

Representation on the Front Line: Gender and MP Staff in Canadian Politics

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Representation on the Front Line: MP Staff in Canadian Politics

There are two widely held generalizations about elected representatives, including Members of Parliament (MPs), generated from two rather different literatures. First, MPs' staff are often the first or only point of contact constituents have with their elected representatives (Docherty 2005). The implication is that staff, rather than the MP themselves, are doing the substantive action of political representation. Second, as MPs, women are expected to (Mansbridge 1999) and sometimes do representation differently (Celis et al. 2008).

These literatures rarely speak to one another. Even in expanding the scope of where scholars should look to observe substantive representation on questions of gender and diversity, representatives' staff are not included (Celis and Childs 2008). This is despite the fact that MPs and other elected representatives choose their staff and directly manage them, giving them direction about the types of activities they should do while at work. Similarly, the literature on MPs, at least in Canada, is almost entirely silent on what MPs do with their staff.

This raises two sets of questions, one theoretical and one practical. What role do staff play in political representation? Accepted definitions of representation, based on Hannah Pitkin's classic work (Dovi 2018), suggests that staff both represent their MP to constituents and also represent constituents to their MP and to other government officials. This places staff at a representational nexus that merits further exploration and leads to several practical questions. Who are MPs' staff? Do MP sociodemographics and partisanship affect their staffing choices or the direction they provide their staff with respect to their work? What is an MP staffer's typical workday? Does the content or experience of their work vary by their sociodemographics? In other words, does women's substantive representation occur because women MPs are more likely to hire women or direct their staff to work on women's issues, or because women as staffers are more likely than men to take this kind of substantive initiative?

We begin by outlining our argument about why we should look at staff to investigate substantive representation, and why we anticipate that the experiences of staff are gendered. We then outline both datasets, and present evidence demonstrating staff hiring practices and typical work weeks. Results show that the type of staffing choices made by Canadian MPs are not affected by MP gender or party. Instead, staff are disproportionately women, regardless of the party or gender of the MP. Women are consistently more likely to be assigned clerical tasks, while men are more likely to hold positions with prestigious titles and as a result, are more likely to report engaging in work that constitutes political representation. And while many staff report that MPs are often out of their depth as employers, women are significantly more likely than men to report that they experience harassment on job, both from constituents and from MPs. We conclude that expanding how we define political representation to include political work generates new insights into how gendered dynamics in politics are produced and reproduced.

Political Representation and MP Staff

One of the most elegant definitions of representation is simply to "make present again" (Pitkin 1967). A more fulsome definition typically comprises four components (Dovi 2018):

- 1) Someone who is representing;
- 2) Someone who is being represented;
- 3) Something that is being represented;

4) A setting where representation takes place.¹

A great deal of research investigating political representation focuses on how those elected or appointed to key positions (i.e. MP, Cabinet Minister) represent constituents, communities of interest, or historically marginalized groups (Mansbridge 1999; Bird 2011; Celis and Childs 2012; Swers 2002). Within this literature, focus is drawn to how representatives from marginalized groups bridge descriptive (“standing for”) and substantive (“acting for”) representation for their groups. While Pitkin classically argues that these forms of representation are distinct, feminist scholarship suggest that increasing women’s representation in legislatures helps improve the conditions for women’s substantive representation, though it by no means guarantees it will happen (Celis and Childs 2008).

There are good arguments for expanding where to look to find substantive representation in general, as we ask specifically about gender representation and women’s issues. For example, focusing only on national parliaments excludes local and subnational governments, as well as any actions taken by civil society organizations or inside political parties (c.f. Celis and Childs 2008). We argue that this expanded view of representation should include a key, though often neglected group that actually performs much of the everyday work of political representation: staff. Staff “stand for” the elected representative in their constituency and parliamentary offices, representing their MP to constituents and, at times, government agencies. Then, through advocacy, staff “stands for” constituents when they bring constituent concerns forward to their MP (c.f. Saward 2006). With the MP often away from the office, typically from Monday through Thursday while Parliament is in session, employees are left to interact directly with citizens, in effect embodying the act of representation for their MP. This includes most communication from constituents, as employees may have the discretion to choose which issues are reported back as important to the MP, as “the volume of such requests far exceeds the ability of members to deal with them personally” (Franks 2007, 31). It seems reasonable to view the daily work of MP staff as an active form of representation.

This argument comports with the most recent work on gender and women’s substantive representation. Arguing that a shift should be made away from the actions of individual actors to the *process* of representation, Celis and Childs (2018) further argue that the “equal inclusion of citizen’s claims in the representative process” is key for good substantive representation of women (ibid.: 315). In this process, then, staff are a key gatekeeper: they control access to information for constituents and also their access to their MP. How staff engage in their work, and how MPs manage and direct their staff are key indicators of the process of representation and, as a result, the substantive representation of women.

There is good reason to expect that the experiences of MP staff will highlight the current state of the process of gender and women’s substantive representation. First, given institutional norms and strong party discipline, MPs arguably have more latitude with what happens in their offices than they do acting on the floor of the House of Commons or in committee work. Their behaviour and options in setting up their offices should be comparably less constrained.² Given

¹ Dovi (2018) includes a fifth component: something that is being left out, such as interests, opinions, or perspectives that aren’t voiced.

² The Board of Internal Economy’s (2019) Member’s Guide places four restrictions on hiring in constituency and parliamentary offices: the MP’s immediate family, their designated traveller, political party executives (those already employed by the political party), or contractors already working for the federal government.

this, their hiring decisions should speak to how they use their staff to act as representatives. Despite this, much of the literature on how MPs represent their constituents observes but does not address how MP's staff conduct much of the day to day work of representation. Instead, while the importance of staff to the MP's ability to perform their representational role is stated in the literature, it is only presented in relation to the MP themselves (Docherty 1997; Docherty 2005; Eagles, Koop and Loat 2014; Koop, Bastedo and Blidook 2018). For example, some MPs report that "it would be inefficient to come to me with every or most problems," as their staff would know how to identify and solve most problems (Docherty 1997: 174). Despite the important role played by staff, though, this literature does not address who these staff are or how they conduct representation themselves, on behalf of the MP, for constituents and voters.

