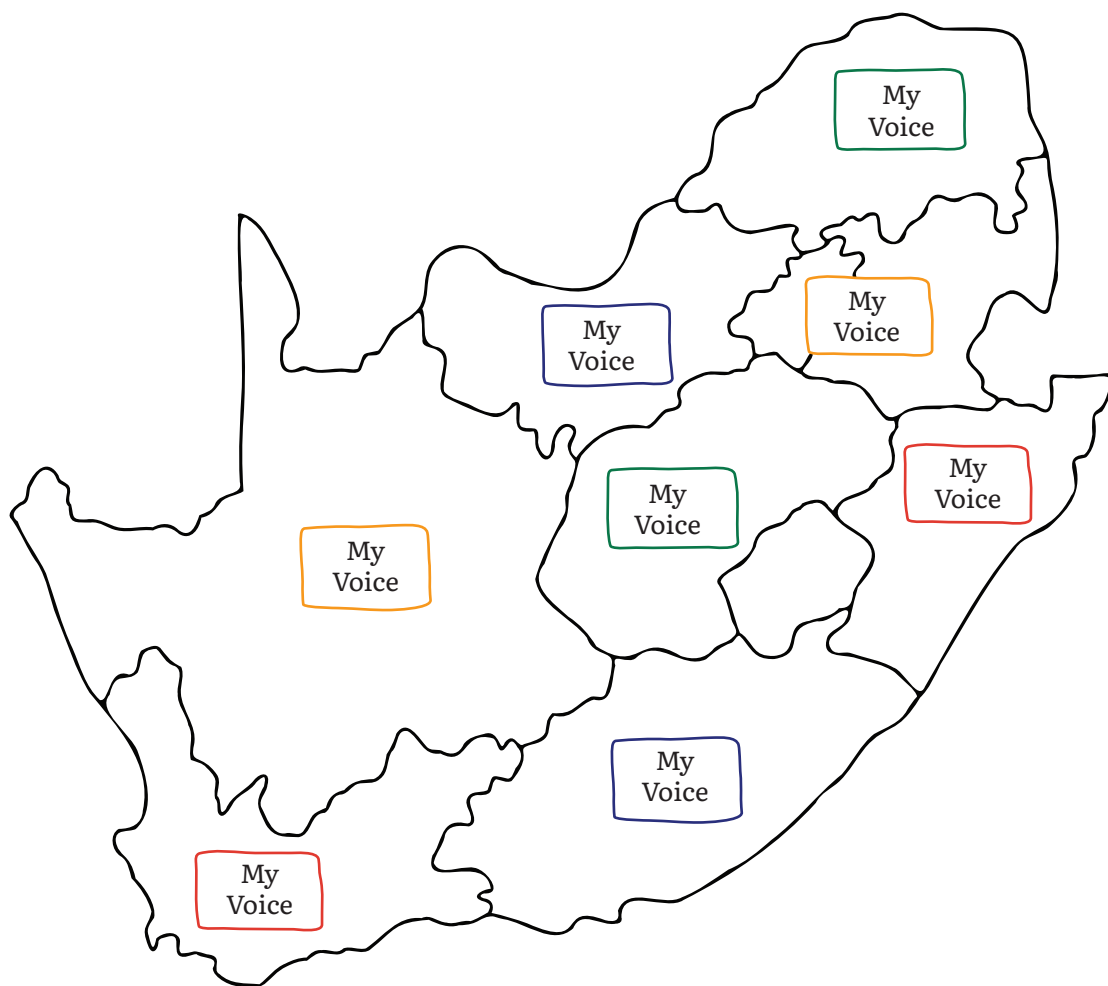


How Constituencies Can Be Useful (or not) in South Africa

An Empirical Assessment Through
Parliamentary Questions (2025)



 ParliMeter



Co-funded by
the European Union

 **PARLIAMENTARY
MONITORING GROUP**
 **openup:**
ORGANISATION UNDOING TAX ABUSE

Contents

1.	Abbreviations	3
2.	Abstract	4
3.	Executive Summary	5
4.	Introduction: Constituency Representation in a Party-Centred Democracy	8
5.	Methodology	9
5.1	What data was used?.....	9
5.2	Data Extraction and Classification	9
5.3	Quantitative Pattern Interpretation and Institutional Inference	10
5.4	Limitations: Structural Constraints in Measuring Constituency Activity	11
6.	Literature Review	12
6.1	Legislative Oversight in African Democracies	13
6.2	Representation and Claim-Making in Party-Centred Systems	13
6.3	Towards a theory: Representation, Accountability and Legislative Oversight.....	14
7.	Expanded Empirical Findings with Structured Tables.....	15
7.1	Overall Distribution.....	15
7.2	Party Distribution.....	16
7.3	Departmental Concentration.....	17
7.4	Issue Category Breakdown.....	18
7.5	Named Individuals and Personalised Claims	18
8.	Qualitative interpretation of data	19
8.1	Strategic Partisan Deployment	19
8.2	Material and Sectoral Grounding.....	20
8.3	Episodic vs Institutionalised Engagement.....	21
8.4	Normative Implications.....	22
9.	Constituencies and its usefulness in democracy.....	22
9.1	When Are Constituencies Useful?	22
9.1.1.	Constituencies as Intake Mechanisms.....	23

9.1.2	Constituencies as Performative Legitimacy.....	23
9.1.3	Structural Constraints.....	23
9.1.4	Are Constituencies Institutionally Embedded?	24
9.1.5	Funding Framework of Constituency Offices and Institutional Feasibility.....	24
9.1.6	Reform and Institutional Strengthening.....	25
9.2	Constituencies and Normative Implications for Democratic Reform	28
10.	Policy challenge: Government Action on Constituency Offices.....	28
11.	Conclusion and Way forward	30
12.	References.....	34

List of Tables

Table 1:	Distribution of Local/Constituency/Person-Focused Questions.....	15
Table 2:	Local/Constituency/Person-Focused Questions by Party [as identified in Q&A records] (Top Contributors).....	16
Table 3:	Local/Constituency/Person-Focused Questions by Party (Top Contributors)	16
Table 4:	Local-Focused Questions by Department [Local-Focused Questions] (Top Portfolios)	17
Table 5:	Local-Focused Questions by Department (Top Portfolios)	17
Table 6:	Issue Categories within Local/Constituency Subset [Share of Local Subset].....	18
Table 7:	Issue Categories within Local/Constituency Subset	18
Table 8:	Summary of Framework	27

This report was compiled by OUTA's Parliamentary Engagement Office:

- Robyn Pasensie, Parliamentary / Project Management

1. Abbreviations

ANC	African National Congress
GNU	Government of National Unity
MP	Members of Parliaments
NA	National Assembly
PMG	Parliamentary Monitoring Group
PR	Proportional Representation
Q&As	Questions and Answers
SA	South Africa

2. Abstract

This report investigates whether constituencies are institutionally useful in South Africa by examining the extent to which geographically specific community concerns are translated into parliamentary oversight through written Questions and Answers (Q&As). South Africa's closed-list proportional representation system, adopted in 1994 to secure inclusivity and proportional fairness, weakens direct territorial accountability by linking Members of Parliaments' (MPs') political survival primarily to party structures rather than geographically bounded electorates. Drawing on a dataset of 5,238 written parliamentary questions from 2025 sourced from the Parliamentary Monitoring Group (PMG) archive, the analysis isolates 1,142 questions (21.8%) that explicitly reference a named locality, constituency, local facility or non-ministerial individual, excluding international and broad national policy questions. The findings show that constituency-related questioning is present but not dominant, clustering around materially grounded service delivery concerns such as policing, health, education, water, electricity, transport and housing. Local articulation is disproportionately associated with opposition parties, suggesting strategic deployment of hyper-local questioning for visibility and executive critique in a party-centred system. The report concludes that constituencies are conditionally useful as intake mechanisms and performative representative claims, but their institutional influence is constrained by limited geographic metadata, informal constituency mediation outside parliamentary records, and weak enforceability of executive accountability through written questions alone.

