

Hanna Pitkin's "Concept of Representation" Revisited

Introduction

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Four decades after publication, Hanna Pitkin's *The Concept of Representation* (1967), continues to resonate with scholars of representation and democratic performance. Many contemporary empirical and theoretical studies of politics begin and/or end with Pitkin's seminal taxonomy of representation (formal, symbolic, descriptive, and substantive representation);¹ her definitions of these different forms of representation; or her conceptualizations of the relationships between the representative and the represented.² This classic work still seems to provide some of the crucial tools and concepts for analyses and critiques that focus on the way in which and the extent to which policy decisions and deliberative processes relate to society.

This is very much the case for scholars concerned with the quality of democratic representation in general as well as with the specific representation of groups seen to be "underrepresented," such as race-

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1. Pitkin developed this taxonomy to map the different roles of elected representatives. Formal representation refers to the formal agreement between the representative and the represented, the process of authorization of the representative and accountability to the represented. Symbolic representation is established when people acknowledge the symbolic quality of an object or a person as constituting representation. Descriptive representation refers to what the representatives "look like"; who they are is what makes them representative. Substantive representation is established by what the representatives do, their acts for the issues, and interests of concern for the represented.

2. See, for instance, the debate concerning substantive representation in the *Critical Perspectives* of 2011's third issue of *Politics & Gender*, "The Meaning and Measurement of Women's Interests" (Schwindt-Bayer and Taylor-Robinson 2011). The fascinating debate between Andrew Rehfeld and Jane Mansbridge in the August 2011 volume of the *American Political Science Review* also addresses this crucial aspect of representation.

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ethnicity- and gender-based groups.³ These crucial issues of responsiveness, quality of democracy, and inclusiveness are at the heart of this Critical Perspectives. Moreover, the way Pitkin's taxonomy links the act of representation to policy outcomes and government action has brought the analysis of policy into the study of representation and in turn representation into policy analysis.⁴ The contributing authors represent this broad range of scholars who continue to use Pitkin's work on representation as an important touchstone.

Our goal here, however, is neither to review Pitkin's contributions to representation studies *in extenso*, nor to assess which elements of her theory are still applicable and which are in need of revision. Our approach is more forward looking and focused on today's salient puzzles. This collection of essays aims at pinpointing the key questions and perspectives on representation that scholars have arrived at through working with Pitkin's theoretical and conceptual toolkit in their own analyses. At issue is how scholars have used Pitkin's original thinking as a take-off point to engage with the newest theorizing on and analysis of representation and democratic performance, including key empirical and theoretical consideration of the representation of race, ethnicity, and gender.

The first pair of contributions unpacks the trinity "representation-inclusion-democracy" in the context of political theory. Indeed, it has become common place that democracy is primarily about high levels of inclusion in the formal/electoral, descriptive "standing for," and substantive "acting for" dimensions of representation. The contributions of Anne Phillips and Dario Castiglione point to the fact that post-Pitkin theories of representation have more strongly emphasized equality and inclusion as a *sine qua non* for democratic representation and also have paid more attention to "non-democratic" forms of representation. Phillips asserts that while scholars working on issues of underrepresentation and exclusion turn to Pitkin, structural inclusion in political representation is undervalued in Pitkin's study on representation.

A major difference between the feminist project and Pitkin's is that, for many feminist analysts, pronounced descriptive underrepresentation is unacceptable under any circumstances. Fair descriptive representation is, as politics and gender scholars have illustrated, not a sure route to

3. For a discussion of the conceptualization of gender and representation in current scholarship, see Celis (2008) and Childs and Lovenduski (2013).

4. Mazur (2002), for example, uses the concepts of descriptive and substantive representation to assess the dynamics and determinants of feminist policy formation in western postindustrial democracies.

substantive representation. It nevertheless has great symbolic value in that it is an indicator of full citizenship, of having a place in the social and political order. Hence, feminist concerns with representation transgress the boundaries of representation as set by Pitkin, who would maintain a strict separation between representation on the one hand and citizenship and participation, on the other. As Dario Castiglione's contribution shows, recent theories of representation have also moved beyond Pitkin, or better complemented her work, by placing an emphasis on informal representation by the non-elected outside of the traditional parliamentary setting as part of the processes of representation.⁵ Furthermore, he argues that political representation is conceived of as not only reflecting interests, but also as constructing them, giving rise to a "trustee-based" conception of the role of the representative.