One of the only in-depth examinations of MP staff, produced for the Privy Council Office (MacLeod 2005), describes MP staff as "disproportionately women, unlikely to consider themselves political and report very high levels of satisfaction with their work" (MacLeod 2005, 11), though it is not clear what is meant by political or being satisfied by one's work. These women staffers are labelled as "lifers" and contrasted against (high) "flyers." Flyers are more likely to be men and report lower levels of satisfaction in their work. Unlike women, men working for MPs are presented as using the job for instrumental reasons as a way to get to Ottawa, either as an MP themselves, or as a more specialist staffer. This insight is echoed in other studies about MP staff on Parliament Hill: men are disproportionately more likely to be employed in legislative or political roles, including policy development, helping the MP prepare for committee work, research, and strategic planning, while women are more likely to be employed in administrative or secretarial positions (Snagovsky and Kerby 2018). Yet, other studies observe that staff (so, lifers) who work in constituency offices are knowledgeable and highly skilled, and their work can include researching policy issues, writing speeches, and helping constituents with federal government casework, such as immigration or tax concerns (Docherty 2005). Thus, though the literature about MP staff in Canada is very small and somewhat contradictory, the gendered nature of these positions is readily apparent.

The contradictions in assertions about the gendered nature of MP staff are also clear. MP offices are described as inherently political places, yet as staff, women are presented as workers with little interest in politics or political ambition (MacLeod 2005). Because MPs are typically members of a political party, their offices "have a mixture of partisan and non-partisan functions, and citizens often regard them as partisan whether they are or not" (Franks 2007: 33). Even when staff are characterized as administrative workers who assist constituents with government forms, it is also assumed that all staff are political enough to belong to the same political party as their MP (Dickin 2016). And, most of the studies that directly address how MPs structure their role as representatives in the constituency do not spend much time discussing or analyzing the work of MPs' staff (Blidook 2012; Koop 2012; Sayers 1999) While some provide case studies of how MPs delegate tasks to their staff (Koop, Bastedo, and Blidook 2018), other studies argue that MPs receive little to no management training (Stos 2018). This suggests that how MPs use their staff to do the work of political representation likely varies by key factors identified in the existing literature on representation, such as MPs' own characteristics and constraints.

Research from the United States about Congressional staff is instructive. Though the American and Canadian systems of government are very different, staff occupy similar representational positions in both systems, providing a key link between constituents and elected representatives. Some studies argue that staff can help explain why some representatives are not responsive to

constituent concerns, particularly if staff rely heavily on organized conservative or business interests for policy information (Hertel-Fernandez, Mildenerger, and Stokes 2019). This supports the argument that an important part of staff's role is to represent ideas, interests, groups, and constituents to their representative. Similarly, there is some evidence to suggest that in the United States, who a representative is structures who they choose to hire. For example, some women representatives are more likely to hire women as staff (Wilson and Carlos 2014). Representatives who hire women, Latinx, and black staff may also empower those diverse staff to act substantively for communities of interest when staff are provide with sufficient resources and autonomy to act on those community demands (Rosenthal and Bell 2003; Wilson 2013). However, when staff are not empowered, it is unlikely they will be able to facilitate substantive representation. In addition to this, the most powerful staff positions, such as policy advisor to the representative in the capitol, remain divided by gender and race; women and racialized staff are still significantly more likely to be found in lower status administrative and service positions in the district (Ziniel 2009; Wilson and Carlos 2013). While this may facilitate diverse staff's ability to provide effective services directly to constituents and communities, it diminishes their ability to play a meaningful role in policy development.

Even though relatively little is known about MP staff in Canada, we have a series of basic expectations. In keeping with past research and insights from the United States, we expect that MPs will be more likely to hire women to fill more clerical roles, and that men will be found predominantly in higher status, policy-based positions. We also expect that racialized staff will be more likely to hold more clerical, constituency-based positions, and that the parliamentary staff will be predominantly white. We expect this will be reflected in staff assessments of their regular work, including the tasks they are assigned.

We expect that staffing choices will vary by MP gender and party. There is some evidence to suggest that as MPs, women are more willing than men to speak to gendered issues, despite the strong constraints on their behaviour in the Canadian House of Commons (Tremblay 1998). Given this, women MPs may be more likely than men to hire women into more powerful staff positions. Similarly, political parties in Canada vary in their views about equality. Some parties only accept equality of opportunity (Conservative Party of Canada) while others endorse equality of outcome (New Democratic Party of Canada or NDP, Liberal Party of Canada; see Thomas 2018). Given that these parties also vary considerably in their willingness to nominate women as candidates, it seems reasonable to expect that this would translate into staffing choices, with NDP and Liberal MPs being more likely than Conservative MPs to hire women as staff, especially in more prestigious, or policy-related positions.

We also ask about staff motivation to seek out work with an MP's office, and what they like and dislike most about their work. Their answers help shed light on how staff might view their role as representatives. While this is exploratory and we do not have strong expectations about what staff might say, we do anticipate that staff will report that MPs expect them to engage in some emotional labour and that women will report that this type of work is more expected of them. Here, emotional labour is comprised of face-to-face interactions with the public that may also "require the worker to produce an emotional state in another person" (Hochschild 1983, 147). Most constituency staff will be required to perform some form of emotional labour, both through casework, where individual constituents are assisted by staff with a direct problem relating to the government, and through general information about the MP and their activities in the district (Arter 2018).