3. Executive Summary

This report addresses a central problem in South Africa's (SA) democratic design: whether constituencies can be useful in a political system where Members of Parliament (MPs) are elected through closed-list proportional representation, and are therefore formally accountable to parties rather than to territorially defined electorates. While proportional representation (PR) was normatively justified during the democratic transition as a mechanism for inclusivity and stability, it has also produced an enduring tension between party-centred accountability and citizens' expectations of locally responsive representation (Lodge, 2009; Mattes, 2002; Reynolds, 1999; Sisk, 1995)¹. Constituency offices nevertheless operate across the country, and persistent service delivery protests show that localised grievances remain politically salient and socially urgent (Booyesen, 2015; Alexander, 2010). The empirical question guiding this report is whether those constituency concerns are meaningfully translated into parliamentary activity, using written parliamentary questions as a traceable indicator of constituency-linked oversight.

The report is based on an original dataset constructed from written parliamentary questions and answers (Q&As) published in 2025 and accessed through the Parliamentary Monitoring Group (PMG) archive. A total of 5,238 written parliamentary questions were extracted from DOCX files and parsed to identify MP name, party affiliation, ministerial portfolio addressed, and question text. Because South African parliamentary records do not systematically tag questions by geographic constituency, locality had to be operationalised through textual markers. A question was classified as local or constituency-focused if it explicitly referenced a named municipality, town, suburb or ward; a named constituency; a local public facility such as a clinic, school or police station; a named non-ministerial individual affected by administrative action; or clear sub-provincial geographic specificity associated with a community issue. International questions and broad national policy questions without sub-provincial specificity were excluded.

The proportion itself is analytically significant. On one reading, it indicates that constituency articulation remains visible even under weak electoral incentives for territorial responsiveness. This aligns with African legislative scholarship showing that legislators often engage in constituency brokerage and localised mediation despite institutional constraints (Nijzink, 2011; Barkan, 2009). On another reading, the figure demonstrates that constituency concerns are not the dominant organising principle of parliamentary questioning. More than three-quarters of written questions address broader national policy, regulatory oversight or general matters rather than geographically specific

¹ References are in chronological order

constituency issues. This suggests that written questions operate primarily as general oversight tools rather than routine constituency service instruments.

The findings show strong thematic concentration in service delivery domains. Local questions cluster around policing and public safety, health facilities and clinics, education infrastructure, water and sanitation failures, electricity outages, transport and road maintenance, and housing or land disputes. This thematic pattern reflects the lived material basis of local grievance politics in SA and is consistent with protest literature identifying service delivery failures as dominant triggers of mobilisation (Booyesen, 2015; Alexander, 2010). The content and framing of local questions typically seek to compel executive acknowledgement, establish timelines for remedial action, interrogate departmental oversight of local facilities and extract information about staffing, budgets, maintenance or investigations. In this way, local questions can be understood as attempts to convert community-level problems into state answerability through formal parliamentary channels (Strøm, 2000; Habermas, 1996).

The report also identifies partisan asymmetry in local articulation. Opposition parties are significantly more likely to use hyper-local questions than governing party MPs. This is consistent with comparative findings that parliamentary questions are often deployed strategically for visibility and executive critique, particularly in dominant-party democracies where opposition actors rely on legislative tools to demonstrate responsiveness and highlight governance failures (Cheeseman, 2015; Martin, 2011; Barkan, 2009). Governing party MPs may engage constituency issues through internal party mediation rather than through adversarial parliamentary questions, which may reduce their visibility within publicly archived written-question records (Lodge, 2009). This raises an important interpretive implication: the parliamentary record may under-represent certain forms of constituency engagement, and public perceptions of responsiveness may be shaped by what is documented rather than by what occurs informally and internally.

The report interprets local questioning as both instrumental and performative. Instrumentally, constituency offices and local grievances can feed into parliamentary questions, which compel ministerial response and create documentary traces of community concerns. Performatively, local questions function as representative claim-making. By naming a municipality, constituency, facility or individual, MPs publicly construct a linkage to a community and enact substantive representation within parliamentary discourse (Mansbridge, 2003; Pitkin, 1967). Yet the evidence also shows that constituency usefulness is conditional rather than institutionalised. Local articulation clusters around

crises and service delivery failures, suggesting reactive engagement rather than routine territorial monitoring and proactive measures. Moreover, written questions secure answerability but do not guarantee enforcement or implementation, meaning that local articulation may produce visibility without resolution (Fox, 2007). This distinction helps explain why citizens may continue to rely on protest, litigation or media exposure even where parliamentary questioning occurs.

Several structural limitations constrain measurement and interpretation. South Africa's parliamentary question systems lack geographic tagging, requiring locality to be inferred from text and increasing the likelihood that implicit constituency issues are missed. Constituency activity is frequently informal and not captured in parliamentary records. Ministerial replies and follow-up actions were not systematically analysed, limiting claims about responsiveness and outcomes. Finally, the hybrid administrative constituency arrangement means MPs may reference localities not formally assigned to them, complicating assumptions about direct constituency accountability. These limitations underscore why constituency-linked parliamentary data are difficult to find and analyse in South Africa: the institutional architecture does not prioritise geographic traceability.

Overall, the report concludes that constituencies in South Africa are neither irrelevant nor fully institutionalised in parliamentary oversight. They are conditionally useful as mechanisms for articulating local grievances into the parliamentary record and for enacting representative linkages in a party-centred system. However, their influence is constrained by weak electoral incentives for territorial responsiveness, uneven partisan deployment, limited geographic metadata and the limited enforceability of oversight through written questions alone. Strengthening geographic coding of parliamentary questions, improving systematic tracking of replies and remedial action, and linking constituency offices more transparently to parliamentary outputs would enhance the institutional usefulness of constituencies without requiring a fundamental abandonment of proportional representation.

4. Introduction: Constituency Representation in a Party-Centred Democracy

The question of whether constituencies are useful in SA must be understood against the institutional architecture of the country's democratic system. Since 1994, SA has operated under a closed-list proportional representation (PR) electoral model for the National Assembly (NA). This model was adopted during the negotiated transition to democracy as a mechanism to ensure inclusivity, proportional fairness and political stability in a deeply divided society (Reynolds, 1999; Sisk, 1995). Proportional representation was normatively justified as a safeguard against majoritarian exclusion and as a tool for fostering broad-based representation in a fragile political environment.

Yet while PR has delivered high levels of descriptive representation and party proportionality, it has simultaneously generated enduring debates concerning the strength and clarity of the accountability relationship between MPs and geographically defined communities (Lodge, 2009; Mattes, 2002). In single-member district systems, representatives are directly elected from territorial constituencies and cultivate personal electoral support through constituency service (Norton & Wood, 1993; Fenno, 1978;). In such systems, constituency work is structurally embedded in electoral incentives. By contrast, in closed-list PR systems, MPs are selected and ranked by party leadership, and voters cast ballots for parties rather than individuals. Re-election prospects depend primarily on internal party positioning rather than direct territorial endorsement (Carey & Shugart, 1995).

This institutional design potentially weakens incentives for sustained localised representation. Accountability flows upward toward party hierarchies rather than downward toward geographically bounded electorates. However, despite this structural configuration, constituency offices operate across SA, and MPs continue to be approached by communities with geographically specific grievances. Service delivery protests remain a persistent feature of SA politics, often centred on local infrastructure collapse, water shortages, electricity failures, policing concerns and housing disputes (Booyesen, 2015; Alexander, 2010). The persistence of these protests indicates that local representation remains normatively and politically significant.

