

The Substantive Representation of Disadvantaged Groups – Taking Stock and Moving Forward

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Title: Introduction to Symposium: The Substantive Representation of Disadvantaged Groups: Tacking Stock and Moving Forward

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This symposium features articles resulting from the ECPR Joint Sessions workshop on ‘Substantive Representation of Marginalized Groups: Reconceptualizing, Measurement, and Implications for Representative Democracy’, which was held online in May, 2021. This workshop attracted scholars interested in understanding and measuring the political representation of disadvantaged social groups. The articles in this symposium take stock of current developments in the field, revisit traditional presence-based approaches to substantive representation, and suggest new and innovative avenues for the study of substantive representation across groups, venues and contexts.

Ever since its publication, Hanna Pitkin’s (1967) classic book, *The Concept of Representation*, has served as a source of inspiration for many academic studies of political representation, including those studying social groups. By now, there is a large body of scholarly work on the formalistic and descriptive representation of disadvantaged groups (such as women, ethnic or racial minority groups, age groups, and low-income groups), which focus on the institutional arrangements that precede the political representation of such groups, as well as the conditions for their representatives to be present in elected assemblies (a.o. Dahlerup and Leyenaar, 2013; Dancygier, 2017; Paxton and Hughes, 2017; Rosset, 2016). Research on symbolic representation has also advanced significantly, with studies exploring the ways in which representatives and representative institutions stand for social groups through symbols that may evoke meanings about and by these groups (a.o. Lombardo and Meier, 2014; Verge, 2022). However, it is substantive representation, or the ways in which a representative “acts in the interest of the represented, in a manner responsive to them”

(Pitkin, 1967: 209), that keeps inviting new academic thought and debate (see Celis et al., 2008; Joshi and Echle eds., 2022). The latter is not surprising. In a rapidly changing world, the nature of political interests and acts, as well as the representative relationships between representatives and represented, are dynamic and constantly shifting (Saward, 2010; Castiglione and Pollak eds., 2018), encouraging scholars to continuously rethink concepts and theories of political representation.

In this reality, scholars are in agreement that substantive representation embodies a key aspect of representative democracy, but there is much less agreement on *what substantive representation exactly entails, how to measure it, and how to improve it*. Substantive representation in Pitkin's (1967) understanding is an active form of representation, but what does this 'acting for' imply: is it linked to certain activities in the legislative process and actual outcomes (Franceschet and Piscopo, 2008), or do representatives also substantively represent when they claim to speak on behalf of a group, perhaps in the broader public sphere (Saward, 2010)? Where shall we look for representative acts – is one place/level of socio-political interaction more important, powerful, and meaningful to society, than another? Moreover, does substantive representation of one group (for instance, women) have the same meaning as substantive representation of another group (for instance, ethnic or religious minorities), and how to deal with this from an intersectional perspective (Kroeber, 2008; Siow, 2023a)? How to measure and assess the substantive representation of groups who are not present (yet) in parliament? And how to measure the quality of substantive representation across and within social groups, venues, and contexts?

The articles in this symposium engage with these issues and deal with questions that relate to the changing nature of the substantive representation of social groups, its conceptualization and measurement, as well as the conditions that may foster or hinder the substantive representation of disadvantaged groups. As such, they also directly speak to the recent expansion and diversification of scholarship on the substantive representation of social groups (Erzeel and Rashkova, 2022). Not only did the number of studies increase significantly in the past 15 years, but the field has also become more diverse in terms of approaches and methods. Recent studies have moved away from studying the effects of presence in parliament towards a more comprehensive outlook on 'what is going on in substantive representation' through a study of various actors, venues, and claims involved in the

substantive representation of social groups (Celis et al., 2008; Saward, 2010). Together, these studies have significantly improved our understanding of the process of substantive representation. Yet, several questions remain unresolved, particularly questions linked to how to conceive and measure substantive representation.

In light of this, we argue that *a continued exploration of what substantive representation entails and how to measure it, also comparatively, is needed*. The latter is precisely what the different contributions in this symposium aim to do. Together, the five articles discuss new conceptualizations and measurements of substantive representation, as well as the implications for the broader understanding of substantive representation of politically disadvantaged groups. Doing so, they explore the boundaries of the concept of substantive representation and set out new roads for future research in a variety of ways.

