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The Indirectness of Political Representation: A Blessing or a Concern? A Study of the Conceptions of Members of the Flemish Regional Parliament

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This article situates itself within ongoing scholarly debates on the conditions of democratic representation. It, more precisely, posits traditional concerns for the 'indirectness' of political representation—that is the possibility for citizens' alienation and exclusion from decision-making—against contemporary accounts that conceive of such 'indirectness' as quintessential to democracy; mobilising citizens' judgement and, potentially, drawing them into the decision-making process and making it more inclusive. Juxtaposing these two theoretical accounts with the practice of representation, this article researches—based on 70 semi-structured interviews with members of the Flemish regional parliament—how representatives themselves conceive of representation and deal with its indirectness.

Over the past two decades, the concept of political representation has received renewed attention from democratic theorists (Urbinati and Warren, 2008, p. 387). This renewed attention builds from a critical reinterpretation of representation's indirectness, that is the spatial and temporal gap between those represented and their representatives. Traditionally, democratic theorists problematised this indirectness. To them, the lack of coincidence between a people and those involved in decision-making processes carried a sense of alienation, potentially leading to the betrayal of citizens' preferences. As a consequence, they conceived of representative democracy as but an imperfect approximation of direct democracy (e.g. Mayo, 1960, p. 95).

Contemporary scholars, in contrast, conceive of representation's indirectness as indispensable to the realisation of democracy. To them, the spatial and temporal

gap between those represented and their representatives carries a reflexive quality it confronts those represented with their representatives' judgement and, within this process, evokes their critical reflection on what is at stake for them. Representation, in this regard, has the capacity to mobilise individuals, elicit their judgement and draw them into decision-making processes, potentially making these processes more inclusive (Plotke, 1997, p. 19; Young, 2000, p. 130; Mansbridge, 2003, p. 515; Urbinati, 2006, p. 5; Rosanvallon, 2011, p. 119). While contemporary theorists do not deny that representation carries a risk of alienation they conceive of representation as imperative to constituting democratic sovereigns. Because the political world and the people who inhabit it are not objectively given, representation is indispensable to drawing people together and imputing a sense of unity on them (Disch, 2011, p. 101).

In this article, we build from contemporary innovations in representation theory and research how members of parliament (MPs) conceive of political representation and deal with its indirectness. To date, only few studies have incorporated these theoretical innovations into their research designs (e.g. Childs *et al.*, 2010; Severs, 2012; De Wilde, 2013; Severs *et al.*, 2013). Building from 70 in-depth interviews with members of the Flemish regional parliament, our study aims to generate new insights into the praxis of political representation and the conditions of democratic representation. Our analysis draws, first, from the extant literature on representatives' roles and the insight that MPs' role orientations are affected by both the formal rules of the electoral system—implying a rational cost–benefit analysis of electoral success—and informal (parliamentary) practices that shape MPs' normative beliefs (an interactional approach) (cf. Searing, 1994; Andeweg, 2003; Esaiasson, 2000; Strøm, 2007). Our analysis draws, second, from contemporary representation theory that has demonstrated the limitations of 'trustee–delegate' binaries for understanding MPs' representative dilemmas (cf. Rehfeld, 2009, p. 215).

Contemporary theorising on the constitutive character of representation has induced important shifts in scholarly debates on democratic representation—defined by citizens' empowered inclusion, and the normative standards that allow for evaluating it (cf. Table 1). Traditionally, democratic theorists conceived of 'the people' as readily knowable (i.e. the electorate) and defined democratic representation by reference to moments of electoral proximity (i.e. moments of authorisation and accountability). The alteration of electoral moments—that is the possibility of electoral sanctions—guaranteed citizens' control over the representation process, enhancing both representatives' accountability to them and promoting the latter's responsiveness to their preferences (e.g. Dahl, 1971, p. 1; Manin *et al.*, 1999, p. 4). Scholars' formalised conception of democratic representation reflected ongoing discord over representatives' role obligations. This discord concerned both the scope of representatives' actions—that is

Table 1 Key shifts in thinking about democratic representation

	'Electoral' conception	**'Constitutive' conception**
Democratic representation	Electoral *moments* of authorisation and accountability	A *process* of conversational turn-taking
Democratic constituents	*Readily knowable* (electoral constituents, the voters)	*Constituted bodies* ('those represented', 'the people')
Representational dilemma	*Trustee* (anticipatory)–*Delegate* (promissory)	*Political artist* (mobilisation as necessity)
Empowered inclusion	*Citizens' control over* the representation process (sanctions)	*People's control within* the representation process (inclusion of judgement)
Representational norms	*Accountability* (responsiveness)	*Deliberative 'account-giving'* (reflexivity)

whether they should act for the nation or a part thereof—and the style of representatives' actions—that is 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, p. 145). While some preferred 'delegates' for their commitment to citizens' (electoral) preferences—what Mansbridge (2003, p. 515) calls 'promissory' representation—others preferred the relative independence of 'trustees'. The latter's perspectival distance from those represented allows them to advocate the 'general good' and respond to unforeseen challenges—what Mansbridge (2003, p. 515) calls 'anticipatory' representation.

