

Abstract

Going Local: How the electoral incentive shapes political behaviour in developing democracies

International assistance to strengthen representative politics in developing democracies has tended to train its efforts on the structures, rules and capacity of parliamentary institutions, in an effort to improve the performance of the MPs inside those institutions. In contrast, relatively little attention has been paid to what they do outside parliament. In countries with constituency-based electoral systems, that local activity tends to be described by those MPs as the most time-consuming, extensive and expensive part of their role. Conversations with MPs in a variety of countries reinforce the same central themes, that constituents come to them with all manner of problems, from jobs, housing and healthcare through to buying air conditioning units, attending funerals and even intervening in marital disputes. And its not just that voters come to MPs with such a diverse range of issues, they invariably want something done immediately. There tends to be an assumption that the Member of Parliament has significant power and significant wealth, and is thus the person to fix any problem.

Inevitably, the reality is different. In the vast majority of cases, there is a limited amount that the elected representative can do. But all of them will try. This is partly because there is a strong social and cultural expectation that this is the job of the representative, as polling in developing democracies in Africa, Asia, the Pacific and the Arab world tends to emphasise, meaning that there is a strong electoral incentive. Saying no to a potential supporter is not an enticing electoral strategy, and if they fail to offer this sort of personal attention to the needs of their voters, they will not only be judged against this record at election time, but will also be facing challengers who will almost certainly be promising to deliver tangible benefits to their voters.

Yet, constituency work tends to be undervalued, understudied and misunderstood, especially by international efforts designed to improve political performance in developing democracies. For the last few decades parliamentary and party strengthening has tended to focus, almost exclusively, on embedding the constitutional functions of parliamentarians in parliament, namely, scrutiny of legislation, oversight of the executive and representing the public interest. There have been basic programmes helping MPs to run constituency offices in many countries, but they remain a mostly technical exercise, and tiny by comparison with the parliamentary programmes. If anything the tendency has been to counterpose the national and local roles, suggesting that MPs should be spending far less time dealing with constituents, and far more time in the legislature, fulfilling their parliamentary duties.

Put simply, this approach – which starts by telling politicians what they should be doing, rather than seeking to first understand what they are doing – will not work, given both the tight logic and the considerable incentives that exist towards the local role. At the most basic level it ignores the fact that MPs are far more likely to get elected because of what they do outside parliament, than for anything they do inside parliament. International assistance should not be seeking to eradicate or diminish that role in favour of more parliamentary activity but should, if anything, be aiming to exploit and expand that function as a means of strengthening parliament.

Where this role is prevalent, MPs are frequently performing vital functions locally, especially in countries where state provision of public services is weak. And in performing that function MPs gain invaluable insights into how national policy is (or is not) working on the ground. The task is partly to help MPs become more effective at dealing with problems locally, generating responses that offer lasting and collective solutions, but also to regard the constituency experience as a resource for policy-makers nationally. MPs have a level of expertise about the gaps in state provision and the

impact of policy at a local level that is beyond the reach of Ministers and officials. This needs to be channelled routinely into parliament, so that it influences government's formulation of policy and spending at the national level.

This purpose of this paper – which is an early chapter from a book still being written about political behaviour – is to explore how constituency roles blend traditional ideas of leadership and representation with political competition, and are shaped by pre-existing cultural, behavioural and social norms. It argues that although the way most MPs pursue constituency work might reflect a logical response to immediate electoral, cultural and social pressures, it is counter-productive and largely ineffective. It frequently tackles symptoms rather than causes, and tends to increase the MP's workload rather than diminish it. The task is to use the logic of the constituency to find strategic solutions at local, regional and national level, and tie that to international assistance efforts.

For international assistance programmes to achieve this sort of shift though requires that far greater attention is first paid to understanding what MPs do locally, and why they do it.