

Constituent services in American multi-member districts: How would it work?

How congressional casework operates today, and how it might operate in a future House of Representatives elected by proportional representation.

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APRIL 2025



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This paper was authored by Anne Meeker and Lee
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The authors are grateful for the careful review and
feedback from Jane Mansbridge, Molly Reynolds,
and Annelise Russell.

This publication is available online at:
[protectdemocracy.org/constituent-services-
multi-member](https://protectdemocracy.org/constituent-services-multi-member)

Suggested citation: Meeker, Anne and Lee Drutman,
*Constituent services in American multi-member
districts: How would it work?*, Protect Democracy,
POPVOX Foundation, and New America (April 2025).

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| | |
|--|-----------|
| Introduction | 03 |
| Key takeaways | 05 |
| Constituent service in the U.S. Congress today | 06 |
| Four models for casework in a multi-member system | 09 |
| Members compete for casework | 09 |
| Delegations pool casework services | 11 |
| Parties pool casework services | 13 |
| Congress establishes an independent ombuds | 14 |
| So would it work? | 17 |
| How do members in multi-member districts value casework? | 18 |
| How does the constituent experience differ between single-member and multi-member systems? | 20 |
| Conclusion | 22 |

Introduction

For many Americans, the most directly impactful thing their member of Congress may do in their lives is not necessarily pass legislation but provide constituent service. In district offices across the country, congressional staff pick up the phones to help constituents navigate challenges with the federal bureaucracy; answer questions about government services; and direct resources like grants and earmarks. In an era when 83 percent of Americans say their elected officials “don’t care about what people like me think,”¹ constituent service is one of Congress’ strongest tools to address this trust deficit by demonstrating accountability, caring, competence, and a commitment to solving shared problems.²

“As a constituent, what happens to constituent service when I don’t have just one representative but many?”

Today, each member of Congress is (in theory) accountable to all people living in one congressional district who request their assistance. But recently, some reformers have suggested that proportional multi-member districts would better represent Americans than the existing model of single-member districts, meaning that constituents would have more than one member representing them in both the House and — as is already the case — the Senate.

Advocates of structural congressional reform, including advocates for a shift to proportional representation and multi-member districts, believe that moving away from the winner-take-all nature of congressional elections could help address challenges related to the two-party doom loop,³ including mitigating political polarization, addressing gridlock, and providing alternatives

¹ Jenn Hatfield, *More than 80% of Americans believe elected officials don’t care what people like them think*, Pew Research (Apr. 30, 2024), <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/04/30/more-than-80-of-americans-believe-elected-officials-dont-care-what-people-like-them-think/>.

² *Id.*

³ Lee Drutman, *Breaking the Two-Party Doom Loop*, Oxford Univ. Press (Jan. 2020), <https://academic.oup.com/book/36918>.

for constituents who currently do not feel effectively represented by either party or an elected member they did not vote for.

However, such a major change raises many questions about constituent service: As a constituent, what happens to constituent service when I don't have just one representative but many? Whom do I contact? And will they care as much about me?

Although we do not advocate for any particular system in this paper, we explore the implications of a multi-party system for constituent services and representative governance. We describe the mechanics of how constituent service operations work in Congress today, and provide initial directions and considerations on how constituent service could work in proportional multi-member districts in a U.S. context.

We establish working definitions for both casework and proportional representation systems; discuss the mechanics of casework in Congress today; and contrast today's casework to hypothetical new systems under a proportional representation system. We also explore potential tradeoffs to different models, and survey the international political science literature for clues as to how these tradeoffs may play out in the U.S.

Key takeaways

Casework is a critical component of broader electoral reform.

- Constituent services play an important role in democratic trust and governance, and electoral reformers must engage with how potential structural reforms would impact constituent experience with elected representatives.

The impact of PR on casework may be positive, but not without its own risks.

- Multi-member districts offer more diverse representation and potentially stronger incentives for representatives to invest in casework, including greater specialization and outreach, at the cost of some clarity regarding the link between constituents and a particular member, both for accountability and navigability of the system.
- Casework impact would likely vary based on the specific proportional system structure (especially party- vs. candidate-centric).

Multiple models could exist for casework in a PR system.

- Multiple viable operational approaches exist for casework in proportional systems, from creating a more competitive market dynamic to incentivizing more efficiency by sharing resources and staff among delegations, parties, or chambers.
- Many of these operational changes are technically possible today, but would be more likely to be implemented to mitigate drawbacks or take advantage of new opportunities in a proportional system.

Evaluating possible models is hampered by blind spots in existing research.

- Limited data exists on operational casework practices across different electoral systems, limiting possible comparative analysis.
- Several factors of the U.S. system — most notably the U.S. ratio of constituents to representatives, and the U.S. presidential system impacting voter turnout — make direct comparisons with other parliamentary democracies difficult.
- More research on constituent services in democratic systems would be a welcome addition to the field.

Constituent service in the U.S. Congress today

Constituent service occupies a prominent piece of Congress' overall capacity,⁴ but few studies address the nuance of constituent services in the U.S. For this reason, it is important to briefly describe key elements of congressional constituent service operations today.