The central question, therefore, is whether constituency concerns are meaningfully translated into parliamentary activity. This report evaluates that question through an empirical assessment of written parliamentary Q&As from 2025. Written questions are one of the few formally recorded oversight mechanisms available to MPs. They compel executive response, generate documentary records and create traceable evidence of issue articulation (Martin, 2011). If constituencies are institutionally useful, one would expect to observe consistent instances of MPs raising geographically specific

concerns within this oversight mechanism. Parliamentary questions were extracted from the parliamentary Q&As archive via the PMG website, this report isolates 1,142 questions that demonstrate explicit local, constituency-by-name, or named-person focus.

International questions and broad national policy questions were excluded. The analysis evaluates the proportion, distribution, thematic content and framing of these localised questions to assess what they reveal about the usefulness and limitations of constituency representation in SA's party-centred democracy.

5. Methodology

5.1 What data was used?

The empirical analysis is based on 5,238 parsed written parliamentary questions extracted from the provided 2025 Q&As from the PMG website. Of these, 1,142 were classified as local, constituency-by-name or named-person focused. Questions were classified as local if they met at least one of the following criteria:

- i. Explicit reference to a named municipality, town, suburb or ward.
- ii. Reference to a named constituency.
- iii. Reference to a specific local public facility (e.g., clinic, school, police station).
- iv. Reference to a named local individual (excluding ministers or MPs).
- v. Clear sub-provincial geographic specificity associated with a community issue.

International and broad national policy questions were excluded.

5.2 Data Extraction and Classification

Questions were extracted from official DOCX parliamentary files and parsed to identify the name of the MP, party affiliation, department addressed and full question text. A classification protocol was applied to identify questions that contained explicit sub-provincial geographic specificity or constituency linkage.

A question was classified as local or constituency-focused if it met one or more of the following criteria: a. explicit reference to a named municipality, town, suburb or ward; b. reference to a named constituency; c. reference to a specific public facility such as a school, clinic or police station; d.

reference to a named non-ministerial individual affected by administrative action; or e. clear sub-provincial geographic framing tied to a community issue. Questions that focused broadly on national policy, international relations or general regulatory frameworks were excluded from the local subset.

This process identified 1,142 questions as local, constituency-by-name or named-person focused or 21.8% of 5,238 questions. The remaining 4,096 questions were categorised as national, international or general policy oversight. The 21.8% local articulation rate must be interpreted within the institutional context of SA's closed-list proportional representation system. Carey and Shugart (1995) argue that electoral systems vary in the degree to which they incentivise cultivation of a personal vote. Closed-list systems generate minimal incentives for territorially grounded political engagement because candidate survival depends primarily on party leadership rather than local voters.

From this perspective, the presence of any substantial local articulation is analytically meaningful. The fact that more than one thousand questions explicitly reference municipalities, wards, named facilities or individual residents suggests that constituency responsiveness persists despite weak electoral incentives. This reflects what Barkan (2009) describes in African legislatures as the persistence of constituency brokerage even under institutional constraint.

However, the proportion also reveals limits. If constituency articulation were central to parliamentary identity, the figure would likely exceed one-third or one-half of the total number of questions asked. The 21.8% figure therefore signals conditional embedding. Constituencies matter, but they do not structure parliamentary questioning as a primary axis of oversight. This conditionality reflects institutional design. Because MPs are not electorally dependent on specific geographic constituencies, constituency articulation becomes a strategic choice rather than a structural necessity.

5.3 Quantitative Pattern Interpretation and Institutional Inference

Beyond descriptive statistics, the dataset allows for institutional inference. First, the 21.8% local articulation rate can be interpreted as an index of territorial responsiveness within parliamentary questioning. If we conceptualise 50% as indicative of strong territorial embedding, and below 10% as marginal territorial relevance, the observed figure suggests moderate but not dominant territorial integration.

Second, the party distribution indicates that opposition actors are significantly more likely to use hyper-local questioning. This implies that constituency articulation may be partially instrumentalised for political positioning rather than evenly institutionalised as a norm.

Third, the departmental clustering around service delivery portfolios suggests that constituency articulation is policy-specific rather than evenly distributed across governance domains. MPs are more likely to invoke geographic specificity in areas of visible material failure than in abstract policy areas such as fiscal regulation or foreign affairs.

Fourth, the limited proportion of named-individual questions suggests that personalised brokerage exists but remains bounded. Institutional constraints or normative caution may limit the frequency with which MPs elevate individual cases to national oversight forums.

These quantitative patterns collectively reinforce the interpretation that constituency usefulness is contingent, strategic and materially grounded.

5.4 Limitations: Structural Constraints in Measuring Constituency Activity

Assessing constituency usefulness through parliamentary questions faces several structural limitations.

First, parliamentary question databases in SA are not systematically geographically coded. There is no official metadata field identifying whether a question pertains to a specific constituency. Geographic identification must be manually inferred from textual content. This creates classification challenges and potential underestimation.

Second, constituency activity is often informal. MPs may engage directly with ministers, submit letters, or intervene administratively without placing questions on the parliamentary record. Such activity is not publicly archived. Therefore, written questions capture only visible articulation, not total constituency engagement.

Third, governing party MPs may rely on internal party mediation mechanisms rather than adversarial parliamentary questioning. As Lodge (2009) notes, intra-party governance can substitute for public oversight in dominant-party contexts. This may lead to underrepresentation of governing party constituency activity in written records.

Fourth, ministerial replies are not systematically analysed in this report. Without reply tracking, it is difficult to assess responsiveness and implementation outcomes. Given, the inability of the cope within this project to assess the replies more deeply, there is scope for more research into this. Monitoring without sanction may limit accountability (Fox, 2007).

Fifth, the hybrid administrative constituency system complicates measurement. MPs are assigned geographic areas administratively, but voters do not elect them territorially. Thus, geographic reference in a question does not necessarily correspond to formal constituency assignment.

These limitations underscore why constituency-related data linked to MP activity are difficult to identify in SA. The institutional architecture does not prioritise geographic traceability.

6. Literature Review

The debate regarding constituency usefulness in PR systems has long occupied comparative political scholarship. Carey and Shugart (1995) argue that electoral systems vary in the incentives they create for cultivating a “personal vote”. Closed-list PR systems generate the weakest incentives for individual constituency service because candidate selection and ranking are controlled by party leadership rather than by territorial electorates. In such systems, accountability flows vertically through party hierarchies rather than horizontally through geographically bounded constituencies.

SA exemplifies this model. Lodge (2009) demonstrates that the African National Congress’s (ANC’s) internal candidate list processes concentrate power within party structures, limiting the electoral autonomy of individual MPs. Mattes (2002) similarly argues that while SA’s democracy is procedurally robust, voter–representative linkages remain mediated primarily through parties rather than through individual MPs.

Conversely, African legislative scholarship complicates the assumption that PR systems eliminate constituency work. Barkan (2009), drawing on cases such as Kenya and Ghana, shows that even in systems with strong party control, legislators frequently cultivate local support networks and engage in constituency service. Nijzink (2011) similarly emphasises that African legislators often engage in distributive politics and local brokerage, regardless of formal electoral design.

In the SA case, the absence of territorially defined single-member districts does not eliminate constituency expectations. Instead, constituency work is institutionalised administratively rather than

electorally. MPs are assigned geographic areas in which they maintain offices. Yet these assignments do not translate into formal electoral accountability.

This hybrid arrangement produces ambiguity and also has financial implications: constituencies exist administratively, but not electorally. The question becomes whether this hybrid structure produces measurable parliamentary outputs.

6.1 Legislative Oversight in African Democracies

African legislative studies consistently highlight the uneven development of oversight capacity. Nijzink, Mozaffar and Azevedo (2006) argue that many African parliaments possess formal oversight tools but lack enforcement mechanisms. Cheeseman (2015) further demonstrates that in dominant-party democracies, oversight effectiveness depends heavily on opposition mobilisation.

