

Whose Interests Matter? Representational Priorities among Members of Parliament in communities with high rates of COVID-19

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Abstract

Through interviews with Members of Parliament (MPs) and an analysis of Statements by Members, this research paper examines the representational priorities and influences of Members of Parliament during the COVID-19 pandemic. It identifies four main representational priorities: the economy and businesses, those with service needs, vulnerable and marginalized populations, and health and long-term care. Through these four priority issues and constituencies, it demonstrates that MPs' representational priorities are varied, and are influenced by riding characteristics, descriptive characteristics, and MPs' previous experiences and priorities. It finds that representational priorities are largely resilient to the pandemic, but that the pandemic has led to the emergence of new priority constituencies for MPs.

Keywords: political representation; representational priorities; COVID-19 pandemic; influences on representation; constituencies

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Introduction

Political representation is a well-studied phenomenon, with a large body of literature theorizing its characteristics and examining how representatives go about the task. But much less attention is given to *who* is represented, to which interests and constituencies are prioritized. There is an implicit assumption that representation requires balancing competing interests, yet these trade-offs are often conceptualized as homogenous local interests in contest with homogenous national interests. The much more complicated reality of competing interests and constituencies at all levels is often obscured, despite the significant implications for the project of democracy. If local constituencies are given one representative at the national level, *which* interests within the local community are prioritized, and what of the deprioritized issues and constituencies?

The COVID-19 pandemic provides a unique vantage point from which to examine this question. As an unprecedented crisis in contemporary society, it has overwhelmingly dominated public life since March 2020, and has affected all communities across Canada. This focusing event can be used to examine which interests and constituencies political representatives prioritize when faced with the same broad challenge. It presents an even more interesting case study when considering its unequal impacts across regions, neighbourhoods, and sociodemographic lines. The same groups who have borne disproportionate health, economic, and social impacts of the pandemic are also traditionally underrepresented in Parliament (Polacko et al, 2020; Griffith, 2019), raising questions about how these groups' interests have been prioritized during the pandemic.

The body of literature on Members of Parliament's (MPs) representational activities indicates significant variation across MPs, including based on riding¹ context and descriptive characteristics. Literature on political representation also demonstrates that representatives prioritize certain interests and constituencies, though there is no research in the Canadian context explicitly examining this question. MPs also demonstrate variation and agency in their representational activities, highlighting the potential for representational prioritization.

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, this research seeks to understand the representational priorities of MPs and the factors influencing those priorities, focusing on cities where COVID-19 cases have been high throughout the pandemic. It identifies the constituent groups that MPs emphasize in their representational activities and the factors shaping those priorities, including riding characteristics (the needs and interests of those within them), descriptive characteristics of MPs, and MPs' previous experiences and priorities. Given the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on racialized people in Canada, particular attention is paid to racialization as a descriptive characteristic. This question is answered through an interviews with MPs and analysis of Member's Statements (SO315) during the pandemic. Analysis was also conducted on the representational styles MPs use to enact their representational priorities, which is included in an annex to this paper.

Four major representational priorities were identified through this analysis, but significant variations exist, demonstrating diversity in MPs' priorities. By exploring the four priority areas of the economy, service needs, vulnerable and marginalized groups, and health, this research will highlight the factors that appear to shape representational priorities. In doing this, it aims to deepen the concept of political representation in Canada by explicitly introducing the concept of representational priorities to allow for further exploration of how various interests are represented in Canadian politics, and the implications for Canadian democracy.

¹ The term 'riding' is used in this paper in reference to representational districts; while riding and constituency are often used interchangeably, 'constituency' in this context refers to the component groups that an MP may prioritize.

Theory

Academic literature on political representation has long focused on defining the role of representatives and examining how they undertake the task of representation. Beginning with early work like Pitkin's (1967) descriptive and substantive representation and the trustee/delegate model, there is an emphasis on translating public preferences into legislation as a central tenet of representation. Yet in reality, the concept is far more nuanced.

Legislative-focused conceptions of representation can be difficult to translate into the Canadian context, where party discipline severely constrains MPs' ability to respond to local constituent preferences. Koop, Bastedo, and Blidook (2018) write that in the context of strong party discipline, "the individual representational style of MPs is often regarded as that of a trustee for his or her constituency, yet as a delegate of his or her party" (p. 6). This has led to broader definitions of representation, including those authors' Representational Connections Framework. The framework distinguishes four types of representational connections: policy connections, or representation of substantive policy preferences; service connections, or solving individual problems and acting as a local ombudsperson; symbolic connections, or psychological bonds of similar identity; and party connections, or relationships with constituents that centre political parties (p. 21-3). Notably, this framework also identifies factors shaping MPs' representational styles: their personal goals and backgrounds, constituency (riding) contexts that influence constituents' needs and expectations, and experiential learning as an MP (p. 24).

The Representational Connections Framework is useful in expanding the definition of the activities comprising representation, which is central to informing the methodology of this study. It also makes clear that there is significant variation in MPs' representational activities and that MPs have agency in deciding their representational styles; crucially to this paper's research question, these underlying assumptions suggest that MPs do make prioritizations in their representational work and that they do have agency over those prioritizations. Though it remains focused on the question of *how* MPs represent constituents, it provides useful foundations from which to explore the question of *which* constituencies and interests are represented.

Building on the trustee/delegate model, Rehfeld (2009) broaches the question of who MPs listen to by identifying three dimensions of representation: a representative's aims (who they seek to benefit), sources of judgement (how they determine their preferred constituency's interests), and responsiveness (to local riding sanctions). Separating these dimensions is particularly helpful because it highlights the underlying question of *who* representatives are seeking to benefit, *who* they listen to, and *who* they answer to. Rehfeld's model focuses broadly on the tension between national interests and local interests, but it nonetheless provides a useful framework to consider how representatives might go about prioritization of specific interests and issues.

Yet there are significant tensions within local and national spheres that representatives must prioritize. There is evidence that the powerful win out in these prioritizations; in the U.S., low-income constituents have less influence over politics (Flavin and Franko, 2017), while organized interest groups can sway representatives to deviate from constituent interests (Giger and Kluver, 2016). Unsurprisingly, this dynamic is observed along racial lines; Harden (2013) notes that "the wealthy and whites get their policy views represented more than do the poor and minorities" (p. 177).

In Canada, it is clear that MPs "remain psychologically committed to representing the wishes of their constituents in Ottawa" (Koop, Bastedo, and Blidook, 2018, p. 9); it is less clear *which* constituents they

represent. In the context of the above international literature, it is worth examining how MPs prioritize various constituencies, particularly those who traditionally hold less power. This is especially relevant considering the COVID-19 pandemic's disproportionate impact on marginalized communities; questions of whether these communities' interests are being adequately represented have significant ramifications for their immediate well-being and for the broader dynamics of political representation in Canada.