"Constituent service" may have many meanings in relevant academic literature and international democracies⁵; however, within Congress, the term most frequently refers to the practice of responding to individual constituent requests for support troubleshooting a bureaucratic problem — aka "casework."

Casework is one of the few commonalities between members of Congress from both parties and every state, with every office employing some staff to manage constituent requests for assistance with federal agencies.⁶ Casework is conducted exclusively by members' "official" or governing offices, which are prohibited from directly coordinating with members' campaigns or political teams.⁷ Within the official office, this work is typically not handled directly by the member but mediated through specialized staff, who are responsible for all components of casework — from responding to a constituent's initial request for assistance to a final "handoff" and any feedback mechanisms when a case is closed. These constituent-facing staff are almost universally based in the lawmakers' district to assist constituents in person.^{8,9} Staff titles, salaries, and other duties for casework staff vary considerably between offices,¹⁰ but caseworkers frequently specialize in a specific agency or region.¹¹

⁴ An informal review puts constituent service-related staff at around 15 percent of congressional member office staffers as of spring 2024: POPVOX Foundation, *Who Does Casework for Congress? An Unscientific Survey*, <https://www.popvox.org/case-notes/who-does-casework>.

⁵ Sanches et. al., *What do we mean when we talk about constituency service? A scoping literature review of four decades of research*, *Pol. Res. Exch.*, vol. 6, no. 1 (2024).

⁶ Anne Meeker, *Congressional casework is ready for innovation*, POPVOX Foundation (Oct. 2, 2023), <https://www.popvox.org/blog/casework-is-ready-for-innovation>.

⁷ "Definition and Rules: What is Casework?" POPVOX Foundation (March 2023), <https://www.popvox.org/casework-basics-manuals/definition-rules>.

⁸ Congressional Management Foundation, *Keeping It Local: A Guide for Managing Congressional District and State Offices*, 3rd ed. (2010), https://www.congressfoundation.org/storage/documents/CMF_Pubs/cmf_keeping_it_local.pdf.

⁹ At least two House offices, Rep. Pat Ryan (D-NY) and Rep. Chuck Edwards (R-NC), have purchased vehicles to assist in hosting mobile casework office hours in the 118th Congress. Representative Edwards even conducted a public input process to assist in naming the vehicle (the Carolina Cruiser). Office of Rep. Pat Ryan, *C.A.R.E.S. Van and Constituent Casework*, <https://patryan.house.gov/issues/cares-van-and-constituent-casework>; Office of Rep. Chuck Edwards, *Carolina Cruiser – Fletcher, NC*, <https://edwards.house.gov/about/events/carolina-cruiser-fletcher-nc>.

¹⁰ For example, a 2022 CRS report on congressional staff salaries notes a slightly higher average salary for congressional staff with "caseworker" titles over staff with "constituent services representative" titles. This may be indicative of a changing trend where "caseworker" as a title is falling out of favor, with younger, newer staff receiving more modern titles. R. Eric Petersen, *Staff Pay, Selected Positions in House Member Offices, 2001-2023*, Cong. Res. Serv. (Sept. 29, 2022).

¹¹ Anne Meeker, *Structuring a Casework Operation*, POPVOX Foundation (Oct. 2, 2023), <https://www.popvox.org/casework-basics-manuals/structuring-casework-operation>.

Congressional offices often describe themselves as a “hail Mary” option for constituents who have exhausted all other avenues to resolve conflict with a federal agency or have met unreasonable burdens in trying to do so. For example:

- A constituent receiving Social Security Disability Benefits may consider contacting their congressional office for help when they have received conflicting guidance about the amount of retroactive benefits they are owed following an appeal;
- A veteran may reach out about medical records required for a VA appeal that have gone missing with the National Archives and Records Administration; or
- A constituent petitioning for a spousal visa for their partner may reach out when their file seems to be lost in transit among multiple agencies under the Department of Homeland Security.

“**Congressional offices often describe themselves as a “hail Mary” option for constituents who have exhausted all other avenues to resolve conflict.**”

Ethics rules for both chambers guide offices to use their resources for casework “asks” that meet three criteria:

1. *on behalf of a constituent*;
2. *in-jurisdiction* (i.e., pertaining to a federal agency, although some offices will help guide a constituent with an out-of-jurisdiction request to appropriate resources); and
3. *actionable* (i.e., pertaining to a specific individual’s case where the office has legal and ethical grounds to intercede, as opposed to general opinion on a program).

Once a case has met these three criteria, casework staff will work with legislative liaison staff for the agency involved and the constituent to facilitate communication, obtain information, and raise any concerns until the case has reached a resolution, whether favorable or unfavorable to the constituent.¹²

¹² *Supra* note 7.

In public communications materials and media appearances, members frequently note the benefits of casework, including:

- Demonstrating accountability and responsiveness;
- Providing tangible benefits to constituents independent of the legislative process; and
- As a low-cost way to reach constituents, especially through word-of-mouth stories from successful casework and earned media covering casework wins.¹³

Notably, casework can be one of the best examples of “recursive representation”¹⁴ in the U.S. today, where members’ staff and constituents develop long-term relationships that have the potential to inform legislative and oversight agendas.

