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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Political representation from the people's perspective: the problem-solving principal–agent partnership

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Abstract

Combining key elements of classical and constructivist approaches to representation, this article suggests a novel reconceptualisation of political representation. Developed through participatory agency research with people in socio-economically difficult situations and anchored in people's lived experiences and sense-making processes, the representative relationship is redefined as a pragmatic and solution-oriented partnership between representatives and the represented. Expanding the classical Pitkinian model, it enables representatives to be better informed about how to address peoples' concerns. In doing so, it advances the notion of dynamic political representation, where the represented are not passive principals but active partners in decision-making. While we uphold the classical principle of acting in the interests of the represented, we reconceptualise these interests as dynamic and continuously evolving – a perspective consistent with constructivist thought. This research aligns with scholarly calls to rethink representation and revise the roles of the representatives and the represented, fostering meaningful and effective engagement. Our empirical findings highlight the urgency of reform for people in socio-economically difficult situations and underscores the broader relevance of these insights, in a context of increasing legitimacy deficits and rising discontent with current modes of representation in contemporary democracies.

Keywords: Representation; democratic reform; political theory; participatory research; citizens's perspective

Introduction

Increasing scepticism about elected representatives and their ability to represent people has been well documented (Celis et al., 2021; Dupuy & Van Ingelgom, 2023; Goetz, & Martinsen, 2021; Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2002; Jørgensen et al., 2022; Knops et al., 2024; Pilet et al., 2020; van Wessel, 2009; Vieten, 2020). More specifically, representatives are no longer perceived to be 'acting in the interests of the represented'; a principle Pitkin considers critical to representation (1967: pp. 119–121). In this classical approach, representation requires representatives to be responsive to the interests, the needs, and desires of the represented (see also: Elster, 1999: pp. 254-255; Pitkin, 1967: pp. 155, 162, 209-210, 213; Wolkenstein, 2021: p. 7). The 'direction of representation' goes from the people to the politicians: the people are the principals who have political interests, and elected representatives are their agents who act upon those interests (Pitkin, 1967). In contrast, constructivist approaches to representation underscore how responsiveness can also be established without the interests of the represented 'starting up' representation and without representatives being responsive agents vis-à-vis a principal (Montanaro, 2017: pp. 3-4; Severs, 2010: p. 412; Urbinati & Warren, 2008: pp. 396, 389). Saward,

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a key theorist of the constructivist strand, contends that representation should be understood as a creative and performative process. In this respect, both the represented and their interests are constructed by elected and non-elected 'representative claimants', whose claim making portrays the represented and their interests as '*this or that*', and as having *'this or that set of interests*' (Disch, 2021; Montanaro, 2017; Rai et al., 2021; Saward, 2006). Responsive representation in this view is established when the represented accept the claims made and when they are not 'read back' or rejected (Saward, 2006: pp. 301–303, 314-315; Rai et al., 2021).

Representation currently falls short of both traditional and constructivist perspectives and their respective expectations. Representatives do not meet the obligation to act upon citizens' interests in the Pitkinian sense, nor in making convincing claims that positively resonate with citizens *qua* Saward. As a result, citizens are increasingly questioning both the outcomes and processes of representation. These concerns fuel demands for better, more effective representation and for creating the necessary conditions that foster a stronger, more responsive, and improved relationship between representatives and the citizenry (De Mulder, 2023; Dupuy & Van Ingelgom, 2023; Neblo et al., 2018; Rosanvallon, 2011; Weinberg, 2023;). Put differently, public grievances present more than simple dissatisfaction; they challenge the very foundations and configuration of the representative relationship. That said, studies on the feelings of being non- or mis-represented are still scarce (see eg Holmberg, 2020; De Mulder, 2023). This multidimensional crisis of representative democracy compels scholars and practitioners of democracy not only to describe and explain the shortcomings of political representation but to also engage in conceptual (re)thinking geared towards improving democracy (Merkel, 2019; Saward, 2021).

This contribution responds to the latter call and builds from a rich scholarship that reconfigures the role of the represented and highlights meaningful involvement, consultation, and partnership with citizens. We are not the first to follow this trajectory, but in contrast to other scholarship (eg Mansbridge, 2017; Neblo et al., 2018; Rosanvallon, 2011), our reconceptualisation of the representative relationship is more transformative. Grounded in 'thick' empirical data from participatory research (Geertz, 1973), we attribute significantly greater agency to the knowledge of the represented as co-creators of representation and for generating legitimacy. Our reconceptualisation is done *with* 'the people',[1] and more precisely with those most affected by representative inadequacies. We reconfigure the representative relationship by answering simple, nonetheless significant, questions: What kind of representation do people want? What is the nature of the representative relationship they require? By firmly grounding our reconceptualisation in how people themselves experience, perceive, and understand representation, the shortcomings they identify, and the changes they desire, we augment its capacity to address the dissatisfaction and lack of legitimacy plaguing our current representative democracies. More precisely, we reconceptualise the representative relationship with people in socio-economically difficult situations who we conceive of as constituting both a typical and a critical case study: typical of the (growing numbers of) socio-economically challenged people and critical with regard to experiences with the limitations of representation and the urgency for change, which is magnified by this group, and widely shared beyond.

Diverging from observations made elsewhere (Delli Carpini, 2000; Hague & Harrop, 2013; Inglehart & Welzel, 2010; Neuman, 1986), our extensive participatory agency research (PAR)[2]

[1]As we make clear in the methodological section, we employ participants' terminology and definitions. 'The people' in this contribution does not refer to 'the majority' but to 'all those who are represented, not in power or part of the political establishment, government, or politicians.' Participants suggested using the term 'people' rather than 'citizens' because it emphasises inclusivity by acknowledging that not all members of society are recognized or treated as full citizens (Amara-Hammou, 2023; in press).

[2]This approach is rooted in action research but places an even stronger emphasis on participants' agency and input throughout the creation of research knowledge. For a more detailed account on the developed approach, see Amara-Hammou (2023, doctoral dissertation).

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conducted with people in socio-economically difficult situations in Brussels shows they care deeply about representative democracy. While the participants fully subscribe to the lack of responsiveness noted above, they still regarded elected officials as *their* representatives, whose job it is to act in the people's interests. Indeed, rather than dismissing them, participants desired a 'deeper' relationship with their representatives. Employing abductive analysis, we re-conceptualise this desired relationship as a 'problem-solving principal-agent partnership'. It is firmly anchored in the principal–agent tradition as described by Pitkin. People's problems are central, and representatives' principal task is to respond to them, and moreover to solve them. People reject the constructivist idea that representation can start with representatives making claims about and for them; instead, they emphasise that the represented are *the* authoritative principal. This suggests that rejecting elements of the classical representative relationship after the constructivist turn may have been too hasty and that a renewed consideration of both holds relevance for addressing current dissatisfaction(s). However, our conceptualisation is not a 'simple return' to Pitkin's model. We envisage representation as more than a 'transmission belt' that once set in motion leaves no agency for either the represented or the representative.[3] Rather, it requires responsiveness from representatives that is not merely based on intent but on tangible actions aimed at addressing real problems, whereby both the represented and their representatives engage as active partners.

