Intersectional Group Representation: Research Designs and Methods

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Abstract

Parties traditionally define electoral groups in terms of geographical borders, social class, gender, age or ethnicity/race. It is therefore not surprising that such categories are central to classical political representation theory and methodology. Recent representation theory moves away from primordial categories and follows a more constructivist approach. At the same time, intersectionality posits that the group categories that political scientists use in their analyses are overly simplistic and reductionist of social reality. This confronts representation scholars with a dilemma. On the one hand political representation is an aggregated process at group level; on the other hand that very unit of analysis (i.e. groups) seems to disintegrate. To tackle this dilemma, we propose a mixed method approach to study intersectional group representation. We argue that a study of political representation should start with an inductive identification of groups and their interests. This initial phase serves as a solid foundation to combine large-N inquiries with case studies. Such a design facilitates cross-national comparative analysis to reveal patterns and causal relations, but gain understanding of the underlying mechanisms through qualitative methods.
Introduction

The notion of groups, such as ‘women’ or ‘ethnic minorities’, which have clear and pre-defined interests are central to classical political representation theory and methodology. Typical questions in representation research include, for example: What is the correlation between the electoral system and the number of women in parliament? Do women represent the interests of women? Do women feel better represented by women than by men?

Recent representation theory moves away from primordial categories and follow a constructivist approach. Questions this scholarship addresses are, for example: who claims to represent the interests of women. At the same time, intersectionality theory posits that the group categories that political scientists apply in their analyses are overly simplistic and reductionist of social reality. Applied to representation it asks, for instance, who are the women present in parliament? Do they belong to an ethnic minority or to the ethnic majority? Do they belong a low or high social class? And what is the influence of these identity mixes on various forms of political representation?

These new approaches to representation and groups are more sophisticated and closer to reality, but they pose a major challenge to political scientists. On the one hand political representation is an aggregated process at group level. On the other hand that very unit of analysis (i.e. groups) seems to disintegrate. What is the way out of this dilemma? The first step is add three questions to standard repertoire of representation scholarship: How do citizens (the represented) themselves identify the group and their interests that should be represented? How politicians (the representatives) identify groups and their interests that
they think they should represent? To what extent do these two perspectives overlap or diverge?

To answer both new and traditional questions about political representation we propose a mixed method design which starts with an inductive identification of groups and their interests. This initial phase serves as a solid foundation to combine large-N inquiries with case studies. Such a design facilitates cross-national comparative analysis to reveal patterns and causal relations, but gain understanding of the underlying mechanisms through qualitative methods. Next, we present the theoretical puzzle and lay out the rational for a mixed method study. Subsequently, we propose a concrete research design to study political representation in today’s diverse societies.

Theoretical Puzzle: Representation without Groups

Scholarship on political representation is strongly influenced by Hanna Pitkin’s *The Concept of Representation* (1967). Four decades after publication of this landmark many empirical and theoretical studies still rely on Pitkin’s seminal taxonomy of representation, quote her definitions of different forms of representation and adopt her conceptualizations of the linkage between the representative and the represented (Celis and Mazur 2012). In Pitkin’s perspective the relationship between the represented (principal) and the representative (agent) forms the core of representation. This relationship can be established through formal authorization and accountability, by what the representatives stand for, act upon or symbolize. Pitkin labels these dimensions formal, descriptive, substantive and symbolic representation. Scholarship on representation for long shared the idea that the principal – the one that literally comes first – is the raison d’être of
representation. The formal, descriptive, substantive and symbolic representation are grounded in the principal: respectively s/he elects the representative; her/his identity or social position is the source of descriptive representation; her/his interests, needs, wishes and perspectives provide the content of substantive representation; and it is only in her/his eyes that a symbol has meaning, like a flag representing a state.