Technologically, each member office’s casework system is an entity unto itself: House and Senate rules both specify that individual members retain personal ownership of any information provided to them in the course of their duties, including constituent information from casework. This means that individual members retain full authority to dispose of cases however they like, including deciding whether to transfer open casework to their successor if they leave office.¹⁵ Individual offices also contract directly with vendors to use House- and Senate-approved Constituent Management System (CMS) systems; these programs are not shared between offices, meaning that transferring casework between member offices must be done manually if necessary (e.g., when a constituent moves to a new congressional district or after a redistricting process).

From a constituent perspective, the U.S. federal legislature is already a “mixed system” combining both single-member districts (the U.S. House of Representatives) and multi-member districts (the U.S. Senate). Constituents may approach any of their three elected federal representatives for assistance; caseworkers report that many constituents, if unsatisfied with the assistance one office offered on their behalf, will reach out to a different office. On the whole, casework operations vary widely among individual offices: A lack of centralized training and oversight, coupled with different levels of constituent demand and different member office priorities, means that some teams are dramatically more equipped and experienced than others.

¹³ Anne Meeker, Connection/Communication, Voice/Mail, Jan. 28, 2025, <https://voicemailgov.substack.com/p/connectioncommunication>.

¹⁴ Mansbridge, Jane. "Recursive Representation." *Creating Political Presence: The New Politics of Democratic Representation*. Ed. Dario Castiglione and Johannes Pollak. University of Chicago Press, 2018.

¹⁵ While we will not focus on the challenges of studying casework in this paper, it is worth noting that this practice also makes gathering reliable data on the scale of casework operations almost impossible.

Four models for casework in a multi-member system

In asking how casework would work in a proportional multi-member system, our first question might be how it already works in other democracies with established proportional systems. The fact that members of parliament in every established democracy do some variety of constituent service is well-established, but when it comes to the operational nuts and bolts of how that service gets done, there is little existing scholarship. As a 2024 literature review of scholarship on constituency service recently found, there is wide variation even in the types of practices included under the term in the comparative political science literature,¹⁶ let alone specificity in details like staffing levels; budgets for outreach; available training and education; and ethical and legal restrictions. Many of these variables would necessarily be modified in a switch to a proportional multi-member system, already impacting how casework would work; comparative ethnographic research to flesh out these comparisons would be a welcome addition to the field.

Extrapolating from what we know about the operations of casework in the U.S. today, we offer four potential models for how casework in the House may work under a proportional system with multiple members per district, with some discussion of how they may address some of the challenges posed by single-member districts and winner-take-all elections. These models are:

1. Members compete for casework
2. Delegations pool casework services
3. Parties pool casework services
4. Congress establishes independent ombuds services

However, we note that these options are likely non-exclusive and may also be sequential. As Congress changes, so does casework.

Members compete for casework

The most commonly discussed scenario under a multi-member proportional system in the U.S. would be to simply increase the number of members per district. In this scenario, individual members are still responsible for developing and managing their individual casework operations, including hiring and training staff; maintaining a database of constituent casework; and performing any outreach and marketing for casework services. However, the fact that constituents now have multiple options not only in the House but also the Senate means that, if desired, House members have opportunities to differentiate themselves from their fellow members to attract casework.

¹⁶ *Supra* note 5.

Essentially, this shifts casework to function more as a competitive market, with multiple suppliers of the same service directly competing over the same pool of available constituent demand.

In this scenario, constituents' decisions about which member to reach out to might be based on a number of factors. Certainly, notoriety and name recognition is one, and this scenario would likely see increased casework demand for members who invest in marketing and outreach in their districts.

However, constituents' choices could also express constituent preference for a member they feel is better able to understand their specific concerns due to a shared background or specific outreach to their community — and incentivize members to focus on specific community needs. Given the sensitive nature of some issues that frequently appear in offices' caseloads (i.e., immigration status for undocumented constituents or medical care for transgender individuals), it is understandable that some constituents may have concerns for their privacy and safety as well, and may benefit from a wider range of options. Congressional casework staff report this type of expressed constituent choice happens with relative frequency in Congress today, with people from other states or districts reaching out to members they trust to better represent them — for example, veterans reaching out to prominent members with a shared military background — not realizing that members are limited in their ability to provide casework for non-constituents.

“ Constituents' choices could express preference for a member better able to understand their concerns due to a shared background or outreach to their community.

With more representatives competing in a larger multi-member district, different candidates and parties can focus on more niche concerns that might otherwise be ignored if one candidate is trying to win maximally broad appeal. As Brian F. Crisp (Washington University) and Patrick Cunha Silva (Loyola University) explore in their work, the dynamics of a multiparty district allow

legislators to specialize to meet specific district needs, rather than perceiving themselves as responsible for the interest of “at least 50 percent plus one of their constituents.”¹⁷ Focusing on niche issues is less necessary when a candidate can count on partisanship alone to discourage meaningful competition or even voter defection.¹⁸

This competitive pressure could ultimately impact the overall quality and standard of casework across the country by increasing the focus on casework as a critical differentiating factor between members in competitive districts. Members may compete to hire the most skilled and experienced caseworkers, creating a more robust job market and career pathways for caseworkers.