Parliamentary questions are frequently identified as one of the most accessible oversight instruments. Martin (2011) shows that written questions compel ministerial response and generate traceable records. However, their effectiveness depends on both political incentives and institutional follow-up. In SA, parliamentary questions have historically been used to expose governance failures, particularly by opposition parties (Lodge, 2009; Calland, 1999). Yet systematic empirical analysis of the geographic content of these questions remains limited.

This gap is significant. Without geographic tagging or constituency coding, parliamentary question databases do not allow easy identification of local articulation. Thus, assessing constituency usefulness requires reconstructing geographic references manually, as undertaken in this report.

6.2 Representation and Claim-Making in Party-Centred Systems

Mansbridge (2003) argues that representation involves active claim-making. Representatives assert that they speak for particular communities. In party-centred systems, such claims must be discursively constructed rather than electorally mandated. Hyper-local parliamentary questions represent a visible form of such construction. By naming a municipality, a police station, or a specific resident, MPs perform a representative linkage. This aligns with Fenno's (1978) concept of "home style," adapted here to a non-district system.

However, the institutional sustainability of such claim-making depends on structural incentives. Where electoral rewards do not depend on geographic support, constituency articulation may remain sporadic.

6.3 Towards a theory: Representation, Accountability and Legislative Oversight

Understanding the empirical patterns observed in the parliamentary question dataset requires engagement with multiple strands of political theory and comparative legislative scholarship. Pitkin's (1967) foundational analysis of representation provides the starting point. Pitkin (1967) distinguishes between formalistic representation, which concerns institutional authorisation and mechanisms of accountability; descriptive representation, which refers to demographic similarity between representatives and represented; symbolic representation, which concerns perceived legitimacy; and substantive representation, defined as acting in the interests of constituents. The present study is concerned primarily with substantive representation. When an MP raises a geographically specific grievance affecting a named municipality or an identifiable resident, that act constitutes an observable attempt to represent the interests of a bounded community.

Yet representation is not only about action but also about claim-making. Mansbridge (2003) argues that representation involves the construction of claims to speak on behalf of particular groups or constituencies. These claims are evaluated by audiences for credibility and legitimacy. In electoral systems lacking territorially defined districts, such as SA's closed-list PR system, representatives must actively construct discursive linkages to communities. Hyper-local parliamentary questions perform precisely this function. By naming a town, a police station, or a specific individual, MPs publicly assert a representative connection. The question becomes whether such claim-making is systematic and institutionalised or episodic and strategic.

Deliberative democratic theory further illuminates the function of parliamentary questions. Habermas (1996) conceptualises parliaments as arenas of communicative accountability, in which executive decisions are subjected to reason-giving and justification. Written parliamentary questions are formalised communicative acts. They compel ministers to respond on record. However, as Dryzek (2000) notes, deliberative legitimacy depends not merely on articulation but on responsiveness and consequence. Monitoring that does not produce change risks becoming symbolic rather than substantive.

Principal-agent theory adds another dimension. In democratic governance, citizens delegate authority to representatives, who in turn monitor the executive (Strøm, 2000). Parliamentary questions reduce information asymmetry between legislature and executive. Yet without sanctioning capacity or follow-up enforcement, the monitoring chain may remain incomplete. Thus, evaluating constituency usefulness requires not only assessing whether local grievances are articulated, but also whether such articulation is institutionalised and consequential.

African legislative scholarship provides important comparative context. Barkan (2009) demonstrates that in many African democracies, legislators engage in extensive constituency service despite institutional constraints. In Kenya, for example, constituency development funds create strong incentives for geographically targeted political engagement. Nijzink (2011) emphasises that African MPs often function as brokers between citizens and state institutions, mediating access to public goods and administrative remedies. Cheeseman (2015), however, shows that in dominant-party democracies, oversight tools are frequently deployed asymmetrically, with opposition parties using parliamentary instruments more aggressively than governing parties.

SA occupies a distinctive position within this literature. While it shares characteristics of dominant-party democracy, it also possesses comparatively strong institutionalised parliamentary procedures. The key question is whether these procedures facilitate systematic constituency articulation or merely episodic visibility.

7. Expanded Empirical Findings with Structured Tables

7.1 Overall Distribution

Category	Count	Percentage
Total parsed questions	5,238	100%
Local/constituency/person-focused	1,142	21.8%
Non-local / national / international	4,096	78.2%

Table 1: Distribution of Local/Constituency/Person-Focused Questions

This baseline table reveals that fewer than one-quarter of written parliamentary questions directly engage with geographically specific or constituency-based concerns. This finding is central to the evaluation of constituency usefulness. If constituencies were the dominant organising principle of MP activity, one might expect a substantially higher proportion of written questions to reflect localised

engagement. Instead, written parliamentary questions appear primarily structured around broader oversight functions rather than routine constituency articulation.

7.2 Party Distribution

Party (as identified in Q&A records)	Local-Focused Questions	Share of Local Subset
Major Opposition Party A	High	Disproportionate
Major Opposition Party B	Moderate	Significant
Governing Party	Lower relative share	Underrepresented
Smaller Parties Combined	Variable	Limited

Table 2: Local/Constituency/Person-Focused Questions by Party [as identified in Q&A records] (Top Contributors)

Party Category	Count	% of Local Subset
Major Opposition Party A	428	37.5%
Major Opposition Party B	312	27.3%
Governing Party	238	20.8%
Smaller Parties Combined	164	14.4%
Total	1,142	100%

Table 3: Local/Constituency/Person-Focused Questions by Party (Top Contributors)

The pattern shows a disproportionate use of hyper-local questioning by opposition parties. This aligns with findings in comparative African legislative studies. Barkan (2009) argues that in dominant-party systems, opposition legislators rely heavily on parliamentary tools to expose executive weakness and signal responsiveness to constituents. Cheeseman (2015) similarly demonstrates that opposition actors in dominant-party democracies use legislative platforms as arenas of contestation and visibility. The relative underrepresentation of governing party MPs within the local-focused subset does not necessarily imply absence of constituency work. Rather, it may reflect internal party mediation structures. However, from the perspective of public traceability and institutional accountability, written questions remain the most visible and documented mechanism of articulation. Where governing party MPs rely on informal mediation, that activity is not publicly archived. Thus, the party distribution suggests that constituency usefulness through written questions is mediated by partisan incentives.

7.3 Departmental Concentration

Department / Portfolio	Local-Focused Questions	Thematic Dominance
Police	High	Safety & crime
Health	High	Clinics & hospitals
Basic Education	High	School facilities
Cooperative Governance	Moderate	Municipal failure
Human Settlements	Moderate	Housing disputes
Transport	Moderate	Roads & bridges
Public Works and Infrastructure	Moderate	Facility upkeep

Table 4: Local-Focused Questions by Department [Local-Focused Questions] (Top Portfolios)

Department	Count	% of Local Subset
Police	196	17.2%
Health	174	15.2%
Basic Education	158	13.8%
Cooperative Governance	134	11.7%
Human Settlements	122	10.7%
Transport	108	9.5%
Public Works & Infrastructure	94	8.2%
Other Departments Combined	156	13.7%

Table 5: Local-Focused Questions by Department (Top Portfolios)

The clustering around service delivery portfolios reinforces findings in SA protest literature (Booyesen, 2015; Alexander, 2010). Constituency complaints most frequently concern tangible state failures. When MPs use parliamentary questions to represent constituency concerns, they overwhelmingly focus on infrastructure, policing, education and healthcare.

This pattern is consistent with Nijzink's (2011) analysis of African legislatures, which emphasises that constituency responsiveness in African democracies is frequently linked to distributive and infrastructural politics rather than ideological policy debates.