First, each article in the symposium offers a novel approach for conceiving of and measuring the *quality* of substantive representation. Some articles locate substantive representation primarily in a parliamentary setting, offering very refined measures to study the substantive representation of politically disadvantaged or marginalized groups. Siow (2023b), Guasti and Geissel (2023), and Vermassen and Caluwaerts (2023), for instance, all offer in-depth empirical investigations of the claims-making approach to substantive representation (Saward, 2010). Siow (2023b) presents a novel rubric of eight facets of substantive representation which allows to make a careful distinction between legislators' claims on behalf of groups, claims about groups and claims against groups. Guasti and Geissel (2023) focus on the heterogeneity in the formulation of representative claims on behalf of denizens as an indication of a qualitative substantive representation. Vermassen and Caluwaerts (2023) use a measure of substantive and explicit claims to examine the representation of a potentially elusive group, namely future generations. Other contributions draw attention to substantive representation both in and outside parliament. Rashkova and Erzeel (2023) suggest a new composite index to capture the multidimensionality of substantive representation across a variety of venues. de Jong and Mügge (2023) return to the concept of responsiveness and emphasize the necessity to study how citizens belonging to minoritized groups evaluate their representatives.

The different articles in the symposium, moreover, contribute to existing research by shedding light on the *substantive representation of previously understudied groups*. In a recent systematic analysis, Erzeel & Rashkova (2022) note that the majority of published

studies on the substantive representation of social groups between 1995 and 2021 have focused on women. Most contributions in this symposium go beyond gender to study groups as varied as denizens (Guasti and Geissel, 2023), citizens of minoritized groups (de Jong and Mügge, 2023), minoritized women (Siow, 2023), and future generations (Vermassen and Caluwaerts, 2023). The widening of the social group focus sheds new light on the conditions that may foster substantive representation, and it also reminds us of the research imperative of intersectionality when studying social group representation (Smooth, 2011). To this end, several articles in this symposium suggest ways to include intersectional approaches in the empirical study of substantive representation (Siow, 2023; de Jong and Mügge, 2023; Guasti and Geissel, 2023).

The focus on previously understudied groups also means that the studies included in the symposium offer highly interesting opportunities for studying the occurrence and quality of *substantive representation without and beyond presence*. None of the articles assumes a direct mechanical link between descriptive and substantive representation; yet, for some groups their descriptive under-representation does seem to limit opportunities for substantive representation. In their study of an extreme case, Vermassen and Caluwaerts (2023) examine the substantive representation of a group that experiences a 'double absence' both as electors and elected representatives. In the absence of future representatives, they find that current-day representatives do engage to some extent with the substantive representation of future generations, albeit to a limited extent, raising concerns about whether substantive representation of future generations is at all possible. In their contribution, Guasti and Geissel (2023) explore the substantive representation of denizens, which, due to limitations on the formal and descriptive representation in parliament, takes place in a specially elected body at the local level. In this case too, the authors are pessimistic about the quality of substantive representation of denizens. Finally, de Jonge and Mügge (2023) report on the gap between what citizens want from their representatives and what the lack of descriptive representation can offer in this regard.

A fourth and final contribution is that all articles offer much needed comparative approaches and insights into the study of substantive representation of disadvantaged groups, by comparing substantive representation across countries (de Jong and Mügge, 2023; Rashkova and Erzeel, 2023), across institutions (Siow, 2023b; Vermassen and Caluwaerts, 2023), across parties (Vermassen and Caluwaerts, 2023; Rashkova and Erzeel, 2023), over time

(Siow, 2023b), and across and within groups (Guasti and Geissel, 2023; de Jong and Mügge, 2023; Siow, 2023b). This comparative framework allows them to identify broader patterns across contexts and groups, and to test and formulate new explanations on the occurrence and quality of the substantive representation of social groups (Erzeel & Rashkova, 2022). Together, the contributions in this symposium point to a number of new avenues for understanding and exploring the ways in which the substantive representation of politically disadvantaged groups occurs, thus enabling a better understanding of how it also might be improved in the future.

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