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Toward an Integrated Perspective of Minority Representation: Views from Canada

Karen Bird, McMaster University

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While Hanna Pitkin's multifaceted conceptualization of political representation is well known and often cited, in practice, researchers still tend to examine each of her four main dimensions independently. The connective tissue and complex configurations of representation deserve more attention, for there is a serious risk of misspecification when one looks at a single, or even a pair of dimensions in isolation from the others (Eulau and Karps 1977; Schwindt-Bayer and Mishler 2005). With regard to minority representation, an integrated perspective brings into clearer focus dimensions of the concept that have been somewhat neglected. In particular, I argue that the symbolic and descriptive dimensions of minority representation are especially important in the Canadian context and should not be discounted as less meaningful than the substantive "acting for" dimension of representation. Following Pitkin, I also emphasize that much depends on the formalistic dimension of representation.

My discussion of these issues is based on interviews conducted with groups of adult citizens of Chinese and of South Asian background, all of whom are residents of the metropolitan Greater Toronto Area (GTA).[1] Focus groups with citizens prove particularly useful for understanding

1. Focus group interviews were conducted between December 2009 and January 2011. Groups consisted of eight to ten participants from the same ethnic community but were otherwise

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minority representation. Citizens surely have a different viewpoint on political representation than Members of Parliament (MPs). But it is no less authoritative an account, for citizens and MPs are equally crucial agents in the representative relationship. And while we have some understanding of the complexity of minority representation in terms of the legislative and constituency work of MPs (e.g., Fenno 2003; Swain 2006), there has been less attention to the multifaceted experiences and feelings of representation from the perspective of minority citizens. Sample surveys of minority populations have been useful for hypothesis-testing various effects of having a minority representative, including implications for individual voting behavior and public trust (e.g., Banducci, Donovan, and Karp 2004; Pew Research Center 2010; Tate 2004). But this method is poorly adapted to addressing the multidimensional meaning of minority representation from the perspective of citizens.[2]

My interviews provide illuminating insights into how minority representation is experienced in Canada. First and foremost, it is clear that modes of minority representation are contingent on the formal rules and arrangements that govern the political system. While certainly not political experts, the participants in my focus groups demonstrated a basic understanding of politics in Canada, and it is this understanding that undergirds their expectations and evaluations of representational dynamics. This was especially evident in discussions concerning what Pitkin calls the "acting for" component of representation.

Overall, discussants saw a limited scope for this element of representation in Canada. They expressed frustration at the "lack of connection" between the constituent and the MP. A typical complaint was: "They care about their party's high command. They care about winning the election. They don't care about the people." But they conceded that this is a normal product of Canada's political system. As one person explained, "It is the nature of politics and power in Canada. Unlike the U.S. where you have to face election to win your seat, in Canada the party elects you." One discussant explained that "MPs are mostly dominated by their party leaders." Another conceded, "I want them to listen but, in the end, they have to vote the party line, otherwise

heterogeneous (in age, sex, political interest, etc.). Interviews were conducted in English or Mandarin. For details, see Bird (2011).

2. We must be cautious in drawing inferences from focus groups. If the participants are more politically integrated than average citizens, then this could result in more positive views of representation.

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the parliamentary system will not work." Even if the formal rules were not explicitly described, these comments reflect the fundamentals of political life in Canada's Westminster-style parliamentary system — including conventions such as party discipline and cabinet solidarity, party- and leader-centered electoral politics, and the minimal influence of local MPs over legislative outcomes. Such arrangements inhibit "acting for" mandate-style representation insofar as an MP can rarely obey the instructions of the constituent-voters in the legislative arena. Constituency influence is not entirely irrelevant (Docherty 1997; Soroka, Penner, and Blidook 2009), but it is a truncated part of the representative relationship in Canada.

