twitter and facebook, serves a similar purpose: it allows them to make their views known to a broader audience and keep ‘in touch’ with their realities. Making reference to the high frequency of these online exchanges, some MPs state that the ‘gap with citizens had never before been this small’.

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27 Interview 60.
28 Interviews 20, 52.
29 Interview 6, 12, 42, 70.
30 Interview 50.
31 Interview 39, also interviews 6, 13.
32 Interview 38, also interviews 3, 18.
Although statements of this kind indicate that MPs have given the so-called gap between citizens and government critical consideration, these statements equally showcase that MPs are not overly worried by this gap. Consistent with contemporary theories on democratic representation, MPs testify about their efforts to fill the spatial and temporal gap between them and those represented with speech. This speech, however, generally falls short of the deliberative qualities specified in the literature (e.g.: Urbinati, 2000: 760; Mansbridge, 2009: 370). MPs, more specifically, do not award those represented the position of equal interlocutors: although they value citizens’ input, their exchanges with citizens are driven by the motivation to rally support and convince the latter to side with them – not the other way around. When confronted with citizens’ discontent or demands, MPs invoke their electoral mandate to keep citizens at a distance. As shows from the following statement, MPs conceive of themselves as privileged interpreters of the people’s interests; allowing them to dismiss citizens’ wants when these are judged ‘partisan’, self-seeking claims only:

‘It entails a discussion on priorities: those of the individual or those of society? What it boils down to is that you listen to citizens, sympathise with their problems and listen to their questions. Then you try and provide an answer and try to convince them that the general welfare holds priority over their individual wants’.

Only a few MPs (5 out of 70) come close to specifying the kind of two-way communication specified in the literature. ‘I have my own views’, one of them states, ‘but I am always willing, quite naturally, I would say I am obliged in a democracy, to correct my views when I hear that the group I want to represent opposes my views or provides input that proves my views wrong’. While this MP clearly situates those represented on equal footing to herself – conceiving of those represented as equally capable of defining what is at stake for them –, the majority of MPs remain wary of doing so. To them, ‘account-giving’ does not carry the sense of a normative obligation but, rather, it holds an instrumental quality in it. It compensates the ‘invisibility’ of their voters; allowing MPs to initiate a representative relationship with them.

5. Discussion and conclusion

This paper built from on-going scholarly debate on the so-called gap between citizens and parliament and citizens’ lowering trust levels in industrialised democracies. It posited traditional concerns for the ‘indirectness’ of political representation – i.e. the possibility for citizens’ alienation and exclusion from decision-making – against contemporary accounts that consider representation’s indirectness quintessential to democracy; mobilising those represented, and inciting their judgment on what is at stake for them. Both type of accounts have advanced diverging manners for minimising the risk of alienation that resides in political representation. While traditional accounts emphasized citizens’ control over their representatives – invoking electoral moments of authorisation and accountability –, contemporary accounts emphasise citizen’s control within the representation process – specifying MPs’ duties by reference to conversational turn-taking with those represented. Contrary to mere speech which carries a uni-directional sense in it, conversational turn-taking requires a sense of relative equivalence between MPs and those represented; implying that power remains permanently shared between them. The shift from institutions to processes of representation implied within contemporary accounts not only suggests that MPs’ behaviour may be crucial in mending the gap between citizens and parliament, it equally makes such endeavour a highly demanding human one.

33 Interview 57.
34 Interview 4.
Confronting these two theoretical conceptions with political reality, we researched how members of the Flemish regional parliament conceive of political representation and deal with its indirectness. Our analysis revealed that MPs invoke both ‘traditional’ and ‘contemporary’ conceptions of representation; merging them in a unique yet non-arbitrary manner (see table 2). We found that MPs defined the *praxis of political representation* (the ‘doing’ of representation) in an explicitly ‘contemporary’ manner; describing it as a process whereby they offer their views to the citizenry and invite them to consider themselves implied within them. MPs, thus, not only acknowledged the ‘mobilising’ character of representation, they equally conceived of those represented as something more or less coterminous with their claims; acquiring meaning within the representation process only. When describing their normative duties, we found, however, that MPs retreated to more ‘traditional’ conceptions of representation; invoking their electoral mandate and specifying norms that reflect their *appointment as representatives* (the ‘being’ a representative). Describing their relationship with their electorate in terms of trust, MPs conceive of it as their duty to act in a responsible manner; expressing their commitment to the societal views which their electorate has approved of at the ballot.

