How Representation Enables Democratic Citizenship

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ECPR General Conference, Oslo, September 6-9, 2017
Within standard democratic theory, representation is primarily about scaling democracy onto mass societies. Through election or selection, representatives stand for, speak for, and act for those who cannot be present in places in which political decisions are deliberated and made, owing to the constraints of scale, time, complexity, knowledge, and attentiveness. In Hanna Pitkin’s well-known formulation, representative processes overcome these constraints by re-presenting: making present what is absent (Pitkin 1967, 9). Representation is democratic when those who are represented have ways and means to authorize representatives to represent them as well as to hold them accountable for their representative activities.

While the concept of democratic representation has received renewed and sophisticated attention over the last decade or so, the broad outlines of Pitkin’s theoretical formulation have remained intact. Importantly, it continues to focus our attention on how and whether representative relationships serve to extend the powers of citizens (a term I use generally to refer to individuals in their political capacities), beyond limitations imposed by time, space, and complexity. We should notice, however, that the formulation focuses primarily on the activities of representatives, not the represented. The focus is part of the framing of representation as a matter of presence and absence: representatives stand in, speak for, or act for the represented in their absence: they are re-presented the spaces and activities where they cannot be.

In this chapter I focus on the political activities of the represented within representative relationships. I am not challenging the questions generated by the standard view of democratic representation, but rather adding another set of questions: What are citizens doing when they assess representative claims, authorize representatives to stand, speak, or act for them, and then hold representatives accountable? How do representative relationships construct and enable the capacities of democratic citizenship? Representative relationships within democratic contexts, I shall argue, can and should develop the capacities of citizens by (1) inducing autonomous judgment; (2) framing individuals in their roles and capacities as members of collectivities; (3) enabling moral judgment by inducing citizens to view the world from the perspective of others; and (4) making discursive accountability possible. Along with other normative criteria, the institutions and practices of representative democracy can be judged as better or worse according to the ways they enable these capacities of democratic citizenship.

In the first section, I review the standard theory of democratic representation, noting the ways it deflects attention from activities of the represented. In the second section, I examine the ‘constructivist turn’ in theories of political representation. The constructivist turn moves democratic theory in the right direction by focusing on (1) the ways interests are constructed within representative relationships, and (2) the conditions of contestability that reduce the possibilities that their constructed interests will simply reflect representatives’ preferences. But the constructivist turn remains overly reactive to problems generated by the standard approach, failing to frame directly the (potential) contributions of representation to capacities of democratic citizenship. In the remaining sections, I develop the positive part of the
argument by focussing on the four ways representative relationships can form individuals into democratic citizens.

**The Standard Theory of Democratic Representation**

Within standard democratic theory, representation is primarily about scaling democracy onto mass societies. Through election or selection, representatives stand for, speak for, and act for those who cannot be present in the bodies and places in which political issues are deliberated and decisions made, owing to the constraints of scale, time, complexity, and attentiveness. In Hanna Pitkin’s well-known formulation, representative processes overcome these constraints by re-presenting: making present what is absent, namely, the interests of those who should have some say in collective decision-making (Pitkin 1967, 9). From the standpoint of democratic representation, the standard approach frames the question as to how those who are absent can, nonetheless, communicate their interests and preferences, and ensure that they are, in fact, being represented. In the now standard formulation: In what ways can individuals (citizens, constituents, etc.) authorize a representative to stand for, speak for, or act for them? And in what ways can individuals hold representatives accountable for their activities as a representative? Electoral democracy formalizes the authorization and accountability cycle, where the vote has the dual role of authorizing a representative, and then subsequently empowering voters to pass judgment on the representative’s performance (Urbinati and Warren 2008). Parties and advocacy groups mediate the voter-representative relationship with platforms, positions, and arguments ideally serving to connect voters’ preferences to their votes for representatives.

Much of the recent literature on democratic representation takes its starting point from this standard view. Sofia Näsström (2011) has helpfully summarized the contributions as motivated by one or more of three sets of problems: (1) how the interests of the represented are constituted; (2) the contributions of representative relationships to political judgment, and (3) political representation outside of electoral democracy. I focus here on the first two (but see Saward [2010] and Montanaro [2012] for analysis of the third).

The first set these problems was already framed by Pitkin: the interests of the represented are not exogenous to the relationship between representative and represented. They are always constituted in some way by the representative relationship. Representatives make claims, which, when successful, at least partially define the interests of those they claim to represent (Saward 2010). The challenge to democratic representation is that if people do not have autonomous preferences, it is difficult to understand them as choosing and directing their representatives—authorizing them to stand, speak, or act on their behalf. Nor can they hold representatives accountable, since what people understand their interests to be are at least partially constructed within the representative relationship itself (Disch 2011, 2015, Montanaro 2012). Political elites can use their resources to manipulate those they claim to represent—and electoral politics provides plenty of incentives to do so. At some (unlikely) limit, the ‘the people’ could be fully constructed, with their assent,
by political entrepreneurs—which would, of course, vitiate any sense in which the people could be said to rule through their representatives.