Many of the focus group participants lived in multicultural electoral districts (in some ridings in the GTA, as many as 85% of the population are visible minorities). Yet this does not alter fundamentally their expectations of representation. Though participants recognized that "we are a formidable vote bank," they were nevertheless uneasy about the idea that their MP should be bound by what the constituents want — that is, that they should follow a strict mandate style of representation. Rather than ask whether an MP reflects ethnic minority interests through legislative action, they tended to evaluate the quality of their representation along other dimensions.

One element that received considerable attention was the personal integrity of MPs. The emphasis on integrity and trust makes sense when we seek, as Pitkin does, a careful middle position in the mandate-independence controversy — where "[n]either 'follow their wishes' nor 'ignore their wishes' will do" (1967, 166). But among visible minority citizens who may have voted for a same-ethnic MP, there appear to be particular concerns with respect to integrity. This became apparent in conversations about a former South Asian MP who had crossed the floor from the Liberals to the Conservatives. Participants were unanimous in their criticism of this MP as a person without integrity: "You just don't change your whole belief system overnight!" Another explained, "I question his principles. I think someone who is representing me should not be flaky on his principles." Floor-crossing by any member gives rise to questions of principle versus opportunism, and whether the MP still embodies the voters' choice. But among discussants there was an added sense that this MP played on and betrayed the trust of his own ethnic group: "He is frowned upon by the community — his own community and Pakistani community in that riding. They are very disappointed. They felt like they wasted their vote." And this failure of integrity was

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seen as posing real harm to the community: "Overall, what happened is all South Asians in the political area are looked at as a bunch of opportunists."

In the United States, a congressperson's policy responsiveness to his or her constituents is often viewed as the key dimension of effective minority representation (e.g., Hero and Tolbert 1995). Among minority citizens in Canada, the information giving, talking, and deliberating elements that are associated with descriptive representation seem more important. Consistent with Pitkin (1967, 63), "[w]hat matters is being present, being heard; that is representation." For example, one participant suggested "an MP with a Chinese background could explain this cultural heritage to westerners and serve as a bridge to communicate differences... [he or she] could bring some explanations to the mainstream society." Another, discussing concerns over Canada's designation of the Tamil Tigers as a terrorist group, noted that "an MP from our [Tamil] community will bring nuance to the issue. It will not be straight from the party line." Another made especially clear that effective minority representation depended on the capacity of the MP to bring her consultations with the ethnic community to bear in party deliberations: "Of course everybody hopes those town hall meetings are sincere. But to me, the most important in pushing further upward is whether the party includes this MP in the team. If not, if they play this candidate as just a pawn... this is insulting to me." Participants did not assume a simple correspondence between descriptive and substantive representation along this information-giving dimension. Rather, they discussed and compared ethnic minority MPs who they thought met these expectations and those who did not. Many discussants felt that it was less important whether the MP was a member of an ethnic minority and more important whether the MP spoke the language of the ethnic community in question. They argued that if an MP understood the language(s) of minority constituents, then it meant that a wider range of them would have their views heard. As we see below, an MP's ability to address a community in its language can also be an important symbolic issue.

Along with the descriptive-communicative dimension, focus group discussions shed light on the key symbolic function of representation within the Canadian political system. The role of symbolism within the complex structure of minority representation has been somewhat overlooked and undertheorized. This is true of Pitkin, who was troubled by the role of symbols in fascist leadership techniques, but especially of

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empirical research.[3] Focus group participants talked about and assessed several examples of symbolic representation enacted by minority and non-minority MPs. For example, a non-minority MP for a riding with a large Tamil population was seen as having “a song and dance routine” that he performed for that community: “You can see right through it. He has one routine where he brings the Charter of Rights and Freedoms in Tamil, and he makes a big show about it. But it’s not a deep understanding or articulation.” Discussants found greater credibility in the symbolic performances of another non-minority MP: “You can see, when Jack Layton really wants to get the Chinese community, he will say something in Chinese to really show he’s not acting.” Another discussion focused on the value of the government’s apology for the historic Komagata Maru incident.[4] There was some skepticism about the credibility of this symbolic gesture, though, because it was not delivered from the floor of the House of Commons.

