

POLITICS SYMPOSIUM

The Good Representative 2.0

Why We Need to Return to the Ethics of Political Representation

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“A [democracy’s] prospects for survival is affected by whether actors normatively (that is, intrinsically) value democracy as a political regime.”

—Scott Mainwaring and Aníbal Pérez-Liñán (2003)

The survival or breakdown of democracies importantly depends on the beliefs and actions of our representatives. For democracies’ representatives cannot only suspend the Constitution, arrest the opposition, restrict the activities of the media, and rig elections; they also can bolster political extremists, determine how “competitive” elections are gerrymandered, mobilize xenophobic and racist populism, and degrade civil and political liberties. Even the refusal to denounce racist, fascist, and xenophobic groups can strengthen groups actively opposed to democratic institutions. Through their words, gestures, and even silences, representatives can construct the political identities of democratic citizens in hatred-filled and democratically divisive ways.¹ The performative function of representatives can undermine “the political realm as a distinct sphere of equals” (Thaa 2016). Even more devastating to the legitimacy of democratic governance, albeit perhaps less obviously, representatives simply can prioritize popular policies over democratic norms and commitments. They can destroy democratic institutions while allegedly acting in the name of “the people.” Bluntly stated, representatives can advance their careers by selling out democracies.

The rise of populist and xenophobic politics illustrates why it is crucial to have good representatives—that is, good democratic representatives. In *The Good Representative*, Dovi (2007) offered three criteria for identifying those actors who represent democratically: good democratic representatives are fair-minded, build critical trust, and are good gatekeepers. Good representatives should be evaluated by the impact of their activities on democratic institutions. This symposium

updates that understanding of good democratic representation in light of recent advancements in the empirical and theoretical literature. The question of good representation is not simply theoretical. Rather, the complexities and uncertainties facing democratic citizens point to the need to recognize and empirically investigate how representatives violate and advance important democratic norms.

The symposium specifically attends to the principle of political equality. A major theme of this symposium is how representation helps and harms those who are intersectionally marginalized and vulnerable. By bringing together political theorists and empirical political scientists, it explores how normative understandings can illuminate empirical analysis and how empirical findings should inform normative assessments. As the articles show, such an encounter between theoretical and empirical analysis is not only fruitful, but it also significantly shifts how we think about and investigate good representation.

WHAT IS REPRESENTATION?

The articles in this symposium share the notion that political representation is not simply a principal–agent relationship that is structured by formal elections (Urbinati and Warren 2008; Warren and Castiglione 2004).² To be sure, our representatives often are legislators, senators, and members of parliament, but they also are leaders of social movements, party members, journalists, and citizens who publicly speak out against injustices. One of the most important advancements in the literature on representation is its recognition of the need to study political behavior beyond formal representation. Pitkin’s (1967) classic account of representation needs updating in light of contemporary representative practices.

We also understand that representatives occupy various institutional positions and roles in democratic politics. They can be monitors, enforcers, reporters, and symbols. This expanded notion of representation recognizes that the representative’s role is not simply to respond to preconceived and already-existing interests and preferences. We concur with Saward’s (2010) insightful understanding of representation as claim-making, as follows:

A maker of representations (M) puts forward a subject (S) which stands for an object (O) which is related to a referent (R) and is offered to an audience (A).

Instead of presuming a preexisting set of interests of the represented that representatives “bring into” the political

arena, Saward's (2010) reconceptualization of representation underscored the constitutive aspects of representation. As a political subject, "the people" does not exist prior to its representation. It originates, instead, within claim-making processes through which representatives construct and select claims that reflect, appeal to, and—in turn—shape the values and norms of the audience. This conceptualization of

that practice. Representatives can galvanize in ways inconsistent with political liberties and political equality. They can dehumanize "others," for instance, by denouncing their rights as refugees, denying people's citizenship, or ridiculing their right to protest by "taking a knee." When identifying the interests and preferences of the people, representatives may awaken the desire to resent and dominate as opposed to rule

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The constitutive character of political representation gives new impetus to normative discussions. The insight that "the people" exist not before political representation but rather should be conceived as originating in exchanges between claim-makers and audiences has led scholars to abandon the traditional focus on preference congruence. As Sunstein (1991, 10) warned, it is impossible to evaluate representative practices based on standards that representatives helped to produce. Reflecting the loss of objective benchmarks for democratic representation, evaluations of representation have become closely knit to system-level conditions, or the extent to which citizens are institutionally empowered to judge their representatives.

