

Unit 7

Roles of Members

Overview

This unit examines the roles of Members inside and outside the legislature in a parliamentary democracy, with a specific focus on the various models of representation. Issues regarding the functions of the executive and the legislature have been discussed previously. Thus, in this section, we will look more specifically at individual members and the kinds of roles they have adopted as parliamentary representatives. In particular, the unit focuses on constituency service, the composition of parliaments and discusses whether the makeup of parliaments reflect society as a whole. The last section examines three conceptions of agency representation: trustee, delegate, and party.

Learning Objectives

After you have completed this unit you should be able to achieve the following:

1. Explain the role of constituency service.
2. Relate the effect of their electorates on legislators.
3. List the different types of agency representation.
4. Discuss how parties may affect role performance.

Commentary

Constituency Service

One of the most important roles of members of parliaments involves constituency service. In our earlier discussion of the functions of the legislative assembly we examined it as a collective body and implicit in that examination was the understanding that individual members may not participate in all aspects of the legislative process. For example, not all members can be on every committee, participate in every debate and pose questions in each question time. The basic functions of the assembly are carried out by a smaller number of leading parliamentarians. However, each individual member does play a role in constituency service if elected on a constituency basis.

For many legislators this is the most rewarding part of their work as it is an aspect through which they can see concrete results. It is also an aspect of the

job that takes an ever-increasing amount of their time. In this role, members serve as a kind of ombudsman for their constituents. Citizens who have difficulties with government or bureaucracy often contact their MPs for assistance with their problems. These problems may include issues such as the immigration of a relative, welfare or employment benefit or pension entitlement.

MPs often receive and deal with problems of this sort. In Britain such activities are referred to as 'surgery' while in some other countries it is described as 'case work.' The effective performance of this role contributes directly to the legitimacy of the political system by providing examples of elected officials working directly on behalf of constituents. It may also enhance the chances members have for re-election as even unknown backbenchers can develop reputations as good 'constituency people.' Legislators often enjoy this role as it provides them with an opportunity to make a positive contribution, accomplish something and serve their constituents. Unfortunately, the other portions of the job do not always provide such tangible rewards.

Other aspects of representation are more controversial; how, for instance, can one person represent another? There are a number of answers to this: they can in some way resemble the person being represented, they can act on behalf of those they represent, in the same way a lawyer would, or they can do precisely what those they represent would do if they themselves were present. Representation means making present in some sense, something that is not in fact present. In theory, parliamentary representatives make society at large present in the parliamentary chamber. Jean Jacques Rousseau provided an early example of the controversy regarding representation by asking if representation could ever truly take place and whether representation eliminates freedom. His answer was clear and related specifically to the Westminster model. In his words "The English Nation deceives itself when it imagines itself free, it is so in fact, only during the election of members of Parliament; for as soon as a new one is elected, it is again in chains and counts for nothing." From this viewpoint, voters are electing governors rather than representatives.

Who Are the Representatives?

One way in which representation rarely takes place in parliament is in relation to descriptive representation or microcosmic representation. This concept holds that parliament should be a sort of miniature replica of society, a mirror image, if you will. Elected parliamentarians should reflect societal characteristics in terms of race, religion, language, gender, class, or occupation. This approach focuses on the overall composition of the parliament and not on individual members. It answers the question of what the representatives must be like to represent society by concluding that they must closely reflect society.

In practice those who sit in legislatures do not provide such representation. Representatives are not fully representative of their society with respect to (among other things) education, occupation, and gender. The vast majority of parliamentarians are well educated, middle class males from professional occupations. As Zimmerman and Rule point out "A prominent characteristic of most parliaments and legislatures throughout the world is the gross

under-representation of women and minority groups" (1998: 872). Moreover, as Copeland and Patterson explain, "The pattern of representation for workers, less educated citizens and those with generally lower status is very similar to the pattern described for women... It is well known that individuals in the professional, managerial, white-collar and business occupations account for the vast majority of the members of parliaments" (1998: xxiii).