However, increasing the amount of constituent choice in casework may pose its own problems. Multiple choices for members may increase the frequency of “member shopping,” or constituents approaching multiple members with the same issue. It is, of course, a constituent’s right to petition for redress of grievances from all of their representatives — and the current inconsistency of casework teams means that sometimes switching member offices can indeed open up new approaches or competencies that will result in a different answer from the agency involved. There are certainly reasons to hope that raising the overall standard for constituent service would cut down on constituents’ perceived need for member shopping; however, at least for an interim period increasing constituent choice, this could add to Congress’ overall workload and tie up agency liaisons with duplicative requests.

Delegations pool casework services

While a more competitive landscape is one potential outcome, switching to multi-member districts could also incentivize greater sharing of resources between members representing the same district. This could include a wide variety of levels of resource-sharing: At a more minimal end, perhaps multiple members invest together on a resource like a vehicle that can be more efficiently used by multiple teams; at a more maximally shared side, members could go so far as to hire shared staff and a joint CRM.

We would expect these arrangements to arise more commonly among members of the same party or those who caucus together, as members of the same party have an incentive to try to keep each other in office to expand their legislative coalition. Therefore, these members may equally benefit from the economies of scale of a joint operation, freeing up additional staff capacity and financial resources to invest in other activities.

¹⁷Brian F. Crisp & Patrick Cunha Silva, *The Role of District Magnitude in When Women Represent Women*, *Br. J. Pol. Sci.* 53, no. 3 (July 2023): 1061–69, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123422000576>. See also Hanna Coffé, *MPs’ representational focus in MMP systems: A comparison between Germany and New Zealand*, *Representation* 54, no. 4 (2018): 367–89; Jason A. MacDonald & Erin E. O’Brien, *Quasi-Experimental Design, Constituency, and Advancing Women’s Interests: Reexamining the Influence of Gender on Substantive Representation*, *Pol. Res. Q.* 64, no. 2 (2011): 472–86, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1065912909354703>; Manon Tremblay, *Women’s Political Representation: Does the Electoral System Matter?*, *Pol. Sci.* 57, no. 1 (June 2005): 59–75, <https://doi.org/10.1177/003231870505700105>.

¹⁸Crisp & Silva, *supra* note 17, at 1062.

Pooling casework among members could take many forms.



Notably, joint delegation casework could also address the common concern about casework in a multi-member system — namely, that constituents will be confused about whom to contact when presented with multiple options in both the House and Senate. There may be ancillary benefits as well: For example, a larger casework team could allow for more specialization; better absorb the seasonal rises and falls in casework demand; and present a better chance of forming a legislative coalition to address a structural or systemic issue raised through casework.

As Senate Associate Historian Daniel Holt notes, shared casework was a relatively normal occurrence among several delegations in the 1970s: Oklahoma’s two senators, for example, had shared casework staff who handled requests for assistance for the state as a whole.¹⁹ There are also examples of some staff-sharing today: It is fairly common for House offices to utilize part-time shared staff for administrative roles like finance or franking specialists, and several members of the New York delegation even share constituent-facing roles like grants coordinators.

On the other hand, this model would also pose its own drawbacks — most notably, individual member control over who is hired to handle casework. The potential benefit of sharing some casework operations fails if the members involved are not able to set and maintain shared standards, including joint responsibility for management decisions.

Also, there may be less incentive for individual members to prioritize casework outreach if they receive less individual credit. As recent scholarship demonstrates,²⁰ individual members can,

¹⁹ *Casework History: How did we get here? With Senate Associate Historian Daniel Holt* (webinar), POPVOX Foundation (Jan. 17, 2024), <https://www.popvox.org/events/casework-history>.

²⁰ Anne Meeker, *The Known Unknowns of Constituent Engagement, Voice/Mail*, Feb. 25, 2025, <https://voicemailgov.substack.com/p/megan-rickman-blackwood>.

through proactive outreach, play a significant role in helping their constituents access federal benefits and services. If the member is not incentivized to prioritize that resource-intensive outreach, constituents may be less aware of their service as an option.

Parties pool casework services

But what happens to delegations with members from multiple parties? Another potential model would be for the parties themselves to develop shared casework infrastructure to help promote standout casework by incumbents of the same party, increasing the likelihood of all their members getting re-elected. While this shift is technically also possible today, it might still be a logical outcome of the switch to proportional multi-member districts, as parties could be increasingly reliant on incumbent members' casework abilities to make them stand out from other incumbent opponents in a more competitive field.²¹

Again, the range of activities here is a spectrum that could run from parties establishing fully shared, centralized casework staff; to parties establishing casework consultants who could be deployed to support member offices in need of assistance; to parties establishing staff-level hiring banks, training resources, and other general support. As with shared casework, this would also address the common concern of constituents struggling to figure out their member with multiple choices.