We also anticipate that staff will report motivations that match other motivations to join the public service, either by reinforcing the staff's image of themselves as a caring or politically motivated individual, or through staffs' desire to serve society and the greater good (Perry and Wise 1990). Here, we expect gender stereotypes to help structure staff motivations, with men being more likely than women to report that working in politics reinforces a particular image of themselves, while women may be more likely to report more pro-social motivations in their work.

Finally, we ask about staff experience on the job, with respect to interactions with the public and with their MP as an employer. Given existing research about gender and the workplace, as well as published reports about sexual harassment and assault on Parliament Hill (Samara Canada 2018), we expect that staff experience of their work will be structured by gender beyond their position, tasks, and motivations. We expect that as staff, women will be more likely than men to experience harassment, broadly defined, from both the public and from MPs. It is plausible that, through casework, staff may encounter members of the public who are hostile or disappointed; similarly, because MPs do the bulk of staff hiring themselves (as opposed to a central agency), rules and practices that may effectively eliminate, diminish, or effectively address harassment in the workplace may not be present.

Data and Methods

We use two datasets in this study. The first is constructed from the Government Electronic Directory Services (GEDS). GEDS is a directory listing for the federal public service, which includes MPs and their constituency office staff. Wilson (2015: 470) notes how, "Although GEDS sometimes has trouble keeping up with staffing changes at times of high turnover... it is the only publicly available reference listing."³ Data were gathered about every MP employee in March 2018, including employee's name, riding, province, political party, gender, and position type (N = 1760). Employee names were used to code employee gender, with the assistance of software that predicts the probability of the name's associated gender (Genderize 2018). For position type, each employee is listed in the government directory as a constituency assistant, member's assistant, parliamentary assistant, or special assistant. While the exact responsibilities of these positions will vary between offices, constituency and member's assistants are typically employed in the district, while parliamentary and special assistants tend to work in MPs' Ottawa offices. This dataset will help us understand how hiring practices vary by MP gender and party.

The second dataset – a survey of MP employees – helps us investigate how MPs use their staff, allowing us to understand how staff's work is gendered. Using the MP's associated C1, C1A, C1B, C1C email accounts, a total of 1038 emails were successfully sent in November 2018; the survey remained open to responses until December 2018. The response rate is 17.7%, as 220 surveys were started, with 184 completes. The survey asked about how employees began

³ A limitation to the GEDS is they do not have executive assistants listed. These assistants could be categorized under constituency assistant or member's assistant instead. Though many executive assistants perform similar duties to the other assistants, they may work more closely with the MP. For example, in February 2019, the Honourable Jim Carr, the Minister of International Trade Diversification, posted a job advertisement for a new executive assistant. This position was advertised to "oversee the running of the Member's constituency office," as well as "complete a broad range of administrative tasks for the Minister." These duties are similar to a constituency assistant and member assistant, though the importance of the executive position is emphasized in the remainder of the job posting.

working in their job, the benefits and challenges of their work, their political involvement and future career plans. The survey also featured a section on harassment in constituency offices, aiming to understand the frequency and magnitude of incidents. The survey collected demographic information, including the employee's gender, age, and education, as well as employee and MP political party.⁴

Results – The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

General Trends in MP staffing

MP offices vary considerably in terms of size, as might be expected given the size and diversity of Canada's electoral districts. On average, MPs employ 5 staff, though this ranges between one and 11 employees.

Of the 1760 people employed by MPs, 59% (N=1036) are women. Figure 1 shows the distribution of women and men across the four job position types listed in the GEDS. Women are overrepresented in the constituency assistant position, confirming that women are more likely than men to be hired to do less prestigious, more clerical frontline work in MP offices. Recall, though, that member's assistants are also employed in district offices, and that Figure 1 shows that men are more likely than women to hold this role. This could be due to differences in their assigned duties, though research on clerical workers offers a gendered explanation. Men in clerical work challenge the femininity of this profession by renaming and reframing the work (Henson and Rogers 2001: 220). This may be the case with member's assistants, where they opt for the more prestigious sounding job title.

⁴ We did not ask MP staff to identify their position. Our goal was to make survey respondents feel protected, and so took extra steps to reassure them that they would remain anonymous. While this limits some of the arguments we can make about the relative experiences of constituency vs parliamentary staff, we argue that the increased candor we could secure as a result of greater anonymity is more important. Future research can probe how these experiences vary by staff location.

A genuine omission on our part relates to staff race and ethnicity. Future work will correct this.