Our abductive analysis reveals that participants thought the principal–agent relationship should acknowledge the importance of practices beyond the formal political structure. This aligns with the constructivist critique that, in changing societies where not all social groups are equally represented, elections alone are insufficient for full authorisation. Participants suggested that those with lived experience — those facing real societal problems requiring political resolution — should be involved in the representational process. In some cases, they proposed that representatives conduct 'fieldwork' to better understand their needs. This demonstrates that interests are by no means static, nor or easily recognisable, and require flexible and evolving forms of engagement.

It is worth noting that the problem-solving nexus is central to the reappreciation of the principal–agent model because, for our participants, there is no representation if problems are not solved. Representation is not an abstract ideal—it is intrinsically linked to the practical solutions of real-life issues. Moreover, participants understood that some problems cannot be resolved on an individual basis and require political resolution. This pragmatic understanding of the power structures in place makes them acutely aware that representatives hold the decisive decision-making power to effect change, whereas they are in vulnerable positions, deliberately leading them to prioritise a principal–agent model that offers the most viable pathway to solutions. This underpins their prioritisation of a model of representation that starts with their problems rather than with the claims of representatives.

The next section discusses the epistemological prioritisation of the perspectives of people in socio-economically difficult situations for our reconceptualisation and theory-building efforts, the PAR it necessitated, and our abductive approach to qualitative data analysis. Thereafter, the discussion of our findings is organised around the participants' understandings of the 'what', 'who', and 'how' of the representative relationship. The final section presents the abductive theory-building from the people's perspective to generate our novel conceptualisation of political representation.

Methods

People in socio-economically difficult situations in Brussels as a typical and critical case study

Our reconceptualisation of representation is derived from a study undertaken with people in socio-economically difficult situations, ie members of society that generally benefit little from

[3]We are grateful to an anonymous reviewer from a different context for this suggestion.

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representative politics, both in descriptive and substantive terms (Dovi, 2002; Phillips, 2019; Williams, 2000). The denomination 'in socio-economically difficult situations' was defined and is owned and preferred by the research participants, in preference over eg 'marginalised' or 'poor'. Similarly, the term 'people' was favoured over 'citizens', reflecting participants' experiences of neither being recognised nor treated as citizens. According to participants, the alternative denomination was more appropriate because it avoids being 'typecast' or described merely as members of a specific group. This mattered greatly to participants, who sought a term that honours their individuality while acknowledging their commonalities, without imposing labels they did not choose. Consequently, the denomination can intentionally represent a diverse range of group members, without applying specific labels. It marks a shift *away* from essentialising people in terms of a socio-economic identity and *toward* isolating the socio-economic characteristics of the typical situations in which people find themselves.

The 126 participants[4] included in our research (see online Appendix 1 for a detailed overview) all lived in Brussels and faced similar yet diverse socio-economic challenges, often engaging initially through collaboration with 28 local social organisations and action groups[5]. It bears mentioning that in the past five years, nearly 40 percent of residents in the Brussels-Capital Region face severe socio-economic challenges (Statbel, 2025), with poverty and social exclusion highly concentrated in certain municipalities and neighbourhoods, such as Anderlecht, Bruxelles-ville, Laken, Molenbeek, Schaerbeek, St-Gilles, and St-Josse. As the administrative hub of EU decision-making, Brussels exemplifies the pattern seen in many European cities, where socio-economic disadvantage is geographically clustered (Nieuwenhuis, et al., 2020; Van Hamme, et al., 2016). Most of the participants lived in the aforementioned municipalities. They included: women, sometimes single mothers, oftentimes with a migration background and commonly residing in social housing units; men with a migration background, single white men, often residing in social housing units; men and very exceptionally women without housing and/or legal documentation; youngsters, in particular students; and seniors.

Confronting existential challenges related to housing, education, health, welfare services, and many other societal inequalities on a day-to-day basis, the participants are arguably more aware of and familiar with the limits of representative democracy than those in fortunate societal positions, who encounter significantly fewer difficulties and have the privilege of being able 'to look the other way' (Harding, 1992: pp. 448, 454; Wylie, 2003: pp. 28-29). In line with standpoint theories, this contribution critically rethinks the representative relationship by building from the socially situated knowledge of people in socio-economically difficult situations that have been excluded or discriminated against. People in socio-economically difficult positions are also more likely to raise critical questions, as their unfavourable societal

[4]The count includes all individuals who were engaged in the research, from those spoken to only once to those involved in long-term co-construction. The latter constituted the majority. This count reflects participants' concern that people in difficult situations are under-recognized when contributing to and sometimes even exploited by academic research. Participants stressed that anyone who contributes, even minimally, deserves acknowledgment, similar to the recognition academic researchers seek. The three-year research period spanned the COVID-19 pandemic, which impacted participation and turnover rates within the social organisations involved: some participants became more engaged, while others chose to leave. Despite these challenges, the participatory agency research approach fostered extensive engagement and collaboration, which continues beyond the research period.

[5]We collaborated with organisations in the poorer areas of Brussels, known as the '*croissant pauvre*', including: DoucheFLUX in Anderlecht, which offers support to individuals experiencing homelessness and lacking legal documentation; Foyer, working with women and youth in Molenbeek and the Roma community; Sunchild in Schaerbeek, supporting families in need with children needing medical and disability assistance; and the federal service Experts by Experience in Poverty and Social Exclusion. The primary action group worked with is the Syndicat des Immenses (SDI), which stands for 'Individu dans une Merde Matérielle Énorme mais Non Sans Exigences' ('individual in a huge, material difficult situation but not without demands'). SDI fights against homelessness by organising weekly meetings and monthly public awareness and political actions (Amara-Hammou, 2023; in press).

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position forces them to understand how society as a whole operates unfairly and prejudiciously (Collins, 2022; Harding, 1995, 2004; Hesse-Biber, 2013; Smith, 2005). Rather than affecting people at the margins and on a random individual level, such discriminatory experiences occupy the heart of society (Harding, 2009, 1992).