Contemporary theorising on democratic representation deviates from these 'formalised' conceptions in two ways (cf. Table 1). First, the 'trustee–delegate' controversy is increasingly conceived as wrongly put: it asks representatives to choose between two aspects that are inextricably bound up in political representation.[1] Building from the notion that political reality is not objectively given but requires interpretation, contemporary theorists (e.g. Mansbridge, 2003; Saward, 2006; Runciman, 2007; Disch, 2011) now conceive of representation as a 'world of claim-making rather than fact-adducing' (Saward, 2006, p. 302). In order to work, that is be conceived as 'standing for' something or someone else, representatives' claims need to establish a meaningful linkage with audiences' prevailing beliefs about what is represented (Severs, 2012, p. 171). Because representation both necessitates representatives' independent judgement ('trustee') and attention to audiences' prevailing beliefs ('delegate'), representatives are increasingly conceived as

[1]This argument was originally made by Pitkin (1967, p. 165), whose seminal work 'The Concept of Representation' remains a source of contemporary theorising.

'political artists': they mobilise those represented to identify with the representative claims offered to them.

Second, scholars have renounced the belief that representatives' responsiveness to citizens' preferences offers (sufficient) proof of democratic representation. The understanding that representatives' claims help constitute what they apparently appear to be describing only (cf. Disch, 2011, p. 109) has, more specifically, shifted scholars' normative attention to citizens' capacity for control within—as opposed to over—the representation process. The constitutive character of representation rendered scholars sceptical of the utility of preference satisfaction as a measure of democratic representation: it is logically impossible to justify social practices—such as representation—by making reference to the groups and preferences they have helped to produce (Sunstein, 1991, p. 8; Page and Shapiro, 1992, p. 354; Kuklinski and Segura, 1995). Instead, scholars now focus on the inclusion of citizens' judgement within the representation processes that affect them (e.g. Warren and Castiglione, 2004, p. 5; Disch, 2011, p. 112). Because 'democratic constituents' only gain meaning within the representation process, power should not reside with those represented (as 'delegators') or their representatives (as trustees) but should remain 'empty'—permanently shared between them (Ankersmit, 1996, pp. 49–50; see also Pitkin, 1967, p. 155).

In keeping with this view, scholars' normative considerations have shifted from static notions of authorisation and accountability—invoking single moments of proximity—to an active form of 'account-giving' (cf. Table 1). Ideally, and because of the possibility for conflict, this 'account-giving' should have a deliberative character; implying a two-way communication and mutual respect between those represented and their representatives (Mansbridge, 2009, p. 370; Severs, 2010, pp. 416–417). 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 and mutual recognition. When the representation process takes on the form of an extended conversation, including turn-taking between those represented and their representatives, it facilitates a shared creativity (Näsström, 2006, p. 330). Turn-taking, in addition, fosters the kind of trust, recognition and accountability typical of democratic relationships (Urbinati, 2000, p. 760; Young 2000, p. 23; Severs *et al.*, 2013, p. 435).

Recently, a series of inductive studies has set out to uncover MPs' 'conceptions of self' (e.g. Esaiasson, 2000; Navarro, 2009; Brack, 2012). Although these studies have effectively demonstrated the shortcomings of the 'trustee–delegate' binary, these studies did not explicitly draw from contemporary representation theory, limiting their capacity to inform critical theorising on the conditions of democratic representation.

The article continues as following. First, we elaborate upon the data gathered and the methods applied in this study. We explain our choice to interview

members of the Flemish regional parliament (MPs) and elaborate upon the character of the Flemish electoral system. Next, we offer a discussion of our main findings. Our analysis reveals that MPs embrace the constitutive logic of representation but seal the creative process off from ordinary citizens. Although MPs acknowledge the constituted character of 'the people' and their part in constituting it, they display important distrust towards the claims formulated by citizens in between electoral moments. Giving evidence of a deep-rooted concern for citizens' potentially self-serving behaviour, MPs express a commitment to the only 'constituent' that has manifested itself in a 'democratic manner', namely 'the people' as defined in their electoral programmes and approved by the electorate. This commitment at once lowers the necessity of acting responsively and relegates those represented to the background, awarding them the status of an audience that exercises sovereignty only at the ballot. This conception is at odds with the democratic principle of 'deliberative account-giving', which sets out to share rather than alternate power with those represented. In the conclusion, we elaborate on the study's implications for electoral democracy and theorising on the conditions of democratic inclusion.