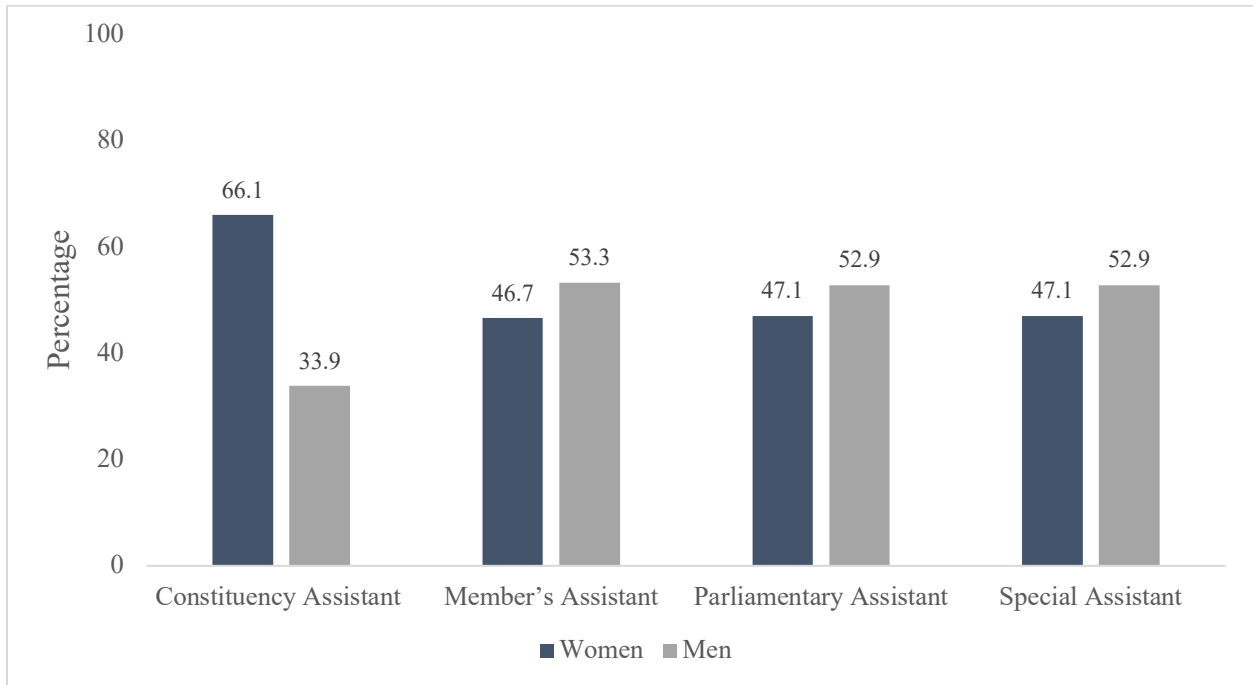


Figure 1: MP staff position and Gender, 2018

On the whole, there are no significant differences between men MPs or women MPs with the composition of these offices, as shown in Figure 2. This is surprising, as it can be expected that feminist MPs would hire more women. Research on role model theory shows that having women politicians serve as role models inspires other women, especially young women, to increase their political activity (Campbell and Wolbrecht 2006). If feminist women and men are supportive of increasing the number of women in Canadian parliament, it would be expected that they would staff their offices with more women, exposing them more to Canadian politics.

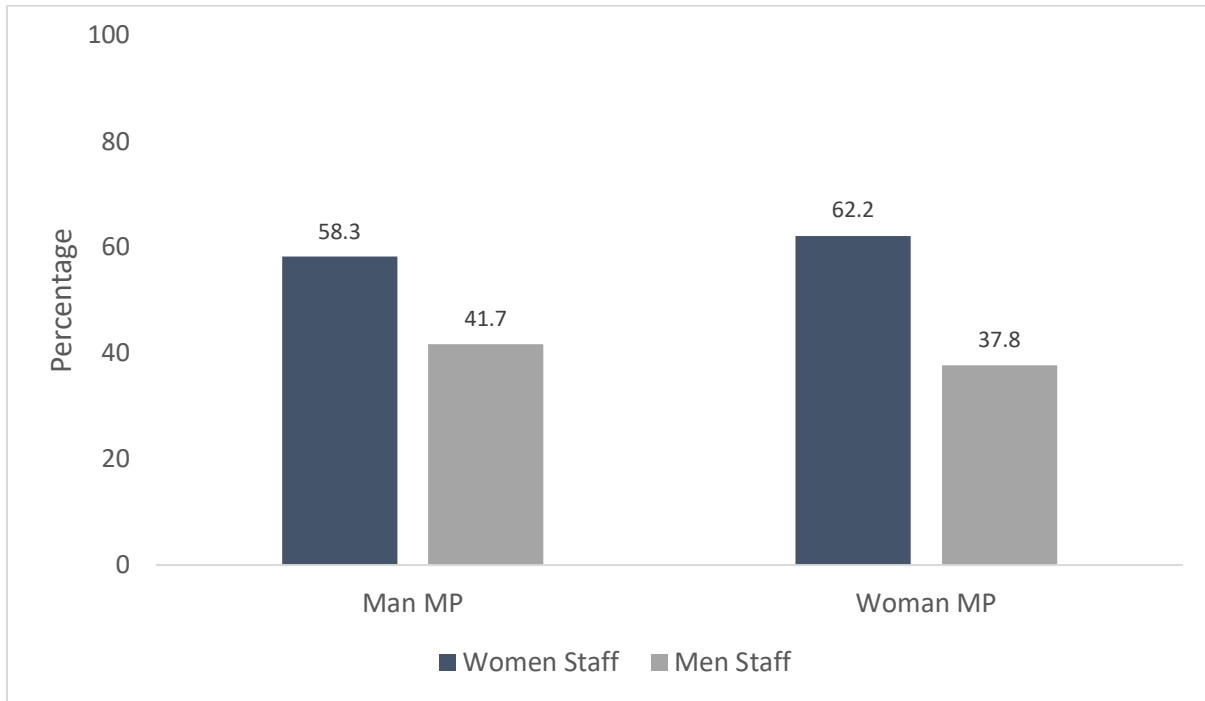


Figure 2: MP Gender and Gender, 2018

Figure 3 shows that there is no significant difference in the percentage of women employed between political parties. If representation is a process, as per Celis and Childs (2018), then the distinct lack of differences in the composition of MP's staff, despite the MP's gender or political party suggests that there is space for substantive representation that is not yet being effectively used in Canadian federal politics. If MPs are not making different staffing choices as a result of their own representational commitments (i.e. feminism) or their party's ideological orientation (i.e. equality of opportunity vs equality of result), then it follows that there may not be significant differences in how MPs choose to use their staff to substantively represent their constituents.