As mentioned, we regard the experiences, insights, and situated knowledge about representation from the people in socio-economically difficult situations who participated in our research as both *typical* and *critical*. The link between socio-economic disadvantage and dissatisfaction with democracy is well documented (Ceka & Magalhães, 2016, 2020; Miscoiu & Gherghina, 2021; Talukder & Pilet, 2021; van der Does et al., 2024). Our findings can thus be considered as reflective or *typical* of the (growing numbers of) socio-economically challenged people across European countries and cities, particularly in gentrified and socio-economically unequal areas (Clerval & Van Criekingen, 2022; Van Criekingen, 2013). The experience of representatives' unresponsiveness is arguably also not confined to those in challenging socio-economical situations. Feelings of being unheard, dismissed, and disconnected from elected representatives are widespread (Costa, 2021; De Mulder, 2023; Dupuy & Van Ingelgom, 2023; Knops, 2023; Knops et al., 2024; Mayer, 2015; Rosanvallon, 2008). The limitations of representation and the indisputable urgency for change are not limited to, yet at the same time particularly pronounced in our group; it needs therefore not only to be considered as a typical case but also a *critical* one. Being both a typical and critical case offers robust analytical traction allowing for our concept building and revisiting objective.

Furthermore, our study highlights two other perceptions of representative politics that are strongly pronounced in the group included in our study, but also shared in wider society. First, there is the desire for a more subjective approach that centres people's everyday lives and feelings about politics (De Mulder, 2023; Rosanvallon, 2021; Weinberg, 2023; White, 2011); many want the 'political to be personal' to a greater extent than is the case today. Relatedly, there is a widespread preference for pragmatic considerations over ideological ones in the realm of representation (Costa, 2021; Dupuy & Van Ingelgom, 2023; Rosanvallon, 2021; Werner, 2020). Reconceptualising the representative relationship in a manner that responds to dissatisfaction with representation, address the desire to centre the people, and promote pragmatism in politics could then serve the wider population.

Data collection: participatory agency research

People in socio-economically difficult situations are as distrustful of researchers and academia as they are of politicians and democratic institutions. If they were going to engage with the project, they demanded a decisive input into the research design and a guiding hand in the research process. In response, a PAR design[6] was adopted, underpinned by the premise that those who are most impacted by societal inequities should be the protagonists. Similar to aspects of action research, in PAR, participants take the lead, 'own' the research, and are its primary beneficiaries (Gaventa et al., 1991; McTaggart, 1997). However, their agency and input during the research design and knowledge production process are emphasised even more strongly. Minimally, it is to be piloted by, or conducted *with* and *for* participants (Gaventa et al., 1991; McTaggart, 1997; Reason & Bradbury, 2007; Stoecker & Falcón, 2022).

In our research, PAR involved a joint endeavour between academic researchers and people in socio-economically difficult situations from the city of Brussels from September 2018 until November 2021. The research conditions, process, and goals were determined together (Borda, 2013; Lewin, 1946; McTaggart, 2003; Reason & Bradbury, 2007). A key condition was

[6]This methodological section offers a brief overview of the developed approach and collaboration with participants. For a more comprehensive and detailed account, see Amara-Hammou (2023, doctoral dissertation).

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that the researcher[7] conducted extensive field[8] and volunteer work before approaching people with (political) questions. She attended educational, social, activist, and recreational activities and various meetings of social organisations and action groups. In doing so, 'recruiting' research participants was avoided. Instead, more informal, spontaneous, respectful, and voluntary interaction was pursued, facilitated by social organisations that provided a space for conversations and discussions about ethical considerations. Participants were thus given the opportunity to decide if participating in our research was purposeful to them and to assess the researcher's methodological validity. Subsequently, great emphasis was also placed on using appropriate, agreed upon terminology and referencing styles. This ensured that the terminology was consistent with people's definitions and language, while also being ethically valid and verifiable by participants. The PAR process was marked by its increasing ownership by the participants, including a key group of ten participants.[9] Their engagement informed data collection, analysis, especially through setting up analytical talks following conversations and thematic coding development and interpretation (see next section), and output. The research goals included meaningful results for the participants, most importantly a co-constructed seminar which centred on participants' knowledge of political representation,[10] their recommendations, and material support for social organisations in participants' neighbourhoods.

Three qualitative methods were used to engage with participants on the topic of political representation: participatory observation, individual interviews, and focus groups. These methods, which the participants preferred to refer to as sit-ins, conversations, and group discussions permitted insight into participants' political sense-making processes (Creswell, 2014: pp. 234–245, 261; Holliday, 2007: p. 16; Ormston et al., 2014: p. 13) and facilitated bottom up theory building. However, their non-directive and non-binary nature (Duchesne, 1996: pp. 190-191; Duchesne & Haegel, 2004: pp. 73–74; Payne & Payne, 2004: p. 129; Van Ingelgom, 2020: pp. 1201–1203) also implied that every conversation was different and not determined by rigid research questions[11]. Instead, sit-ins (43), conversations (63), and group discussions (19) generally focused on the political topics brought up by participants or questions they picked up on and wanted to discuss further. Because part of the data collection took place during the COVID-19 pandemic[12], some of the ongoing conversations with participants were continued by telephone (77).

[7]It should be noted that the first author conducted the participatory-action-oriented fieldwork as part of her PhD dissertation; the co-authors were the PhD supervisors.

[8]The term 'fieldwork' is used cautiously due to its associations with exotification and objectification (Blommaert & Jie, 2020; Powdermaker, 1968; Said, 1978; Seymour-Smith, 1986). Nonetheless, participants emphasised its significance as a 'learning process' and advocated for its use. With respect to our research, we consider the field to be the various Brussels neighbourhoods, and more specifically the social organisations, where we met and talked with people in socio-economically difficult situations, and who concomitantly became participants in the research.

[9]The (pseudo) names of key participants are indicated in bold in the online Appendices. While these participants helped establish a foundation for more rigorous participant involvement in data collection, analysis, output and ethics, other participants were not excluded and were consulted and involved too, their suggestions were frequently followed up on. However, the key participants were more involved in the organising of co-construction activities and available for long-term collaboration.

[10]After a two-year collaboration with participants, and at their request, the seminar was held at the university on October 22nd, 2021. Consistent with their wishes, the seminar facilitated an interactive dialogue between people in socio-economically difficult situations and politicians, academics, and social workers.

[11]Initially, a questionnaire was used, which can be found in Appendix 2. However, it later evolved into a working document for exploring academic and experiential perspectives. It was subsequently employed as a tool to differentiate, clarify, and gain insights into various academic and lived experience viewpoints. In general, participants took the lead during conversation and discussed the issues they identified as critical for better representation.

[12]The COVID-19 pandemic refers to the contagious disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus that spread around the world from March 11, 2020 (WHO, 2023). To prevent the further spread of the virus and reduce the high number of infections and deaths, the Belgian government took strict measures in 2020: from a mandatory quarantine to an overall lockdown of various

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Data analysis: abductive and participatory analysis

To extend our participatory agency approach to all facets of the research, methodological insights were also used for theory building purposes. This means that, building on Borda's emphasis that research is about connecting and interweaving theory and practice (2013), the knowledge gained from conducting and practising research has been used to develop theoretical ideas.