Within this context, the literature suggests that both descriptive representation and the riding's characteristics may have an impact in determining whether marginalized communities' – particularly racialized communities – interests are represented. Racialized MPs have been shown to actively champion the interests of racialized groups, but this constituency's interests are generally supported by MPs when they have a significant racialized population within their riding (Saalfeld and Bischof, 2012). Yet, some literature suggests that substantive policy representation is not impacted by racialized representatives (Bowen and Clark, 2014, p. 703), though descriptive representation may still matter in other ways. Bird (2012) highlights the importance of symbolic representation of racialized constituents within the Canadian context; in the United States, Black constituents and Members of Congress alike place an emphasis on service connections, which is suggested to be the result of greater service needs in racialized communities (Bowen & Clark, 2014).

Based on the existing literature, variations in MPs' representational priorities can be expected. It is also clear that racialized and otherwise marginalized constituencies are often de-prioritized by representatives, but that descriptive and riding characteristics may influence whether these constituencies' interests are championed. Representational styles may also differ because of these influences, which is why this research includes an annex of findings on representational activities and styles of MPs during the pandemic. Given the noteworthy trends in the literature and the lack of research on representational priorities in Canada, this work will start to fill an important gap by uncovering the representational priorities of MPs during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Methodology

The COVID-19 pandemic is used as a focusing event to examine how MPs' representational priorities vary within a similar context. Given this scope, the research focuses on MPs who represent cities that have consistently experienced high COVID-19 cases. While COVID-19 has been present across Canada, communities with high case counts have acute experience with the health impacts of the pandemic and the knock-on effects of public health restrictions. As a result, the pandemic touches all facets of life in these communities and is more likely to be a central focusing concern.

MP Case Selection

Since Canada does not have a uniform mechanism of reporting COVID-19 data, case selection requires a degree of extrapolation. Varied reporting mechanisms and boundaries across and within jurisdictions make comparison difficult across communities. Within these constraints, the focus of this research was on cities in Ontario, Quebec, and Alberta, the provinces with the highest total case counts throughout the pandemic and the highest rates of COVID-19 throughout much of the pandemic² (Government of Canada, 2021). Twenty-four

² Manitoba and Saskatchewan surpassed Ontario in total case rate in the Spring of 2021, after cases were selected for this research. Despite their exclusion from this research, the focus on communities that have been epicentres throughout the

MPs from the six cities of Montreal, Toronto, Peel, Hamilton, Calgary, and Edmonton were used as a sample for this research. These cities were the sites of significant local epidemics within the provinces, providing the clearest cases of communities where the pandemic has been a focusing event since March 2020.

MPs selected from these cities represent the three major national political parties. The sample of MPs was restricted to private members (excluding ministers in the current government) to build on literature about Canadian backbenchers, and because it was not feasible to gather data on Ministers through the chosen methodology. While the exclusion of MPs from certain provinces and rural regions of the country limits this research, the selected MPs represent sufficient diversity across parties, descriptive and riding characteristics, to identify differences in representational priorities.

It is widely noted that the pandemic disproportionately impacted certain neighbourhoods, notably those with higher proportions of low-income, racialized, and frontline worker residents (Subedi, Greenberg, and Turcotte, 2020). To capture this variation, two groups of MPs were selected within these cities; 'Target' MPs, who represent neighbourhoods with high case counts and high proportions of racialized residents, and 'Control' MPs, who represent neighbourhoods with relatively lower case counts and lower proportions of racialized residents. These groupings often divide along income lines as well; Target ridings are reliably lower-income than Control ridings. MPs representing split ridings, which included neighbourhoods that were highly-impacted as well as relatively minimally-impacted neighbourhoods, were included in the Target group in order to examine how they represented their most vulnerable constituents. These MPs present interesting cases, as they represent less homogenous constituencies and interests, and must prioritize between them. Ridings within these cities were selected based on a combination of local public health data, published demographic information, and news reports highlighting the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 in certain communities.³

Table 1: Distribution of MPs in SO31 Analysis by Party, Race, and Target Group

	Control			Target			Total
	Racialized	White	Total	Racialized	White	Total	
CPC		2	2	4	2	6	8
LIB	1	3	4	6	3	9	13
NDP		1	1	1	1	2	3
Total	1	6	7	11	6	17	24

To the degree possible, MPs represent a diversity of descriptive characteristics, including gender and race. Nine MPs are women, a slightly higher proportion of women than the broader population of MPs. However, gender is not a focus of this study. Twelve MPs are racialized, which is significantly higher than the proportion of

pandemic provides a solid basis for analysis of the impact of the pandemic on representational priorities among MPs representing hard-hit communities.

³ Full sources are included in the bibliography.

racialized MPs in the current parliament. This reflects the ridings selected, as racialized MPs more often represent racialized communities that are hard-hit by the pandemic. Descriptive variations were difficult to achieve in all cases; since racialized MPs are more likely to represent ridings with higher proportions of racialized constituents, only one racialized MP is included in the sample of control MPs. This variation alone is notable, and its implications for political representation in Canada deserve further exploration. A breakdown of MPs by party, target grouping, and race are provided in Table 1.

Data Collection and Analysis

Statements by Members

SO31s provide a useful starting point to understand MPs’ representational priorities. They can be made by all private members on “virtually any matter of international, national, provincial or local concern” (Bosc & Gagnon, 2017, ch. 10). Notably, because SO31s can only be one minute long, and only 15 MPs can deliver SO31s each sitting day, MPs must by nature prioritize which constituency or issue they raise, providing a useful window into their representational priorities.

For this research, SO31s of 24 MPs from the three national parties were analysed from March 2020 to May 2021. A conventional approach to content analysis was used, in which codes were derived from the data and categories were developed and refined during data analysis. The aim of this analysis was to describe the issues and constituencies discussed by MPs without the existence of previous theory; this approach to content analysis was most appropriate because it relies on the data to define categories, rather than imposing preconceived theoretical categories that may not capture the breadth of themes (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

Table 2: SO31 Coding Themes

Equity	Recognition	Partisan Agenda
Gender	Community Organizations	Health
Human Rights	Frontline Workers	Economic/Business
Racism	Individual	Equity/Social
	Economic/Business	Justice
	Cultural Celebration	

SO31s were coded into three themes and a variety of sub-themes, enumerated in Table 2. ‘Equity’-related statements recognize structural or systemic problems faced by equity-seeking groups, including racism, gendered inequities, and human rights concerns. They are unlinked to an MPs’ partisan affiliation and represent a symbolic connection to an equity-seeking group. Likewise, statements within the ‘Recognition’ theme indicate a symbolic connection; instead of focusing on equity, these statements recognize those within an MPs’ own riding or a broader constituency they wish to recognize. SO31s falling under the ‘Partisan Agenda’ category may cover the same subjects as those in the first two categories (such as racism, businesses, or frontline workers), but rather than forming a symbolic connection, their primary angle is partisan. MPs use these statements to advance their party’s position or criticize the government, and thus instead of focusing on their own personal symbolic connections to a constituency, they use the party as a means of connection.