1. Studying MPs' conceptions: data and methods

From a socio-cultural and institutional standpoint, the Flemish regional parliament offers an interesting case for studying MPs' conceptions of political representation. Established in 1993, the Flemish regional parliament formed the upshot of a series of state reforms that regulated the transition from the Belgian unitary state to a federal system with extensive regional policy-making powers.[2] Its inception and early years were marked by a political will to bring 'politics closer to the citizenry' and break with elitist and corrupt ways of doing politics. Following a series of political and party financing scandals, a 'new political culture' of transparency, equality and efficiency was articulated (Suetens and Walgrave, 2001; Celis and Woodward, 2003). In 1994, and reflecting this 'new political culture', gender quota were imposed on the composition of party lists.[3] To date, similar measures to remediate the underrepresentation of citizens with migrant backgrounds have not been taken.

[2]Despite a shared policy burden with the federal level, the Flemish regional parliament holds important policy-making competences in communal areas (e.g. education, culture, healthcare, child care, social care, equal opportunities, issues related to integration) and regional areas (e.g. housing, spatial planning, the environment, farming and fishing, energy, employment programmes, public transport and Flanders' international relations).

[3]Following a series of law reforms (1994, 2002), 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 (Meier, 2004).

Although the EU Maastricht Treaty (European Union, 1992) has extended municipal voting rights to EU-migrants (1996) and non-EU migrants (2004), the Flemish debate on the political rights of citizens with migrant backgrounds has tended to revolve around the latter's growing demographic strength and concomitant capacity to unsettle the traditional party system.

The specificities of the debate on citizens with migrant backgrounds should be understood in light of the Flemish electoral system. Contrary to the British 'first past the post' system, Flemish MPs are elected in multi-member districts and appointed on the basis of proportionality. This system at once allows MPs to act more independently from their electoral constituents and to appropriate themselves a specific electoral profile such as, for instance, that of champion of migrants' interests. MPs' autonomy is further enhanced by the Flemish system of personal votes, which lowers the effect of their party list positioning. Members of the Flemish regional parliament often also hold a local mandate and alternate regional and federal parliamentary mandates. Because of the proportional logic of the electoral system, it is likely that Flemish MPs will, in comparison to MPs elected in majoritarian systems, put greater emphasis on their representative autonomy—either as a 'trustee' or 'political artist'.

The study draws on in-depth, semi-structured interviews with members of the Flemish regional parliament. The interviews were conducted in spring 2012; halfway through the current legislature (2009–2014). In November 2011, all 124 sitting members were invited to participate in the study. 70 MPs agreed to a face-to-face interview[4] (response rate 56.5%). These MPs are a representative sample with respect to a range of characteristics, including gender, age and political ideology. The diverging response rates among parties (cf. Table 2) reflect the outcome of the 2009 elections. The response rate is particularly high for the Flemish nationalist party, which made its electoral breakthrough in 2009. The social-democratic and liberal parties suffered important electoral losses. The lower response rates for these parties suggest that these parties had not fully recovered from these losses—and their implications in terms of restructuration and re-staffing—at the time of our study. The high response rate among green and right-wing parties may, then again, be explained by the fact that these parties traditionally belong to the opposition. They conceive of parliamentary studies as an opportunity to be treated on equal footing with governing parties.

The interviews were semi-structured and set out to uncover MPs' conceptions on political representation, its indirectness and their ways of dealing with it. Because of the multi-faceted character of MPs' activities, we explicitly framed the interview in terms of political representation. This allowed for getting at the

[4]The interviews lasted approximately 1 h were tape-recorded and anonymity was guaranteed. The interviews took place at MPs' offices, party headquarters and, in one case, an MP's house.

Table 2 MPs' party affiliation compared with parliamentary seat distribution (as per 1 November 2011)

	Governing coalition			**Opposition**					
	Christ-Dem.	**Flem.-Nation.**	**Social Dem.**	**Green**	**Liberal**		**Right-wing**	**French-speak.**	**Ind.**
	CD&V	**N-VA**	**sp.a**	**Groen!**	**Open Vld**	**LDD**	**Vlaams Belang**	**UF**	**Independent**
	(18/31)	**(14/17)**	**(8/19)**	**(5/7)**	**(9/22)**	**(3/7)**	**(13/19)**	**(0/1)**	**(0/1)**
Parliamentary seats (124)	25%	13.70%	15.32%	5.64%	17.74%	5.64%	15.32%	0.80%	0.80%
Participants in study (70)	25.7%	20%	11.42%	7.14%	14.28%	4.28%	17.14%	0%	0%
Discrepancy (54)	+0.70%	+6.30%	−3.90%	+1.50%	−3.46%	−1.36%	+1.82%	−0.80%	−0.80%