²¹ In the wake of the 2024 election, we note several House members who outperformed their parties, crediting extensive casework services for their victories. See *Marie Gluesenkamp Perez Interview*, *N.Y. Times* (Nov. 8, 2024), <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/11/08/us/politics/marie-gluesenkamp-perez-interview.html>.

Once again, there is some level of precedent for how this could work today: Both Democratic and Republican leadership teams host annual “fly-in” days for senior district staff, recognizing their role in managing excellent casework services; additionally, for some time the House had a separate listserv for caseworkers in Democratic offices. Other examples of partisan staff training activities include the LevelUp training program for Republican staff,²² run by the Committee on House Administration’s Republican team.

Again, however, there are clear drawbacks, the most obvious ones again being the incentive for individual members to still work to highlight available casework services if they will receive less credit for their work. For members running in unpopular parties, losing casework as a differentiating factor may also create additional electoral vulnerability.²³

Additionally, the top-down, party-level assertion over member autonomy and decision-making in such a fundamental aspect of representation is also reason for some concern. A party-led casework program could ostensibly be used as a tool of party discipline — the same way that members today express concern over their ability to get a higher number in the ballot for Hill office space if they buck their party’s leadership.

Another concern could be that politicizing casework would stall the recent gains on the Hill toward supporting and strengthening casework for all members. The last several years have seen promising steps forward for Congress supporting and elevating casework as an institution, including the in-house development of a digital Privacy Act release form; the emergence of national casework forums, where staff share information and coordinate on a nonpartisan basis; an in-progress pilot project to aggregate anonymized casework data into a national dashboard; and the establishment of an agency “main street” in a House office building to make agency liaisons more centrally available to congressional stakeholders. The political willpower to push for these improvements has largely been based on the fact that casework is a commonality among all members of Congress across party lines; therefore, reform efforts to strengthen casework do not privilege one party over another. Shifting casework into the control of parties could eliminate this drive to create institutional resources.

Congress establishes an independent ombuds

Finally, in the most dramatic (and least likely) maneuver, Congress may elect to eliminate casework as an element of congressional activities altogether by establishing a separate, stand-alone body tasked with responding to constituent inquiries, either directly or through referrals from legislative offices.

²² Max Cohen, *News: Details on House GOP training*, Mar. 28, 2024, *Punchbowl News*, <https://punchbowl.news/article/house-republican-training-details/#:~:text=New%3A%20House%20Republicans%20are%20expanding,sessions%20in%20the%20next%20month>.

²³ “Accordingly, MPs devote a good deal of attention to constituency work as a way of minimising the impact of the potential unpopularity of their party (Costa and Poyet 2016)” David Arter, *The What, Why’s and How’s of Constituency Service*, at 12 (2018) (citing Olivier Costa & Corentin Poyet, *Back to their roots: French MPs in their district*, *Fr. Pol.* 14, no. 4 (2016): 406–38).

This is not a new idea in American politics and has seen several unsuccessful attempts over the last century. The most viable example was a bill from Senator Vance Hartke in the 1970s that would have introduced a Congressional Research Service-like body to function as a shared institutional layer of support for casework teams.²⁴ Hartke's proposal would have retained an intake role for members of Congress who would talk to constituents about their problems, but then referred the actual administrative work of the case out to this new entity.

Outside of Congress, this structure has been implemented on the agency side in at least one prominent example: persistent unmanageable constituent complaints about IRS service in the 1990s eventually spurred Congress to create the Taxpayer Advocate Service, a specialized unit with the IRS that handles constituent complaints, conducts research on the tax system, and reports directly to Congress.²⁵

“ A professionalized casework entity may be able to provide more consistent and higher-quality services to constituents.

Some state legislatures also adopt this approach. For example, the Arkansas House of Representatives has a team of permanent staff who handle constituent service requests. The state is divided into four “caucuses,” each consisting of 25 state house districts, and two “legislative analysts” are assigned to each caucus. If a constituent contacts their representative in the state house, that representative’s office can refer the constituent to the relevant legislative analysts, who then handle the request in consultation with the representative’s office.

There is international precedent as well, albeit in a country with a dramatically different political landscape: The Swedish Parliamentary Ombudsmen are appointed by the Swedish parliament to serve a casework-like role, managing constituent complaints with Swedish government services that exceed the capacity of normal agency customer service channels and providing investigation, oversight, and recommendations to support better policy implementation.²⁶

²⁴ A bill to establish an Office of Constituent Assistance, and for other purposes, S. 2500, 93rd Cong. (1973), <https://www.congress.gov/bill/93rd-congress/senate-bill/2500>.

²⁵ *Our History*, Taxpayer Advocate Service, <https://www.taxpayeradvocate.irs.gov/about-us/our-history/>.

²⁶ *About JO*, JO - Riksdagens Ombudsmän (Mar. 24, 2023), <https://www.jo.se/en/about-jo/>.