Nevertheless, the very idea that the principal comes first in the representation process, and more precisely in the descriptive and substantive dimensions thereof, is strongly questioned and revised in recent scholarship. Newer representation theories representation focus on ‘creative’ acts by the representative that call the represented into being (Mansbridge 2011; Rehfeld 2006, 2011; Saward 2010; Urbinati and Warren 2008; Warren 2002; Warren and Castiglione 2004). Mansbridge (2003) identifies ‘gyroscopic’ and ‘anticipatory’ representation in which representatives ‘look within’ themselves to interests, common sense, or principles derived from their own identity. Or, alternatively, focus on what they think their constituents will approve by the time the next election comes around. Saward (2010) sees representation as a process of ‘claims-making’ in which the constituency in whose interests the representative claims to speak is constructed within the framework of the claim. Saward argues that discourses are central to substantive representation. Representation involves claiming to represent groups of citizens and framing issues as being of importance to them. For instance, Nicolas Sarkozy’s claims to defend ‘les français qui se lèvent tôt’ [the French who get up early]. Such claims construct groups of citizens with shared interests (i.e. the early risers). At the same time these claims construct Sarkozy as the representative that stands for this group of citizens (descriptive representation) and defends their interests (substantive representation). Representation in this view is thus not a passive procedure of receiving
‘signals from below’ or a relationship ‘from principal to agent’; rather, it is constitutive and primarily runs from agent to principal.

This constructivist approach to representation is more applicable to representative politics today than Pitkin’s conceptualization. One might claim that ‘the principal’, for instance ‘blue collar workers’, and its interests have to a certain extent always been the product of representative claims-making. But today the need to conceive the representative and the represented as being constructed in the course of the representation process is even more relevant than in the past. Meaningful social or political collectives based on, for instance, social class are evaporating. Representative democracies are facing high levels of electoral volatility and party de-alignment, such as the tradition tie between blue collar workers and socialist parties (Andeweg 2003; Caramani, Celis and Wauters 2014). These phenomena make it increasingly unclear whom and what representatives should represent. They also reinforce the claim that the represented and their interests should not be conceived as pre-existing entities with pre-defined identities and interests that can simply be imported into representation.

A theory that very well captures the complexity and heterogeneity of groups is intersectionality. Intersectionality theory underpins the problematization of groups having similar interests. It was coined by critical race scholars in the 1980s to highlight that black women face different forms of oppression than black men or white women; namely they experience racism and sexism simultaneously. From an intersectional perspective categories are ‘always permeated by other categories, fluid and changing, always in the process of creating and being created by dynamics of power’ (Cho, Crenshaw and McCall...
In other words, one’s identity and structural position in society is never constituted on the basis of, for example, one’s gender alone. Positions are always influenced by the combination of identities such as gender, race, class, sexuality, age, ethnicity, ability (Crenshaw 1991; Hill Collins 1998). Such intersections generate positions of marginalization as well as privilege, depending on the specific time, context and space in which they operate. For instance, young ethnic minority women may experience discrimination in a particular context. Yet, in other contexts this same identity may be an advantage or not even matter. Which groups and which group interests are politically relevant – in the sense that they should be represented – is not pre-given: it is an open empirical question.

Intersectionality has become widely established in gender studies and is often customized to the many disciplines it spans. Consequently, intersectionality is applied very differently across disciplines and research topics. However, also within disciplines, including political science, and their subfields the way intersectionality is applied varies (Simien and Hancock 2011; Mügge and De Jong 2013; Mügge 2013). Intersectionality is first and foremost a research paradigm. In political science research intersectionality can be viewed as a critique on the commonly used unitary and multiple approach (Hancock 2007). While the unitary approach addresses one single category of identity as most salient and explanatory, the multiple approach a priori recognizes several categories to matter equally. In these first two approaches categories are taken as static at the individual or institutional level. This is problematic for a study on political representation as it ignores internal differences within race/ethnic groups and denies other categories of difference to be equally important. In the third approach several categories do matter.
equally, but differ from the multiple approach as the relationship between the categories is an open empirical question (ibid.).