Interviews

Interviews were conducted in Spring 2021 during the third wave of the pandemic, using a semi-structured format. A total of six MPs were interviewed: three Liberals from the Greater Toronto Area (two from Toronto and one from Brampton), two Conservatives from Calgary, and one New Democrat from Hamilton⁴. MPs were offered anonymity during these interviews to allow them to speak more freely about their experiences. As such, MPs will be referred to by their party or city throughout this research. Questions were designed to identify the issues and constituencies prioritized by the MP throughout the pandemic as well as the activities and representational connection styles used. Questions were also designed to identify how MPs' own personal experiences with the pandemic had shaped their representational priorities.

The interviews were analysed using a combination of conventional and directed content analysis. Similarly to the SO31s, coding themes about the key issues and constituencies prioritized by MPs was developed through analysis of the transcripts, allowing the themes to emerge from the data. Inspiration was taken from Koop, Bastedo, and Blidook's (2018) Representational Connections Framework in identifying influencing factors of MPs' representational priorities, however their identifying factor of experiential learning proved to be less relevant in the new context of the pandemic and the data from interviews and SO31s demonstrate the significant influence of descriptive characteristics, leading to a different set of influencing factors emerging from this research. A directed content analysis using the Representational Connections Framework was also conducted to identify patterns of representational activities used by MPs, allowing for an analysis of the impact of the pandemic on these representational styles. This analysis is included as an annex to this research.

Limitations

A small sample size was necessary to conduct this research within the constraints of the Parliamentary Internship Programme, and as a result, may not fully represent all MPs' representational priorities. The exclusion of rural MPs was necessary to meaningfully compare amongst MPs in Canada's epicentres, however it does limit the generalizability of the findings. Availability of MPs for interviews also shaped the sample of MPs to a small extent, though sufficient diversity exists to highlight differences and examine influencing factors.

Additionally, while the pandemic provides a unique context through which to examine MPs' representational priorities, it does create several constraints. Restricted House of Commons operations in Spring 2020 limits the sample of SO31s early in the pandemic, and priorities described in this research represent a snapshot in time during a crisis. Because of these limitations, further research on representational priorities will help to fully develop the literature on this subject in Canada. Despite these limitations, this research provides an important first analysis of MPs' representational priorities.

Findings on Representational Priorities

Though the pandemic was a focusing event in Canadian public life, MPs continue to demonstrate a broad range of representational priorities. The constituency groups enumerated in this section were notable common

⁴ The NDP MP interviewed offered to waive anonymity and consented to full attribution during his interview. He will not be named in this research, however in light of this consent, identifying characteristics such as race, city, and previous occupation may be used in this paper where they are relevant. It may be possible to identify this MP through these identifying characteristics.

themes that emerged across interviews and an analysis of SO31s, though representational priorities were broader than these four themes and were as diverse as the MPs themselves. Table 3 illustrates the incidence of themes in the SO31s analyzed, highlighting the breadth and diversity of representational priorities, even during the pandemic. Within the constituency themes highlighted in this section, the variations across MPs will be highlighted to further nuance and develop the concept of representational priorities and its influences.

Table 3: Incidence of SO31 Themes

Equity	30	Recognition	71	Partisan Agenda	53
Gender	7	Community Organizations	23	Health	10
Human Rights	9	Frontline Workers	2	Economic/Business	19
Racism	14	Individual	26	Equity/Social	18
		Economic/Business	8	Justice	6
		Cultural Celebration	12		
Grand Total				154	

Across all interviews, a common thread emerged: MPs noted that the pandemic exacerbated pre-existing challenges in their ridings, whether economic, social or health-related. Likewise, MPs’ priority issues and constituencies largely remained the same; shifts were to address the changing needs and issues of existing priority constituents. In rare cases, it appears that catalyst events can create new priority constituencies for MPs, though the resiliency of these priorities is unclear.

Constituency 1: Economic and Business Constituents

The economy was a key priority for MPs during the pandemic. While MPs mentioned providing service to help constituents access income supports, businesses were prioritized more than individual constituents in the conceptualization of economic issues. This was observed across representational connection activities; MPs symbolically recognized local businesses and used support for businesses as the basis for partisan critiques in SO31s; in interviews, they described spending significant time providing services to businesses and advocating for policy on their behalf.

Prioritization of Businesses

Businesses were a pre-existing constituency for some MPs, while for others, this constituency emerged during the pandemic. Those with pre-existing connections were connected to local BIAs and business leaders prior to the pandemic. When asked about the impacts of the pandemic, these MPs focused primarily on the impacts to the local economy and business community, emphasizing these as an indicator of their communities’ well-being. Given that they already viewed businesses as a key constituency, these MPs sought to represent them through all types of representational activities during the pandemic, often engaging in proactive outreach to understand how they could support businesses.

For other MPs, businesses were a newly important constituency during the pandemic. Those who hadn’t indicated pre-existing connections to businesses highlighted the influx of demands for support from businesses

during the pandemic and shifted resources in their offices to prioritize businesses. One MP from Toronto described shifting a full-time staff member from immigration work to address the service needs of businesses, explaining “I had 400 small businesses that were asking for help”. New connections with business constituents were also policy-oriented; MPs also noted that business owners “were calling every day to try to advocate for their businesses in the support that they wanted to see roll out of the government”, and these MPs also advocated for businesses at the policy level.

Despite nearly all MPs advocating for policy changes to support businesses, there was a difference between MPs who identified businesses as a pre-existing constituency and those for whom businesses were a new constituency. Those with pre-existing connections emphasized businesses as a greater element of their pandemic representation, often focusing overwhelmingly on businesses when describing their policy connections and emphasizing their symbolic connections with businesses. In contrast, those without pre-existing connections emphasized other issues and constituencies as more important; businesses were prioritized because of the sheer volume of service requests.

Descriptive and Riding Influences

MPs interviewed from the control group were more likely to engage actively with businesses during the pandemic and to identify them as a pre-pandemic constituency. This trend was also visible in SO31s; control MPs spoke more often about economic concerns and in recognition of businesses, as illustrated in Table 4. Notably, this also included the MPs who represented mixed communities; they engaged significantly with business owners in wealthier parts of their riding, describing representational priorities more aligned with their colleagues from control ridings. In interviews and SO31s, these MPs overwhelmingly spoke about business and economic concerns of the pandemic, generally reflecting control MP trends in SO31s.