'Analytical talks' with key participants informed the data analysis. During these talks, the researcher asked questions about matters she did not understand, to elicit key participants' thoughts on how we ought to interpret what was said. Key participants simultaneously shared their own reflections and questions, with respect to data-analysis and on-going research activities. Working in this manner made it possible to engage in profound and thorough discussions to develop preliminary insights to guide further analyses. To treat participants as research subjects (not objects) and respect the integrity and singularity of each participant equally during the data analysis, we adopted a thematic idiographic or individual focus (Smith & Shinebourne, 2012: p. 197). We centralised our focus on what individual participants had said about political representation, and then investigated how this connected to their personal experiences. In this respect, participants raised matters beyond their own lives, discussing what other members of society experience, the organisation of society and collective and structural problems.

Participatory analysis was combined with an abductive approach to underpin the concept building efforts. Abductive analysis involves an iterative process of connecting striking empirical observations to academically informed theoretical ideas (Vila-Henninger et al., 2024; Edwards et al., 2021: p. 1276; Timmermans & Tavory, 2022: pp. 15–16). Significantly, it does not exclude deductive or inductive reasoning (Peirce, 1955; Tavory & Timmermans, 2014; Vila-Henninger et al., 2024). Embracing what Timmermans and Tavory call the abductive analysis' defamiliarisation phase, we first looked at what seemed 'odd' about our observations (2022: p. 57), 'interrupting' our usual academic thought processes (Timmermans & Tavory, 2022: p. 57), and focusing on those that diverged and did not dovetail with our theoretical expectations. Next, we conducted a thematic coding, to address the unexpected findings and isolate pattern categories and codes (see Appendix 3). The coding identified three main pattern categories that referred to the 'what', 'who', and 'how' of political representation: representation as problem solving; elected representatives as problem solvers; and the represented as partners. Each pattern category is further divided into subdimensions identified through more specific codes. For example, the pattern category of 'elected representatives as problem solvers' contains the following codes: 'Politicians', 'Power', and 'Solutions'; whereas the pattern category of 'the represented as partners' evolves around the following codes: 'Field', '(Inter)action', 'Knowledge', 'People', and 'Proximity'.

Our process of abductive theory building begins with existing theories, identifying 'misfits' or deviations in the empirical data, which in turn feed into and lead to new conceptual and theoretical insights – in this case, a reconceptualisation of representation. Following our PAR approach, we grounded our analysis in participants' accounts of 'non-representation' yet continued appreciation of representation, using these as a starting point to re-examine foundational theories, particularly Pitkin's (1967) concept of representation. We focused on its meaning and relevance to participants and observed that, despite alignment with the principal–agent model, the empirical data on how representation currently functions did not fully conform to this framework nor its configuration. This divergence prompted us to explore constructivist features of representation and also to expand our literature review. More precisely, the unexpected empirical findings steered a focused search for alternative perspectives that aligned with the

industries such as the economic, educational, social, and catering industries. During the height of the pandemic, the governmental measures especially aggravated the precarious conditions and isolation that people in socio-economically difficult situations, and in particular, those without legal documentation and housing were facing (LDH, 2020: pp. 15–25; Lucera & Tosi, 2021: pp. 103–107).

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deviations we observed and supported the innovations participants sought in the representative relationship. These extant theories and concepts then, in turn, supported the reconceptualisation of the representative relationship. By iterating between empirical findings and political theory, we modified and tailored the principal–agent framework to better align with participants' needs.

Findings: the 'what', 'who', and 'how' of political representation

Based on our thematic analysis and abductive concept building approach, we found three unexpected patterns concerning the *what* of political representation, *who* it concerns and *how* it is done: (1) participants made a strong connection between the problems they experience in their everyday lives and the content of political representation; (2) they reject *and* foreground elected officials ('politicians,' 'political representatives') as their representatives or problem-solvers; and (3) they centre the represented ('the people'), who in a partnership with political representatives should have an active role in political decision and policymaking to enable problem-solving. The following sections explore these patterns, beginning with the overarching idea of political representation as problem-solving. To this end, it unpacks quotes that were selected for their ability to capture and convey the general trends we observed regarding participants' reasoning and political meaning-making processes, thereby illustrating the patterns we identified. Our discussion of the findings stays close to the language used by our participants. Where we do use concepts such as 'dissatisfaction', 'distrust', or 'powerlessness' they reflect the themes that inductively emerged through the analyses; rather than complying with an *a priori* operationalisation, they capture the meaning given to these concepts by the participants. The conceptual work is conducted only in the final section of this contribution where we jump off from the empirical findings presented here and engage anew in a conversation with existing theories on political representation to complement our understanding of it.

What? Political representation as problem solving

When discussing political representation, participants not only raised their own problems but also highlighted issues experienced by people in socio-economically difficult situations more generally. When discussing how people in socio-economically difficult situations are *not* politically represented, they refer to how these problems are *not* being solved. Participants equated effective political representation with *problem-solving*, being politically represented with *problems being solved*, and the act of representing with *activities that resulted in solving problems*. Significantly, participants resolutely referred to 'politicians' as those who ought to solve problems. For example, Marijke, a key participant, discussed representation by referring to her experience with inter-generational poverty. As a single mother, Marijke struggled with the knowledge that her family, her parents and grandparents, and all experience(d) socio-economic problems.

> Marijke: With all the misery I've been through in my life and my children have been through in their lives, do I still need to be asked if I'm politically represented? I have no trust in the government (Marijke, telephone conversation, October 2020, p. 5 – Pattern category: representation as problem-solving; Codes: Problems; Non-representation; Trust)

Implicit in Marijke's rhetorical question is the notion that being politically represented means that problems are tackled and solved. Given that hers remained patently unsolved, she logically considers that she is not represented.

Another participant, Nabila also felt political representation was rooted in problem-solving; in her case counteracting Islamophobia. For Nabila, Islamophobia was experienced daily by her and her sons, as well as many other people in her community – a problem that she expects politicians to take action on:

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> Nabila: When you don't have the right name, you don't have a job, you have to insist on that. For young people, it is very difficult. When your name is Mohamed. (. . .). Many people just don't know much about Islam and get the wrong idea. Politicians should do something about this, inform people to stop it (discrimination), but I don't think they want to (Nabila, telephone conversation, December 2020, p. 2 – Pattern category: representation as problem-solving; Problems; Future).