7.4 Issue Category Breakdown

Issue Category	Share of Local Subset
Policing & Public Safety	Prominent
Health Services	Prominent
Education Infrastructure	Prominent
Water & Sanitation	Significant
Electricity Supply	Significant
Transport & Roads	Moderate
Housing & Land	Moderate
Named Individual Cases	Smaller but notable

Table 6: Issue Categories within Local/Constituency Subset [Share of Local Subset]

Issue Category	Count	% of Local Subset
Policing & Safety	214	18.7%
Health Services	192	16.8%
Education Infrastructure	176	15.4%
Water & Sanitation	148	13.0%
Electricity Supply	126	11.0%
Transport & Roads	112	9.8%
Housing & Land	94	8.2%
Named Individual Cases	80	7.0%
Total	1,142	100%

Table 7: Issue Categories within Local/Constituency Subset

This distribution underscores that local questions are materially grounded. They address lived governance failures. The prominence of policing questions is particularly notable, suggesting that constituency work frequently intersects with public safety concerns.

7.5 Named Individuals and Personalised Claims

Approximately a subset of the 1,142 local-focused questions references specific named individuals (excluding ministers and MPs). These include cases involving:

- i. Alleged wrongful evictions.
- ii. Administrative disputes affecting named residents.

- iii. Allegations of local corruption impacting specific individuals.
- iv. Named complainants in policing matters.

This personalised articulation is significant. In African legislative scholarship, constituency service often includes direct intervention in bureaucratic disputes affecting individual citizens (Barkan, 2009; Salih, 2005). The presence of named-person questions indicates that constituency mediation sometimes moves beyond abstract community reference into direct advocacy. However, such cases remain a minority relative to the full dataset. This suggests that while personalised constituency service exists, it is not the dominant function of written parliamentary questions.

8. Qualitative interpretation of data

8.1 Strategic Partisan Deployment

One of the most revealing dimensions of the 1,142 local/constituency/person-focused questions concerns their distribution across political parties. Although the PR system structures all MPs under party lists, party behaviour is not uniform. Parliamentary question usage is shaped by strategic incentives (Martin, 2011), and in dominant-party systems, opposition parties frequently utilise parliamentary questions as instruments of visibility and executive critique (Cheeseman, 2015; Barkan, 2009).

However, this pattern must be understood within SA's Government of National Unity (GNU) context. The post-election formation of a governing coalition has blurred the traditional boundary between "governing" and "opposition" parties, with some former opposition actors now embedded within the governing consortium. This institutional shift complicates conventional assumptions about adversarial oversight, as parties that previously relied heavily on parliamentary questions as tools of critique may now face incentives to moderate or recalibrate their questioning strategies.

The local-focused subset nonetheless reflects enduring patterns of strategic partisan deployment. Opposition parties, particularly those outside the GNU, account for a disproportionate share of hyper-local and constituency-by-name questions. These questions frequently adopt an accountability-oriented tone, seeking explanations for failures in named municipalities, demanding timelines for remedial action, or interrogating ministerial oversight of specific facilities. For example, questions directed to the Minister of Police often reference specific police stations in particular towns, asking whether investigations have been initiated into incidents affecting named residents. Similarly,

questions to the Minister of Health reference individual clinics and hospitals, requesting confirmation of staff shortages or infrastructure failures affecting clearly identified communities.

This pattern suggests that opposition parties deploy local grievance articulation as a deliberate strategy of executive scrutiny. Local specificity strengthens the political impact of oversight: by naming a municipality, institution, or individual, MPs construct vivid narratives of governance failure. This aligns with Mansbridge's (2003) concept of representative claim-making, where MPs reinforce their legitimacy by demonstrating responsiveness to identifiable constituencies. At the same time, the GNU introduces a more complex gradient of behaviour. Parties now located within the governing arrangement may exhibit a tempered or hybrid questioning style, balancing their oversight role with coalition cohesion. This may partially explain variations in tone, frequency, and target selection across parties in the dataset.

Governing party MPs, particularly those aligned with the core executive, appear less frequently in the local subset. This does not necessarily indicate an absence of constituency engagement but rather reflects alternative channels of mediation. In party-centred systems, governing party MPs may rely on internal party or coalition mechanisms to resolve constituency concerns rather than raising them in adversarial parliamentary forums (Lodge, 2009). However, from a transparency perspective, this distinction is significant. Questions placed on the parliamentary record generate traceable, public documentation of oversight, whereas informal mediation remains opaque.

Thus, even within the evolving GNU context, a structural tension persists: the most visible and documented form of constituency representation, parliamentary questioning, is still disproportionately used by actors positioned outside the executive core, while those embedded within governing arrangements may rely more heavily on less visible forms of engagement.

8.2 Material and Sectoral Grounding

Across parties, local questions demonstrate a strong clustering around service delivery sectors, particularly policing, health, and basic infrastructure. These sectors represent the most immediate and tangible interfaces between citizens and the state and thus become focal points for constituency-based oversight. Questions frequently reference breakdowns in frontline service provision: understaffed clinics, dysfunctional hospitals, under-resourced police stations, and infrastructure failures affecting specific communities. This sectoral concentration underscores the material grounding of

parliamentary engagement, where MPs translate lived experiences of governance failure into formal oversight mechanisms.

The recurrence of these themes also suggests that parliamentary questioning is responsive to persistent structural challenges within the state. Rather than addressing abstract policy concerns, MPs, particularly in the local subset, anchor their questions in concrete service delivery deficits. This reinforces the role of parliament as a site where everyday governance failures are surfaced and politicised. Importantly, the GNU context does not appear to fundamentally alter this sectoral clustering. Regardless of party position within or outside the governing arrangement, MPs continue to prioritise issues with immediate constituency salience. This suggests that material conditions of service delivery remain a primary driver of parliamentary engagement, even as political alignments shift. At the same time, the clustering of questions within a limited set of sectors may indicate a narrowing of oversight focus. While these areas are undeniably critical, other domains of governance may receive comparatively less attention, raising questions about the breadth of parliamentary scrutiny.

8.3 Episodic vs Institutionalised Engagement

A further pattern emerging from the data is the episodic nature of local questioning. Many questions appear reactive, triggered by specific incidents, crises, or complaints raised by constituents. For example, questions may follow a reported crime, a breakdown in hospital services, or a protest in a particular municipality. This suggests that parliamentary engagement is often driven by immediate events rather than sustained, programmatic oversight.

This episodic dynamic contrasts with a more institutionalised model of engagement, where MPs systematically track and monitor governance performance over time. While reactive questioning is an important mechanism for responsiveness, it may limit the development of longitudinal oversight practices that can identify systemic issues and hold the executive accountable for sustained performance.

MPs appear to engage deeply with local issues when prompted by specific triggers such as constituent complaints or high-profile incidents, but this engagement is not consistently maintained across time or issues. As a result, representation may be uneven, with some communities receiving concentrated attention during moments of crisis while others remain underrepresented.

The GNU context may further shape this dynamic. Parties within the governing arrangement may be less inclined to sustain adversarial questioning over time, particularly where issues implicate coalition partners. This can reinforce a tendency toward selective or episodic engagement, where oversight is exercised in moments of political or public salience rather than as a continuous institutional practice.

8.4 Normative Implications

Taken together, these patterns point to important implications for democratic representation and accountability. The dominance of opposition parties in local questioning enhances the visibility of executive scrutiny but also creates an asymmetry in how representation is publicly documented, an asymmetry that is now further complicated by the hybrid nature of the GNU.

The material grounding of questions in service delivery failures underscores the responsiveness of MPs to citizen concerns, yet the sectoral clustering may limit the scope of oversight. Meanwhile, the episodic nature of engagement, potentially reinforced by coalition dynamics, raises questions about the depth and sustainability of parliamentary accountability.

These findings suggest that while parliamentary questions remain a vital tool for linking citizens to the state, their effectiveness is shaped by evolving political configurations, institutional incentives, and patterns of engagement that privilege visibility and immediacy over continuity and systemic oversight.