In sum, given that political representation is never about an individual and always entails aggregation to a group level – i.e. to the level of ‘meaningful collectivities’ (Andeweg 2003: 150) – the constructivist and intersectional turn in representation- and gender studies poses a major puzzle. Which groups and which group interests are in need of political representation is a constantly shifting terrain. Groups and interests are constituted by context and time specific intersecting identities that are constructed by citizens on the one hand and through representatives’ claims-making on the other hand. How, then, should we understand and study the linkage between the represented and the representatives? How can we assess whether citizens are adequately represented? If we can, let’s say, no longer take ‘women’ or ‘ethnic minorities’ to be a politically relevant group, how can we attribute meaning to the numerical presence of women or ethnic minorities as MPs or decision-making on their behalf?

**Researching Intersectional Group Representation: Design and Methods**

Taking intersectionality seriously implies that scholars, can no longer pretend to know what the ‘unit of analysis’ is when investigating who is represented. The first task at hand is identifying to which groups (‘meaningful collectives’) citizens themselves consider to belong to and what, as a consequence of this, their political interests are. An intersectional study of political representation invites methods of analysis grounded in interpretative and critical feminist theory. To date many intersectional empirical research has been qualitative nature, often from a standpoint- and/or postcolonial epistemological stance.
Critical race feminist scholars who pioneered with intersectional methods deployed oral traditions, narratives, storytelling, biography, and personal testimony, these methods face criticism because they are not seen as positivist, rigorous, theoretical, or scholarly enough. Yet methods considered antipositivist are traditional tools of existing intersectionality type work because they center situated and experiential knowledge. (Dhamoon 2011,240)

It is only after politically meaningful political entities or groups and their interest are identified that the researcher can turn to investigating whether that particular group is formally, descriptively, substantively and symbolically represented. The requirement of starting the research inductively, does however not imply that the remainder of the research design has to be so as well, quite on the contrary. Although we concur with Dhamoon that empirical intersectional research requires a qualitative approach, we do not believe that a study on political representation benefits from reproducing the old qualitative-quantitative divide (cf. Goertz & Mahoney 2012). We agree with Hancock (2007) that intersectional empiricists cannot rely on data collected in the same old unitary way, but should develop new ways of collecting and analyzing data in a mixed method research design.

The motivation for a mixed method study of political representation is that it allows for an ethnographic approach to reveal how citizens define their belonging and interests that it also provides room for cross national analysis to produce generalizable results. Moreover, the advantage of a mixed method study over a single method study is that is allows for
confirmation and complementarity (Small, 2011, 63). The rationale behind confirmation is to verify or to ‘triangulate’ the findings from one type of data with those derived from others. Complementarity refers to the value of combining different types of data to compensate for their various weaknesses (ibid.). This increases interpretability, meaningfulness and validity, and counteracts biases in other methods and sources (Schensul, Schensul and Lecompte 2013, 158).

Our research design is inspired by an ethnographic approach to data collection. Here, ethnography is understood as an approach rather than a uniform method, guided by its commitment to direct experience with a population or community which may entail both quantitative and qualitative data collection (Schensul et al. 2013, 2). Ethnography lends itself particularly well for a mixed-method study as it may include surveys and other instruments to test concepts and theories derived from other fields or from ‘outsider’ observation. However, central to ethnography is that such instruments and the theories directing them should not be arbitrarily used without testing them locally for both practical and theoretical applicability (Lecompte and Schensul, 1999, 3). In other words, central to an ethnographic approach is the return to the subject’s point of view. Rather than reproducing top down categories it allows for the bottom up construction of categories. For a study on political representation political ethnography is particularly helpful. Political ethnography is new in political science and differs from traditional anthropological ethnography in that it does not focus on culture, but on politics. Political ethnography is conducted by political scientists who are ‘open to simplify for analytic coherence, and to seek to produce generalizable results’ (Schatz 2009, 306).
Figure 1 illustrates what such a mixed method research design would look like and which methods could be applied therein. The research designs should be read as ideal types. We contend that 1) including all dimensions of representation; 2) studying their interaction; and 3) sequencing quantitative and qualitative research for each provides the most complete insight in the extent to which groups are represented. The research designs, however, can also be read as a menu à la carte. For good reasons researchers may decide to study, for instance, only substantive representation and only in a qualitative manner, and that would indeed also shed light on the level of representation. However, we do contend that research phase 1 can, for the reasons mentioned above, should not be avoided.