Once again, there are benefits and drawbacks. Congress has long struggled with internal staff capacity, so moving routine casework out of its purview would reclaim a significant amount of staff labor. A professionalized casework entity may also be able to provide more consistent and higher-quality services to constituents than member office staff hired with little relevant experience. It would also eliminate the problems of member-shopping, and transferring cases when a member retires or otherwise leaves office.

Centralizing casework services into a nonpartisan expert body would also allow for higher-quality data collection on the types of cases Congress sees, providing a more accurate and real-time body of information for oversight. Like the Taxpayer Advocate's annual reports to Congress, this body could provide district-level reporting on common issues, and provide nonpartisan recommendations for technical legislative fixes to address these issues. It may also facilitate further innovations in casework, especially in communication between agencies and Congress: It is technically much easier to build and maintain a many-to-many system than a many-to-one system for referring and tracking inquiries between branches of government.

However, as with centralizing casework under parties, this option still removes the incentive for members to publicize casework services when they will receive less direct credit. It also removes the element of experiential learning that members' staff benefit from by working to troubleshoot bureaucratic problems, and weakens the recursive relationships between constituents and staff developed throughout long-term casework.

So would it work?

Overall, comparative political science literature points to the fact that no matter the electoral system, parliamentarians will always do some level of casework. For most elected representatives, direct service and connection to constituents is part of the job. So then the question of the potential switch from single-member districts to multi-member districts in the U.S. is one of quality and quantity: How would the experience of participating in casework change for both constituents and members?

Again, this paper does not argue for any particular system, but reviews potential pros and cons for casework related to a shift to multi-member districts as a whole, regardless of the specific model.

We'll also note some cautions against making direct comparisons between other parliamentary systems and the U.S., including comparisons between state and federal representatives in the U.S. The U.S. is one of only a handful of countries that combine single-member districts with presidentialism, and one of only a handful of genuine two-party systems in the world. Uneven turnout in presidential election years can dramatically impact congressional elections, complicating the connection between casework and voter choice.

The United States also has among the largest constituent-to-member ratios in the world, with about 765,000 constituents per representative in the House; only India has a higher ratio.²⁷ This extremely large constituent-to-member ratio means that interactions between members and constituents in the U.S. are more likely to be mediated by staff, which increases distance between members and constituents — making it more difficult to impute direct member prioritization/insight to decisions and interactions in casework. The large numbers of constituents also means there can be significant variability in casework demand: In conversations with caseworkers, the range of what might be considered a “standard” caseload is anywhere from 10 open cases to over 1,000. Districts with large populations receiving federal benefits (e.g., immigrant populations, disabled constituents, veterans, or federal employees) will likely have higher levels of demand, regardless of the member office's outreach and advertising efforts.

These caveats point to productive future directions for research on constituent service in the U.S. and around the world to answer some of these questions around staff mediation in constituent interactions; constituent experience of casework; casework as an element of voter choice; casework demand as a function of member outreach; casework demand as a function

²⁷ After the U.S., Japan has the next highest ratio, at about 262,000 to 1. Japan's legislature is slightly larger than the U.S. (465 members), but Japan has one-third the population of the United States (approximately 122 million).

of administrative burden; and more. In the absence of this work, we will attempt to draw some limited comparisons.

How do members in multi-member districts value casework?

Comparative literature on constituent service in multi-member versus single-member districts around the world — including Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom — finds that representatives from single-member districts prioritize constituency service more than those from multi-member districts.²⁸ Bruenig et al. also find that in an experiment comparing proportionally elected versus majoritarian-elected members of the same Parliament — the German Bundestag — the majoritarian-elected MPs were almost twice as likely to respond to a constituent email.²⁹

However, under this big-picture finding, there are other factors that affect the overall volume of constituent service performed, especially the level of emphasis individual members place on advertising their services to constituents.

“ The most vulnerable incumbents are also most likely to invest in personal vote-seeking through constituency service.

One of the strongest factors in predicting high levels of constituent service is electoral vulnerability. In countries with single-member districts, including Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia, more vulnerable representatives tend to do more constituent service,³⁰ especially

²⁸ Heitshusen, Valerie, Garry Young, and David M. Wood, *Electoral Context and MP Constituency Focus in Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom*, *Am. J. Pol. Sci.* 49, no. 1 (2005): 32–45. See also Jeffrey J. Harden, *Multidimensional Responsiveness: The Determinants of Legislators' Representational Priorities*, 38 *Legis. Stud. Q.* 155 (2013), p. 171, finding that “legislators in multi-member districts rate service as a lower priority, on average, compared to legislators in single-member districts.”

²⁹ Christian Breunig, Emiliano Grossman & Miriam Hänni, *Responsiveness and Democratic Accountability: Observational Evidence from an Experiment in a Mixed-Member Proportional System*, 47 *Legis. Stud. Q.* 31 (2022).