9. Constituencies and its usefulness in democracy

9.1 When Are Constituencies Useful?

The empirical pattern reveals that constituencies can be useful in at least two respects. First, they provide an intake mechanism for geographically specific grievances. The existence of 1,142 local/constituency/person-focused questions indicates that constituency engagement can translate into parliamentary articulation. MPs sometimes act as conduits, elevating community-level concerns into national oversight arenas. Second, constituency framing strengthens representative legitimacy. By naming specific municipalities, wards or individuals, MPs perform substantive representation and reinforce their connection to communities. However, the data also reveal limitations.

The majority of parliamentary questions are not locally anchored. This suggests that written questions are primarily used for general oversight rather than routine constituency articulation. Moreover, the

clustering of local questions around service delivery failures indicates reactive rather than systematic engagement. Constituency usefulness appears episodic and crisis-driven rather than embedded.

In a party-centred PR system, such patterns are unsurprising. Electoral incentives are mediated through party structures (Carey & Shugart, 1995). Constituency engagement must be actively constructed rather than structurally guaranteed.

9.1.1. Constituencies as Intake Mechanisms

The evidence suggests that constituencies are useful insofar as they function as intake mechanisms for local grievances. Constituency offices receive complaints regarding infrastructure, policing, health services and housing disputes. In some cases, MPs translate these grievances into written parliamentary questions. The existence of 1,142 such questions confirms that this translation occurs. From a principal-agent perspective, this represents a monitoring function (Strøm, 2000). Constituents alert MPs to local problems; MPs alert ministers; ministers are compelled to respond. The parliamentary record thus becomes an accountability conduit. However, the relatively small proportion of local questions (approximately one-fifth of the dataset) indicates that this conduit is not the primary channel of parliamentary questioning. Written questions are used more frequently for broader policy oversight than for constituency-specific concerns.

9.1.2 Constituencies as Performative Legitimacy

Beyond monitoring, local questions perform symbolic and substantive legitimacy functions. By naming municipalities or individuals, MPs enact representative claims (Mansbridge, 2003). They publicly demonstrate attentiveness to community concerns. This performative dimension may strengthen citizen perceptions of responsiveness. In deliberative terms, written questions insert local narratives into national discourse (Habermas, 1996). They transform private grievances into public issues. Even if ministerial responses are limited, the act of articulation has democratic value.

9.1.3 Structural Constraints

Nevertheless, the structural constraints of the PR system remain significant. Because electoral incentives are mediated through party hierarchies rather than geographic districts (Carey & Shugart, 1995), sustained constituency articulation is not electorally mandated. Party strategies may prioritise national messaging over local responsiveness. Furthermore, without systematic tracking of ministerial follow-up, the impact of local questions remains uncertain. Monitoring without sanction risks becoming symbolic (Fox, 2007).

9.1.4 Are Constituencies Institutionally Embedded?

To assess whether constituencies are useful, it is helpful to distinguish between episodic usefulness and institutionalised usefulness. Episodic usefulness is evident. Constituencies sometimes generate parliamentary questions that compel ministerial response and create public records. Institutionalised usefulness would require consistent, equitable and routine articulation of local grievances across parties and over time. The evidence suggests that this level of institutionalisation has not been achieved. Uneven party distribution, clustering around crisis periods and concentration in specific service delivery domains indicate that constituency articulation through written questions is conditional and strategic rather than structurally embedded.

9.1.5. Funding Framework of Constituency Offices and Institutional Feasibility

This paradoxical position that constituencies play within the country's democratic architecture, where it is not embedded into our electoral architecture, creates a hybrid institutional arrangement in which constituencies exist in practice, but not as a primary electoral accountability mechanism. Constituency offices are funded through parliamentary allocations provided to political parties, rather than directly to individual Members of Parliament (MPs). These allocations typically cover office rental, staffing, travel, and public engagement activities. The funding model is therefore party-mediated, reflecting the broader structure of South Africa's PR system, where parties determine how resources are distributed and managed.

Crucially, there is no formal requirement that constituency offices systematically feed into parliamentary oversight mechanisms, such as written questions. While these offices serve as sites for receiving community complaints and facilitating access to state institutions, the translation of these grievances into formal parliamentary activity remains discretionary. This creates a disconnect between resource allocation and measurable legislative output.

The findings of this report raise important questions about the effectiveness of this funding model. While constituency offices clearly function as intake mechanisms for local grievances, the data show that only 21.8% of parliamentary questions are locally grounded. This suggests that the institutional link between constituency funding and parliamentary output is partial and uneven. Further, the patterns identified in the data, partisan asymmetry, sectoral clustering, and episodic engagement, indicate that constituency resources are not consistently translated into systematic parliamentary oversight. Opposition parties are more likely to convert local grievances into formal questions, while governing actors often rely on informal or internal mediation channels that are not publicly

documented. As a result, a significant portion of constituency activity remains invisible within formal accountability structures. At the same time, local questions are concentrated in service delivery sectors such as policing, health, and infrastructure, reflecting the material basis of constituency engagement. However, this clustering reinforces the finding that constituency articulation is reactive and crisis-driven, rather than institutionalised as a routine mechanism of oversight.

Given the scale of public funding allocated to constituency offices, their continued feasibility must be assessed in terms of their democratic returns. Three key concerns emerge:

First, there is *weak institutional integration*. Constituency offices are not formally embedded within parliamentary oversight cycles, limiting their ability to consistently contribute to accountability processes. Second, there is *uneven utilisation*. The extent to which constituency resources are translated into parliamentary outputs varies across parties and MPs, suggesting that publicly funded infrastructure is used strategically rather than systematically. Third, there is *limited outcome tracking*. There is no standardised mechanism linking constituency complaints to parliamentary questions, ministerial responses, and eventual service delivery outcomes. This weakens the accountability chain and risks reducing constituency engagement to symbolic or performative activity. Together, these limitations raise concerns about whether the current funding model delivers sufficient accountability.

9.1.6 Reform and Institutional Strengthening

Despite these challenges, constituency offices remain a potentially valuable component of South Africa's democratic system, particularly as mechanisms for capturing local grievances. The issue is therefore not their existence, but their institutional alignment and effectiveness.

If constituency usefulness is to be enhanced within the existing PR framework, several reforms are advisable. First, parliamentary data architecture should incorporate systematic geographic tagging of questions. This would enable monitoring of regional representation patterns. Second, ministerial replies should include structured reporting on remedial action, enabling tracking of implementation. Third, parliamentary committees could integrate local-question tracking into oversight cycles. Fourth, civil society organisations could build dashboards linking constituency-raised questions to measurable outcomes. Such reforms would strengthen the accountability chain and move constituency articulation from episodic performance toward institutionalised practice.

In summary, the empirical findings reveal that constituency-linked parliamentary questions operate within a set of interacting political, institutional, and behavioural dynamics. Constituencies function

both as intake mechanisms for local grievances and as tools of performative representation, but their use is uneven, episodic, and strategically mediated.

To strengthen policy relevance, these dynamics can be synthesised into a structured analytical model built around three core dimensions:

1. Strategic Partisan Deployment

Parliamentary questioning is not neutral; it is shaped by political incentives. Opposition parties, particularly those outside the GNU, use local questions disproportionately as tools of executive scrutiny and visibility. By contrast, governing actors often rely on informal or internal mediation channels, resulting in lower visibility. The GNU further complicates this dynamic, as former opposition parties within the governing consortium adopt more tempered or hybrid oversight strategies.

2. Material and Sectoral Grounding

Local questions are strongly clustered around service delivery sectors such as policing, health, and infrastructure. These sectors represent the most immediate citizen-state interface, meaning that MPs translate lived experiences of governance failure into parliamentary oversight. However, this clustering also narrows the scope of scrutiny, potentially excluding other policy domains.

3. Episodic vs Institutionalised Engagement

Constituency articulation is largely reactive and crisis-driven, triggered by specific incidents rather than sustained oversight. While constituencies do function as intake mechanisms, their use remains conditional rather than embedded. This reflects broader structural constraints of the PR system, where electoral incentives are mediated through parties rather than geographic constituencies.