Table 4: Percentage of SO31s on Economic and Business Concerns by MP Grouping

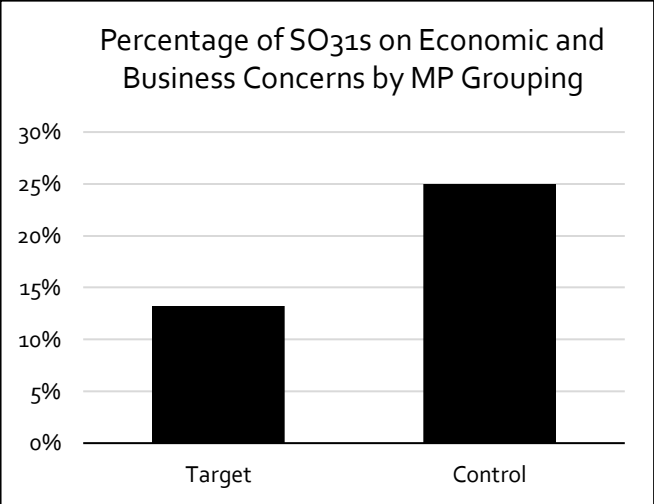
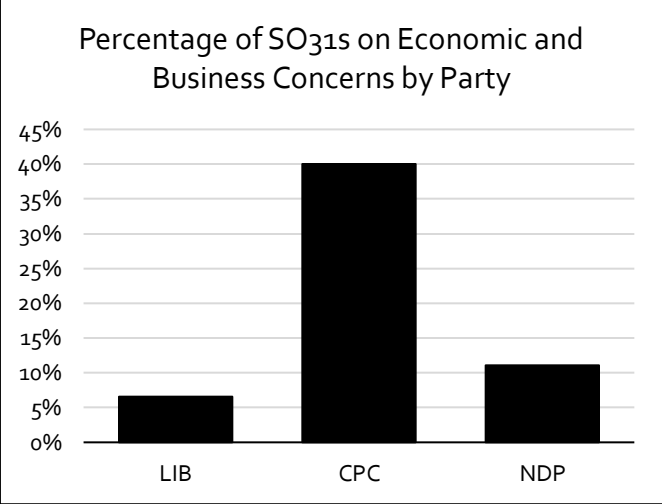


Table 5: Percentage of SO31s on Economic and Business Concerns by Party



There was a stronger focus on businesses by Conservative MPs in interviews and SO31s. 40 percent of all SO31s delivered by Conservatives focused on businesses, as illustrated in Table 5. They often emphasized entire industries (such as oil and gas or hospitality) as a constituency, while it was more common for Liberal MPs to focus on small businesses in their own ridings. The NDP were an exception. The NDP MP interviewed was a

former business-owner but did not mention businesses at all in describing his pandemic representation. None of the NDP MPs included in the SO31 sample mentioned businesses in their economic-focused statements, suggesting a consistent deprioritization of businesses by NDPs. The variation across parties when speaking about economic concerns are highlighted in three SO31s in Table 6. This table illustrates how broad issues are interpreted differently across ideologies, leading to prioritization of vastly different constituent groups.

Table 6: SO31s on Business from MPs from Each Party

<p>Stephanie Kusie (CPC): <i>Mr. Speaker, for months we have been begging the government to step forward to help the aviation sector. We have pushed to exhaustion the ideas of rapid testing, pilot projects and a well-thought-out plan, but it is evident that the effects of the government's inaction go well beyond this sector, as we see the chaos and fear surrounding us today. The implementation of further travel requirements, with more on the way, is further proof of the government's incompetence. We pushed rapid testing and testing on arrival; the Liberals have not listened. Canadians did what they always do. They were patient, trusting the government when it said that a supply of vaccines was on the way, hoping this was a sign of a return to normal and a full restoration of the economy and life in Canada. Once again, the government has failed. In September, when I first spoke about this, it was about the airline sector, but inaction and incompetence of the government has moved far beyond this. The current government managed to fail on it all: rapid testing, testing on arrival and now is failing terribly on vaccines to the detriment of not just one sector, but all Canadians.</i></p>
<p>Rob Oliphant (LIB): <i>Mr. Speaker, over 6,500 businesses responded to the government's call to action to combat COVID-19, including two companies in Don Valley West. SecureKey Technologies Inc. created a secure digital ID software. This software is used primarily for online banking transactions, but it is also used by online government services, such as MyCRA, to ensure that Canadians have secure access to online services. Our fine local brewery, Amsterdam, is also a COVID-19 hero. During the pandemic, it converted surplus beer-making capacity to make hand sanitizer and donated it to hospitals, including our own Sunnybrook. I send a big thanks to these two companies and all the companies that have stepped up over the last year to protect Canadians. We are made in Canada and in this together.</i></p>
<p>Heather McPherson (NDP): <i>Mr. Speaker, with COVID-19 rates skyrocketing, the stress on young people and recent graduates is incredible. They lost their summer employment, they have few job options, and those available are often low-paying and put them at risk for COVID-19. Recent graduates from the University of Alberta, King's University and the Northern Alberta Institute of Technology, all post-secondary institutions in my riding, are struggling to get by. By rushing to give almost \$1 billion that was supposed to go to students to their well-connected friends, the Liberal government has left students and recent graduates in the lurch. At the urging of the NDP, the government implemented a moratorium on student loan repayments in the spring to give some relief to recent graduates. However, as of September 30, the student loan moratorium ended, despite Canada's descent into a second wave. Extending the interest-free moratorium on student loan repayments could make the difference recent graduates need to get through the winter. Canadians can count on New Democrats to fight for young people, pausing loan payments and getting rid of interest on student loans altogether.</i></p>

This emphasis on economic issues - and businesses in particular - during the pandemic may be explained by jurisdictional boundaries and the federal government's outsized role in financial support. It is unclear why MPs prioritized businesses as a constituency over individuals in need of income support, but this may be a result of

the differences in supports initially rolled out; CERB (the support for individuals) was rolled out quickly and with broad eligibility, while CEBA, CEWS and CERS (supports for businesses) initially had limited eligibility and support that was generally seen as inadequate (McGregor, 2020).

Nonetheless, both the interviews and SO31s reveal that businesses were the primary economic constituency, but that this was influenced by MPs' previous experience, the context of their ridings, and by descriptive representation (particularly political party). Each of these findings are significant in demonstrating the diversity of representational priorities and the relevance of influencing factors in shaping MPs' representational priorities.