phenomenon under study—representation's indirectness—without needing to engage in overly broad exchanges on what MPs do on a day-to-day base. Our topic guide contained questions related to the general nature of political representation, such as 'how would you describe representation?' or 'when are you representing?', and questions aimed specifically at MPs' relation with 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 the students extensive training prior to the interviews, including the collective creation of a topic guide. We also organised learning sessions that allowed the students to exchange interviewing 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 representation.[5] Although MPs appreciated being interviewed on the matter, many stated that they found the interview difficult.[6] This may be explained by our study's explicit appeal to MPs' capacity for abstract reasoning. Although we encouraged MPs to substantiate their views on the basis of their personal experiences, we refrained from framing our questions in terms of specific parliamentary debates. Such framing would have elicited predominantly political—pro or contra—reactions, diverting attention from the overarching question as to how MPs undertake representation. Moreover, and in order to lower social desirability bias, MPs were never directly asked to judge the legitimacy of their representative strategies. Indirect questions, including projective questions such as 'how do you believe other MPs react to these challenges?' or 'would you consider your view on representation unique in any regard?' were used to this purpose (Kvale, 1996, p. 134).

The method of analysis applied to this study was directed content analysis (Burnham *et al.*, 2004, p. 236; Hsieh and Shannon, 2005, p. 1281; Childs *et al.*, 2010, p. 206). Directed in the sense that the analysis builds from our understanding of representation theory and the outlined conceptions of democratic representation (cf. supra). Through an iterative and in-depth reading of the interview transcripts, we organised the main elements in MPs' accounts and reconstructed their conceptions of political representation. We conceived of the outlined theoretical conceptions as a theoretical—and, hence, artificial—binary. Rather than attempt to classify MPs' accounts as expressions of an 'electoral' or 'constitutive'

[5]Interview 18; also interviews 2, 19, 32 and 38.

[6]Interview 1; also interviews 10, 33 and 36.

conception of representation, we set out to uncover the specificities of MPs' conceptions and how these relate to and combine elements of the two theoretical models. Our analysis was aided by our knowledge of Belgian and Flemish politics and our understanding of parties' ideological foundations. We did not detect any consistent variation among MPs from different political parties. This finding suggests that the determinants of MPs' conceptions of democratic representation and ways of dealing with its indirectness need to be situated at the systemic—as opposed to the ideological—level.

As stated in the introduction, we found that MPs combine the 'electoral' and 'constitutive' accounts in a specific yet non-arbitrary manner. In the remainder of this article, we demonstrate, first, how MPs intuitively tie their moral obligations up with the electoral system—as 'electoral trustees'. Following that, we showcase how this normative orientation conflicts with their 'constitutive' understanding of representation and lowers their willingness to engage in discursive interactions with citizens in between moments of elections. In the conclusion, we offer some tentative explanations for our findings and elaborate upon their implications for theorising on democratic representation.

2. An 'electoral' trustee: privileging accountability over responsiveness

When specifying the meaning of political representation, members of the Flemish parliament spontaneously invoke normative ideals related to their function. They define political representation in terms of a contribution 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. To MPs, political representation essentially boils down to the promotion and execution of their societal views. Although they acknowledge the subjectivity of their views (i.e. claims about society), they justify their right to impose these views on society by making reference to their electoral mandate. MPs conceive of their election as evidence of citizens' trust in them and approval of their views. This authorisation sets MPs' activities apart from other instances of 'acting for' (such as lobbying or civil society advocacy): it charges them with the responsibility to steer society in the 'right direction' and vests in them the necessary powers to effectuate societal change.

In MPs' views, the ballot serves a dual purpose: while it features as their main source of legitimacy, it equally serves as a perpetual reminder of the origin and temporality of their decision-making powers. This particular combination—the legitimate but provisional character of their powers—forms the basis of MPs' normative considerations. 'The tasks and the powers that I have,' one MP states,[7] 'have been

[7] Interview 46.

entrusted to me. They are not my own but they are mine temporarily'. Conceiving of themselves as but temporal custodians of sovereign power, MPs define their relationship with the citizenry in terms of a privilege, implying gratitude for the powers vested in them as well as a sense of responsibility towards those represented.

MPs conceive of their political responsibilities as entailing a prudential leadership. While MPs emphasise the importance of carefully weighing off the impact of their actions on citizens' lives, they equally stress the emphasis of a certain boldness, implying a willingness to assume responsibility when citizens are incapable or unwilling to make decisions themselves.[8] This understanding of political responsibility secures an important space for MPs' representative autonomy. Although MPs consider citizens' preferences valuable, such preferences are neither necessary nor binding for democratic representation (cf. Rehfeld, 2009, pp. 215–216). When asked about the nature of their relationship with those represented and how they determine what to do and how to act, MPs invariably reject the notion of acting directly (as a 'delegate') on the basis of the preferences of electoral or other 'constituents'. In contrast, MPs favour an 'indirect' linkage with those represented based on a sense of 'trusteeship'. As one MP (emphasis added) puts it

> 'I do not conceive of it [representation] as [entailing] a direct link. You know, it does not mean that you should render acts nor that you should, in a populist style, become the spokesperson of a particular group. Neither does it imply that there should be any direct linkage to a societal pillar—as is the case in certain parties—nor that you should, all of a sudden, begin to say whatever you believe your voters, ohm, ... may want you to say. I believe that it entails a more loosely defined connection. In a sense, yes, people have ... you know, extended their trust in you ... I believe the link needs to be conceived as something more loosely defined.'[9]

As shows from the above statement, MPs legitimate their representative autonomy in a twofold manner: they combine formal arguments (making reference to their appointment as representatives) with substantive arguments (making reference to the quality of their representative actions).