Responses to this issue tend to focus on either the representative or the represented. Those who focus on representatives emphasize role responsibilities. Pitkin, recognizing that those who are represented often do not have well-formed preferences prior to articulation by representatives, argues that representatives should ‘act in the interest of the represented, in a manner responsive to them’ (1967, 209). This formulation recognizes the constructed element of representation, distinguishes the interests people have from the preferences they hold, and defines a duty of representative. As Disch notes (2011, 106-8), Pitkin’s formulation both articulates and suspends the problem. On the one hand, she recognizes that preferences can (and often must) be formed by representatives. On the other hand, without more analysis, the formulation can tacitly legitimize paternalistic claims by representatives to know what is best for their constituent’s interests, often despite their preferences. At some limit, this formulation merges with Burke’s conception of elected representatives as trustees who substitute their (better) judgment for those of their relatively uninformed constituents. But it can also issue in the more productive question implied in Pitkin’s formulation: Democratically speaking, how should a representative fulfil the duties of responsiveness, given their constitutive role in representative relationships? (Dovi 2007) What is occurring within this relationship that could count as responsiveness?

The second set of problems helps to give definition to this question of responsiveness: How is representation involved in political judgments—especially those that are responsive to constituents? Bernard Manin (1997) focuses on the ways in which representatives form decision-making bodies (legislatures, councils, etc.), within which justifications for representative claims are deliberatively structured. For this reason, representative constitution of the interests of the represented are not arbitrary; they are moulded within discursive relationships, and justified by arguments to the represented (Manin 1997). Nadia Urbinati (2006) broadens Manin’s approach, focusing on the ways in which representative institutions focus public advocacy and discourse, through which interests gain articulation and constituencies are called forth (see also Disch 2011, Garston 2009, Runcimen 2007).

If we pursue this line of argument, it frames a question that has been mostly overlooked in the new literature on representation. By the very nature of the question of representation, we have tended to focus on the activities of representatives, whose judgment we have tended to see as substituting for citizen judgment. To a large extent, this focus follows from spatial metaphor built into the Latin repraesentare, which ‘means to grant something a literal presence, for example … to present a new Pope before a crowd’ (Runciman 2007, 94). The spatial metaphor has stuck, so that political representation is widely understood as making present what is absent, which in turn underscores the presence of representatives, and the absence of citizens. The metaphor works for (say) the far-flung empire of the Romans, or forging a representative government for the original thirteen American colonies. But we should notice that the metaphor also de-focuses non-spatial connections—language in
particular—which do not follow the spatial logic of presence and absence. Especially in highly mediated, linguistically-saturated contexts, those who are represented may be quite active, especially in their judgments as to how they should be represented, and who or what should represent them. To fill out our theories of democratic representation, we shall need to ask about these activities and judgments of the represented—those who are ‘absent’ (cf. Mansbridge 2003, 2009).

Stated just a bit more analytically, any simple political representative relationship can be formulated as follows: $X$ represents $Y$ with respect to their interests $Z$ as involved with, or affected by, a collectivity $C$ within which $X$ serves as a representative. Within this formulation, there are two loci of judgment that need to be robust in order for democratic representation to occur.

- The representative needs to be responsive to the represented, which involves judgments about their interests as affected by a relevant collectivity.
- The represented need to judge in what ways and how well they are being represented by a representative, especially insofar as their interests are affected by a relevant collectivity.

The literature has tended to focus on the first kind of judgment, influenced by the standard view that representation substitutes the judgment of the (present) representative for the (absent) represented. But decisions about being represented—accepting or rejecting a representative claim; trusting, monitoring, or opposing your elected representative or governing party, etc.—are kinds of political judgments. These are kinds of political participation that comprise democratic citizenship, indeed, they are among the most important kinds in a representative democracy.

More specifically, I am interested in four further questions that follow from a focus on citizens’ judgments:

- When are citizen judgments to be represented autonomously, in the sense that their judgments can be said to be their own?
- How do citizens come to understand themselves as represented in their role as members of a collectivity, such that they can be represented at the level of a collectivity, and be said to be a constituent of that collectivity?
- What kinds of capacities for moral judgments—that is, judgments about duties and obligations to others—are enabled by representation?
- How do representative relationships enable relations of discursive accountability?