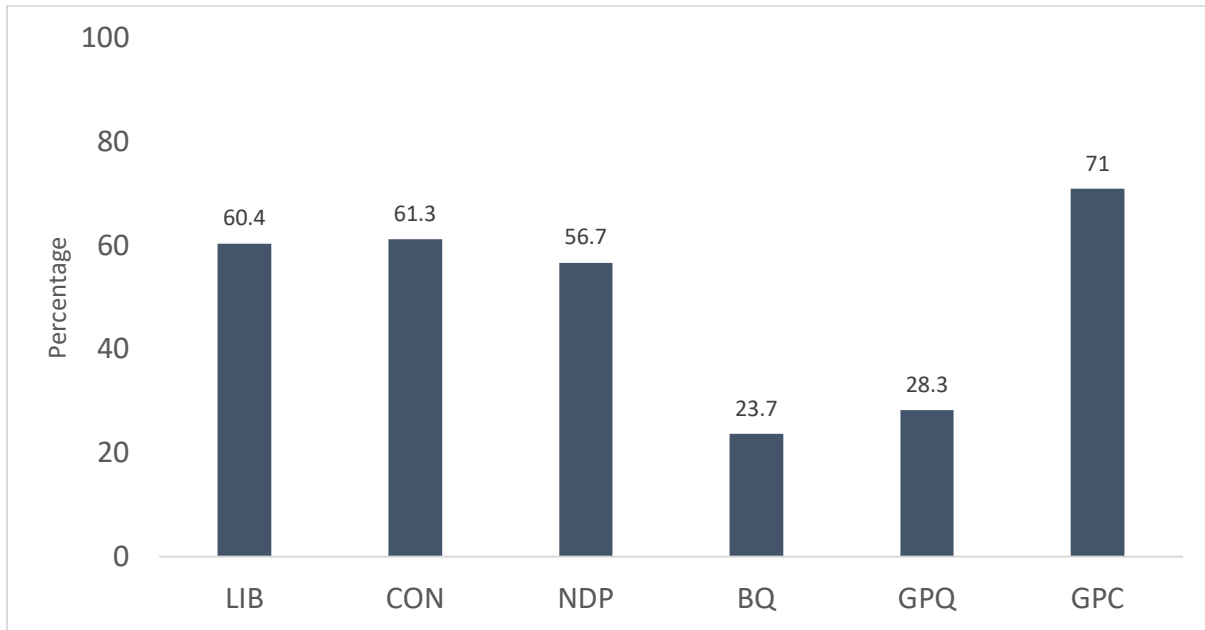


Figure 3: MP Political Party and Percentage of Women

To assess how MPs use their staff during a typical workweek, we asked survey respondents to fill out how many hours per week they spend on tasks commonly mentioned in the literature (MacLeod 2005; Docherty 2005). This will help us determine if and how MPs engage their staff to substantively represent their constituents and highlight if MPs do so to substantively represent gender or women. On average, staff spend the most time per week acting as a constituent liaison (10.67 hours) and emailing or answering phone calls (10.40 hours). This is followed by providing policy information to constituents (3.98 hours) and attending community events (3.67 hours). Staff spend little time with the MP themselves (2.22 hours) and preparing them for community events or government work (2.10 hours). Little time is spent on writing newsletters (0.89 hours).

For most tasks, there were no significant differences between men and women staff. Only two significant differences emerge. Men report spending about 12.6 hours more per week ($SD = 12.62$) doing activities that constitute representation such as meeting with constituents, assisting and connecting constituents to proper government avenues for their problems, and filing immigration casework. Women, in contrast, report spending just over 9 hours per week on these same activities ($SD=8.95$, $p=0.0788$). As well, women report spending about an hour more time per week scheduling meetings for their MP do than do men.⁵ These differences could be interpreted two ways: either MPs are using their women staff to do more clerical work and privileging staff who are men when it comes to more substantive political and representational work, or men are exaggerating the amount of substantive work they do for their MP. While both explanations are plausible, it seems more likely, given that politics is heavily masculinized and that MPs do not appear to vary much in the gender composition of their offices, that MPs

⁵Scheduling meetings: Men ($M=1.377$, $SD=1.90$); Women ($M=2.23$, $SD=2.63$), conditions $t(138) = -2.1138$, $p=0.0363$.

systematically ask their staff who are men to do more substantive representational work than do they do the women they employ. This does

An “other” option, with an open text box for specification, allowed for respondents to include additional work tasks. The other option was selected frequently (N=171) by about 35% of survey respondents. This option provides insight into what happens in offices outside of what the literature predicts for MP staff. One respondent noted, “can’t possibly estimate, I do all of the above and work overtime most weeks.” Another noted that it is hard to track as each day is different and each week varies. Staff spontaneously reported their “other” tasks includes casework for immigration concerns; finance and administration tasks, including submitting receipts and bills on behalf on the MP; planning events; coordinating with stakeholders and community organizations; and researching and drafting correspondence, policy, and speeches.

A major task completed by staff is publicity and advertising, mainly through posting on social media. Staff help the MP with their social media presence, including acting as a photographer for the MP at community events. This is another unexplored area for future research, as Docherty’s (2005) study began to discuss the difficulties MPs had with maintaining e-mail accounts and personal websites, arguing that the MP did not want to appear “too partisan” (83). Today, MPs’ websites and social media accounts are directly linked to the political party.

We also asked what drew staff to their job. Working for a MP is typically assumed to be a political appointment (MacLeod 2005; Snagovksy and Kerby 2018). However, results suggest that more nuance is required in interpreting why people are drawn to be MP staff. Only 25% of survey respondents indicated they had volunteered on their MP’s campaign. Others (18.4%) simply applied for the position. A majority of respondents (54.4%) did know the MP before starting their job. This could be because the majority of survey respondents (73.49%) also belong to the same political party as the MP they work for. Not all staff are co-partisans with MPs, as about 14% of survey respondents not belonging to any political party or were members of a different political party (12.65%).⁶ Instead of partisan considerations, the most common reasons why staff decided to work for a MP was to help people or their community (24%); because they had a background in the field, whether through work or education (23.3%); or an overall interest in politics (19.3%). This comports with research that outlines why people are motivated to work in the public service (c.f. Perry and Wise 1990), as this type of work often fulfills desires to serve the public interest or greater good. One respondent said that they “wanted to do something that made my heart happy and left me with a feeling of helping others and making a difference at the end of the work day.”