Some scholars have questioned whether the apparent elite bias to representation is negative or positive. More than a century ago Walter Bagehot lamented the 1867 Reform Act indicating that the newly enfranchised voters were incapable of thoughtfully reflecting on public issues. From this perspective a chamber whose members are better trained and more highly educated is a positive feature. On the other hand one could ask whether a chamber dominated by people incapable of experiencing childbirth or never having experienced poverty is capable of making informed decisions on these sorts of issues. Who is in the chamber may make a difference in how the chamber operates and what the chamber does.

Agency Representation

The other major approach to representation focuses on the representative acting as the 'agent' for the represented. There are three distinct conceptions surrounding this sort of 'agency' representation.

Representatives may act on behalf of those they represent as a 'trustee'. In this role representatives see themselves as elected to exercise their own judgement on behalf of those they represent. They act, as would a lawyer on behalf of a client. Such members rely on their own personal judgement about what should be done and the role of those represented is restricted to determining whether to elect or re-elect.

A Member of Parliament thus maintains his or her independence in the exercise of what they see as their best judgement. The 19th century British philosopher and parliamentarian Edmund Burke provides the classic defence of this role. As Burke put it: "Your representative owes you, not his industry only, but his judgement, and he betrays instead of serving you if he sacrifices it to your judgement." A trustee considers an issue and, after hearing all sides of the debate, exercises his or her own judgement in making decisions about what should be done.

In stark contrast to the trustee role is that of representatives who see themselves as a 'delegate'. Delegates are representatives who subordinate their own views to those of their constituents. They act on the belief that they have been elected because of what they said they would do and as a representative they must act on that support or act as if they have a full set of instructions from those who elected them. In essence they try to determine what their constituents want done, and do it. They act according to the judgement of their constituents, not on the basis of their personal views. It is useful to think of these representatives as realtors, who may provide advice to their clients, but in the end accept and act on their clients' desires.

The trustee and delegate roles assume a legislative role that may be somewhat misleading. These roles assume that representatives are chosen on their own merits and free to vote as they wish in parliament. This accords rather poorly with the decline of parliament thesis discussed earlier.

Most parliamentarians today represent parties as much as they do their constituents. In this role the parliamentarian acts and votes as a loyal member of a party. They take and follow the instructions of the party and its leadership. They do not take independent stands either on the basis of their own opinions or according to the wishes of their constituents. As Saalfeld notes “party is the single most important factor influencing voting patterns in any parliamentary system” (1998: 795). There is much justification for this role after all; elections are contested and organised around parties and leaders. The effective functioning of parliament makes it necessary for those who form the government to do what is needed and have stability in the operation of Parliament. Parliament operates on the principle of majority rule and in order for legislation to pass, and for a government to remain in office, it must have the support of 50 per cent + 1 of the legislators. Representatives who are acting as delegates or trustees do not provide this sort of stability. Moreover, it is often the case that members are elected more because of their party or party leader than as a result of their own qualifications or attractiveness to voters. Acting on an independent basis thus partially distorts the existing political reality.

Despite this, citizens in many countries have expressed dissatisfaction with this form of representation and a desire for more independent actions on the part of their representatives. Unfortunately for members, who try to act in this way, the constituents may have short memories and fail to reward such actions at the ballot box. In 1990 Alex Kindy, a Conservative member of the Canadian House of Commons, voted against a controversial tax his party sponsored. He was expelled from the Conservative Party but it was clear that the vast majority of his constituents supported his actions. Nonetheless, in the next general election Mr. Kindy was decisively defeated.