In formulating these questions, I am focusing mostly on individual-level effects of democratic political systems. While I will not do so here, we can judge the representative dimensions of democratic systems by the ways they enable these individual-level capacities. Political systems that enable citizens to use their powers will also be more likely to generate these powers—a point that has been fundamental to those strains of democratic theory that stress the active and vigilant features of citizenship, represented by Tocqueville, Mill, Dewey, as well as contemporary participatory and deliberative theories of democracy.
The Constructivist Turn

Although these questions have not been put directly in the literature, they have been broached indirectly, especially by the new constructivism, which is most completely represented by Michael Saward’s innovative book, *The Representative Claim*. Representation, as Saward puts it, ‘is not just there, a thing. It is made, or constructed, by someone, for someone, and for a purpose’ (Saward 2010, 13; see also Urbinati 2007, Disch 2011, 2015, Montanaro 2012). Saward develops a theoretical account of representation in two steps, focusing on analysis of representative claims. The ‘general form’ of the representative claim involves these relationships: ‘A maker of representations ... puts forward a subject ... which stands for an object ... that is related to a referent ... and is offered to an audience’ (2010, 36; see also Rehfeld 2006). By abstracting from institutionalized forms of representation and focusing on the speech act (the claim), Saward is able formulate precise questions about each element. Thus, on the one hand, through their assertions, makers of representative claims seek to form their audiences relative to problems, goods, or topics. On the other hand, audiences accept or reject the claims made on their behalf. So if a representative claim is successful, it ‘prompts certain constituents to recognize the status-claim, and to recognize the selective depiction of themselves—the object—within it’ (2010, 47). In this way, he shows the many ways in which constituencies can be constructed by the activities of claim-makers. While Saward’s approach is quite consistent with voting-based representation, the focus shifts to the performative features of representation: elections serve to select and remove representatives, but performing as a representative—interacting with constituents, responding to problems and initiatives, locating oneself within a party—take place through serially-sequenced speech acts in response to specific audiences.

It is this feature of Saward’s analysis that is especially salient here: he shifts the theoretical framework from spatial metaphors of presence and absence to *speech acts that establish representative relationships* (see also Saward 2014, 725). A claim is an assertion whose generic form is performative and linguistic. It follows from Saward’s framing of representation as ‘claims’ that the democratic features of representation will focus on uptake and acceptance by those subject to claims. Saward generalizes by speaking of ‘acceptance acts’ which need not, in themselves, take a verbal form. Voting, for example, is a speech act only in the sense that a vote expresses a preference from a limited list of possibilities. Other kinds of ‘acceptance acts’ may include (presumably) followings, memberships, verbal support and other kinds of acts that transform representative claims into a democratic relationship (Saward 2010 151-53). The logic, however, is that each kind of act could be justified in the form of speech: ‘I voted for X because...; I joined this group because....’

The constructed features of representative relationships follow this form: potential representative make claims, which ‘call forth’ a constituency. The representative claim forms and engages; members of a proposed constituency are challenged, as it were, to accept or to offer objections. Representatives gain their democratic legitimacy by building constituencies through claiming and responding.
From the perspective of democratic representation, then, Saward’s framework directs attention to the nature and status of ‘acceptance acts.’ How do we know that these acts are owned by citizens, especially if they are, as it were, ‘called forth’ by representative claims? From a democratic standpoint, choices to be represented should (ideally) be autonomous—not outside of constructed representative relationships, but rather the result of reflection on the claims to represent interests. Moreover, we should want to know how representative relationships underwrite citizens’ capacities to make political judgments.

Saward is appropriately cautious. In some cases, it is reasonable to infer the autonomy of ‘acceptance acts’—for example, a party wins an electoral majority under free and fair conditions. Others may be ambiguous, complicated by repeated and shifting representative claims. Even more difficult is to infer democratic legitimacy from silence—the linguistic form of absence. Even in relatively robust mass democracies, most citizens are relatively inattentive to most issues, most of the time. Their representatives must typically infer their legitimacy much of the time from (as Pitkin puts it) ‘non-objection’ (Runciman 2007). And how do we know that ‘non-objection’ is (say) affirmative acquiescence or a considered judgment to trust (Mansbridge 2009), rather than disaffection, ignorance, or the effect of subtle forms of silencing built into marginalizations or dependencies (Saward 2010, 152)? The question of the quality of citizen judgments (to be represented) is bound up in the same question: how do would we know that citizens’ ‘acceptance acts’ are considered, reflective, and politically robust?

Constructivists have a common answer to both questions—one that is certainly right, but also incomplete: we need to look at the conditions under which judgments are formed (Mansbridge 2009, 391). Saward focuses on the differences between open and closed societies. In ‘relatively closed’ societies, ‘it may be more difficult for actors and observers to impute a degree of democratic legitimacy’ to representative claims. ‘In undemocratic or semi-democratic contexts, with, for example, limited information flows and freedoms, people may not have sufficient resources ... to make assessments of representative claimants’ (158-59). Thus, we need to ask, are the conditions ‘conducive to open and uncoerced choices by members of the appropriate constituency?’ (Saward 2014, 733). But since it will be difficult to judge the conditions of each kind of judgment, we should ‘zoom out’ and ask about ‘to what extent are conditions conducive to uncoerced and open acceptance acts across a diverse range of dyadic claims—as a systemic-governmental level or more broadly on a systemic-societal level’ (2014, 733).