Phase 1 is highly valuable for researching a dimension of political representation that requires quantitative hypothesis testing methods. If the group that will be researched is ‘new’ in the sense that it has not been studied yet in that composition, this may bring innovative insights that can further hypothesis, concept and theory building. After this inductive phase researchers may validate potentially new findings with a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods.
**Figure 1** Intersectional Group Representation: A Research Design

*Phase 1: Who are the groups? What are their interests?*

**Induction:**
- **Semi-structured interviews**

**Interests**
- **Quantitative:** surveys to map who feels represented
- **Qualitative:** mini-publics or focus group interviews to understand feelings representation

**Groups**
- **Quantitative:** composition of parliament to count the number of MPs candidates
- **Qualitative:** interviews with MPs or voters to understand electoral participation

*Phase 2: Are groups and/or their interests represented?*

- **Formal**
  - Quantitative: statistical analysis of election lists to establish number of candidates
  - Qualitative: interviews with candidates or voters to understand electoral participation

- **Descriptive**
  - Quantitative: surveys to count to number of ‘acts’
  - Qualitative: process tracing or participant observation to understand the representation of interests

- **Substantial**
  - Quantitative: surveys to map who feels represented
  - Qualitative: mini-publics or focus group interviews to understand feelings representation

- **Symbolic**
  - Quantitative: statistical analysis of election lists to establish number of candidates
  - Qualitative: interviews with MPs or voters to understand electoral participation
Phase 1: Defining Intersectional Groups and their Interests

To study how identities interactively operate and define groups in specific contexts is not only complex but also highly subjective. This subjective dimension can be best captured by inductive research methods, such as semi-structured interviews with a relatively large sample. The size and the nature of the sample depends on the key focus of the respective study. For instance, a study on the representation of ‘visible minorities’ in a given national context could start with a representative sample of citizens who according to traditional categories belong to a certain group, such as blacks in the US or Moroccans in the Netherlands. The interviews with these respondents should reveal citizens’ definitions of groups and interests. This can be established by structuring the interviews along the following research questions:

1. To what extent and under which conditions do they identify with top-down categories
2. How do they self-identify?
3. Which identity or intersectional identity mix do they believe to be most relevant for political group representation?
4. What are according to them the interests of these groups?

This exercise should result in the construction of groups and their interests directing subsequent data collection in phase 2.
Phase 2: Analyzing Intersectional Group Representation

Phase 1 directs the analysis of formal, descriptive, substantive and/or symbolic representation. This may include a variety of quantitative and qualitative research methods. We will discuss these, thereby devoting more attention to the methods that are less common in representation studies.

Quantitative data is suitable to determine the level of formal and descriptive representation. Data on for example parties, voters, candidates behavior, the composition of candidate lists and elected assemblies are useful sources to map the degree to which the group as identified in phase 1 participates in elections as voters or candidates, and is present in elected assemblies. Such data is also beneficial to test explanatory hypotheses about, for instance, beneficial or unfavorable institutional contexts or the relation between these and other dimensions of representation. Additionally, it would be useful to apply inductive methods such as elite interviews with for instance selectors, candidates, voters or MPs to understand conditions that are specific to that group. These insights may generate new hypotheses to develop large-n research.

Traditional large N analysis of MPs’ behavior may indicate the level of substantive representation. Useful data include parliamentary questions, policy proposals an parliamentary speeches or of MPs attitudes. This will show which intersectional groups are well represented, which groups are not, and, through hypothesis testing, why.

The constructivist turn in representation studies calls for a specific kind of qualitative research. As, explained in the introduction, the represented and representative are both
actively constructed in the process of representation. It allows for a comparison between citizen’s views (phase 1) on the one hand, and representatives’ perception of which citizens and what interests they should represent on the other. Consequently, the outcome of this comparison indicates the quality of representation. High levels of divergence indicate bad quality of representation, democratic deficit. Whilst high levels of overlap indicate good quality of representation. This offers a new measure to assess the quality of democracy.