The essays by Karen Celis, Karen Bird, and Carole Uhlaner share Castiglione's concern for the quality of the very processes of representation, a traditional issue in feminist representation studies (Celis 2008). In line with Pitkin, Celis, Bird, and Uhlaner do not limit their assessment of the quality of representation to descriptive representatives alone. Their contributions tie in substantive and symbolic dimensions of representation and point at responsiveness — realized or potential — and citizens' assessment of being represented as essential ingredients of representation. Karen Celis's essay is concerned with substantive representation and, more specifically, the extent to which representatives are responsive to women in society through public policy, a theme that cuts across all of the pieces. She contends that taking seriously the diversity among women and the divergent, complementary, and even competing claims about what is in the interest of women is a strong indicator of responsive substantive representation — in other words, policy decisions that represent the diversity of the interests of the represented.

According to Karen Bird, the most important question to be asked is whether citizens believe in representation; in other words, what makes representation credible? In contrast to Celis, who stresses only one dimension of representation (substantive representation), Bird focuses on the nexus of the multiple dimensions of representation that come together in complex configurations when the question is asked, under

5. For empirical work on representation outside of the legislative arena, such as through women's movements and women's policy agencies, see, for example, Weldon (2002) and McBride and Mazur (2010). Uhlaner's contribution to this Critical Perspectives also highlights the importance of the "non-elected" in the representation process.

what circumstances do citizens feel represented? She does this empirically in the case of “visible” minority groups in Canada through focus groups. Carole Uhlaner addresses that question as well in her empirical work on the United States. Her response points to the importance of potentiality (the potential readiness of representatives to respond to citizens) for citizens to feel that they have been represented, which is a precursor to their political participation. Her linking of participation and representation echoes the approach of Anne Phillips in this forum, who criticizes Pitkin for keeping the two processes separate.

Although descriptive representatives who “stand for” given groups — women, people of color, etc. — are not the first and only focus of the contributions in this Critical Perspectives, they do maintain a central role in group representation. Descriptive representatives might increase reflexivity and government’s substantive responsiveness according to Celis; in some contexts, though not in all, they are essential for citizens’ feelings of being represented according to Bird, and they remain a source of potential responsiveness from the viewpoint of the citizens as discussed by Uhlaner.

Based on a concise overview of race/ethnic representation studies, Michael Minta further investigates *how* descriptive representation leads to substantive representation in the case of Black and Latino interests in the U.S. Congress, thereby pointing to the role of racial group consciousness, identification, and organization. Given the overlap of this approach to the feminist work on women’s representation, Minta makes a plea for more synergy between the two research traditions.

Reflecting broader trends in feminist scholarship to examine intersectionality where gender-based phenomena — identities, discrimination, equality, and inequities — crosscut and intermingle with other vectors of identities and inequities, like race, ethnicity, class, or sexuality, this Critical Perspectives firmly places this new concept into the representation puzzle.⁶ In fact, all of the contributors, albeit to different degrees, address how multiple identities and interests get processed by systems of representation. Indeed, as Minta specifically stresses for gender and race issues, any future research agenda on representation needs to explore explicitly how intersectionality comes into play in the complex processes of representation, an issue that was not on the scientific radar when Pitkin wrote her classic work.

6. For more on intersectionality as an analytical concept, see, for example, Weldon (2008) and the special 2011 issue of *Political Research Quarterly* edited by Hancock and Simien.

Thus, in closing, these essays point to the resilience and continuing salience of Pitkin's thinking on representation, showing how it still stands at the center of theorizing about and studying the critical processes of democracy in terms of the represented, the representative, and democratic performance more broadly speaking.

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Representation and Inclusion

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In 1995, the fourth and most influential world conference on women delivered the Beijing Declaration, calling for "women's empowerment