Importantly, participants did not raise just any kind of problems when discussing political representation: they raised problems they regarded as political and *urgent*.[13] They are issues that demand to be resolved quickly, because they are detrimental for their ability to live their lives; not only for them personally, but also for members of their neighbourhood and local community. Even though participants raised specific problems that were rooted in their personal everyday experiences – for instance, being unable to access the job market or affordable, adequate or even basic housing – what they highlighted was how problems were shared and could not be resolved on an individual level. In this respect, participants almost never suggested that elected representatives ought to intervene directly in their personal lives. Rather, participants used their experiences as a segue, to make the point that political action is needed for tackling and solving the more systemic problems they experience, such as intergenerational poverty or Islamophobia. Regarding systemic problems, Abdel, a participant with neither legal documents nor housing, repeatedly advocated for affordable housing solutions, not just for himself, but for all people, especially young people in socio-economically difficult situations:

> Abdel: I want things to change, not for myself but for the other generations. Not for me, for me it is already too late. My life is almost over. (. . .). I failed. It will be for the next generation. (. . .) For the youngsters (Abdel, conversation at *DoucheFLUX* in Gare du Midi neighbourhood, March 2021, p. 6 – Pattern category: representation as problem-solving; Codes: Problems, Future).

Who? Elected representatives are the representatives

Although participants consistently referred to politicians as 'representatives', considered to be a job for solving the problems they identify, they expressed substantial dissatisfaction with politicians' unwillingness to do so. They regularly portrayed politicians as 'egocentric', 'dishonest', and 'lazy' and referred to them as 'mafiosi', 'liars', 'thieves', and 'bullies'. Despite this, participants also stressed how politicians were still the ones who should solve problems because they are in a unique position to do so, explaining why participants insisted on referring to them as *their representatives*. Unlike *all* other members of society, representatives have a mandate that first obliges them to act in the interests of people and second is constituted through the actuality that they hold political decision-making power and are paid to solve problems. The first is illustrated by Brahim, a student with financial problems who lives in a social rental studio, and Nadia and Soumia, two financially struggling mothers of children with special needs. The second is illustrated by Stijn, a participant suffering from cancer who lives in a precarious situation:

> Brahim: They (@politicians) are paid 5000 euros/month to find solutions. We (@people in socio-economically difficult situations) are surviving (Brahim, group discussion at

[13]The fieldwork made apparent that the situation participants find themselves in played a role in what they identified as urgent problems. Yet, what remains consistent is that problems are found so significant, that political action is to be taken forthwith, and solutions provided as soon as possible. Not because it is preferable, but because it is *necessary* (Elster, 1999: p. 399). In addition, urgency manifested itself in the form of political demands in the present, but also the need for politicians to take actions that would define the future course of people's lives.

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1Toit2Ages in Horta, July 2020, p. 17 – Pattern category: elected representatives as problem solvers; Codes: Politicians; Solutions; Resources).
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Nadia: The solutions have to come from above, from politicians.
Soumia: They are paid 10.0000/month and have the job to find solutions, the people are struggling! (*Sunchild* Group discussion in Anneessens, July 2020, p. 11 – Pattern category: elected representatives as problem solvers; Codes: Politicians; Solutions; Resources).
Stijn: They have resources at their disposal we (the people) simply don't have (. . .). This isn't likely to change. (. . .) But they (politicians) have to do it. They are at the controls (Stijn, telephone conversation, July 2020, pp. 23, 34 – Pattern category: elected representatives as problem solvers; Codes: Politicians; Solutions; Power).
Stijn: Even Obama knows it: Responsibility, responsiveness, transparency. (. . .) They (politicians) are at our (the people's) service. Politics is *by, for* and *with* the people. That is how it is or how it ought to be. Politicians should tackle problems, and aren't they paid excessively to do so? (Stijn, telephone conversation, October 2020, p. 2; pp. 4–5– Pattern category: elected representatives as problem solvers; Codes: Politicians; Solutions; Resources; Power; Responsiveness).

Stijn touches upon a feeling commonly expressed by participants when discussing representation: powerlessness. As his last quote demonstrates, participants' sense of powerlessness is, paradoxically, what encourages them to demand greater responsibility from politicians. In this sense, holding a political mandate entails an *exclusive* responsibility.

During the preparations for the co-constructed seminar, the question of who we ought to invite to the seminar was discussed. In that conversation, Abdel similarly emphasised that the most important attendees should be politicians, and not, for instance, the royal family. This is significant because Belgium is a constitutional monarchy, meaning the royal family holds considerable symbolic power and influence. Moreover, many participants highlighted the royal family's visits to neighbourhoods, shelters, and orphanages as a fieldwork example for politicians to follow. However, recognising that the royal family lacks political power and a public mandate, the participants did not attribute political dissatisfaction to them, as they saw no direct responsibility; they did not find they entertained a principal–agent relationship with them:

Abdel: Politicians have a four year mandate to govern, and they do nothing. They complain and come up with excuses. They say, 'it isn't my fault'. There are many empty buildings in Brussels and nothing is done. So many people sleep on the streets, but they just leave everything as it is. Politicians have a duty.
(. . .)
Researcher: Should we invite the royal family to the seminar?
Abdel: No, the royal family is innocent. (. . .). The royal family shouldn't be invited, the royal family is not concerned. Politicians are (. . .) All actors with legislative power are concerned (Abdel, conversation at *DoucheFLUX* in Gare du Midi neighbourhood, March 2021, p. 4 — Pattern category: elected representatives as problem solvers; Codes: Politicians; Mandate; Power).

For Abdel, the royal family are 'innocent', and unlike politicians who possess legislative power, they have no need to be involved. The use of the term innocent suggests that Abdel regards politicians as culpable, or in the wrong, and consequently negligent of their obligations. In his case, this is related to the lack of action on the problem he experiences, notably homelessness.

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How? (1) The represented and the elected representatives working together

While 'incompetence' was repeatedly cited by participants when discussing what is wrong with representation, they particularly identified the absence of their experiential knowledge as the principal reason why representatives are unable to effectively represent. Politicians were perceived to have a very superficial understanding of problems, with no idea how these are anchored, or manifest in people's lives. Nor do they grasp the wide ranging and changeable nature of people's experiences with these problems, and how they touch upon the fabric of the local community. Representatives have the obligation to solve problems, but the question for participants was how to solve a problem if you don't know it exists? For most, the distance between representatives and the represented was palpable. The research shows that they nevertheless have very clear ideas about *how* politicians can overcome their lack of knowledge: they have to come to the *field* – the socio-economically challenged neighbourhoods in which the participants lived.

To become knowledgeable about their lives, participants argued that politicians ought to spend time in the field. Preferably, they ought to interact with, listen to people who work, but especially *live*, in socio-economically challenged neighbourhoods and who are knowledgeable about the problems people experience. Participants often referred to social actors in this regard, and suggested politicians talk with them. Those who work in the community are accustomed to talking with people and taking part in local events and activities in socio-economically challenged neighbourhoods. Nedim who was very worried about social housing-related problems faced by himself and many other people in his neighbourhood, reflected this view:

> Nedim: They (politicians) need to know the policy matters they deal with and the field, the field, the field. They have to do something. They first have to come to the field. And not come and stay 15 minutes, they need to take their time to know the field. (. . .). Politicians and people don't know each-other. They need to get to know each-other more and politicians have to know the traumatic aspect of the question better (Nedim, telephone conversation, May 2020, p. 10 – Pattern category: the represented as partners; Codes: Field; Proximity; Action; Knowledge).