Within this "systemic turn," scholars disagree about the extent to which normative evaluation should be left to the people. Saward (2010, 144–5), for instance, stressed how legitimacy is linked to claims that are perceived to be legitimate by "appropriate constituencies under reasonable conditions of judgment." Expanding on these conditions, Saward (2014, 734) argued that citizens' approval of the claims formulated in their names can be taken as proof of democratic representation only in contexts of pluralism and contestation and when alternative sources of information are available. These qualifications caused Disch (2015, 496) to critique Saward (2010) for renouncing his epistemological constructivist standpoint: he replaced the citizens' perspective with a "substantive snapshot" about how representative processes should be conducted and who should approve claims. Any prior specification of the constituents most appropriate, or entitled, to judge political representatives implies a retreat from the constructivist premise that the people—as a political subject capable of enforcing demands—gains its face and value only after and through representation.

THE NEED FOR REPRESENTATIVE ETHICS

This symposium explores how representation is not only constitutive of democratic practice but also how it can imperil

together and deliberate. By so doing, representatives can influence the capacities of the represented to mobilize around and advance certain claims. Stated differently, they feature as "critical actors" who shape the structures and substance of representative processes.

In light of the foregoing discussion, the "systemic turn" of contemporary representation theory—that is, the growing acceptance that evaluations of ethical representation should focus on system-level conditions—demands a critical intervention. We should ask (1) what is lost and gained from examining representation only at the level of the representative system, and (2) what escapes our analysis when we focus solely on conditions that enable citizens to evaluate their representatives?

Drawing on the insights and findings of this symposium's authors, it is clear that this systemic turn should give us pause. First, it tends to reduce the function of political representation to that of constitution or "people-making," thereby overlooking the ways in which representation also functions as gatekeeping, which is a mechanism of inclusion and selection in decision making (Castiglione 2012; Warren 2017). As Holm and Ojeda Castro (2018) remind us in their article, the inclusive design of deliberative and representative institutions can function to distract attention from the suffering and vulnerabilities of marginalized groups. Similarly, Junn and Sadhwani (2018) demonstrate how the electoral design of California's primaries impacts the diversity of elected officials. The lack of objective benchmarks for evaluating democratic representation, therefore, must not lead us to turn a "blind eye" to the impact of gatekeepers on our representative systems.

Second, the systemic turn risks obfuscating the impact of structural inequalities on the functioning of representative systems. The focus on the systemic conditions of people's capacity for judgment is premised on the assumption that individuals can act independently or become increasingly free from the social structures that, at least in part, define them. Yet, political scientists know that the ability to become free(er) of one's social structures and call them into question is unevenly distributed among people. Furthermore, when people speak up, the influence of their claims is conditional on their fit with prevailing stylistic and cultural repertoires (Williams 1998; Young 1989). When our democratic theories

fail to approach individuals as socially embedded selves and speak of them in overly generic terms, this not only limits the political effectiveness of these theories (i.e., their capacity to elicit democratic change) but also risks downplaying—and thereby rendering less contestable—the impact of structural inequalities. This concern about structural inequalities and their impact on representative processes is at the center of this symposium. It also explains why the authors, although

recommends structuring the processes of claim-making fairly as a precondition to ethical representatives. Having good representatives importantly depends on the institutional context. Similarly, Junn and Sadhwani (2018) reveal how the institutional design for primaries in California impacts the diversity of representatives.

Other contributions stress the harms incurred outside of formal claim-making processes. For instance, Dovi (2018)

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drawing on and contributing to broader debates on political representation, focus mainly on social-group representation.

Another qualification: we reject the notion that articulating standards for evaluating representatives or representative practices presumes or reifies essentialist conceptions of those represented. Although it is true that the identification of standards builds on the idea that citizens ultimately must make political judgments about their representatives, such an endeavor does not necessarily treat the identity, needs, and wants of citizens as given. As the various contributions to this symposium illustrate, the identification of normative standards is less related to defining a concrete set of interests that warrants representation than to clarifying the power relationships between those represented and their representatives, and among those represented themselves. In this sense, articulating standards becomes a way of identifying the standard violations and misuses of representatives' extensive powers (Rubenstein 2014). Because of our attention to contextualized power relations, our identification of standards also is compatible with Disch's (2015) citizens' perspective: we treat vulnerable groups (those worthy of scholarly attention) as contingent on context-specific power relations. Clearly, the identification of standards for good representatives is not the same as arguing that these standards should be applied in all circumstances. Neither does it remove the right of citizens to evaluate their representatives on their own terms (Dovi 2002).