Due to the social construction of women being “natural caregivers” and women being overrepresented in the service industry, it was hypothesized that more women would list a desire to help citizens as a reason that drew them to work for a MP. However, men (34.0%) are more likely to say that helping their community or constituents was a reason that drew them to the job than women (20.3%). In contrast, women (11.4%) were more likely to cite systemic change as a reason for taking the job than men (3.8%). One woman wrote she was drawn to this position due to “the ability to cause change, to advocate on systemic issue.” Another woman staffer wrote how she “wanted to learn about the political system first-hand from the inside, in order to get a

⁶ Three employees of Liberal and Green MPs belonged to the New Democratic Party. Of those working for a Conservative MP, three were not members of a political party; two employees of Liberal MPs belonged to the New Democratic Party and fifteen were not members of any political party.

better idea of how to potentially change it in the future.” This could indicate some women are trying to change the nature of politics and are trying to do so through an accessible route; this is in line with how Celis and Childs (2018) describe substantive representation.

While historically MPs’ staff were rooted in secretarial support (Docherty 2005), the overall findings from motivations of why people work for MPs suggest that staff do not simply view the position as an administrative one. Although some staff noted that it simply was a paycheck, or that the office was close to their home, others had a strong commitment to helping their community or emphasized their interest in politics. Women (17.8%) were slightly more likely to list an interest in politics as a reason that drew them to the position compared to men (15.1%). However, when explicitly asked if they have always been interested in politics, men (75.4%) were more likely to strongly agree than women (58.3%). This follows previous findings of men being more overt in their political interest than women (Gidengil et al. 2004; Prusyers and Blais 2014). And, only a small proportion of MP staff saw their position as a stepping stone to a career in politics, though staff’s political ambition is considerably higher than the general public’s. About 18% of respondents would run in an election, though this holds for staff between the ages of 18-34 (33%) and 35-54 (9.8%) ($p < 0.00$). Staff over 55 were decidedly not interested in running as a candidate. We also find that the gender gap in political ambition is significant: men are about 17 percentage points ($p < 0.02$) more likely to say they would run in an election if asked than women. This gap is comparable to findings with other research (Fox and Lawless 2011; Prusyers and Blais 2014).

The Good – Helping People

When asked “What do you like about your job”, most MP staff reported that “helping constituents” (94%) and “making a difference in my community” (93%) were their top considerations. While women and men were equally likely to report they enjoyed helping people as MP staff, women were nearly 16 percentage points more likely than men to strongly agree that their work positively impacted other people’s lives. Many of the responses staff offered indicated they were expected to engage in a great deal of emotional labour (Hochschild 1983; Pugh 2011). When citizens meet friendly front-of-office government employees, they may be more likely to have a positive assessment of the candidate overall. In his study on local representatives in France, Le Lidec (2008) notes how MPs often take credit for any positive results that come out of their offices, regardless if they had a role in the outcome. One woman staff member mentioned one of her tasks was writing birthday cards to citizens, and another mentioned completing the shopping for the office. Both are tasks that are beneficial to MPs and both are examples of utilizing emotional labour skills.

Staff also reporting enjoying being involved in politics, both with respect to seeing policy implemented at the grassroots level or learning something new about their community or about government. Many responded that working for their MP specifically made their job enjoyable and worthwhile. The majority of respondents also indicated that meeting new people, attending community events, the workplace environment and the flexibility were positive aspects of their job. Half of respondents reported that they like informing policy decisions, though the other half of MP staff did not feel as though they had any impact on policy decisions. One respondent noted that they wished they had more of an opportunity in formulating policy; another wrote that they enjoyed being connected to what is happening in Ottawa. Some of the older respondents noted that they enjoy mentoring younger staff. One wrote how impressed they were in the exceptional talent in volunteers and potential employees and seeing potential in those interested

in politics is a benefit to their work. Others praised the flexibility and the autonomy of the position.

While an interest in politics was something that drew employees to the position, only 36% of respondents stated they enjoyed writing government documents, including speeches and policies. One respondent noted that they initially thought they would have more responsibility in writing legislation, but they do not have the opportunity to write government documents. This could be due to their MP's focus on directly serving constituents (Docherty 2005).

The Bad – Schedules and Management

Prior to November 2018, MP staff, though dealing directly with government services and employees, were not protected under the Canada Labour Code. On November 7, 2017, Bill C-65 – *An Act to amend the Canada Labour Code (harassment and violence), the Parliamentary Employment and Staff Relations Act and the Budget Implementation Act, 2017, No. 1* (hereafter referred to as Bill C-65)– was introduced. The main goal of Bill C-65 is to include MPs and their employees under the Canada Labour Code. This helped protect employees from various workplace incidents, whether it was harassment, or being fired without due cause. All parties supported the bill during the first two readings; it was passed into law in November 2018.

Though Bill C-65 helps protect staff in theory, many negative aspects of working for a MP still persist. For example, the legislation does not address the precarious nature of working for an MP. Staff's jobs are only secure for four years and dependent on outcome of the election. Given that Canadian election are notoriously volatile (Sayers 2017), it is reasonable to conclude that most MP staff assume their jobs are insecure. Reports about federal cabinet political staff observes that how many political aides often leave for other careers, citing long term job security as a drawback to working as a political staffer (Brodie 2012). This is reflected in our survey: of those who responded to the survey, 20% have worked in their current position for less than six months. A preliminary comparison of the GEDS data presented above, gathered in 2018, with an update collected in 2019 shows that about one third of staff left their position within that year. Despite this, the gender distribution of staff did not change, suggesting that women and men leaving their jobs are being replaced with personnel of the same gender.