Participants were convinced that they knew what problems needed to be addressed and were adamant that they should be able to discuss problems with politicians *in person*. Participant Philippe, who found himself in a situation of homelessness, found it insulting, and a severe lack of respect, that politicians kept people in socio-economic difficult situations out of political decision-making processes; for him, the lack of interaction between people and politicians was not only inefficient, but deeply undemocratic:

> Philippe: Stop with the intellectual self-gratification (@politicians). Enough! (. . .) You (@politicians) have regular meetings, it may be good to invite us because we have a lot to say. (. . .). They (@poltiicians) discuss among themselves, make plans among themselves, but where are the people who are concerned. (. . .) I believe firmly in democracy (. . .). And I find it hard to believe, absurd that in modern-day society a substantial part of the population is not invited to share its opinions, ideas and take part in political debates? (Philippe, conversation at *DoucheFLUX* in Gare du Midi neighbourhood, September 2019, pp. 5, 10 – Pattern category: the represented as partners; Codes: Interaction; People; Proximity).

Finally, participants stressed that to really solve the problems people experience, it is necessary to make visiting the field and talking with people a recurrent political activity, rather than a token one-off appearance. Only in this way, politicians can cultivate their understanding of the problems people face and develop the (more tailored) solutions these problems require. Participants not

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only pointed out the importance of politicians being present in socio-economically challenged neighbourhoods, but also how politicians' behaviours and attitudes depend on what they expose themselves to; the impressions and feelings they have will give them insight into people's daily needs and concerns. This is what Léo, a participant who was homeless for 8 years, stressed when he talked about politicians' lack of knowledge.

> Léo: They (@politicians) should quite simply be closer to people! But that doesn't mean conducting a safari, like the political party NVA did in Molenbeek (. . .). Not a politician who comes once when elections are coming up. They have to, at least, spend one or two days in the field, to *feel* what people feel. Not 20 minutes for a postcard, that is the same thing as saying we couldn't care less about people. Otherwise, they might just as well not come and continue working in their office. You know, a person who spends the night on the streets, is cold at night and could have died outside . . . So being in the field calls for devoting time (Léo, telephone conversation, October 2020, p. 61 – Pattern category: the represented as partners; Codes: Interaction; People; Proximity).

How? (2) The represented and the elected representatives becoming partners

In addition to the above, and considering the way in which participants found the input of people in difficult socio-economic situations a prerequisite for solving problems, the identified lack of respect for the represented constitutes a serious issue for representation. For participants, prioritising the active role of the represented is therefore the key condition in upscaling their status. This means that participants consider that politicians are obliged to not only reconsider how they perceive the field and re-evaluate how they relate to its residents, but also the place they assign to them in the representative process. They ought to regard the latter as privileged actors; as those best placed to inform and educate them about their problems, and the solutions.

Participants Amadou's and Soumia's comments underscored what most felt was needed, namely not sympathy or compassion, but rather appreciation for the *experiential knowledge* that people testify to. Not doing so, they argue, undermines representatives' capacity to effectively represent.

> Amadou: They (@politicians) aren't knowledgeable because they don't live poverty first-hand. And they can't represent people in poverty if they don't consider people in poverty to have good ideas. So, to me, they don't represent people in poverty (Amadou, telephone conversation, April 2020, p. 7 – Pattern category: the represented as partners; Codes: Field, People, Knowledge; Experience).

> Soumia: Basically, we (@other participants) don't think politicians want to acknowledge us or our needs, want to actively listen to us and respond to our questions and needs. At least not in an appropriate manner, a manner that acknowledges us as *actors* and not *victims* (Soumia, *Sunchild* group discussion in Anneessens, July 2020, p. 9 – Pattern category: the represented as partners; Codes: Field; Proximity; People; Action).

Participant Phillipe made a similar, albeit larger societal plea by alluding to the lack of recognition for the status of those represented, especially if they occupy precarious social positions. As a person in a situation of homelessness, he attached great importance to (not) being regarded as unknowledgeable or, as he called it, 'ignorant' (Philippe, September 2019, p. 5). He never understood that being in a situation of homelessness means that you are unable to have an intellect, a discussion, ideas, or contribute to society. Philippe found it rather strange to think, or rather normalise the idea, that people suddenly lose their 'lived experience' and 'intellect' when they no longer have a 'bank account'. Furthermore, according to Phillipe, this showed the extent politicians were disconnected from reality when they think that people in socio-economically

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difficult situations cannot have a 'debate' with them at 'their level'. He argued that if politicians thought they could solve these problems without consulting people who knew what it was like, they were making a mistake.

> Philippe: The barrier is often talked about. It is said that people in socio-economic difficult situations have crossed over to the other side of the barrier (. . .). Because, and I have experienced this myself and I sense it every day, when people talk about . . . What does it mean to be homeless ? To be a person who no longer owns his own voice? Intelligence? life? To be a person who has nothing anymore? (. . .). Do they (@politicians) think we can't have a debate at their level? It might well be the case. That's what I call and how I recognise that they may be really disconnected from reality (Philippe, conversation at DoucheFLUX in Gare du Midi neighbourhood, September 2019, pp. 5, 18 – Pattern category: the represented as partners; Codes: Credibility; Field; Knowledge).

The experiential knowledge of the represented, then, must be regarded as both a valid and intrinsic component of political knowledge, precisely because it will inform, shape, and strengthen political decision and policy making. It thus allows for the more effective type of decision-making that participants envisaged would lead to more tangible solutions and play up their role as partners in decision-making as well as their status as the represented.

Abductive concept building: a problem-solving principal–agent partnership

Having presented the empirical data on what, who, and how political representation is generally perceived by participants, we now proceed with our abductive analysis, focusing on the concept building it indicates. In doing so, we link the empirical findings to the leading scholarship on representation and reconceptualise the classical relationship to better reflect participants' primary needs and desires—what we term the *people's perspective*. To refine this reconceptualisation and revisit its foundation, we incorporate new scholarly ideas on representation. These iterative cycles underpin our participatory and abductive approach.

Bridging classical and constructivist views on representation

The introduction briefly sketched the two dominant understandings of what representation is, and how and when responsiveness is established. The classical approach contends that this is critically the case when elected representatives (agents) act in the *predetermined interests* of the people (the principal) (Burke, 1826; Pitkin, 1967; Przeworski et al., 1999; Schwartz, 1988). In contrast, the constructivist approach posits that responsiveness can also be established when people accept representatives' claims in which (elected and non-elected) representatives construct the interest of the represented as part of a creative and performative claims-making process (Dutoya & Hayat, 2016; Montanaro, 2017; Saward, 2006, 2010). Our new understanding of a representative relationship from the perspective of the people, builds and expands on *both* traditions: representation is established between *elected* representatives and the people; however, we maintain the premise that representatives must act in people's interests in ways defined *by them*. Our analysis shows that participants consider themselves as cognizant of what their interests are. They claim to know the problems people experience and cannot resolve on an individual level, hence identifying the issues that representatives need to act upon.