First, and related to their 'being' representatives (cf. Rehfeld, 2006, pp. 17–18), MPs emphasise the fact that their election resulted from a highly competitive and formalised process during which citizens could select their preferred candidates. MPs invoke the routinised character of elections, that is its timely and regular

[8] Several MPs (Interviews 9, 25, 55 and 67) refer to the 'burden of responsibility'; describing their feeling of being at loss at the onset of their mandate. One MP (interview 65) states to prefer the term 'parliamentarian' over that of 'representative of the people'; deeming the latter 'too heavily loaded'.

[9] Interview 55.

organisation—as a means to justify their relative independence from those represented. According to MPs, citizens are sufficiently acquainted with the rules of elections to understand that the latter entails a (temporal) transfer of sovereign powers. 'Citizens know: I vote for this person, I extend my trust in him or her,' one MP[10] says, 'and if he or she or the party does not perform well, then I will, at the next election, retract my vote'. According to MPs, citizens are sufficiently acquainted with this dual function of elections, that is the selection and subsequent rewarding or sanctioning of representatives. While making reference to this 'common place', MPs minimalise citizens' role in between moments of elections and elevate citizens' acquiescence to the level of civic virtue. Recurrent within the interviews were MPs' statements that citizens should give MPs the space and time to prove themselves. As shows from the above statement, MPs clearly distance themselves from a 'delegate' role conception: rather than commit themselves to their constituents, citizens should commit themselves to their (authorised) representatives.

Second, and concerning the quality of their representative activities, MPs argue that their autonomy facilitates the promotion of the general good, that is Flanders' interests. It allows them to rise above the calls of the masses, prevents them from being swayed by issues of the day and allows them to introduce necessary policy measures at times when citizens are unaware of or incapable of correctly assessing the character and scope of societal challenges. MPs, in addition, argue that their relative independence allows them to breach taboos and give voice to social groups that are silenced or lack the possibility to speak up for themselves.[11] Many MPs testify about their important attentiveness to the interests of marginalised or destitute social groups (e.g. 'the poor', 'the underprivileged') and pride themselves for their regular contacts with civil society actors (such as labour unions, professional associations and non-governmental organizations [NGOs]) that promote the interests of these groups.[12] MPs, however, consider the role of 'spokesperson' inappropriate.[13] Such a role would restrain their independence and, concomitantly, their capacity to promote the general good. As one MP puts it

[10]Interview 6.

[11]Interviews 7, 10, 11, 28, 47 and 70.

[12]Interviews 3, 53, 55 and 59.

[13]Although we were unable to detect a consistent pattern among female MPs, some of them—especially incumbents—explicitly identified themselves with 'women' and stated to regularly act on behalf of women. Two out of the five sitting MPs with a migrant background participated in our study. Neither of them made reference to migrant communities. Although our findings are inconclusive on this matter, the greater tendency to identify with social groups among female MPs may be explained by the institutionalisation of gender equality in the Flemish parliament (e.g. gender quota).

> No, I do not let that one person or those dozens that voted for me define my conception of the general good . . . Because then you fall prey, in fact, to a set of people that are capable of organising themselves . . . And what about the silent majority?[14]

As representatives of the people, elected through universal franchise, MPs define their moral obligations in reference to the general good. A crucial task for them consists in integrating the interests of dispossessed groups in a broader conception of the general good. To MPs, this commitment equally implies that MPs should be willing to stand up to (parts of) their electorate when they consider the latter's views erroneous, unjust or uncalled for. Making allusion to the popular idiom: 'only dead fish swim with the current', one MP[15] suggests that society is not served by a politics of appeasement. This view is generally shared among MPs: about half of them (34 out of 70) explicitly state that they do not fear electoral sanctions.[16] Although MPs consider the possibility of being held to account—and potentially being voted out of office, they emphasise the importance of staying true to their views instead of 'chasing after their electorate'.[17]

At this stage, the limitations of MPs' electoral conception of political representation become apparent. MPs' emphasis on their electoral mandate taps into the long-standing belief (cf. Mayo, 1960) that representation entails a clear division of labour between those represented and their representatives—as opposed to a shared creative endeavour. This division of labour along with the conception that they act as temporal custodians of sovereign power frees MPs of the duty to engage in reciprocal interactions with citizens in between electoral moments. During the interviews, MPs express great distrust of citizens' claims and consider the latter as largely self-serving. Making reference to their electoral mandate, MPs consider it their prerogative to decide whether and how to respond to citizens' claims. Although this attitude does not in itself preclude the possibility of responsiveness, it does indicate that accountability—that is the possibility of being held to account—offers in itself no guarantees for representatives' responsiveness to those represented.