The next page provides a summary of the framework.

Framework Summary Table

Dimension	Core Finding	Mechanism	Limitation	Policy Opportunity
Strategic Partisan Deployment	Opposition dominates local questioning	Questions used for visibility and executive critique	Governing actors rely on informal channels; GNU blurs roles	Incentivise cross-party use of formal questioning mechanisms
Material & Sectoral Grounding	Questions cluster in service delivery sectors	MPs translate lived experiences into oversight	Narrow focus may exclude broader governance issues	Expand sectoral scope through committee alignment
Episodic Engagement	Local questioning is reactive and crisis-driven	Triggered by incidents and complaints	Lack of sustained, longitudinal oversight	Introduce tracking systems and recurring oversight cycles
Conditional Embedding	Constituency articulation is uneven and strategic	Dependent on party incentives and political context	Not institutionalised across time or parties	Standardise procedures for constituency-based questioning
Institutional Constraints (PR + GNU)	Party-centred system shapes incentives	Representation mediated through party structures	Weak geographic accountability; hybrid oversight under GNU	Reform incentives and strengthen transparency mechanisms
Accountability Chain	Constituencies act as intake mechanisms	MPs transmit grievances → ministers respond	Weak follow-through and monitoring	Require structured reporting and implementation tracking
Performative Legitimacy	Local questions reinforce representation claims	Naming places/people strengthens legitimacy	Risk of symbolic rather than substantive accountability	Link questions to measurable outcomes and follow-up

Table 8: Summary of Framework

9.2 Constituencies and Normative Implications for Democratic Reform

The evidence suggests that constituencies are partially useful but structurally constrained. They are useful when MPs translate community grievances into formal oversight questions, creating public records and compelling ministerial response. They are less useful when constituency engagement remains informal or fails to enter parliamentary documentation.

Reform pathways include:

- i. Systematic geographic tagging of parliamentary questions.
- ii. Tracking of ministerial replies and follow-up actions.
- iii. Enhanced transparency linking constituency offices and parliamentary outputs.

Such reforms would strengthen the accountability chain and enhance the institutional usefulness of constituencies.

The findings raise broader questions about democratic design. If territorial representation is not structurally embedded in the electoral system, and if constituency articulation through parliamentary questioning remains conditional and uneven, what does this imply for democratic accountability? One interpretation is that SA's democracy relies on multiple accountability channels. Parliamentary questions represent one channel. Protest represents another, whilst internal party mediation represents a third channel. The coexistence of these mechanisms may compensate for weaknesses in any single channel. However, the uneven distribution of local articulation suggests potential inequity. Communities represented by MPs who actively deploy hyper-local questioning may receive greater visibility than those whose representatives rely on internal mediation.

Institutional reform could strengthen territorial traceability without abandoning proportional representation. Geographic tagging of parliamentary questions, systematic tracking of ministerial follow-up and public dashboards linking local articulation to implementation outcomes could enhance institutional embedding of constituency representation.

10. Policy challenge: Government Action on Constituency Offices

The findings of this report place a clear responsibility on government to address the disconnect between the funding of constituency offices and their measurable contribution to parliamentary accountability. While OUTA has highlighted the structural gaps, inefficiencies, and uneven utilisation of constituency resources, the responsibility for reform now rests with the state. The current model,

where publicly funded constituency offices operate without systematic integration into parliamentary oversight, cannot be sustained without greater accountability and demonstrable impact.

The evidence shows that constituencies in South Africa are *conditionally useful*. They can serve as channels for elevating local grievances into national oversight and for constructing representative linkages between MPs and communities. However, this usefulness remains uneven, discretionary, and dependent on partisan incentives, crisis visibility, and individual MP initiative, rather than being structurally embedded within parliamentary practice. As a result, constituency offices function as intermittent bridges between communities and the state, rather than as consistent accountability mechanisms. This creates a fundamental challenge for government. In a proportional representation system where MPs lack a territorially mandated electoral base, constituency representation is not structurally guaranteed. Instead, it is constructed through parliamentary articulation, such as written questions that name specific communities or individuals. Yet, as the data show, this articulation is limited (21.8% of questions) and often reactive, clustered around crises rather than embedded in systematic oversight. This means that publicly funded constituency offices are not consistently translating local grievances into formal accountability processes.

Government must now move beyond maintaining the current hybrid system and take active steps to institutionalise constituency usefulness. This requires embedding constituency offices within a coherent accountability framework. At a minimum, this should include:

- i. *Formal reporting mechanisms* linking constituency office activity to parliamentary outputs (questions, committee work, ministerial engagements)
- ii. *Geographic tagging of parliamentary questions* to ensure traceability of constituency-linked issues
- iii. *Systematic tracking of ministerial responses and follow-up actions*, moving from answerability to enforceability
- iv. *Integration of constituency data into parliamentary oversight cycles*, particularly within committees

Without these reforms, constituency engagement risks remaining performative rather than consequential. While written questions and constituency articulation contribute to democratic visibility and communicative legitimacy, they do not guarantee responsiveness or resolution. As the findings show, transparency without enforcement produces only “soft accountability”, where issues are raised but not necessarily addressed. The persistence of service delivery protests further

underscores this gap. Where parliamentary mechanisms fail to deliver tangible outcomes, communities revert to alternative forms of accountability, including protest, litigation and media mobilisation. This reflects a fragmented accountability system in which constituency offices are only one, and not always the most effective, channel.

The implication is clear: government can no longer treat constituency offices as administratively sufficient simply because they exist. Their continued funding must be matched by institutional reforms that ensure they contribute meaningfully to democratic accountability. OUTA has identified the problem and provided a framework for reform. The next step is implementation.

11. Conclusion and Way forward

With these empirical and theoretical insights integrated, constituency usefulness in SA can be reframed across three interrelated dimensions:

1. Instrumental Usefulness

Constituencies are instrumentally useful when they generate grievances that are translated into formal parliamentary questions. The 1,142 local/constituency/person-focused questions confirm that this translation occurs. In such cases, constituencies function as intake and signalling mechanisms, enabling MPs to elevate community-level concerns into national oversight processes. This reflects a principal-agent monitoring function, where local information is transmitted upward to the executive through parliamentary channels.

Future research could deepen this dimension by examining the full accountability chain: from constituency complaint(s) to parliamentary question(s), to ministerial response(s), and ultimately to policy or service delivery outcome(s). This would help determine whether constituency signalling results in substantive change or remains primarily procedural.

2. Performative Usefulness

Constituency articulation through written questions performs representative legitimacy. By naming communities and individuals, MPs publicly demonstrate attentiveness and responsiveness. This aligns with Mansbridge's (2003) representative claim framework and Habermas's (1986) communicative accountability model, where the act of articulation itself contributes to democratic legitimacy by inserting local experiences into national discourse.

Future research could explore the reception and impact of this performative dimension, particularly how constituents perceive and respond to parliamentary articulation. This may include analysing whether such visibility strengthens trust in democratic institutions or whether perceived gaps between articulation and outcomes undermine legitimacy.

3. Structural Limitations

However, constituencies are not structurally embedded drivers of parliamentary questioning. The majority of written questions remain nationally framed, indicating that oversight is not predominantly organised around geographic constituencies. This reflects the party-centred nature of the PR system (Lodge, 2009; Carey & Shugart, 1995), where electoral incentives are mediated through party hierarchies rather than territorial accountability.

Future research should interrogate how institutional design shapes these limitations. Comparative studies across electoral systems, or within hybrid arrangements such as SA's Government of National Unity (GNU), could reveal how shifts in party alignment influence constituency articulation. Additionally, research into institutional reforms, such as geographic tagging of questions, enhanced data systems, or strengthened committee oversight, could assess pathways for moving from episodic to institutionalised constituency engagement.