Representation from the people's perspective clearly has elements of a classical principal–agent relationship focused on representing the principal's interests, and more precisely, on problem-solving. Therefore, we reaffirm the classical emphasis on the ability of the represented to determine, and evaluate, whether those representing them are acting in their interests (Pitkin, 1967: p. 162). This is a capacity that elected representatives *must* recognise and cannot downplay.

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Like other researchers, we stress the importance of responsiveness to representation in the classical sense (Costa, 2021; de Mulder, 2023; Dupuy & Van Ingelgom, 2023; Severs, 2010). However, building on the participants' perspective, we frame the lack of responsiveness in terms of a core knowledge deficit, suggesting the need for a more rigorous and stricter interpretation of the authority of the represented as principals: the agency of the represented is the key to solving the problem of politicians' knowledge deficit.

In this regard, participants asserted that to become knowledgeable of the problems people face and develop strategies to resolve them, representatives need to understand people's interests. To do this, they are required to spend a substantial amount of time in non-institutional settings, preferably the field where they can engage with those who live and work there, and non-elected actors. The active involvement of the represented as *partners* (how) and their accredited status as the represented (who) is an indispensable part of our conception of the representative process. This stands in contrast to the classical principal–agent relationship in which the principals (are expected to) fully transfer the capacity to act to the agent (Burke, 1826; Przeworski et al., 1999; Schwartz, 1988). Consistent with some constructivist scholarship, participants' understandings of representation are interactive, dyadic, and continuous, surpassing electoral cycles (Disch, 2021; Kuyper, 2016; Maia, 2012; Montanaro: 2017; Saward, 2006; Warren, 2019). Importantly, it is also *performative* in nature (Disch, 2021; Montanaro, 2017; Rai et al., 2021). The way representatives currently carry and present themselves, interact and talk with the represented is regarded as embodying a lack of knowledge, competence, and a distinct absence of respect. Instead, the participants felt that responsive representation requires representatives to perform openness and a willingness to learn from the represented and recognise the latter as knowledgeable about their problems and how that can be solved.

In sum, the appropriate innovation to representation involves constructively revising the classical principal–agent relationship to create a more interactive and responsive model. Drawing on Pitkin's idea that representation starts with the people and their interests, we build on constructivist insights that representation is dynamic and evolves through ongoing interaction between the people and the represented and empirically grounded in the mobilisation of the peoples' perspectives. This revision integrates both theoretical traditions to better align with people's perspectives. Revisiting representation from the perspective of the people invites not only a combination of understandings from classical and constructivist approaches but also suggests two additional features. The first concerns the *partnership* between representatives and the represented, whereas the second is attentive to the holistic and *cumulative* nature of interests (Dienstag, 2019).

Rethinking representation: from responsiveness to partnership

The role of being a partner, and the related necessity for both actors to work together to problem solve, is neither captured in classical nor constructivist approaches. While both approaches acknowledge the significance of representing interests, they do not fully account for the continuous, interactive relationship required for true partnership and knowledge exchange. Representatives would be required to continuously interact with the field and the people to develop knowledge on the latter's interests, to (i) accept the people as instructive partners providing information on the interests to be acted upon; (ii) act as learning partners open to the input of the represented; while (iii) still carrying the exclusive responsibility to provide solutions. Adopting a people's perspective shows that the activity of 'acting in the interest of the represented' involves and depends upon the recognition of political agency of both the representative and the represented. Agency implies both a meaningful say and the recognition and valorisation thereof (Sanchini et al., 2019: p. 11).

Scholars like Mansbridge (2017), Neblo et al. (2018), and Rosanvallon (2011) do advocate for stronger citizen involvement and partnership-like relationships, but they still tend to situate citizens in a largely reactive role – responding to representatives or legitimising existing structures through

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dialogue. On the one hand, unlike Mansbridge's recursive model, which focuses on the legitimacy-enhancing role of citizen feedback, our approach takes this further by emphasising how the represented actively shape who represents them and how; rather than citizens learning from representatives as the recursive model suggest, we suggest that it is foremost the representatives that are expected to learn from the people. On the other hand, in contrast to Neblo's (2018) model of directly representative democracy – which centres structured deliberation between representatives and constituents – our approach highlights how legitimacy is co-produced through the continuous and situated knowledge of the represented themselves.

For Pitkin, the viability of representation depends on the represented's ability to assess whether their representatives are acting on their interests (1967: p. 162)—an aspect that underscores their evaluative and knowledgeable role. However, she does not frame the representative process in terms of direct participation or a partnership. Her concept of systematic responsiveness (1967: p. 234) opens up to this possibility by suggesting that meaningful connections between representatives, and the represented should be both cultivated over time and grounded in institutional and systemic conditions that promote them. This resonates with Rosanvallon's (2011) emphasis on proximity and transparency as vehicles for trust-building, but our participants go further by insisting that proximity primarily serves as a means for more informed and effective political action. This is particularly relevant for our argument, as we see it as essential for addressing structural flaws in representation, especially by listening to those who currently lack representation (Celis & Childs, 2024). When the represented become partners, the knowledge that is generated for representational purposes is both experiential (from lived, first-hand experience) and practical (from working, doing things, and partaking in activities in the field). The representatives become and remain *senti-pensante* (Fals Borda, 2015), thinking-feeling actors who build their understanding from experiential and practical knowledge and are able to discern that the types of solutions people need are those that are embedded in the local context and in harmony with their ways of life (Borda & Moncayo, 2009 [1925–2008]; Gaventa, 1991). It also implies they learn to rely on their bodily senses of sight, sound, touch, smell, and taste to expand their knowledge about the challenges people face and how they can engage with people and their surroundings. This requires a deeper 'proximity', ie a stronger personal bond, where representatives are physically accessible, can be approached and spoken with, are attentive to, and considerate of what they say, and are transparent about how they do it (Goldhammer & Rosanvallon, 2011: pp. 171–175, 200, 203–204). Yet, in contrast to Rosanvallon, who views proximity as part of an evolving relationship of trust, our findings suggest that proximity must be instrumental: valued not for symbolic access, but for the concrete political knowledge it enables. For participants, proximity is thus a vehicle for more informed decision-making by virtue of increasing politicians' knowledge of people's interests.

Participants' understanding of the relationship between the represented and representatives as a collaborative, knowledge-driven partnership likely explains why they did not emphasise descriptive representation. With their unfixed, cumulative understanding of interests, they stress the vital importance of *ongoing* knowledge acquisition for *all* representatives and the need for continuous engagement with those who are currently experiencing problems: the represented. Furthermore, participants' negative experiences of not being taken seriously may influence their belief that descriptive representatives face the same credibility challenges, often feeling compelled to downplay their experiential knowledge to fit within the status quo, rather than challenging it.