Along the same lines, Disch builds a ‘mobilization’ theory of representation that focuses on the ways groups articulate the needs, identities, and interests of constituents through successive formulations. Democratic responsiveness is more likely when political systems are ‘reflexive’—full of places and institutions within which claims are considered and reconsidered from differing perspectives. What induces reflexivity, Disch argues, is competition among claims. And competition is good because it ‘may activate citizens’ judgement.’ (Disch 2011, 112)
We find very much the same kind of approach offered by Runciman (2007), whose key concern is with Pitkin's non-objection principle. Because of the absence that is definitive of re-presentation, representatives must speak and act in the name of those they represent, usually as groups, in spite of their absence. Following Pitkin, Runciman suggests that the "democratic legitimacy can be constructed from the 'non-objection criterion': 'presence comes from the ability of individuals to object to what is done in their name' such that 'representation takes place when there is no objection to what someone does on behalf of someone else' (95). Thus, 'the non-objection criterion allows a kind of latent presence for the represented, such that their silence can be taken as a form of assent. However, it also means that where that silence is broken, and explicit objections are voiced, representation starts to break down' (95). When does an objection to a representative claim terminate representation? It cannot simply be that an individual objects qua individual. Rather, objections need to be registered on behalf of a group. Thus, objections capable of terminating representation must be made from a second-person, not first-person, vantage point: 'For these objections to count, they must be voiced not on behalf of the crowd, speaking for themselves, but by a crowd making a claim to speak in the name of the people' (107). And the conditions for this kind of process involve competition among claims. 'Political representation is best understood not in the language of veto but of competition. Objections to the actions of representatives can prove decisive when they constitute a plausibly competing claim to speak in the name of the person or thing being represented.' (106-7)

Finally, Garsten (2009) offers a libertarian version of a similar logic, arguing that 'a chief purpose of representative government is to multiply and challenge governmental claims to represent the people' (91). Representative institutions should 'prevent any one interpretation of the popular will from claiming final authority' (91), accenting 'the negative function of popular sovereignty' (107). If we extend Garsten’s logic to the individual level, however, what such institutions accomplish will be to induce reflexivity though competitive claim-making.

Can Representation Underwrite Democratic Citizenship?

We can now put the central question for this chapter directly: In what ways can representative political systems support and develop capacities for democratic citizenship? A premise of this question is that decisions to be represented are an important kind of political judgment in democratic political systems. As Pitkin notes (presciently but without developing the idea), ‘the represented’ need to be conceived as entities ‘capable of action and judgment’ (1967, 155). How do the judgments of the represented contribute, in principle, to capacities of democratic citizenship?

In principle, I suggest, we can identify at least four kinds of contributions. Democratically representative political systems can contribute to (1) citizen autonomy; (2) citizens’ views of themselves as members of collectivities; (3) citizens’ moral/ethical capacities; and (4) citizens’ capacities for discursive accountable. As we shall see, the literatures of political theory discuss each of these capacities. But they
have been discussed only tangentially as normatively desirable consequences of democratic representative relationships.

**Autonomy**

The term *autonomy* has Kantian origins, and means that an individual holds their views in ways that do not simply reflect impulses or desires, but rather considered positions that could be justified with reasons to others. Autonomy in this sense is a capacity that individuals gain through their participation in discursive relationships. From a democratic perspective, autonomy is important because it is essential to self-rule within the context of collectivities. On the one hand, autonomous judgments are the result of self-reflection, so that they can be said to be *owned* by individuals (that is, they are not the result of manipulation, propaganda, etc.). As Nedelsky puts it, autonomy is the idea that ‘acts can arise from the actor rather than being determined by something else’ (2011, 45) On the other hand, autonomy is enabled *through* discursive interaction with others, particularly through those that involve mutual justification through the offering and receiving of reasons (Nedelsky 2011, 45-49).

The possibility of autonomy responds directly to the primary problem for most constructivists—the endogeneity of preference formation within representative relationships. As we saw above, the constructivist response is that representative systems should underwrite reflexivity through openness to multiple and competitive representative claims. The implication is that where individuals are subjects of multiple competing claims, they will be induced to judge simply by competition among them, thus tending to transform preferences into choices that could be articulated and justified. Thus, autonomy is, at least in part, a consequence of considered individual decisions to be represented in one way rather than another.

It is possible, of course, to describe electoral representation in these terms. While political scientists have put enormous energy into understanding voting behaviour, it has been remarkably unusual to view voting decisions as anything more than (say) selection or removal of representatives based on their promises relative to pocketbook voting or ideological framing. In contrast, Mansbridge’s 2003 article, ‘Rethinking Representation’ was innovative because she identified representative relationships that go well beyond this ‘promissory’ relationship. Representatives may anticipate constituent’s needs and interests; they may function as moral ‘gyroscopes’ that voters select for their moral trustworthiness; and they may represent causes outside of their districts as ‘surrogates.’ Each of these roles requires some level of deliberative interaction with constituents, which helps to redirect our attention to citizens’ participation in representative judgment. When competition and multiplicity in representative claims induce these kinds of judgments, we can go one step further, and describe one function of representation as the development of autonomy.