The opportunities for responsiveness appear, moreover, thwarted by the complex relationships of accountability MPs enter into following their election (cf. Strøm *et al.*, 2003, p. 60). MPs are considerate of the fact that they share in their parties' electoral success and losses and, in this sense, owe allegiance to

[14]Interview 30; also interviews 1, 13, 45, 46, 55 and 61.

[15]Interview 70.

[16]MPs belonging to the governing coalition were more sensitive to electoral sanctions than their counterparts in the opposition.

[17]Interviews 7, 30, 48, 50 and 70.

their party's views.[18] In a similar vein, MPs express the need to uphold inter-party governing agreements. 'At elections, the voters state their mind,' one MP[19] 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 are more recurrent among MPs belonging to the ruling coalition, opposition members express a similar commitment. 'You do not need to agree with it,' one opposition member[20] states, 'but you need to help exercise control over it'. These diverging responsibilities tie MPs increasingly closer to governmental institutions, lowering the opportunities for spontaneity—and responsiveness—in their contacts with those represented (cf. Mair, 2009, p. 11–15).

In sum, we find that MPs' conceptions of representation are largely consistent with the 'electoral trustee' account as specified in the literature. MPs define their moral obligations in reference to the electoral system and conceive of themselves as acting for and accountable to 'the people' who emanated from their electoral offerings and the electorate's approval thereof. Expressing their responsibility to this people, MPs are greatly distrusting of the democratic status of the claims formulated by citizens in between electoral moments. As a consequence, they consider it their prerogative to judge whether and how to respond to these demands. The rigidity of this conception stands in sharp contrast to MPs' self-proclaimed creativity and their need to anticipate societal challenges and merge the interests of dispossessed, unorganised groups within the 'general interest'. In the following section, we will unpack this ambiguity further and connect it to the difficulties which MPs experience in reading their 'electorate'.

3. A 'political artist': compensating invisibility with visibility

During the interviews MPs regularly testify about the difficulty of 'reading' their voters (cf. Saward, 2006, p. 306) and their fears of representing a 'wrong'—that is non-democratic—constituency. When asked about the kind of people which they belief to represent, MPs intuitively make reference to their electorate yet simultaneously state not to know who their voters precisely are. 'But who is my voter?', one MP[21] 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] and who thinks it's okay for me to talk big'. Because of the secrecy of the ballot, MPs can only guess about the kind of citizens which they are accountable to. Because of the

[18]Interviews 14, 50 and 68.

[19]Interview 19, also interviews 7, 15, 19, 39, 41, 50, 56, 67 and 68.

[20]Interview 35.

[21]Interview 69.

'invisibility' of their voters, MPs consider it safest to orient their actions towards the 'constituent' defined in their electoral programme and authorised by the electorate. As one MP formulates it

> 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 becomes better and welfare increases.[22]

When specifying how they determine what is in the interest of these 'invisible' voters, MPs often refer to their past professional experiences or volunteer work and elaborated on how the ways in which these experiences have helped them to identify the type of issues and, subsequently, the type of people which they need to represent. Alternatively, some MPs[23] make reference to their party programmes or state that their understanding of 'the people' and its interests are shaped by party meetings. A third set of MPs state,[24] then again, that 'the people' only gains meaning within the parliament as the result of cross-party exchanges and confrontations.

MPs' testimonies about the lack of transparency of their constituents and their active part in calling the latter into being bears close resemblance with contemporary theories (e.g. Mansbridge, 2003, p. 515; Saward, 2006, p. 306; Rehfeld, 2009, p. 5; Disch, 2011, p. 108) that problematise the stability and ready knowability of constituents and their interests. In keeping with contemporary theories, MPs acknowledge the subjectivity of their claims and emphasise the importance of gaining recognition: in order to be conceived as meaningful—that is as standing for something or someone—their claims need to be recognised by others. When considering the daily practicalities of political representation and the type of actions it requires, MPs emphasise the importance of establishing, at the ideational level, 'a connection between their representative acts and those represented'.[25]

MPs understand that the representation of people (who have a mind of their own and are capable of objecting) and the representation of ideas (who do not) are not invariably in harmony with one and another (cf. Pitkin, 1967, p. 155). In order to attain harmony, citizens need to be mobilised; that is, they need to be solicited to care about the policy issues advanced by MPs and to accept the latter's stances on these issues (cf. Disch, 2011, p. 107). This view stands in sharp contrast to electoral

[22]Interview 70, also interviews 10, 34, 48, 50 and 68.