Whether a symbolic representation of minority political inclusion is meaningful depends to some degree on the rules that govern the political system. Consider the formalistic rules of representation in Canada and the United States. Because the U.S. president is formally the head of state (and not merely of government), and because he is voted in by the people, the election of Barack Obama was much more than an achievement in descriptive representation. It was a hugely symbolic event signifying an important step toward the resolution of the country’s troubled history of racial inequality. The election of a visible minority as Canadian prime minister would not have the same symbolic effect, in part because it is the monarch who formally embodies the state, and in part because the PM is not chosen directly by the voters, but is rather the leader of the party that holds the most seats in Parliament. Consider also the parliamentary rules regarding majority governments in Canada. Given that opposition parties have little hope of defeating a government bill, they are prone to engage more heavily in symbolic representation.[5] Yet we should be cautious in discounting

3. Empirically, symbolic representation tends to be operationalized quite narrowly as the potential for increased trust among group members once more of their kind are in elected office.

4. In May 1914, the 376 passengers of the Indian ship *Komagata Maru* were denied entry into Canada despite their being citizens of the commonwealth. The vessel sat in harbor for two months before steaming back to Calcutta. It was met by police, and 20 people (all Sikhs) were killed as they disembarked.

5. A striking example of symbolic minority representation can be seen in Liberal opposition tactics around Bill C-50, introduced in June 2009 by the then minority Conservative government. While technically a budget implementation bill, the measure contained significant reforms to immigration

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symbolic representation as less meaningful than the substantive "acting for" dimension of representation. Quite the opposite, it is a crucial means for securing the representational relationship in instances where responsiveness in terms of policy outcomes is compromised by institutional and party rules.

My main purpose in this essay has been to show how a particular political system gives rise to certain repertoires of minority representation. Against the general current of empirical research in this domain, which tends to treat one dimension of representation as more important than another, I have focused more on how the elements work together, often in compensatory fashion. I have also delved into the less examined citizen end of the representational nexus. Looking forward, further case studies and comparative work along these lines can contribute to a deeper understanding of the configurations of representation across different political contexts and of the circumstances in which ethnic minorities (as well as women) feel represented.

Karen Bird is Associate Professor of Political Science at McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario, Canada: kbird@mcmaster.ca

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policy. Under Canadian parliamentary rules, the defeat of a budget bill means that government has lost the confidence of Parliament, thus triggering an election. Opposition Liberals were not keen to face an election, given their weak standing in the polls. So, while the Liberals denounced the proposal vigorously in the House, their MPs refrained from voting — all except for about a dozen representing some of Canada's most ethnically diverse ridings. These MPs *did* vote against the bill and furthermore arranged press releases emphasizing that they had voted against Bill C-50 on the grounds of its immigration measures. Of course, these votes had no impact on the policy decision. They were presumably coordinated by the Liberal whip, who could permit only a limited number of such votes and still avoid defeating the government.

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Potentiality and Representation: The Link between Descriptive Representation and Participation in the United States

Carole J. Uhlaner, University of California–Irvine

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One crucial element of Hanna Pitkin's (1967) definition of political representation has been relatively neglected in the voluminous literature her work has inspired. That element is what I will refer to as *potentiality*, the subjunctive idea that to be considered represented, citizens must feel that someone *would* defend their interests if those interests *were* threatened. Attention to potentiality provides a reason to value descriptive representation. Second, it illuminates the representation provided by nonelected leaders and social groups. Third, it clarifies the reciprocal links between participation and representation: persons who are participatory have better grounds to believe that their interests will be protected, and those who have such a belief participate more. Evidence to support this claimed relationship between participation and representation is presented for the U.S. case.

Potentiality appears toward the end of Pitkin's concluding, synthetic discussion of representation. Representation is a function provided by elites for the mass public, a function that requires the two "great moods" of form (institutions, rules) and substance (intentions, purpose).

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