**Citizens as Members of Collectivities**

One of the oldest questions in democratic theory—indeed, political theory—is the question of how individuals come to see themselves as belonging to collectivities.
for purposes of collective self-rule. How do individuals come to understand themselves as part of a *people* that can self-rule? There are ways of dissolving the problem, by speaking of nations, communities, and other collectivities to which individuals are attached in pre-political ways. But in modern societies, collectivities are multiple and fluid, and individuals belong to multiple collectivities for different goals and purposes. Political collectivities are more challenging than many other kinds, in that they are usually not chosen; individuals find themselves as co-dependents entangled with others, sharing fates, injustices, or relative advantages, and—most importantly—sharing collective action problems for the provision of collective goods.

Political representation is a pivot between individual self-understanding *qua* individual, and individual self-understanding as a member of a collectivity, people, or public. Without representation, there is no ‘people.’ Focusing on the aesthetic functions of representation, Ankersmit notes that without political representation we are without a conception of what political reality—the represented—is like; without it, political reality has neither face nor contours. ... Political reality only comes into being after the nation has unfolded itself into a represented and in a representation representing the represented. Without representation, no democratic politics’ (2002, 115).

If we combine Ankersmit’s point with the constructivist ideal of the representative environment as comprised of multiple competing claims, then we can see that these claims amount to differing accounts of collective membership. Representatives assert their claims in the form of ‘we’ (and, too often, ‘they’), each with their accompanying identities, demands, benefits, burdens, and responsibilities. Importantly, Ankersmit argues, representation opens up a distance between representative and citizen (2002, 118). In doing so, the representative enables citizens to objectify the claims—to distance the claim from the self—and to decide whether to try it on, and to judge its fit with the multiple collectivities within which each individual is always already embedded. When issues are significant enough to have representative claims attached, individuals are presented, in effect, with a pallet of possible memberships: Canadian, women, taxpayer, middle-class, entitled, disenfranchised, trustee of non-human beings, caretaker of the Earth, parents of children, youth, employee, retiree, Christian, aggrieved, exploited, subjects of injustice, crime-threatened, and so on. In democracies, representatives are continually trying out these identities, the groups they form, associated goods or risks, and the boundaries they create. Sometimes claims build on existing communities; sometimes they build on reactive fears; sometimes they challenge individuals to assume responsibilities for unacknowledged shared fates (Williams 2003).

Although Ankersmit makes this point by reference to the aesthetic dimensions to representation, the same point can be made through its discursive dimensions. Indeed, the point is better made in discursive terms, since it is language that transforms representations (visual or verbal) into propositions—claims—to which individuals can assent or object.
Runciman arrives at a parallel formulation in working through the question of what it could mean for a group to object to the way in which it is represented. While a group cannot typically object as a group (unless the group is small enough to speak with one voice), individuals can object to representations that are made ‘in our name,’ if they have formulated their positions in a public form to which a constituency is attached: ‘as an X, I object to Y.’ That is, a representative claim identifies a public that has existence in the form of public opinion by naming and claiming, giving it an existence sufficient for discursive assent or objection. To make this point, Runciman draws a distinction between

the public on whose behalf political representatives act, and the public whose opinions of the actions of those representatives determine whether or not they can plausibly claim to be representing the people as a whole. The first of these publics is an abstraction ... an incapable object at the mercy of competing claims of its representatives and the separate individuals who retain the right to object to what is being done in its name. The second public—the public of ‘public opinion’—is not an abstraction as such, since it is constituted by agents capable of acting their own right ... (2007, 106)

This ‘second public’ gains its identity through the process of being identified and represented. This said, Runciman’s formulation is ambiguous on the crucial question of whether public opinion pre-exists the representative process. A clearer theoretical formulation would be that acts of representation give form to public opinion to have an existence, such that individuals can assent or object to the collectivity and position framed by that opinion. Many empirical variations will exist, of course: some publics are old, stable and established; others may coalesce around an issue or problem that calls it into existence. Urbinati’s emphasis on the ways in which advocacy brings into existence publics follows similar lines of thinking (2000, 2005). When we flip this idea into its individual dimensions, it highlights a shift in register from individuals speaking (or judging) as individuals, to individuals speaking (or judging) as members of collectivities—that is, as citizens.

**Perspective-taking and Moral Thinking**

We are now at a point, conceptually speaking, at which the potential moral (or ethical) functions of representation come into view. To develop this function, I turn to another literature, this one having to do with the moral or ethical representations of broad communities. The conceptual transition is not a big one. Once ‘being represented’ introduces the perspective of being part of a ‘people’ (public, constituency, etc.) within the context of representative claim-making, the theoretical infrastructure is in place to view citizens in their capacities for perspective-taking—that is, viewing a situation, issue, or train of effects from the perspective of another, particularly others most affected or likely to be affected. Perspective-taking in this sense is the core capacity in all moral and ethical judgments. Representation plays a pivotal role in enabling this capacity.