[23]Interviews 13, 41 and 64.

[24]Interview 47, also interview 48.

[25]Interviews 34, 48 and 50.

conceptions that treat 'the people' as unequivocally given and prior to the representation process. Contemplating on his demarche from conventional (i.e. electoral) conceptions, one MP[26] argues, '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'.

As shows from the foregoing, the understanding that political representation entails a 'performance' was highly recurrent within MPs' interviews. When reflecting on the 'invisibility' of their constituents, MPs emphasise the importance of their proper visibility. They conceive of their representative successes as largely dependent upon their capacity to establish a meaningful linkage with those represented. Although MPs predominantly conceive of this 'performativity' in theatrical terms—understood as a dramaturgical presentation of self—they equally acknowledge the ontological effects of their performances.[27]

In relation to the theatrical aspects of representation, MPs greatly emphasise the need to 'be seen'. Absent from the public's eye, MPs contend, their representative acts lack meaning or, more accurately, lack being seen to exist. 'You should compare it to doing justice,' one MP[28] states, 'it is not only important that you strive after justice but people equally need to see that justice is being done'. This element of visibility features most prominently in MPs' comments on the public broadcasting programme 'Vila Politica', which has been airing parliamentary question times since 2002. Many MPs mention the programme and testify about the ways in which the presence of camera crews has altered their representative strategies. As shows from the following statement, MPs have become more aware 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 recording because I know that it affects the way in which people perceive me. 'Those slackers, where are they?', people wonder. 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 checking '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 ensure that people at home have seen me work.[29]

[26]Interview 48, see also interviews 1, 5, 14, 17, 27, 32, 31, 34, 38, 48, 50, 51, 55, 57, 65 and 67.

[27]Within contemporary representation literature, the notion of performativity is often limited to the theatricality of political representation—understood as action by actors. However, and influenced by speech act theory, performativity is more broadly conceived as processes by which representative actions attribute unfixed and precarious states of affairs, the appearance of substance and continuity (cf. Disch, 2011, p. 108).

[28]Interview 10.

[29]Interview 60.

MPs[30] regularly testify about the efforts it took them to gain recognition as the people's representative. They elaborate on their creation and adoption of a public image that sets them apart from other MPs and that makes it easier for citizens to identify with. Consistent with previous studies (e.g. Andeweg, 1997, p. 124), we found that MPs' policy specialisation forms a key element in their representative strategies. Besides giving them a sense of purpose and self-worth (e.g. Searing, 1994, p. 389; Navarro, 2009, p. 490), their specialisation in certain topical issues also enhances their visibility within the media, making it easier to be conceived as caring about citizens' interests.[31]

Although this theatricality comes at an obvious loss of 'authenticity of the self', MPs regularly invoke the notion of 'authenticity' when describing their relation with those represented. According to MPs, it is crucial to be perceived 'similar to' citizens, sharing a mode of living and the daily worries associated with it. To this end, MPs not only participate in social media networks but also attend 'everyday' events, such as soccer games and farmer's markets.[32] Many MPs also stated that they refrain from the use of high-sounding language when giving an account of their activities to citizens.

Although MPs' representational strategies appear predominantly motivated by the need to mobilise citizens, MPs are considerate of the contextual limits to their representative creativity (cf. Saward, 2006, p. 303). Evoking the need for a sense of 'real-ness', they critique some of their colleagues who retreat into the 'ivory tower' or 'bell-jar' of parliament. 'You may never bed yourself down in parliament where society is only artificially present and you only receive information on societal problems through committee reports and the like,' one MP[33] argues. Elaborating further on the risk of alienation, another MP[34] states, 'MPs who only hang around here in Brussels [location of the Flemish Parliament] . . . in the end, they do not know how much a loaf of bread costs anymore'.

Although these findings suggest that MPs try to fill up the gap between them and those represented with speech, this speech generally falls short of the deliberative qualities specified in the literature. MPs, more specifically, do not attribute to citizens the position of equal interlocutors. Such position would imply a sense of recognition and conversational turn-taking with those represented (Urbinati, 2000, p. 760; Mansbridge, 2009, p. 370; Severs *et al.*, 2013). MPs, in contrast, conceive of themselves as privileged—because democratically appointed—interpreters of

[30]Interviews 20 and 52.

[31]Interview 6, 12, 42 and 70.

[32]Interviews 2, 13, 19, 21, 24, 25, 28, 30 and 43.

[33]Interview 39, also interviews 6 and 13.

[34]Interview 33.

'the general good'. Invoking their electoral mandate, MPs introduce a clear distinction between themselves (as representatives of the 'general good') and those represented (as partisan, biased, and inherently, self-serving). This distinction justifies their unilateral take on 'account-giving'. They set out to mobilise those represented to side with them—not the other way around

> 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 to provide an answer and convince them that the general welfare holds priority over their individual wants.[35]

This dichotomised conception not only reifies the notion that there is an objective difference between the 'general interest' and individuals' wants—negating the 'constituted' character of the former—it equally seals off the creative process to individual citizens who, according to MPs, risk corrupting rather than contributing to the articulation of the 'general good'.