PUTTING POWER AT THE CENTER

The articles in this symposium take different routes in their exploration of the meaning of ethical representation. They emphasize different aspects of representation, identify different ways of being vulnerable to representation and, consequently, suggest different ways of ethically representing others. By putting power at the center of their analyses (Severs, Celis, and Erzeel 2016), these articles offer various cautionary insights about the potential harms of representation. The first cautionary insight concerns how representative processes can exclude people at the same time that it includes others. Celis and Childs (2018) propose evaluating collective representative processes using three criteria: responsiveness, inclusiveness, and egalitarianism. In this way, their work

stresses the need for evaluating good representatives by how they promote accountability. In particular, good representatives foster the autonomy of those being represented and, thereby, their capacity to reject and endorse claims made by representatives. As a result, Dovi insists that evaluations of good representatives must look beyond their activities and claims and consider their impact on the represented.

Holm and Ojeda Castro (2018) show that inclusive institutional designs still can facilitate co-option and function to silence vulnerable and marginalized groups. Their study focuses on the Twitter thread #solidarityisforwhitewomen. Although Twitter is a deliberative context that seemingly lacks formal gatekeepers, they show how power dynamics prevented marginalized groups from articulating their claims. Although #solidarityisforwhitewomen sought to criticize and dismantle white women's privileges to define the feminist agenda, the architecture of Twitter (giving greater visibility to tweeters with a greater number of followers) paradoxically reinforced the visibility of white women who co-opted the media space by emphasizing how they were “listening.” Instead of sharing the criticism of black feminists, white feminist tweets dominated the thread. Holm and Ojeda Castro's work shows a tension among various criteria for evaluating representation: inclusion can be in tension with responsiveness.

Lombardo and Meier (2018) examine how political equality can be undercut through symbolic representation. They turn to the understudied symbolic dimension of political representation and demonstrate how public art, along with other public symbols (e.g., coins and flags), can reinforce white, masculinist, ableist norms. Symbols powerfully contribute to normalization processes and, in doing so, privilege the political identities of some groups at the expense of others. They argue that the inclusivity of the symbolic realm is pivotal: its emotive appeal to who and what “the people” is about lays the groundwork for all other dimensions of representation.

Its importance notwithstanding, inclusion—as contributions to this symposium caution—is not unequivocally good. Including historically marginalized groups in the central arenas of political representation often comes at the cost of essentializing group identities, potentially reinforcing within-group inequalities. The empowerment of certain

representatives and communities can come at the expense of others. This harm speaks most poignantly from Mendez's (2018) contribution about the representation of undocumented

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Latinos and Strolovitch and Crowder's (2018) analysis of LGBTQI representation.³ Mendez highlights the vulnerability of undocumented Latinos and demonstrates that horizontal mechanisms of accountability (i.e., between elected representatives and non-governmental organizations) are needed to mobilize (Latino) representatives to advocate the interests of undocumented Latinos.

Strolovitch and Crowder (2018) similarly suggest that the respectability politics of LGBTQI advocates can come at the price of marginalized subgroups—what Minow (1991) identified as the "dilemma of difference" and Cohen (1999) depicted as "secondary marginalization." Although demanding equal respect, the emphasis of LGBTQI advocates on sameness with majority groups does little to dismantle or disrupt prevailing systems of domination—to the detriment of groups that deviate most from the "standard" citizen.

Finally, as Severs and de Jong (2018) argue, inclusion also can be impaired by minorities' vulnerability to pressure to conform. Drawing on the literature about colonial cultural brokers, they demonstrate how contemporary ethnic-minority representatives serve as bridges, uniting yet also keeping social groups separate. Because they embody the symbolic boundaries routinely drawn up between social groups, minority representatives are well suited to transform the relationships between social groups to make them more equitable. At the same time, however, their presence in parliament is overly scrutinized and their integrity routinely called into question. This potentially causes them to abide by rather than dismantle the discourses that structure intergroup relationships on unequal terms.

Clearly, this symposium—although wide-ranging—does not exhaust the array of questions and debate on the meaning of and conditions for good representation. Rather, it starts a conversation about the ways to identify how representatives abuse their power as well as the types of institutional support and empowerment needed for ethical representation. These judgments are improved when empirical political science intersects with political theory. Consequently, the articles in this symposium provide an important foundation for future research.

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NOTES

1. On our view, democracy embraces plurality as opposed to visions of a "unified people." However, following Christiano's (1996) view that democratic institutions are necessary when citizens disagree, we maintain that democratic forms of governance enact fair ways to resolve conflicts constrained by democratic norms—for example, the protection of civil and political liberties for all citizens.
2. For a more detailed analysis and discussion of the meaning of representation, see Dovi (2017)
3. LGBTQI is the abbreviation for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer, and Intersex people.

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