The seeds for this insight can be found in two early arguments for representative government. The first can be found in Madison’s well-known
discussion of the problem of faction in Federalist number 10 (Hamilton, Madison, and Jay 2003 [1787]). Here Madison argues against ‘democracy’—by which he idiosyncratically means direct democracy—in favour of a ‘republic,’ by which he means ‘a government in which the scheme of representation takes place...’ The problem to which representation is the solution is that of citizens’ judgment: because it is direct, a ‘democracy’ unites judge and cause, which is likely to undermine good judgment. ‘No man is allowed to be a judge in his own cause, because his interest would certainly bias his judgment, and, not improbably, corrupt his integrity. With equal, nay with greater reason, a body of men are unfit to be both judges and parties at the same time.’ Madison notes that in matters of justice, the judge clearly cannot be an interested party if justice is to be served. In matters of legislation, however, parties to a judgment are almost always interested. It is not possible to remove interests, but it is possible to structure a scheme of representation that increases the likelihood that collective judgments will be good judgments. Famously, Madison’s solution is twofold. First, representative relationships separate the sites of cause and judgment, locating the latter within small, deliberative bodies such as legislatures that represent broader publics. Second, the scale of constituencies should be sufficiently encompassing of interests so that no single set of interests (including ‘majority factions’) can dominate the body. Interestingly, Madison sees breadth of inclusion as serving a communicative checking function as well: ‘Besides other impediments, it may be remarked that, where there is a consciousness of unjust or dishonorable purposes, communication is always checked by distrust in proportion to the number whose concurrence is necessary.’

We should notice two features of Madison’s problem and recommendation that are generalizable. First, Madison’s dictum that ‘no one should be judge of their own cause’ highlights the psychological circumstance that people often lack of perspective on their own lives, including the claims they make on others, no matter how well motivated. Narcissism—or, less unkindly, partiality—is built into the first-person perspective that each one of us has on ourselves. This existential fact becomes a moral failing if not balanced with perspective. Madison’s twofold solution introduces perspective, both the perspective gained by separating judge and cause through representation, and that gained by multiplying the interests included in a representative body. It is not just that this kind of political design counterbalances interests through competing perspectives—although they do that. It is also that representative structures induce broader perspectives, as representatives must couch their claims in terms of an inclusive ‘we.’ The effective extent of inclusions—how they are expressed and tested—depends crucially on how incentives for representative claims are built into representative institutions.

We find a similar kind of argument in Kant, who argues that the primary consideration in political institutions is whether judge and cause are unified or separated. Unified structures amount to ‘despotism,’ whether the polity is a monarchy, aristocracy, or democracy. Similar to Madison, ‘republican’ governments build in the separation of judge and cause through representation. While Kant’s constitutional thinking is not remarkable in itself (Madison’s thinking is much more sophisticated),
he does combine these recommendations with a theory of Right, which mirrors the
ethics he develops in the Critique of Practical Reason. The general formulation for
Kant’s ethics is, of course, the categorical imperative: *act in such a way that the maxim
of your conduct could become a universal law.* The parallel formulation of Right is ‘the
sum total of those conditions within which the will of one can be reconciled with the
will of another in accordance with a universal law of reason.’ The imperative for
individuals is to ‘let your external actions be such that the free application of your will
can coexist with the freedom of everyone in accordance with a universal law’ (Kant

While it has long been fashionable to dismiss Kant’s ethics as overly
rationalistic, there are two key features that relate representation to citizen judgment
that remain important. First, Kant does not prescribe any particular action, but rather
a ‘law of reason’ that individuals should apply to their potential actions. That is, Kant’s
ethics is not paternalistic; it asks for judgment from each individual. Second—and this
is the important link to theories of political representation—Kant’s ‘law of reason’
asks individuals to consider whether they could live in a world in which other
individuals acted in ways they are considering. The categorical imperative asks each
individual to imagine the community of people linked through their (potential)
actions and their effects. These communities must be represented in the imagination
for individuals to exercise practical reason. The imagination, in Arendt’s evocative
commentary on Kant’s political philosophy, must go ‘travelling’ (Arendt 1989). The
concept Kant chooses for these purposes, following Rousseau, is ‘the General Will.’
The concept that is far too abstract in itself—as it is a perspective from nowhere. But
considered as a concrete guideline for judgment, it directs individuals to consider
potential collective decisions from the standpoint of every other individual. The
imperative borne by each individual as a rational being is to represent, if only in the
imagination, the community constituted by the effects of proposed laws and
legislation. The objects of representation are those linked by effects. Indeed, this
principle is so central to Kant’s thinking that he should be considered an early
proponent of the ‘all-affected interests’ principle in contemporary democratic theory
(Fung 2013).