Approximately 37% of respondents indicated a desire to continue to work within their position as a constituency office employee. However, their job position is dependent on whether or not the MP gets re-elected. In their research on frontline employee's passion and emotional exhaustion, Chen and colleagues (2019) argue it is important to create a culture of passion in the workplace, as it becomes part of the worker's identity. The authors find that when front-line workers are passionate about their job, they are "less likely to feel emotionally drained" (169). The authors emphasize that creating a worry-free environment can help to maintain worker's passion. In the current structure of MPs' staff, employees are always going to have a sense of worry that they will be out of a job following the next election. Nine respondents explicitly noted they were worried about their job security, noting how they can "lose it in 4 years" [Author's translation]. One respondent noted he disliked the "few employment protections in place." Creating a more professionalized and formal institution for MPs' staff could help to decrease thoughts job loss anxiety, which could decrease emotional exhaustion and overall enhance service quality for constituents.

One of the biggest challenges reported by the survey respondents was the MP as their main employer and an overall ambiguous management structure. Elected MPs come from diverse occupational backgrounds and not all are familiar with how to manage or run an office. Many of the respondents noted how their MP had unrealistic expectations of staff, including not knowing how to properly compensate their staff, schedule unrealistic hours, which often include many weekend functions. One respondent reported: “MPs are not given management training which can lead to [inefficient] and unrealistic expectations of staff and poor office management. An MP’s staff team is spread out over the riding and the country for some, it takes strong management skills to effectively run that ship - and MP’s are given little to no training on [how] to do this. Unless we are only electing bosses and people from corporate background - which we shouldn’t - this training should be provided for all MPS for the wellbeing of [their] staff and constituents.” Other respondents noted how labour was overtime and often unpaid. One respondent wrote, “Members don’t always understand the stress their staff is under and many of them don’t want to compensate staff for their work. They also don’t understand all the extra labour time being put in”. One respondent noted their MP has “high expectations of 24/7 availability.” Another wrote, “I don’t feel that I am paid enough for the commitment and dedication that I show, and for what is expected of me.” One respondent noted how they felt they were doing more than the MP themselves, throwing “tasks they should be doing on their staff which stresses the staff out and their members get the day off.”

This dedication is amplified around election time, with constituency office employees attending many extra events with their MP. One respondent noted that their day goes “well beyond a normal work day,” and that “no overtime is paid” even when they work evenings and “every single weekend.” A few respondents noted how the hours made it difficult to manage a work/life balance. Some respondents noted that, while they sometimes enjoy attending community events, having to attend at least one each weekend makes it difficult to “have a life outside of this field.”

Another reason for a high turnover rate could be due to emotional exhaustion from dealing with constituents. Emotional exhaustion is defined as “a state of physical or mental depletion, which is often accompanied by a high turnover rate, poor employee performance and low organizational effectiveness” (Chen, Chang and Wang 2019, 163). A constituency office “straddles the line between business and social service, depending how participants orient to the potential benefits and burdens” (Hofstetter 2016, 39). Constituency offices are not usually the first place that constituents go to with a problem, but the last: “People turn to their MP as a last resort and are often agitated/hostile.” Whether or not each case is successful is not always important, as “even acting as a good listener or going through the motions of helping can be enough to satisfy constituents” (Hofstetter 2016, 25). When utilized as a last resort, these offices and employees often face problems with great emotion.

The Ugly: Harassment from the Public, MPs

A challenge that was frequently mentioned by survey respondents was dealing with angry constituents. One survey respondent noted how political talk tends to be very emotional for people. As well, constituency offices are a primary resource for those looking to access visas for friends or relatives outside of the country. Reuniting constituents with a loved one can be incredibly emotional, for which one respondent noted the difficulty in knowing that “sometimes you aren’t going to be able to help constituents.” When constituents are angry, MP staff often have to deal with verbal abuse that can, at times, escalate to ongoing harassment.

While harassment in politics is certainly not new, the visibility of the stories of harassment within government offices has been amplified. Currently, the *Policy on Preventing and Addressing Harassment* (2014) (hereinafter referred to as the *Policy*) is the only policy regarding harassment in the workplace for MPs and their employees. The *Policy* applies to all MPs as employers, as well as staff, interns and volunteers employed by Members, House Officers and Research Officers. Harassment is defined by the *Policy* as “Any improper behaviour by a person that is directed at someone else, that is offensive and which that person knew or ought reasonably to have known would be unwelcome.” Harassment can be a one-time or ongoing situation. Experiencing harassment in the workplace has many emotional, physical, psychological, and economic impacts. It ranges from one being less effective at their job to experiencing mental health issues such as depression, to being deterred from a certain career path (Houle et al. 2011; Krook 2018). While this *Policy* provides some direction for cases involving harassment, there are still challenges that face Members and employees within government

We find that 23% of survey respondents experienced harassment at work, 65% of whom are women. This might be an underestimate, as MP staff reported some confusion as to what constitutes harassment, despite the definition provided in the *Policy*. When asked who was involved in the harassment, 47% indicated it was a constituent. One woman wrote: “People are assholes, and that includes the public. The amount of misogynistic and bigoted commentary by the public opposed to thoughtful critical responses is abhorrent and disgusting. The fact that Member's offices and Members are not able to call out this behaviour or identify constituents in that capacity further enables this behaviour.” Another woman noted how “constituents tend to forget that we are humans with feelings, so being a strangers' personal punching bag isn't fun.” Another woman wrote, “People can act inappropriately with staff. They can often be angry, rude, and sexist with interaction.” Another woman said specifically commented that constituents act with aggression, since people who are reaching out to the government do not have anywhere else to go. She also said how “political talk tends to be very emotional for people,” and is done so in an aggressive tone.