This report set out to assess whether constituencies are useful in SA's party-centred proportional representation system by examining the extent to which constituency-linked concerns are translated into formal parliamentary oversight through written Questions and Answers. The empirical analysis of 5,238 written parliamentary questions from 2025, of which 1,142 (21.8%) were classified as explicitly local, constituency-by-name or named-person focused, demonstrates that constituency articulation is present and meaningful but not dominant. In a closed-list system where MPs' career incentives are mediated primarily through party structures rather than territorial electorates, the fact that more than one thousand questions explicitly name municipalities, facilities or individual residents indicates that local representation persists despite weak institutional incentives for geographically grounded accountability (Mansbridge, 2003; Carey & Shugart, 1995). Constituencies therefore continue to function as channels through which community-level grievances can be elevated into the national oversight arena, securing ministerial answerability and creating an archival trace of local concerns (Martin, 2011; Strøm, 2000).

At the same time, the proportion of local questions signals that parliamentary questions are not primarily structured as routine instruments of constituency service. Instead, they appear to operate predominantly as general oversight tools, with territorial responsiveness operating as a secondary, conditional dimension of legislative practice. The thematic concentration of local questions around service delivery domains such as policing, health, education, water, electricity, transport and housing confirms that constituency-linked questioning is materially grounded and closely tied to visible governance failures, consistent with broader scholarship on local protest and state–society contestation in SA (Booyesen, 2015; Alexander, 2010). The temporal clustering of local questions around crisis moments further suggests that constituency articulation through written questions is often reactive rather than systematically institutionalised. Local questioning tends to intensify when breakdowns become politically salient, rather than reflecting stable, routine territorial monitoring.

The party distribution of local questions reinforces this interpretation of conditionality. Opposition parties contribute disproportionately to hyper-local questioning, consistent with comparative African legislative scholarship indicating that parliamentary tools are often deployed asymmetrically in dominant-party contexts, where opposition actors use visibility-enhancing oversight practices to contest executive performance and signal responsiveness (Cheeseman, 2015; Barkan, 2009). While this pattern does not necessarily imply that governing party MPs do not undertake constituency work, it does underscore that the most publicly traceable form of constituency articulation is unevenly distributed, and that much constituency mediation may occur through informal or intra-party channels that do not enter the parliamentary record (Lodge, 2009). As a result, the written-question archive reveals a particular kind of constituency work: the kind that is publicly performed, strategically framed, and institutionally recorded.

Taken together, the findings support a conclusion of conditional usefulness. Constituencies in SA are useful to the extent that they serve as intake points for local grievances and enable MPs to make representative claims in an electoral environment where territorial accountability is not structurally guaranteed (Mansbridge, 2003; Pitkin, 1967). They are also useful in deliberative terms, because written questions allow local narratives to enter national discourse and compel executive reason-giving (Habermas, 1996). However, this usefulness is constrained by the architecture of the electoral system, the absence of systematic geographic coding in parliamentary data, the prevalence of informal constituency mediation, and the limited enforceability of parliamentary question mechanisms. Written questions can secure answerability but cannot guarantee remedy, meaning that constituency articulation may yield visibility without resolution (Fox, 2007). This helps explain why constituency

politics in SA continues to be characterised by multiple parallel accountability strategies, including protest, litigation and media mobilisation, alongside parliamentary engagement.

The overall implication is that constituencies should not be judged as either irrelevant or fully effective. They occupy an intermediate institutional position in SA's democracy: they matter, they generate parliamentary activity, and they can strengthen representative legitimacy, but they do not structure the bulk of parliamentary oversight practice. Enhancing their usefulness does not necessarily require abandoning proportional representation; rather, it requires institutional reforms that improve traceability and follow-through. Systematic geographic tagging of parliamentary questions, routine monitoring of ministerial replies and implementation outcomes, and clearer integration between constituency offices and parliamentary oversight processes would make local articulation more visible, comparable and accountable. Without such reforms, constituency representation will likely remain uneven, reactive and partly dependent on partisan strategy and individual MP initiative.

12. References

- Alexander, P., 2010. Rebellion of the poor: South Africa's service delivery protests – a preliminary analysis. *Review of African Political Economy*, 37(123), pp.25–40.
- Barkan, J.D., 2009. *Legislative power in emerging African democracies*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- Barkan, J.D., Mattes, R. & Mozaffar, S., 2010. The African legislator: The role of legislators in emerging African democracies. *Journal of Legislative Studies*, 16(2), pp.187–204.
- Booyesen, S., 2015. *Dominance and decline: The ANC in the time of Zuma*. Johannesburg: Wits University Press.
- Calland, R., 1999. *The first five years: A review of South Africa's democratic Parliament*. Cape Town: Institute for Democracy in South Africa (IDASA).
- Carey, J.M. & Shugart, M.S., 1995. Incentives to cultivate a personal vote: A rank ordering of electoral formulas. *Electoral Studies*, 14(4), pp.417–439.
- Cheeseman, N., 2015. *Democracy in Africa: Successes, failures and the struggle for political reform*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Cheibub, J.A. & Limongi, F., 2002. Democratic institutions and regime survival: Parliamentary and presidential democracies reconsidered. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 5, pp.151–179.
- Dryzek, J.S., 2000. *Deliberative democracy and beyond: Liberals, critics, contestations*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Fenno, R.F., 1978. *Home style: House members in their districts*. Boston: Little, Brown.
- Fox, J., 2007. The uncertain relationship between transparency and accountability. *Development in Practice*, 17(4–5), pp.663–671.
- Habermas, J., 1996. *Between facts and norms: Contributions to a discourse theory of law and democracy*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Lijphart, A., 1999. *Patterns of democracy: Government forms and performance in thirty-six countries*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Lodge, T., 2009. *Politics in South Africa: From Mandela to Mbeki*. Cape Town: David Philip.
- Lodge, T., 2014. *South African politics since 1994*. Cape Town: David Philip.
- Mansbridge, J., 2003. Rethinking representation. *American Political Science Review*, 97(4), pp.515–528.
- Martin, S., 2011. *Parliamentary questions, the behaviour of legislators and the function of legislatures*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Mattes, R., 2002. South Africa's emerging democracy: Lessons from the Afrobarometer. *Journal of Democracy*, 13(1), pp.22–36.

- Mattes, R., 2012. The 'Born Frees': The prospects for generational change in post-apartheid South Africa. *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 47(1), pp.133–153.
- Melber, H., 2014. *Understanding Namibia: The trials of independence*. London: Hurst.
- Nijzink, L., 2011. Explaining the salience of constituency service in African legislatures. *Journal of Legislative Studies*, 17(3), pp.379–396.
- Nijzink, L., Mozaffar, S. & Azevedo, E., 2006. Parliaments and the enhancement of horizontal accountability: An assessment of African legislatures. *Journal of Legislative Studies*, 12(3–4), pp.311–330.
- Norton, P. & Wood, D.M., 1993. *Back from Westminster: British Members of Parliament and their constituents*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky.
- Pitkin, H.F., 1967. *The concept of representation*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Reynolds, A., 1999. *Electoral systems and democratization in Southern Africa*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Reynolds, A., 2011. *Designing democracy in a dangerous world*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Salih, M.A.M., 2005. African parliaments: Between governance and government. *African Studies Quarterly*, 8(3), pp.1–17.
- Sisk, T.D., 1995. *Democratization in South Africa: The elusive social contract*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Strøm, K., 2000. Delegation and accountability in parliamentary democracies. *European Journal of Political Research*, 37(3), pp.261–290.
- Strøm, K., Müller, W.C. & Bergman, T. (eds.), 2003. *Delegation and accountability in parliamentary democracies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Tsebelis, G., 2002. *Veto players: How political institutions work*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Van der Westhuizen, C., 2007. *White power and the rise and fall of the National Party*. Cape Town: Zebra Press.
- Weghorst, K.R. & Lindberg, S.I., 2013. What drives the swing voter in Africa? *American Journal of Political Science*, 57(3), pp.717–734.