Only a few MPs (5 out of 70) come close to describing the kind of deliberative qualities specified in the literature. 'I have my own views', one of them[36] 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 that I want to represent opposes my views or provides input that proofs my views wrong'. While this MP clearly embraces the value of representative reflexivity, the majority of MPs retained a greater distance to those represented in between electoral moments. To them, 'account-giving' is not a normative obligation but, rather, it is a necessity with instrumental quality: it compensates the 'invisibility' of their voters and facilitates the establishment of a representative relationship with them.

Given that our analysis revealed no consistent variation among MPs from different political parties, the determinants of MPs' conceptions of democratic representation and ways of dealing with its indirectness need to be situated at the systemic—as opposed to the ideological—level. The Flemish system of proportional representation in multi-member districts may, indeed, explain MPs' sensitivity to the constituted character of 'the people'. In comparison to single-member districts, cross-party debate and compromise is inevitable in multi-member districts. The subsequent need to defend this compromise to their rank and file may explain why Flemish MPs conceive of 'the people' as something more or less coterminous with their actions. Their firm attachment to the electoral system indicates, then again, that they experience the absence of objective benchmarks

[35]Interview 57.

[36]Interview 4.

for representative action as greatly discomforting and seek reassurance through an enhanced emphasis on the electoral system.

4. Discussion and conclusion

Our study revealed that members of the Flemish regional parliament invoke both 'electoral' and 'constitutive' accounts of representation and merge elements of these accounts in a unique yet non-arbitrary manner (cf. Table 3). While reflecting on the day-to-day praxis of political representation (the 'doing' of representation), MPs underscore the constitutive aspects of representation. They locate the origin of the representation process in their claims to speak for those represented and emphasise the need for citizens' mobilisation. However, when describing their moral obligations MPs retreat to an 'electoral' conception of representation and invoke their appointment as representatives (the 'being' a representative) as a means to legitimate their authority to define what is in the interest of 'the people'. To MPs, elections imply a transfer of sovereign power. In keeping with this view, they emphasise the importance of responsibility—acting in a manner that is consistent with their electoral programme—over that of responsiveness to citizens' claims.

These findings suggest that contemporary theorising on representation's indirectness may be overly optimistic. Although our analysis demonstrates that MPs fill up the temporal and spatial gap opened up by representation with speech, this speech generally falls short of the deliberative qualities specified in the literature. Because MPs define their relationship with citizens in terms of a division—as opposed to a sharing—of representational powers, they fail to conceive of citizens as genuine interlocutors in the representation processes whose claims merit

Table 3 MPs account of democratic representation (highlighted in grey)

	'Electoral' conception	**'Constitutive' conception**
Democratic representation	Electoral *moments* of authorisation and accountability	A *process* of conversational turn-taking
Democratic constituents	*Readily knowable* (electoral constituents, the voters)	*Constituted bodies* ('those represented', 'the people')
Representational dilemma	*Trustee* (anticipatory)—*Delegate* (promissory)	*Political artist* (mobilisation as necessity)
Empowered inclusion	*Citizens' control over* the representation process (sanctions)	*People's control within* the representation process (inclusion of judgement)
Representational norms	*Accountability*	'*Account-giving*'

a response (i.e. deliberative account giving). MPs' distrust of the democratic character of citizens' claims not only lowers their capacity for reflexivity, that is their capacity to (re)consider their proper views in light of the counterclaims formulated, it equally attributes to citizens the status of an audience that can only exercise its sovereignty at the ballot (cf. Manin, 1997).

Besides generating important insights into the representational dilemmas that underpin MPs' role orientations, our findings also speak well to contemporary studies that have emphasised the continuing centrality of electoral politics in representation processes (e.g. Urbinati and Warren, 2008; Severs *et al.*, 2013). MPs' distrust of citizens' claims suggests, more specifically, that non-electoral yet organised forms of representation (e.g. civil society movements, NGOs and labour unions) will be more successful at provoking deliberative exchanges between society and its electoral institutions. Operating on the basis of alternative forms of democratic legitimacy (e.g. mass-membership), these associations may hold greater 'democratic credibility' to MPs. Our findings, put differently, underscore the importance of the recent systemic turn in theorising on democratic representation (cf. Disch, 2011). They suggest that 'surrogate' forms of accountability—whereby third actors, such as civil society associations but also international organisations, sanction representatives on behalf of the citizenry (Rubenstein, 2007; Saward, 2009)—may be conducive to the overall quality of electoral representation. Further research on the impact of non-electoral representatives and their capacity to hold MPs to account appears needed.

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