Women respondents also mentioned that they were the ones to be blamed for government decisions, defined broadly, by constituents. One woman wrote that she disliked “being yelled at by the general populous who think that I personally have somehow formed the current policies.” She continued by saying people call her directly saying that she should “be ashamed for working for the government,” thinking that she personally represents the elected government. A different woman wrote how she did not “like being blamed for the decision that the government makes.” While the MP may be the ones representing constituents in Ottawa, their constituency staff are often the ones dealing with constituent’s angry concerns about the government’s actions.

This raises questions about substantive representation of women. Given that women staff are disproportionately to be constituency assistants, they are also more likely to bear the brunt of aggravated and hostile communication and harassment from constituents. There seems to be a reluctance amongst MPs to call out their constituents for abusing their staff; instead, it is easier to ask staff to absorb this abuse. Can MPs who ask their staff, predominantly women, to work under such conditions really claim to substantively represent women as a group?

When cases of harassment occur within MP’s offices, the *Policy* recommends reporting to the MP first. The difficulty is that 33% of harassment reports from staff’s co-worker. An additional 14% of harassment cases reported in the survey were committed by the MP the respondent

worked for; 2% were committed by another MP. If the MP is the harasser, or if the MP fails to adequately address peer harassment, the *Policy* recommends reporting to the political party's Whip. There is no guidance for whips, though, and so it is plausible to expect that, in some cases, staff may assume the whip will protect the MP, their colleague, over the staff. The *Policy* does allow complainants can report to the Chief Human Resources Officer, located in Ottawa, but this may not be accessible for all staff across the country.

When asked how they handled the harassment, one respondent wrote: "I was always taught if you have a problem with someone you should address it with them. I attempted this and the following few months were bad. I felt like my job was at risk every day and now I just ignore it because short of going to a newspaper (and still losing my job) there's nothing you can do. Even our resources [in the office] work to protect the members." This comports with research on sexual harassment in the workplace that shows that most victims of sexual harassment quit their jobs because there are few mechanisms to meaningfully improve their work environment (McLaughlin et al. 2017). Many news stories have reported victims of sexual harassment on Parliament Hill chose to quit their job rather than reporting the abuse or continuing their work alongside their harasser (Zubi 2017). With a high turnover rate of employees and a lack of job protections or security without a centralized human resources department, it is plausible that many employees who experience harassment within these offices choose to leave their position instead of reporting the incident.

The *Policy* does have a Harassment Prevention Program which has the goal of early conflict resolution. Prevention and protecting employees are key goals of Bill C-65, where harassment and sexual harassment is taken as seriously as other work health and safety hazards (Hajdu 2018). This program provides an online training session for Members and their employees and is committed to providing regular training sessions. Pierre Parent, the Chief Human Resources Officer, reports 687 Members and employees have completed the online training as of March 31, 2018 (Board of Internal Economy 2018). However, when asked if employees have completed the online training program for preventing and addressing harassment, only 33% of survey respondents indicated they had. Those who did not complete the online training program were mostly full-time (83%) employees. This suggests that all employees are not being consistently trained on how to manage and report harassment at work.

Some MPs argue a one-time training is not enough, urging training should be completed on an ongoing basis (Rempel 2018). Indeed, research shows that harassment policies are more effective when they are well-known, salient and have zero to low tolerance levels (Jacobson and Eaton 2018). With the high turnover of employees, it would be easy for MP or senior constituency office workers to forgo properly training new staff on workplace harassment procedures. A more centralized hiring process, including consistent training standards for each employee working for a MP could ensure that every employee is aware of their rights as workers and of resources available to resolve issues.

We argue that MPs who harass their staff, or who turn a blind or incompetent eye to when members of their staff harass their peers, they cannot be good substantive representatives.

When we are considering substantive representation, we need to consider representatives as employers, and provide adequate resources and training to ensure harassment does not occur at work. We find that 33% of harassment came from staff's co-worker. In any other workplace

environment, these findings would be unacceptable. MPs should be adequately trained to support staff that deal with harassment from constituents and manage workplace harassment between employees. As well, staff should receive ongoing training to ensure that they are aware of the resources and support systems in place, and how to respond to harassment from constituents. If we are to understand politics *as* work, adequate protections need to be in place to protect employees.

Analysis and Future Steps

The experience of MP staff helps clarify the process of substantive presentation, particularly for groups such as women. Focusing on staff hiring practices, typical work tasks, as well as the abuse and harassment that staff face helps unpack how substantive representation of women exists as a process in Canada.

On the surface, it seems that most MPs are not using their staff as substantive representatives, or if they are, they are more likely to use men to engage in substantive representation. This may be a missed opportunity for many MPs who claim to (want to) represent women as a diverse group. Most MPs ask their staff to maintain unreasonable schedules for little to no overtime pay. There are few contexts where this kind of approach to employment would be tolerated. Worse, many MPs ignore, or at least fail to address harassment their staff face. We argue an MP cannot claim they substantively represent women if they ignore the harassment their staff face. Because women staffers are more likely to report harassment from constituents, and sexual harassment from peers and from MPs, it is clear many MPs fail here. What is not yet clear from the research on substantive representation is whether these failures as employers invalidate some of the more public acts MPs can undertake (i.e. votes, member statements, etc). We think it does.

Comparative research shows that staffing MP offices does not have to be this ad hoc. Instead, a centralised HR department akin to New Zealand's Parliamentary Service could both improve staff's job security, as well as their employment conditions. This would centralize staff hiring and use an HR department to act as a buffer between staff and MPs. In the New Zealand case, MP staff generally do belong to the same political party. Even so, much of the work MP staff report doing in Canada is not necessarily partisan. When helping constituents and their community, staff members forgo ideology, focusing on helping citizens in need.

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