³⁰ Heitshusen et al., *supra* note 28, at 32–45.; R. Buck & B.E. Cain, *British MPs in Their Constituencies*, 15 *Legis. Stud. Q.* 1, 14 (1990), quoted in Brian F. Crisp & Richard E. Simoneau, *Constituency Service in the United States and Canada: Electoral Incentives*

when their party is unpopular.³¹ Similarly, in multi-member proportional systems with intra-party competition, the most vulnerable incumbents are also most likely to invest in personal vote-seeking through constituency service.³² Because multi-member districts also allow for some intra-party competition, there are effectively no safe seats. No incumbent can afford to ignore the value of constituent service. In these contexts, the “personal vote” for the individual candidate or incumbent’s reputation, track record, and personal brand matters as a differentiator among multiple candidates who may share more or less the same political positions. In democracies where voters directly select candidates, representatives not only have more reason to devote time to constituent services, but they also have more reason to emphasize constituent service in public messaging, since they are more likely to get credit for their work (as opposed to closed-list systems where voters vote for the party, not the candidate).

For example, Ireland arguably has the most candidate-centered electoral system, the single-transferable vote, which is a form of ranked-choice voting with multiple representatives. Because individual candidates compete for rankings, they have a tendency to compete to outdo each other in their constituency focus,³³ with one Irish MP claiming to spend only about 30 percent (of time) on legislative work “because in order to get re-elected you need to spend time on constituency work.”³⁴ Fifteen percent of all Dáil (lower house of the Irish national legislature) deputies elected at the 2016 general election were Independents, and for them a track record of constituency service was plainly a sine qua non of re-election, as they were unable to fall back on partisan loyalty to attract votes.³⁵

Since around 90 percent of elected U.S. representatives today come from electorally safe districts,³⁶ prioritizing constituent service is relatively optional from an electoral standpoint, and more likely depends on the member and their priorities. A shift toward a system that pits incumbent members of the same party against each other for re-election (with all the attendant pros and cons of developing a more competitive casework environment) essentially reduces the number of safe seats, possibly incentivizing more casework.

and Personal Representation, 85 *J. Pol.* 351, 354 (2023). Buck and Cain “came away with the strong impression that the competitiveness of the electoral district was a big determinant of whether the sitting MP was a faithful constituent servant.”

³¹ *Supra* note 23.

³² Selb and Lutz (2015) point to the variable candidate dynamics in open-list systems and generate an “index of intra-party competition.” They conclude that “personal vote seeking is most important for the candidates at the edge, which means candidates that are unsure about their chances of getting elected and that are hardly able to tell whether they are about to face electoral doom or victory.” The inference is that marginal incumbents have the greatest incentive to undertake constituency service. Peter Selb & Georg Lutz, *Lone fighters: Intraparty competition, interparty competition and candidates’ vote-seeking efforts in open-ballot PR elections*, *Electoral Stud.* 39 (2015): 329–37.

³³ John Coakley & Michael Gallagher, *Politics in the Republic of Ireland*, 5th ed. (Routledge 2010).

³⁴ Eimear O’Leary, *The constituency orientation of modern TDs*, *Ir. Pol. Stud.* 26, no. 3 (2011): 329–43.

³⁵ Chris Terry, *The 2016 Irish General Election: PR and the Local Link* (Electoral Reform Society 2016), <https://www.electoral-reform.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/2016-Irish-General-Election.pdf>.

³⁶ In its forecast for the 2024 election, the Cook Political Report lists only 22 out of 441 races as a “toss-up,” and a total of 43 races as either “toss-up” or “lean” toward one political party. *2024 CPR House Race Ratings*, Cook Political Report (May 2024), <https://www.cookpolitical.com/ratings/house-race-ratings>.

How does the constituent experience differ between single-member and multi-member systems?

Unfortunately, the relative quality of constituent service (and the constituent experience of it) has been greatly understudied at the federal level in the U.S. However, two elements that may point to the quality of constituent experience include the subject-matter expertise parliamentarians bring to their work and diversity in representation.

In single-member districts, each party picks only one candidate. This method often leads to choosing candidates who fit the traditional mold: typically white, male, older,³⁷ wealthy,³⁸ with advanced degrees, and with backgrounds in law and government.³⁹ By contrast, multi-member districts allow parties to offer a variety of candidates in order to attract a wider range of voters by addressing diverse interests and identities.⁴⁰ For example, in multi-member districts with party lists, women are more likely to get elected — one of the most consistent findings in the academic literature on political representation.⁴¹

This diversity among elected legislators impacts the expertise and priorities that members bring with them to Congress, including to casework. In an exhaustive study of state and local elected representatives in the U.S., Washington University political scientist Daniel J. Butler finds that “politicians exhibit favoritism toward some constituents over others” and “politicians are less responsive to constituents who are not from their racial group.”⁴² Importantly, Butler argues that much of this unresponsiveness cannot be explained by strategic behavior. As Butler explains, “politicians come to office with different information, knowledge, and sets of experiences that make it easier for them to work on issues important to people like them ... politicians’ personal knowledge allows them to more easily help those most like them. This is exactly the behavior we expect from rational officials: they should work on the issues for which their personal knowledge makes it less costly to do so.”⁴³ For example, Butler finds that:

³⁷ Jennifer Manning, *Membership of the 118th Congress: A Profile*, Cong. Res. Serv., July 24, 2024, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R47470>.