Constituency 2: Those with Service Needs

Those with service needs emerged as a new priority constituency during the pandemic, illustrating the adaptability of representational priorities. Providing services to constituents is often seen as the bread and butter of MPs' work, but this does not necessarily make those with service needs a priority constituency. Service needs are often dealt with one-on-one in private and may not be prioritized as a broader representational strategy (Koop, Bastedo, and Blidook, 2018, p. 60). However, during the pandemic, those with service needs emerged as a key constituency for MPs, evidenced in their universal connection of service needs to broader policy advocacy and in some MPs' active involvement in service connections for other jurisdictions.

A significant increase in service requests at the beginning of the pandemic set the stage for this prioritization. In the early days of the pandemic, one MP described acting as "pseudo Global Affairs", explaining "We were working day and night in different time zones. We were people's lifelines". This around-the-clock crisis response was shared by many MPs, and affirms the early pandemic findings of Koop, Blidook, and Fuga (2020), who wrote that "the pandemic resulted in an increased emphasis on constituents' requests for service from MPs, which limited the diversity of representational practices normally found among MPs" (p. 2). As a result of this demand, significant time and resources were dedicated to service representation throughout the pandemic, often shifted from other connection types and representational priorities.

Service-to-Policy Pipeline

This influx of service requests occurred as support programs were rapidly changing, creating a window of opportunity in which the government was open to input and collaboration. In these conditions, MPs nearly universally described newly-prioritizing those with service needs as a constituency. MPs formed a direct service-needs-to-policy-advocacy pipeline, in which service needs directly informed their policy work as they focused on influencing the government to respond and adapt to constituent needs. One Liberal MP explained:

We would be taking calls from local people as to what [a] program should look like or what should be changed and which ways they should be changed. We were then feeding that information in [to the government] daily. I also don't think I had in my previous term ever seen so much caucus involvement. Of course, caucus is always involved in voicing their opinions, but the amount of direct feedback going into the offices of cabinet Ministers and to Ministers directly [was unprecedented].

Service-to-policy connections equally emphasized by opposition MPs, who also described providing direct feedback to the government and using constituent service needs to inform partisan strategies. One opposition MP explained "hearing directly from individual constituents [helped] inform the kind of policy positions that we're taking because there is qualitative data that precedes the quantitative in ways that we just

know are predictable”, going on to describe a system his office implemented to track service trends to anticipate and respond to systemic program-related problems.

MP advocacy was successful in achieving changes to business and income supports, but its impact is best highlighted through smaller examples. In interviews, several MPs described being confronted with highly specific service issues, such as income supports for non-permanent residents or immigration pathways for frontline workers. These issues were relatively niche, mentioned only by MPs with significant pre-existing representational connections to the immigrant community, and have not been a public focus during the pandemic. These MPs described work behind the scenes to advocate for policy change as a direct result of constituent service requests and were successful in achieving niche policy changes. These smaller examples indicate that early pandemic programmatic changes were not only made in response to public attention; they highlight the important role of MP advocacy during this period to translate service needs into policy changes.

Despite this new and powerful prioritization of those with service needs, this constituency remained a relatively private representational priority for MPs; unlike the business constituency, individuals with service needs were generally not profiled in MPs’ SO315 during the pandemic. MPs did not appear to take public credit for this advocacy work, and it remains to be seen whether a service-to-policy pipeline will be part of MPs’ representational strategies beyond the pandemic. However, the emergence of those with service needs as a priority constituency during the pandemic – even if temporarily – demonstrates the responsiveness of MPs to the contexts within their ridings and the adaptability of representational priorities.

Entanglement of Service Connections

Beyond service-to-policy connections, interviews also revealed an ‘entanglement’ of service connections, in which MPs became active in addressing constituent service needs outside of federal jurisdiction. MPs with high proportions of low-income constituents described becoming especially involved with landlord-tenant issues and evictions, while another MP representing many COVID hotspot neighbourhoods described becoming heavily involved in the local vaccine rollout. As one MP described:

In the past, we’ve done things like job fairs and tax clinics and stuff like that. But now it’s dealing with [vaccines] and evictions. [...] We create lists of people who are looking for vaccines in different age groups. We were at one point trying to get that information out daily as it was changing to constituents: where they can go, where they can book. We’ve helped people book their vaccines, [we] really walk them through and do it ourselves for them.

This entanglement of service connections has persisted past the initial crisis point, which is a sign itself that this trend could persist beyond the pandemic. Notably, several MPs described developing greater ties with other levels of government over the course of the pandemic, which may also signal persistent entanglement. This is a significant shift in service connections, and MPs’ willingness to be of service beyond federal jurisdiction demonstrates MPs’ clear prioritization of those with service needs as a key constituency.

MPs emphasized a desire to continue helping constituents however possible and remain relevant in their lives. This has significant potential implications for the concept of representation at the federal level, though it remains to be seen how this might impact service connections beyond the pandemic and or how it may impact constituents’ expectations of service delivery from their MPs.

Constituency 3: Vulnerable and Marginalized Groups

Vulnerable and marginalized groups who bore the economic, social, and health impacts of the pandemic also emerged as a priority constituency, though not universally across MPs. This constituency is defined broadly, since MPs described vulnerability along varied vectors across ridings and intersecting vectors within them, and did not single out race, income, or immigration status as primary vectors of vulnerability. The most frequently mentioned vulnerable groups were frontline workers, racialized, low-income and disabled constituents.

While each of the MPs selected for this research represented cities with high rates of COVID-19, not all represented hard-hit communities, so the degree of vulnerability in their ridings varied. In interviews, nearly all MPs identified the heavy service needs of this constituency. These needs were particularly significant in target ridings, and while all MPs interviewed mentioned service as a significant service burden early in the pandemic, MPs from target ridings indicated persistently high service demands throughout the pandemic.

Riding Influences

Though most MPs described a heavy service burden from vulnerable groups, MPs’ policy connection with these constituencies varied. It was target MPs who advocated on behalf of this constituency to effect policy change. This was visible in the service-to-policy pipeline described above; nearly all MPs advocated to improve business supports in the early days of the pandemic, but not all advocated for those who were being left out of individual supports. The SO₃₁ analysis quantifies these trends; there was a greater public and symbolic focus on these constituencies by MPs from target ridings through a focus on equity concerns. This is illustrated in Table 7.

Notably, MPs from mixed ridings were included in the target group but demonstrated patterns in their SO₃₁s more closely resembling the control group. These mixed MPs’ SO₃₁s focused on the wealthier parts of their ridings, recognizing individuals who had made contributions to their communities, celebrating students’ achievements during the pandemic, and generally aligning themselves symbolically with wealthier constituents rather than highlighting the challenges faced by harder-hit constituents.