Rawls develops this line of thinking more explicitly. Building his Theory of
Justice within a broadly neo-Kantian framework, he suggests the ‘original position’ as
a ‘device of representation,’ aimed at restricting reasons for principles of justice to
those that apply only to persons as free and equal beings, endowed with capacities to
self-govern under fair terms of cooperation (Rawls 2001, 17-18). It is, in fact,
somewhat curious that Rawls refers to the original position as a ‘representative’
device, except in the old philosophical sense in which concepts were considered to be
mental representations. But there is an obvious political translation into a political
concept that does not suffer from abstract universalism. If we consider the original
position as a representative claim (specifically, a claimed moral imperative), it
amounts to demand to each individual that they view the impacts of collective
decisions (legislation, policies, etc.) on everyone else, admitting justifications only
insofar as they can work from the perspective of everyone else. Universalization is
embedded in acts of judgment relative to the impacts of collective actions on each individual, viewed as a being capable of self-government and embedded in relationships of co-dependency. Because this is precisely what moral reasoning requires, representative claim-making that assumes the form of the original position enables capacities for moral judgment by each individual in their capacities as citizens.

These formulations may seem unduly abstract. There is a point, however: they bring into focus an important relationship between representations of universal perspectives and democracy. Madison and Kant imagined that representatives would be inward looking, toward the institutions in which they are embedded, while citizens would remain subject to their individual or group desires. But the distancing between judge and cause can occur through public discourse, where that discourse is structured by representative claim-makers, the key conduits of voice within mass democracies. The means through which individuals can develop their moral capacities is by listening and attending to the (represented) perspectives of others—and listening to (understanding, empathizing with) the perspectives of others.

Hannah Arendt has a particularly nice description of the relationship between representation and the capacities for perspective that are at the heart of moral thinking. 'Political thought is representative. I form an opinion by considering a different issue from different viewpoints, by making present to my mind the standpoint of those who are absent; that is, I represent them ... The more people's standpoints I have present in my mind while I am pondering a given issue, and the better I can imagine how I would feel and think if I were in their place, the stronger will be my capacity for representative thinking ... (It is this capacity for an “enlarged mentality” that enables men to judge; it was discovered by Kant ... )." (Arendt, 1968, 237).

Following Arendt, the way to avoid abstract universalization is not to give up on generalization, but rather to generalize by adding more perspectives, to ask others, to understand their places, problems, and lives, up to the point that the chains of affectedness that link the circumstances of one to another, are reasonably well exhausted. Representation within the context of an open democratic society is what makes this possible: claim-makers propose impacts, which are, in turn, discursive claims that can be accepted, modified, rejected, or simply ignored. Claims of this kind provide the substantive structure of political deliberation, which in turn should pull individuals out of their existential narcissism, providing them with discursive context that enables ethical judgments—that is (following Kant and Rawls), judgments that take into account multiple circumstances and vulnerabilities. The right description of the supporting ethical theory is discourse ethics: that is, ethics that produces judgment through the give and take of reasons, often embedded in representations, among those affected or potentially affected by situations, possibilities, fates, and proposals (Habermas 1990, 43-115). Political representation makes it possible for citizens to generalize their judgments though hearing, contesting, debating, and understanding their impacts on others. Representatives can provide the pathways for such voices just to the degree that a political system and society provides protection and standing
for representative claims (see also Young 2000, chap. 4; Benhabib 2002, chap. 2). The context that enables representative claim-making to assume these kinds of moral/ethical functions is, of course, exactly that of a deliberative democracy.

**Discursive Accountability**

The final citizenship capacity enabled by representation is accountability. There is, of course, the obvious sense in which representative democracy enables accountability empowering citizens with votes that they can to hold elected official to account for their performance in office. As Mansbridge has argued, these relationships are more complex than their stylizations in much of the literature on voting and elections (2003, 2009). And, of course, the power of the vote to hold accountable is highly contingent upon constitutional design, electoral system design, and the overlap between issues and residence-based constituencies.

Here, however, I again want to return focus to a somewhat more generic question: What is the relationship between a representative act, especially the act of speaking for, and citizen capacities to hold representatives accountable? I want to focus on a relatively simple answer: accountability relationships are intrinsic to speech acts. They must therefore be intrinsic to acts of representative claim-making. This meaning of accountability is both obvious and widely overlooked—probably because within theories of representative democracy, the problem of accountability is usually framed as a problem of enforcement or sanction. Voters hold representatives accountable by selecting or de-selecting them for office in regular, competitive elections. Constructivists converge on competition among claims as enabling accountability: citizens can hold accountable when they can choose among the claims on offer. These analyses are not wrong. Conceptually speaking, however, they start downstream of accountability relationships that are constituted by speech acts.

This feature of representation I want to focus upon here is better captured by idea of **discursive accountability**: to hold to account is always, at least in part, to ask for an account—that is, a justification of an act—here, a representative act, such as speaking for (Warren 2014). This concept is now widely used, and I simply wish to elaborate its enabling features within the context of representative claim-making.