³⁸ *Personal Finances*, Open Secrets (2018), <https://www.opensecrets.org/personal-finances>.

³⁹ The American Bar Association notes that 117 members of the 118th Congress have law degrees, making the legal profession the best-represented in Congress. *In the weeds: A grassroots deep dive*, Am. Bar Ass’n (2022), https://www.americanbar.org/advocacy/governmental_legislative_work/grassroots-action-center/In_The_Weeds/.

⁴⁰ For examples, see Crisp & Silva, *supra* note 17; Matthew S. Shugart, Melody Valdini & Kati Suominen, *Looking for Locals: Voter Information Demands and Personal Vote-Earning Attributes of Legislators Under Proportional Representation*, *Am. J. Pol. Sci.* 49, no. 2 (Apr. 2005): 437–49, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3647687>; Yongwook Kweon & John M. Ryan, *Electoral Systems and the Substantive Representation of Marginalized Groups: Evidence from Women’s Issue Bills in South Korea*, *Pol. Res. Q.* 75, no. 4 (2021): 1065–78.

⁴¹ Lena Wängnerud, *Women in Parliaments: Descriptive and Substantive Representation*, *Annual Review of Political Science* 12, no. 1 (June 1, 2009): 51–69; Pamela Paxton, Melanie Hughes & Matthew Painter, *Growth in Women’s Political Representation: A Longitudinal Exploration of Democracy, Electoral System and Gender Quotas*, *European Journal of Political Research* 49, no. 1 (2010): 25–52; Ian McAllister & Donley T. Studlar, *Electoral Systems and Women’s Representation: A Long-term Perspective*, *Representation* 39, no. 1 (March 1, 2002): 3–14, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00344890208523209>; Michelle M. Taylor-Robinson, *Gender and Legislatures*, in *The Oxford Handbook of Legislative Studies*, edited by Shane Martin, Thomas Saalfeld & Kaare W. Strøm, Oxford Univ. Press, 2014.

⁴² Daniel M. Butler, *Representing the Advantaged: How Politicians Reinforce Inequality* (Cambridge Univ. Press 2014), <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139871969>.

⁴³ *Id.* at 118.

“Female officials are more likely to have personal knowledge about issues that are important to female constituents. Similarly, officials from low-income areas are more likely to be able to answer questions of interest to low-income constituents.”⁴⁴

Finally, we’ll note that this descriptive representation may be slightly dependent on the type of proportional system involved: There is a slight tension here between candidate-oriented voting systems, like single-transferable-vote (STV) and party-list systems. List systems are better able to ensure descriptive representation because voters are voting for a party — a predetermined slate that will be more likely to include a diversity of candidates in order to attract a diversity of votes. Open list still retains this party-oriented feature while allowing for a more substantial personal vote, and STV is the most candidate centered. Under STV, candidates may still run on a party slate, but voters can rank candidates freely irrespective of party. The more candidate-centric a system, the more it may encourage candidates to develop a “personal vote” through active constituency work. But by spotlighting individual candidates rather than parties, candidate-centered systems may trigger early campaign concerns about “electability,” leading to fewer female and minority candidates running for office in the first place. In particular, women are less likely to volunteer themselves for office than men. Countries that use the more candidate-oriented voting systems have lower shares of female legislators.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ *Id.*

⁴⁵ Ian McAllister & Donley T. Studlar, *Electoral systems and women's representation: a long-term perspective*, *Representation* 39, no. 1 (Mar. 1, 2002): 3–14, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00344890208523209>.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the choice between single-member and multi-member districts for constituents with regard to casework has some tradeoffs around the constituent experience of casework: Single-member districts simplify representation, making it more likely that constituents who do not closely follow politics will know who their member is and that they can reach out if needed. However, multi-member districts may mean more diverse representatives with direct personal insight into the needs and experiences of a wider range of constituents, as well as more emphasis from vulnerable members in competitive races on recruiting casework. These tradeoffs may change depending on the specific structure of the proportional system (i.e., candidate-centric or party-centric systems).

We outline four models for how casework could work operationally in a proportional system, noting that some of these potential changes are technically possible today but more likely to happen in a shift to a proportional system — as well as the potential tradeoffs for these models. Key tradeoffs include member office incentive to promote casework services to compete for constituent attention; cooperation or competition between member offices in the same delegation; and the strengthening or weakening of recursive relationships developed between members and constituents through casework.

Some of these tradeoffs invite further research on casework in the U.S. and in other parliamentary democracies around the world; there are simply many questions we do not have adequate data to answer.

Ultimately, the question of how casework would function in a proportional representation system is just one of many considerations in the broader debate about electoral reform. However, given the importance of constituent services in building trust and facilitating effective governance, it is a question that deserves careful consideration. As discussions about potential reforms to the U.S. electoral system continue, we hope this analysis will serve as a useful starting point for further research and debate on this critical aspect of democratic representation.



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