Table 7: Equity-Related SO₃₁s by MP Grouping

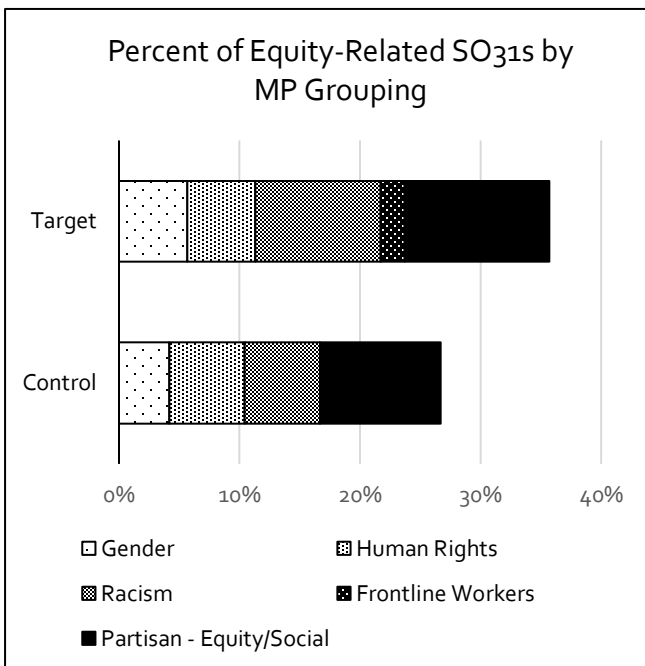
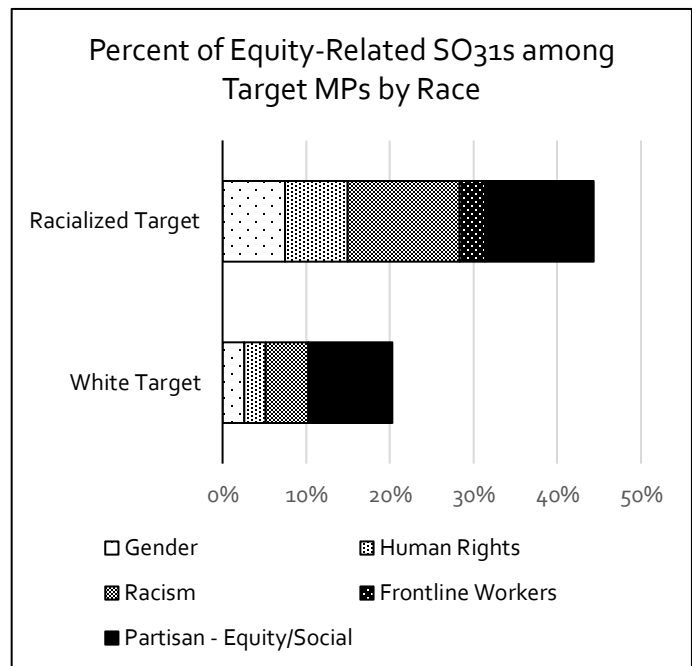


Table 8: Equity-Related SO₃₁s among Target MPs by Race



Descriptive Influences

However, descriptive characteristics are a greater predictor of prioritization of vulnerable constituencies. The two racialized Liberal MPs interviewed described advocating for the interests of recent immigrants and frontline workers in policy changes, despite one representing a control riding. The white Liberal MP interviewed did not describe the same policy advocacy, despite representing a mixed target riding with a significant population of recent immigrants and frontline workers. Likewise, in the SO₃₁ analysis, racialized MPs drove the focus on equity in both target and control groups, especially on issues of racism. This gap for target MPs can be seen in Table 8. This illustrates the importance of descriptive representation, especially for constituencies whose interests may otherwise be overlooked. It suggests that while riding characteristics may be important in determining MPs' service representational priorities, descriptive characteristics may be more important in ensuring the policy needs of vulnerable constituencies are prioritized.

It is also notable that racialized MPs more often weave intersectionality into their statements, even those that were not explicitly coded as 'equity'. This contrast is highlighted in two NDP MPs' SO₃₁s about the long-term care crisis, illustrated in Table 9. While both highlight deaths and lack of personal protective equipment, Green, a racialized MP, draws attention to the crisis's intersections with race, and calls for different solutions than his colleague based on this intersectionality. This has significant implications for the importance of descriptive representation, in both symbolic representation of racialized groups and policy advocacy on their behalf.

Table 9: SO₃₁s of Racialized and White NDP MPs

Scott Duval (NDP): *Mr. Speaker, we are in the midst of a global pandemic that has shone a bright light on the deplorable conditions in some of our for-profit, long-term care homes in Canada, and in Hamilton. The site of the deadliest outbreak of COVID-19 in our city, Grace Villa long-term care, exemplifies what is wrong with the for-profit model. There were 234 cases and 44 of the 156 residents, or 30%, have died due to the virus. We have heard stories of poor sanitation, lack of personal protective equipment, bad working conditions and understaffing, resulting in woefully inadequate care. We recently learned that not one single long-term care home has had resident quality inspection by the Ontario Ministry of Health since 2018. It is time for the federal government to work with our provincial and territorial partners on long-term care. It is time to improve the working conditions to allow for better care. It is time to develop national care standards and regulations, and step up the Canada Health Act. It is time to take profit out of long-term care.*

Matthew Green (NDP): *Mr. Speaker, today I rise to honour all the health care workers who have lost their lives serving this country on the front lines of the COVID pandemic. According to journalist Nora Loreto, of the 6,000 Canadians who have died from COVID-19, over 5,000 are linked to residential care facilities, close to 86%. We know from the unions representing these workers that a significant portion of these workers are racialized. I rise to honour Leonard Rodriques, a personal support worker and member of Unifor, whose family says his death was due to a lack of PPE at his workplace. He was buying masks from the dollar store because his workplace was not providing him with PPE. After he was denied the personal protection from his workplace, he was sent home. He tested positive, and when symptoms worsened he went to the hospital. A few hours later, he was discharged from the hospital, and he died two days later. The story of Mr. Rodriques cannot be forgotten. We must begin to collect race-based data related to COVID-19.*

Finally, the analysis revealed a partisan difference in responding to vulnerable constituents. Conservative MPs identified structural challenges for vulnerable constituents laid bare by the pandemic but expressed concern in interviews that the pandemic would be used opportunistically by the government to drive a progressive agenda. There were also no SO31s about race from Conservative MPs, despite the inclusion of a proportionate number of racialized MPs in the sample. Liberal and NDP MPs, meanwhile, preferred to use the pandemic as a catalyst to address structural issues.