Table 2: MPs accounts of democratic representation – highlighted in grey

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Defined as:</th>
<th>Traditional conceptions</th>
<th>Contemporary conceptions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Electoral moments</td>
<td><em>Defined as:</em> <em>Electoral moments of authorisation and accountability</em></td>
<td><em>A process of conversational turn-taking</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democratic constituents</td>
<td><em>Readily knowable (electoral constituents, the voters)</em></td>
<td><em>Constituted bodies</em> (‘those represented’, ‘the people’)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Representational dilemma</td>
<td><em>Trustee (anticipatory) – Delegate (promissory)</em></td>
<td><em>Mobilisation (anticipatory, future-oriented)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empowered inclusion</td>
<td><em>Citizens’ control over their representatives (sanctions)</em></td>
<td><em>People’ control within the representation process (influence)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Representational norms</td>
<td><em>Accountability (responsiveness)</em></td>
<td><em>Deliberative ‘account-giving’ (reflexivity)</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

MPs’ ‘retreat’ to the electoral system appears closely connected to what they describe as the ‘invisibility’ of their voters. Because of the secrecy of the ballot, MPs remain uncertain about the type of citizens whom they are, in fact, accountable to. Troubled by this ‘invisibility’, MPs define their normative duties in reference to the only ‘constituency’ that has revealed itself to them in a democratic manner; namely the one that emanated from the electoral process, and gained meaning from MPs’ electoral programme and the electorate’s subsequent authorisation thereof. Conceiving of themselves as privileged – because democratically appointed – interpreters of the general good, MPs are greatly suspicious of citizens’ potentially self-serving demands. This suspicion prevents them from treating citizens as equal conversational partner and prevents them from astutely dealing with the signals which citizens send in between electoral moments. During the interviews, MPs defined their interactions with those represented predominantly in terms of ‘listening’ and not ‘responsiveness’ which presumes the formulation of a response in addition to listening (cf. Severs, 2010: 417).

The net result of MPs’ management strategies appears to be an enhanced distance with those represented whereby MPs mainly look within as a basis for action – acting as ‘gyroscopes’ in Mansbridge’s (2003: 515) terminology. Our findings, thus, feed existing concerns for the so-called gap between citizens and parliament. In MPs’ accounts citizens increasingly take on the meaning of an audience which reacts to rather than sets the political agenda (cf. Manin 1997). While MPs’ felt need to publicise their actions may make it easier for citizens to hold their
representatives to account – lowering monitoring costs –, the gains thereof may be thwarted by MPs’ suspicion of citizens’ demands; contributing to rather than correcting citizens’ alienation from parliament. 

Our findings not only proof relevant to our understanding of the gap between citizens and government. They equally speak to research on MPs’ role conceptions. MPs’ accounts reveal the limitations of traditional ‘trustee-delegate’ conceptions. Their connection to the electoral system cloaks the procedural aspects of political representation and the representational dilemmas that derive from MPs’ encounters with citizens in between electoral moments. Taking the notion of the representation process seriously not only implies that scholars develop new ways for evaluating the quality of MPs’ representative activities, it equally implies that scholars should pay closer attention to the part of those represented in representation process, how they experience the indirectness of political representation, and the kind of normative expectations they hold. Such studies may shed further light on the meaning of citizens’ lowering trust levels, and their feelings of dissatisfaction with those that (should) represent them.

6. References


7. Appendix

Appendix 7.1: Respondents’ party affiliation compared to parliamentary seat distribution (as per 1 November 2011)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Governing coalition</th>
<th>Opposition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>CD&amp;V</td>
<td>N-VA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(18/31)</td>
<td>(14/17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(5/7)</td>
<td>(9/22)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(13/19)</td>
<td>(0/1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parliamentary seats</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>13.70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants in study</td>
<td>25.7%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discrepancy</td>
<td>+0.70%</td>
<td>+6.30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Note:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Apart from the French-speaking party ‘Union des Francophones’ and one independent MP, all parliamentary fractions participated to the study. The lower respective higher response rates among parties reflect the outcome of the 2009 elections – i.e. the electoral victory of N-VA, and the demise of sp.a, Open Vld and LDD. Groen! and Vlaams Belang showcased, in keeping with their long-standing opposition histories, an important willingness to participate in our study.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Appendix 7.2: Respondents’ sex – comparison with seat distribution in parliament (as per 1 November 2011)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Male MPs (47/74)</th>
<th>Female MPs (23/50)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parliamentary seats</td>
<td>67.20%</td>
<td>32.80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants in study</td>
<td>61.20%</td>
<td>39.80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discrepancy</td>
<td>+6.00%</td>
<td>-7.00%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Appendix 7.3: Respondents’ age – comparison with seat distribution in parliament (as per 1 November 2011)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Parliamentary seats (124)</th>
<th>Participants in study (70)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MPs’ average age</td>
<td>45 years</td>
<td>43 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age distribution</td>
<td>Early thirties to mid-sixties</td>
<td>Early thirties to mid-sixties</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>