Towards a problem solving and cumulative framework for representation

Adopting a people's perspective to representation highlights the importance of a broader interpretation of interests. As discussed above, interests exist prior to the representative process since they are determined by the represented and are material; they pertain to the *de facto* problems the represented encounter in their lives. Interests are thus embedded in real lives, and in societal (and material) contexts that are in constant evolution. This gives rise to a more holistic

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interpretation of interests and calls for the acknowledgment of their unfixed and cumulative nature. Interests are neither set in stone nor unidimensional, rather they have multiple, accumulative layers to them, making the acquisition of knowledge about interests a process without bounds and continuous.

This holistic interpretation is what enables participants to genuinely identify as 'the represented.' In contrast to those in power (the representatives), it allows them to envision a 'collective bond' (White, 2011: pp. 5, 28, 220) among all members of society who face various social problems and challenges and possess knowledge. In turn, this requires representatives to understand: (i) how the problems the represented experience are ingrained in their local communities; (ii) the complexities of these problems; and (iii) the hierarchical character of the problems predicated on their differential degree of urgency. In this respect, understanding problems as interests that run like red threads through their lives and impact their everyday existence and their communities comes close to Dienstag's understanding of 'cumulative representation' (2019). This concept underscores representation as a process in which representatives grasp the contextual embeddedness of the problems faced by the represented and their local communities by 'following' the interests of the represented and their ability to live their lives (Dienstag, 2019; see also Bezold, 2006; Mansbridge, 2003; Toffler, 1978).

The represented, however, also redirect cumulative representation and make it more *forward* looking. In this sense, the 'act of representing' becomes a matter of seeking out and *anticipating* how problems affect the lives of the represented, not just at one specific moment, but in relation to what their prospects might be, and what they and their communities might need in the future. It extends beyond merely aligning interests, acting on behalf of the represented involves understanding, accommodating, and providing for a specific lifestyle or way of life. It separates the act of 'acting in interests' from simply pursuing issue congruence.

Conclusion

Notwithstanding their deep disappointment and fierce criticisms, the Brussels' people in socio-economically difficult situations that participated in our research did not reject representative democracy, but do feel mis or not represented – clearly illustrating the democratic paradox (Celis, et al., 2021). Rather than dispensing with the concept of representation, they wanted to reinstate *elected* representatives as *actual* representatives, emphasising their own status as *the represented* and refusing to be treated as anything else by *their* representatives. Our findings reflect a representative landscape in which people claim back their political representation and seek a deepening of representative politics. They sought more effective, particularly better informed, political decision-making and importantly, aspired to a greater level of involvement for themselves in formal, electoral politics.

We analysed these empirical findings in light of existing theoretical accounts of political representation. Our ambition was to discern novel insights that could help in reconceptualising the representative relationship as part of a response to the widespread dissatisfaction with representative democracy. Understanding what people value in and expect from the representational relationship is a necessary first step before engaging in exploring the factors behind (failed) representation. We focused on this foundational step of theory-building, clarifying what the relationship should entail, as a prerequisite for developing explanations of why it falls short. The abductive analysis we conducted anchored our conceptualisation of the representative relationships as a 'principal-agent problem-solving partnership' firmly in classical accounts of representation. The nature of the roles of the principal and the agent was, however, amended and key tenets from the constructivist approach were embraced. In the 'principal-agent problem-solving partnership', the represented inform and educate the representatives about the problems in holistic, dynamic, and cumulative ways that enable the solutions to be explored, located, and implemented. For these ongoing thinking-feeling representational activities, the representatives engage with, and are present, where the represented live and work.

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The representative relationship developed in this contribution is firmly embedded in the ways people in socio-economically difficult situations understand, think about, problematise, and experience it. Reimagining the representative relationship from their perspective enables the problematic lack of responsiveness that characterises current representative relationships to be redressed. People experiencing socio-economic precarity constitute an increasingly substantial group among democratic populations. Research has shown that these citizens are often heard less in the political process, which further justifies centring their perspectives in theoretical work on representation (Sevenans et al., 2024). Based on the common observation of the relationship between socio-economic precarity and dissatisfaction with democracy, we contend that our new conceptualisation is also valuable for people in socio-economically difficult situations elsewhere. Their lived experiences provide crucial insights into the shortcomings of existing representative structures, which inform systemic barriers to political participation and recognition more broadly.

Furthermore, the dissatisfying experience with current political representation is arguably drastically enlarged in the group of our participants, yet dissatisfaction with political representation is not limited nor specific to them. Many citizens, across different socio-economic backgrounds, express a desire for stronger engagement with their representatives, calling for a more responsive, personalised, and pragmatic rapport with politicians. This broader demand for representative reform suggests that while our theoretical framework originates from studying socio-economically disadvantaged groups, its relevance extends beyond them. The tensions and deficiencies they articulate resonate with a wider democratic discontent, making their perspectives an underexplored starting point rather than an exclusive focus.

Based on this reasoning and reflecting our and our participants' epistemological standpoints, we cautiously generalise from people in socio-economically difficult situations to 'the people' more in general. Our cautious generalisation builds on our typical and critical case study and answers our objective of concept building. It does not assume uniformity across all citizens but rather proposes a way of rethinking representation that is inclusive of, but not limited to, traditionally underrepresented voices. Our reconceptualisation of the representative relationship can gain traction through empirical validation in future studies and additional research identifying revisions when considering the perspectives of 'other people'.

Further studies could seek to refine and adapt our conceptual framework by examining how other groups interpret and demand political representation. This is particularly relevant in light of broader democratic transformations, such as shifting political alignments, the rise of new forms of civic engagement, and evolving public expectations of politicians. Moreover, research that prioritises conceptual (re)thinking with the meaning-making processes of the represented taken as primary (see also Dupuy & Van Ingelgom, 2023) could find intellectual sustenance from the PAR and abductive concept building presented here. It highlights how those who are minimally, or in a tokenistic fashion, included in research can be involved more substantively in data collection *and* analysis geared towards responding to widespread discontent with representative democracy. By signposting how a better representative democracy begins from the perspective of the people, wider avenues for revitalising the representative relationship can be explored. We believe it is essential to do so and hope to inspire other researchers to adopt a similar approach.

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Data availability statement. The data underlying this article were generated through PAR involving individuals in socio-economically difficult situations. Due to the sensitive nature of the data and ethical obligations to protect the confidentiality and anonymity of participants, the full datasets are not publicly available. Anonymised excerpts or summaries of the data may be made available by the authors upon reasonable request, subject to ethical review and participant consent in line with the conditions approved by the Ethics Commission in Human Sciences of the Vrije Universiteit Brussel.

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