Participant observation is a fruitful method to capture representative’s perspectives on why they construct the represented and their interests the way they do (Crewe 2005; Fenno 1978). Participant observation implies that the researcher ‘hangs around’ as much as possible in parliamentary and other meetings where representation is taking place. The research tries to meet and talk to as many actors involved inside and outside of parliament as possible. Anchored in political ethnography, this fieldwork does not focus on cultural aspects, such as body language or habits and rituals, but on political games, network formation and lobbying. The general idea would be to become a part of the group driving the representative process to generate access to the actors, their information and perspective on their own representative behavior, as well as that of others. This enables researchers to study actors’ behavior and their decisions as it is happening.

To capture the constitutive dimension of substantive representation – the ways in which groups and their interests are constructed - Critical Frame Analysis is useful (Verloo 2005; Meier 2008). Critical Frame Analysis is predominantly used to analyze policy documents, but can also be applied in analyses of other kinds of texts, like interview
transcripts. The aim of Critical Frame Analysis is to identify the dominant interpretations of societal issues, problems and also group interests, so-called ‘frames’. The researcher analyses text through posing a set of ‘sensitizing questions’ that address three issues: the nature of the policy problem; who/what is causing it, and how it should be resolved. These questions guide and structure the analysis and the coding. This analysis enables the researcher to reveal the ‘interpretative schemes’ or frames. Mapping these interpretative schemes sheds light on the ways groups are constituted in the course of representation, on the way this evolves.

*Symbolic representation*, whether citizens feel represented, is the dimension of representation that is problematically under-studied. This is surprising since citizens’ satisfaction with representation remains the litmus test of democracy (Norris 1999). There is a long-standing research tradition concerning political trust, traditionally considered to be one of the most important resources for the stability of a political system (Almond and Verba 1963; Easton 1965). However, this has been insufficiently studied in relation to the extent and the way in which citizens are represented. Nonetheless, it is to be expected that citizens’ positive assessment representation increases their belief in the political system. Moreover, in the eye of the represented various dimensions of representation do not swing free from each other. In some contexts formalistic representation (having elected the representatives) or descriptive representation (representatives sharing the identity of the represented) is essential to citizens’ feelings of being represented. In other instances, substantive representation and the type of claims that are made more strongly incite the feeling of being represented (cf. Bird 2011).
Statistical analyses may very well measure and explain levels of symbolic representation. A more inductive qualitative approach could consider mini-publics. Mini-publics are a new method foremost used in deliberative democracy experiments and applied to the study of, for instance, preference (trans)formation and the quality of deliberation (Grönlund, Bächtiger and Setälä 2014). In these mini-publics the group included in the study is perceived as a microcosm of society. This method is suited for discovering views and assessments of phenomena at the group level. Since the participants in the discussions reflect on each other’s positions this will uncover a shared logic or a common view (Steward and Shamdasani 1991; Niemeyer 2011). The aim of the mini-publics is to identify to what extent and under which conditions intersectional groups feel adequately represented. During the discussions a moderator invites participants to respond to:

1. The narrative about the representative processes that concern them. Who did what, when, and how in representing them;
2. The way how they as a group and their interests have been constructed (based on Critical Frame Analysis) over the course of the representative process;
3. Their level of formal representation, such as participation in elections, as well as their descriptive representation.

Through their participation mini-publics’ participants become more informed about the political issue at hand than regular citizens. In that respect mini-publics are experiments; in real life, citizens are no so highly aware of the political representation process.
Conclusion

The constructivist and intersectional turn in scholarship on representation and in gender studies poses a major challenge to the study political group representation. Traditional categories that researchers use to study levels of representation do not reflect complex mixtures of identities that shape everyday politics. Therefore, we argue, citizens’ perspectives should become the starting point of representation research. The groups and interests they identify as in need of representation need to guide the further research steps. To establish this, we propose a two phase mixed-method research design. This research design enables scholars to assess and understand more sophisticatedly the over- and under-representation of groups.
References


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