Constituency 4: Health and Long-Term Care

The final theme of health illustrates both the adaptability of representational priorities and the continued relevance of jurisdiction. With the exception of long-term care residents, pandemic-related health issues were consistently less of a priority than other issues and constituencies. A lack of substantive emphasis on health suggests that has not been a pre-existing priority for MPs, likely because healthcare is provincial jurisdiction.

Broad Health-Related Connections

Of all the representational priority themes highlighted in this paper, health was the only theme for which MPs did not engage in policy representation. Yet, MPs demonstrated adaptability to changing constituent priorities by addressing the new context by highlighting health in symbolic, partisan, and service connections. The focus was on broad health issues impacting the entire population, underscoring health-related connections as an attempt to respond to MPs’ existing broad priority constituencies. MPs did not speak about health issues impacting a smaller subset of their constituents, such as those who had caught the COVID-19 virus, except in ridings with extremely high case counts, where experience with the virus was common. Rather, they described organizing virtual events on mental health and vaccines, coordinating with local health authorities, and providing service on booking vaccines. However, this was a relatively minor focus compared to other priorities, as illustrated in Table 10.

Table 10: Number of Health-Related SO31s

Number of Health-Related SO31s	
Frontline Workers	2
Health	10
Non-Health	142

In interviews, MPs expressed frustration at the pandemic for diverting constituent attention to health and away from federal priorities. As one MP lamented, “There’s a challenge [in] getting people’s focus and concentration on substantive policy issues that don’t relate to ‘where is my vaccine? How do I get it in my arm?’”, explaining that this had affected his ability to advance more federally-relevant medium- to long-term priorities. This limited and reluctant focus on health – without policy connections – highlights how MPs may adapt to reflect constituent needs and priorities, but that jurisdictional lines may limit the priority of these issues for MPs.

Long-Term Care

The exception to MPs’ reluctant and limited focus on health was their prioritization of long-term care residents as a new constituency. MPs emphasized long-term care residents as the most impacted constituent group

during the interviews, notable considering that interviews were conducted during the height of the third wave. There was strong common condemnation of the country across MPs from all parties for failing seniors, reflected in one Liberal MP's statement:

Another thing that's come into sharp relief has been this issue of the abject failure – and I use those words quite deliberately – of all three levels of government with respect to seniors in care. [...] I think that's something that we need to be aware of; we need to acknowledge it and we need to take action on it. And prior to the pandemic, I don't think you could say that I was a seniors advocate as such. But because of the pandemic, I've become [one] a lot more. [We] need to address the situation using the levers that we can as the federal government. So what I mean by that is standards for long-term care, funding to support the implementation of those standards, funding to support healthcare workers, [...] putting in a definition of elder abuse in the criminal code.

The call for action in this statement is echoed across all parties; there was a common appetite for federal action in this policy area, despite long-term care being under provincial jurisdiction.

This convergence around a previously deprioritized constituency is significant, even more so considering MPs' reluctant and minimal focus on other health-related issues and the jurisdictional lines that would otherwise exclude this constituency from federal priorities. It illustrates that MPs are not only responsive to their key constituencies, but can also be responsive to the needs of emerging constituencies, especially in response to catalyst events and policy failures like the long-term care crisis. It remains to be seen whether this newfound priority constituency will remain for MPs after the pandemic, and whether federal policy action will materialize.

Conclusion

This examination of MPs' representational priorities during the COVID-19 pandemic revealed used four priority constituencies to illustrate the significant diversity in MPs representational priorities and the agency and adaptability of MPs in shaping their representational priorities. This closely echoes the findings of Koop, Bastedo, and Blidook (2018) and builds on their Representational Connections Framework by demonstrating similar influences on MPs' representational priorities.

This research shows that riding characteristics, descriptive characteristics, and MPs' previous experiences shape their representational priorities. MPs' representational priorities were resilient; MPs shifted to address the new issues facing their priority constituencies and appeared to emphasize the issues facing constituencies with which they had previous connections. They are also adaptive to changing interests and needs within their ridings, including prioritizing entirely new constituencies. However, while responsive to contextual factors, the diversity of MPs' representational priorities – like the diversity of their representational activities – demonstrate MPs' agency in representation.

These findings underscore the theoretical importance of representational priorities and highlights this as an important avenue for continued study. The concept has significant implications for who is represented at the political level in Canada, including which voices are heard, what issues are included on the agenda, and how issues are framed, debated, and addressed. Overall, it represents an exciting new avenue for exploration that has the potential to contribute significantly to conceptions of political representation in Canada.

There are many avenues for further study to fully develop this concept and understand its role in the Canadian context. Research to identify other influencing factors on MPs' representational priorities or to deepen the

factors included in this research – particularly looking at a broader range of descriptive characteristics – would help fully develop representational priorities as a concept. Studying the representational priorities of other political parties, regions of Canada, and types of ridings (including rural ridings) would further develop understandings of representational priorities in Canada and may help to identify further diversity in priorities. It will also be important to examine representational priorities beyond the crisis of the pandemic, which may have focused MPs' priorities to a degree not seen normally. Finally, further research would be especially helpful to link the concept of representational priorities to representational styles, building on the preliminary findings presented in this paper's annex.

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Annex: Representational Styles

The Representational Connections Framework identifies four representational styles (Koop, Bastedo, and Blidook, 2018), however there is an apparent convergence around service connections at the beginning of the pandemic (Koop, Blidook, and Fuga, 2020). Interviews and SO31s analysed in this research suggest that past the early points of the pandemic, there is an observable diversity in representational styles, with all representational styles clearly visible. It appears that MPs remain consistent in both the representational styles and priorities that they had before the pandemic, though they may experience challenges in maintaining their normal connections to constituents and must adapt to the pandemic's restrictions.

It is relevant to the overall conceptualization of representational priorities to note that priorities and connection styles may be linked; in the United States, Black constituents and representatives place a greater emphasis on service connections as a result of the greater service needs in their communities (Bowen and Clark, 2014), and initial research in this annex suggests that a similar pattern may exist in Canada; the MPs interviewed for this research who represent the ridings most heavily impacted by the pandemic adopted service as central to their representational styles. However, any link between representational priorities and styles requires further study.

Service connections

Both Koop, Blidook and Fuga (2020) and this research found that MPs were confronted with heavy service needs, especially early in the pandemic. As a result, all MPs engaged in some degree of service connections, however the extent to which they emphasized these connections varied. While those MPs who had previously emphasized service connections doubled down, those who hadn't previously emphasized service continued to focus on other connection styles where possible.