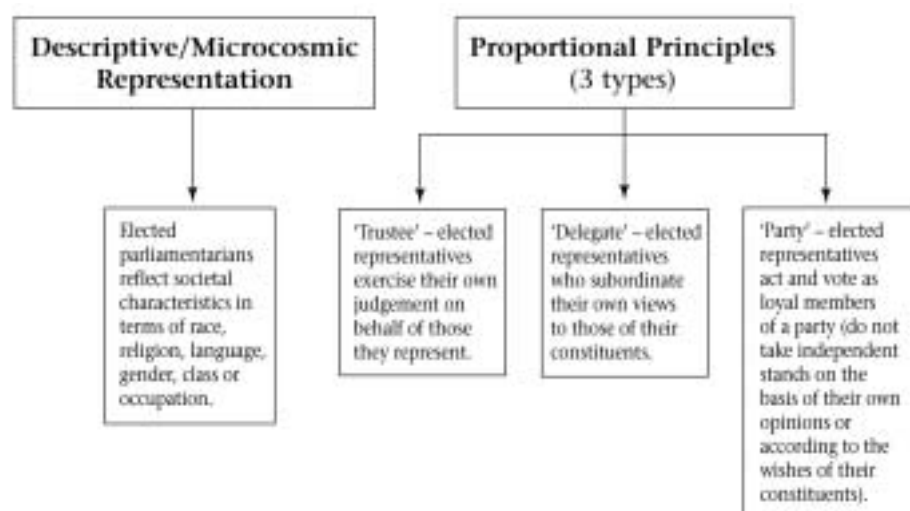


Figure 7.1 Two Major Approaches to Representation

Issues of representation are controversial for members of parliament. Although they may wish to act independently, although their constituents may wish them to act independently, independent action can carry consequences which may benefit neither the system nor the member who does so. This is in large part due to the domination of parliamentary systems by parties.

Recommended Reading

Pitkin, Hanna. *The Concept of Representation*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967, 112-144.

Zimmerman, Joseph and Wilma Rule. "Women and Minorities in Parliaments and Legislatures" in *World Encyclopedia of Parliaments and Legislatures*.

Study Questions

Based on your readings, see if you can answer the following questions. If not, read the commentary over again to find the answers.

1. What is the role of constituency service?
2. To what degree do legislators resemble their electorates?
3. What are the different types of agency representation?
4. How do parties affect role performance?

Internet Resources

Roles of Members

Parliament of Australia. House of Representatives Factsheet No. 4:
Committees

<http://www.aph.gov.au/house/info/factsht/fs04.htm>

Parliament of Australia. House of Representatives Factsheet No. 6:
Opportunities for Private Members

<http://www.aph.gov.au/house/info/factsht/fs06.htm>

Parliament of Australia. House of Representatives Factsheet No. 7: Making
Laws

<http://www.aph.gov.au/house/info/factsht/fs07.htm>

Parliament of Australia. House of Representatives Factsheet No. 15: The
Work of a Member of Parliament

<http://www.aph.gov.au/house/info/factsht/fs15.htm>

Parliament of Australia. Library Research Note 50 1995-96: Parliamentarians,
Outside Employment and Outside Income

<http://www.aph.gov.au/library/pubs/rn/1995-96/96rn50.htm>

Library of Parliament. Parliamentary Research Branch. "Members of the
House of Commons: Their Role"

<http://www.parl.gc.ca/information/library/PRBpubs/bp56-e.htm>

Parliament of Western Australia. Commission on Government. Elected
Officials

<http://www.wa.gov.au/cog/html/Report3/report3/c7s1.html>

UNDP. Parliamentary Strengthening Reference Manual. "Internal
Organization of the Legislative Branch" (February 2000)

[http://magnet.undp.org/docs/parliaments/notes/
Organization%20of%20Legislatures%20.htm](http://magnet.undp.org/docs/parliaments/notes/Organization%20of%20Legislatures%20.htm)

UNDP. Parliamentary Strengthening Reference Manual. "The Legislature
and Constituency Relations" (February 2000)

[http://magnet.undp.org/docs/parliaments/notes/
Constituency%20Relations%205%20.htm](http://magnet.undp.org/docs/parliaments/notes/Constituency%20Relations%205%20.htm)