The most generic problem of accountability in representative relationships is the question of agency: who is accountable to whom for what? It is basic to speech acts that they constitute speakers as agents by tying the content of a speech act to a performance. Representative claims that involve ‘speaking for’ have a relatively simple structure that identifies agency through promises and commitments: ‘If elected, I promise...’ ‘As an X, I will fight for Y on your behalf.’ ‘As party X, we will protect your Y.’ And so on. In each case, the promise gives the audience license to view the speaker as an agent responsible for a claim. Speech acts by their very nature leave behind what Robert Brandom calls chains of ‘deontic scorekeeping.’ That is, speaking reveals an agent, but also commits the agent to action. Simple commitments among individuals coordinate actions: ‘I’ll meet you at seven’; ‘I’ll get the groceries on the way home’. Thus, when I speak or act, I entitle you to expect from me that which is inferred by my claim or action. I take on this obligation with respect to you. You may
respond explicitly, or you may simply register the commitment and organize your actions accordingly. Deontic scorekeepers ‘are licensed to infer our beliefs from our intentional actions (in context of course), as well as from our speech acts’ (Brandom 2000, 93; see also Arendt 1958, chap. 24). Speaking involves, in Brandom’s terms, a ‘default entitlement’ in which the speaker is assumed to be trustworthy, unless and until they prove otherwise. In these ways, then, speech acts generically constitute agents and establish responsibilities, for which agents can then be held accountable.

In the simplest cases, the agent is an individual. Representative claim-making usually involves more complex forms, since the claim is often on behalf of a collective agent, such as a party with a platform, a government, an opposition, or an organization with a leadership and mission. In the politically interesting cases, representative claims are functioning to constitute collective agents. Without this agent-constituting moment, there can be no accountability, for citizens have no agents to hold accountable.

Lest this point seem too abstract, note that one of the reasons that people dislike politics (or so they will often say) is that the collective agents implied in claim-making shift blame or disappear. Campaign promises become fuzzy or lost. Interpolated agents never fully materialize. From the perspective of disaffected citizens, speech fails to do what it should: reveal an agent who can become the locus of accountability. It can work the other way around too: representatives can infer their constituencies (and their positions) from their silence, taking it for non-objection—and then find that their silence was evidence of disaffection or disinterest rather than authorization.1 In contrast, political arrangements that result in collective agents enable citizens to use their votes to extract accountability, to engage in other kinds of political participation that has both locus and focus. When these conditions are in place, citizen participation is enabled because it has an object. But where representative claim-making fails to constitute responsible agents, the point of political participation drifts away into disaffection.

Constituting collective agents of a kind that can be held accountable by citizens is thus one of the most important functions of representative political institutions. The problem is relatively easy for mission-based organizations, as they can align words and deeds through self-selection. In contrast, inclusive political institutions internalize conflict (that is what they are for), meaning that their agent-constituting functions will often trade off directly with political brokerage. Westminster systems, for example, excel at constituting collective agents based on strong parties with relatively clear platforms. Elections constitute governments that unify powers, so that agency is relatively clear from the campaign through actual governing. But Westminster systems achieve these effects by giving up on political negotiation and deliberation once governments are formed: unified powers enable governments to externalize conflict. In contrast, the US system of separated powers buys political brokerage at the cost of collective agency: often no one appears to be in charge. Individual politicians can make wildly irresponsible claims and promises, knowing they can blame

1 Thank you to Sean Gray for this formulation.
'Washington insiders’ or other scapegoats when their promises come to naught. Citizens often do not know whom to hold to account, and so find it difficult to use their votes and voices well. The northern European unified power parliamentary systems based on proportional representation probably do a better job of splitting the difference between strong collective agency and the necessary political work of deliberation and negotiation. Ideally, representative institutions should close the loop between sanction-based accountability such as votes and discursive accountability base on reason-giving. When they function in this way, they develop citizens’ capacities for discursive accountability.

Conclusion

I have been arguing that representation is essential to building and maintaining capacities of democratic citizenship in four ways:

- By enabling autonomous judgment;
- By framing individuals in their roles and capacities as members of collectivities;
- By enabling moral development through perspective-taking, and
- By making discursive accountability possible.

While I have been primarily concerned with the question of what representation does—how it works—the argument is also straightforwardly normative. These are functions that representation should accomplish, insofar as it contributes to democracy generally, but more particularly to the capacities that comprise democratic citizenship. In making this argument, my focus has thus been on the individual rather than on social structures and institutions, mostly because individuals as ‘the represented’ has tended to be framed out of consideration, as in need of ‘re-presentation’ just because of their absence. It should be clear, however, that the argument is also that institutions and their encompassing societies should structure representative relationships in ways that enable and empower democratic citizenship. Here, however, my arguments are likely to be less novel—and rather add up to more strong reasons to favour institutions that are desirable on other democratic grounds.

References