The 'entanglement' of service connections described in the main body of this research was a notable shift as a result of the pandemic and was observed most clearly in MPs who represented highly impacted constituencies with significant service needs. Another significant impact of the pandemic on service connections is the role that MP offices filled where public service failed. Especially in the beginning of the pandemic, MPs described their offices operating as "pseudo-Global Affairs" and communicating directly with Canadian High Commissions around the world to bring constituents home. Though services have long been seen as the bread and butter of MPs' representational work, the offloading of public service on MPs has implications for overall representational activities. The continued heavy burden of service requests on MP offices throughout the pandemic has required continued dedication of MP resources to service delivery; should this persist past the pandemic without additional resources for MPs, it may constrain MPs' ability to conduct representation in other areas. This is especially significant for MPs representing ridings with a high level of service needs, as they already demonstrate a greater focus on service connections and would be the most impacted by any further offloading of the service burden. The existing load of service needs on MPs representing vulnerable constituencies does have the potential to impact their ability to conduct other representational work and deserves further study.

Finally, MPs described significant changes to the ways they formed and maintained service connections. They describe shifting service delivery online and closing their offices to the public, often implementing new systems overnight to address the influx of service demands and the changing way of working. However, despite the changes to working arrangements because of the pandemic, service connections did not appear to be

interrupted; MPs and their staff simply had to find ways to persist, given the massive influx in urgent requests for help.

Policy Connections

Though service demands certainly increased during the pandemic, it was clear that some MPs continued to prioritize policy connections as their primary representational style. The pandemic and its increased focus on government supports and services have significantly impacted the focus and tools of policy work done by MPs.

As described in the main body of this research, MPs' policy priorities directly reflected the influx of constituent service needs, especially at the beginning of the pandemic. They also described having direct influence on the policy process and greater access than usual. As the pandemic wore on, MPs also became increasingly involved in policy conversations at other levels of government. This trend can be described as an 'entanglement' of policy connections similar to the entanglement of service connections described above. One MP described this as a natural extension of service entanglement, explaining "navigating [vaccines] is something we've been helping constituents with, but then also advocating to government to try to improve those systems, even if it is provincial governments". At the local level, MPs described forging new connections with public health officials, and remaining in constant contact in a two-way flow of information and ideas. These new connections with local officials reflect a greater involvement in areas of local jurisdiction, including local policy-making. MPs also described cross-jurisdictional coordination and advocacy on issues of local concern; the NDP MP interviewed explained:

I convened a joint statement of all of the city councillors representing [my riding] and the member of provincial parliament in writing a letter [expressing] concern - rage, quite frankly - to the Doug Ford government for leaving out our entire riding from the first phase of the pharmacy vaccine rollout . So there is a coordinated response that's happening from the different levels of government , recognizing that all levels of government have a role to play.

Like the entanglement of service connections, it is difficult to know the extent to which entangled policy connections will persist beyond the pandemic. However, it indicates a clear desire of MPs to be involved in policy that affects constituents' lives, regardless of jurisdiction, and may influence MPs' representational styles going forward.

Beyond the influx of service requests that may have temporarily overwhelmed some MPs' policy priorities, MPs efforts at maintaining policy connections were frustrated in other ways. In a virtual parliament, MPs lamented the informal communication lines they would have access to in-person. One Liberal MP explained "it's been challenging in terms of finding those moments when you can just have sort of off the cuff conversation with the immigration minister, the public safety minister, the health minister, etc., just to say, 'hey, this is what I'm hearing, my constituents want to give you this feedback'". One MP with a clear policy-focused representational style also lamented the impact of the pandemic on his other policy-related goals, explaining that it was a challenge "getting people's focus and concentration on substantive policy issues that don't relate to where is my vaccine? How do I get it in my arm? When can my kids go to school? When can I open my business?". This illustrates the importance of policy connections as a two-way street, and the difficulties some MPs have experienced in maintaining their representational styles as they would have hoped during the pandemic.

However, the pandemic has also exposed new tools and strategies for policy connections. One MP enthusiastically explained attempting to move to a “digital type of democracy” engaging new tools to gather constituent input into policy positions and “connect constituents to the process of government”, describing what he saw as greater engagement with Parliament as a result of these efforts. While many MPs will certainly yearn to get back to in-person parliament, certain tools and tactics to build and maintain policy connections may well persist beyond the pandemic and become new norms for MPs.

Symbolic Connections

Perhaps the connection style most impacted by the pandemic were symbolic connections. MPs described the significant difficulty of maintaining connections with constituents online, and while many indicated enthusiasm for Facebook Live events and methods of virtual symbolic connections early in the pandemic, appetite among both MPs and their constituents appears to have waned as the pandemic wore on. Online, one MP explained, “you don't get that human interaction and you don't get that feel of physical proximity to the individuals that you're serving”. MPs have found that feel of proximity to be impossible to replicate and explain that many opportunities for symbolic connection are foregone altogether. One symbolic-focused MP describes this shift in saying:

Normally on a weekend in May I had to have a minimum of 10 events to a maximum of twenty-two events. We leapfrog from literally eight thirty nine in the morning until 10:00 or 11:00 at night doing street fairs, business festivals , park events , school events , fun fairs , street sales , neighborhood things. I have a popcorn machine. And The popcorn machine has not moved for a year. Now, my staff have weekends free. They're intense days, but they don't have evening work nearly as much.

This reflects a shift away from symbolic connections entirely, though for those who prioritize symbolic connections, it is clear that this shift will be temporary. For other MPs, however, a break from symbolic connections may influence their representational priorities going forward. One MP admits “I've kind of really enjoyed the break from all the constituency events because on a weekend I'm going to three to five a day. At least three of my nights are booked off and it's far easier to sit in my living room than drive all over the place. I like the term JAMO [to describe this]: the joy of missing out”. Once the pandemic wanes, it is possible that some MPs will maintain certain symbolic connection practices that preserve their personal time, especially if symbolic connections are not a key representational priority.

Partisan Connections

The impact of the pandemic on partisan connections is less clear than other connection styles. At the beginning of the pandemic, many MPs noted a “Team Canada” approach, and this was evidenced in their service and policy work across party lines. However, this approach disintegrated, and opposition MPs were quick to criticize the government during my interviews, while government MPs often spoke in the Liberal “we” about their pride in the government's accomplishments.

Opposition MPs are significantly more likely to tap partisan connections in their SO31s, while government MPs primarily emphasize symbolic connections, as illustrated in Table 10. This is likely a reflection of strong party discipline and party incentives creeping into the sphere of SO31s, and is part of an emerging trend of using SO31s for partisan purposes (Sotiropoulos, 2009). However, given the history of SO31s for partisan purposes since at least the 38th Parliament, this does not appear to have changed as a result of the pandemic.

Table 10: Symbolic and Partisan Connections Expressed in SO31s by Party

