On Substantive Representation, Diversity, and Responsiveness

Karen Celis, Vrije Universiteit Brussel

doi:10.1017/S1743923X12000542

When are "the people" — with all its different groups — represented? It is commonly accepted that democratic representation implies that no significant parts of the population are excluded from the right to vote or to stand for election and, similarly, that parliaments and even governments should, to a certain extent, mirror the represented and governed population. If authorization and accountability indicate the democratic quality of the formal dimension of representation (i.e., it is democratic when it is accountable), then representativeness allows for evaluating descriptive representation (i.e., it is democratic when it is representative of society) (see also Celis 2009). But what are our standards for judging the democratic quality of substantive representation? According to Hanna F. Pitkin, that normative standard is the representative's responsiveness: substantive representation is "acting in the interest of the represented, *in a manner responsive to them*." Responsiveness turns what representatives do into substantive representation of the *demos*. It is a metacriterion for democratic representation in the sense that accountability and descriptive representativeness need also to ensure responsiveness. But, again, questions arise: How should we understand responsiveness? How do representatives establish it? Where and when does responsiveness need to be established?

How substantive representation is achieved and the conditions for its realization are, in my view, the key questions for future representation studies.[1] I side with Pitkin in rejecting too strong a focus on descriptive representation because that diverts attention from substantive representation, which she believes is a far more important dimension of representation. This was challenged by feminist research on political representation, which attaches great importance to the descriptive representation of women. Feminist scholars have done so for intrinsic

This article is part of a research project on the substantive representation of women, the elderly, and migrants, which has been made possible by a research grant from the Research Foundation Flanders (FWO, project number G.0083.08N).

1. One of the few studies dealing with the conditions for women's substantive representation — whether women's policy agencies promote the substantive and descriptive representation of women's movement interests — in a comparative perspective is McBride and Mazur (2010).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X12000542 Published online by Cambridge University Press

reasons — democratic values such as fairness, justice, inclusion, and legitimacy — but also to further the substantive representation of women. In earlier work on the substantive representation of women, I argued that our understanding of women's representation would benefit from shifting the attention from the relationship between descriptive and substantive representation toward substantive representation as such: how it is done, who is implied, where it happens, and for what reasons (Celis et al. 2008).

These matters, however, pose important challenges, not the least at the conceptual and normative levels. When do women representatives make a difference and come to realize the women's movement priorities? Under which conditions does the substantive representation of women occur? Shifting the focus from the first question to the second requires a clear understanding of what constitutes substantive representation — and the criteria we could use to assess the quality of substantive representation. When can we say that women or ethnic minorities are substantively represented, especially when, fully appreciating the existence of intersectional identities, we recognize that "women" and "ethnic minorities" are highly diversified groups? This is a major challenge for representation studies. In this contribution, I will sketch how we might conceptualize substantive representation and responsiveness in such a way that they can, in the best feminist tradition, be assessed from a normative point of view (Childs and Lovenduski 2013).

I would like to suggest that plural and possibly conflictual or contradictory interests and perspectives are the basic ingredients of democratic substantive representation. Since women are not a homogeneous group and are expected to have diverging views (e.g., the opinions of leftists versus conservatives/neoliberals, whites versus people of color, high versus lower classes, for instance, on the burqa, quotas, or maternity leave), responsiveness increases when divergent and even contradictory views are included in the representation process. Political deliberation in the course of which different views are argued for and are substantiated contributes to a greater extent to responsive representation in diverse societies than pretending that the conflicting interests do not exist.

I do not, however, exclude the possibility that, with regard to some issues, universal consensus could exist and that, in these cases, representatives should bridge ideological and partisan differences and join forces to translate these particular issues into decisions and policies.[2]

2. The Critical Perspectives essay "The Meaning and Measurement of Women's Interests" in the September 2011 issue of *Politics & Gender* illustrates the tension between, on the one hand,

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X12000542 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Nevertheless, with regard to most issues, diverging interests do exist, and in these cases, voicing differences in the course of the representative process is key. This approach to the substantive representation of women thus differs fundamentally from investigating whether female representatives or women's policy agencies act in women's interests or realize women's movement interests in several respects. Most importantly, it places political debate and conflict about what is in the interest of women at center stage.

When is substantive representation of women truly responsive? This quality assessment consequently focuses on the diversity of claims and the extent to which these establish a substantive link with the various and varying groups and subgroups in society (see also Celis and Childs 2012a and b). The outcomes of the representative process — laws and policy — are the temporary result of the struggle over what is in the interest of women; for instance, equality policy should be regarded as "an arena for feminist struggles about what feminism is about and what it can become at a certain time and location" (Verloo 2011, 6). These outcomes should, of course, be responsive to women in society or to women's movement demands. Whereas the possibility that not all women agree with the final outcomes does not affect its democratic quality, I contend that the exclusion of specific women's interests that are supported by specific groups of women in society *in the process* leading to a law or policy on women decreases its democratic quality and legitimacy. Responsiveness during the process of representation should thus be broad and include a plurality of women, women's organizations, and women's interests.

As a consequence, the level of responsiveness of the process and the outcome of substantive representation greatly depends on the reflexivity of the political and policymaking system (i.e., its capacity to draw out and engage with different groups and perspectives). Reflexivity is a system capacity criterion that measures the extent to which the system furthers input, contestation, and objection from the represented citizens (Disch 2011). Legitimate representation is in practice generated by "mobilization democracy," enabling the interaction of claims and empowering the represented to form their preferences and to make judgments. Reflexivity can be understood as the political system (for

recognizing women as a diverse group with possibly different and conflicting interests (Reingold and Swers 2011) and, on the other hand, the desire to delineate a set of women's interests that are common to all women and transcend such differences (Baldez 2011).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X12000542 Published online by Cambridge University Press

instance, parties, MPs, women's policy agencies, and administrative actors) actively searching for divergent, conflicting interests related to women's issues on the political agenda. It is a strategy to capture diverging and conflicting interests and, hence, a prerequisite to establishing responsiveness with as many groups in society as possible.

One might, however, not think of reflexivity as merely "bringing in" preexisting interests and perspectives. Pitkin's conceptualization of substantive representation has recently been criticized by several scholars, especially Saward (2010), on the grounds that it assumes such a static notion of interests as entities that exist "out there," ready to be brought into the representational process. Newer theories on representation stress the importance of "creative" acts by the representative whereby the constituency in whose interests the representative claims to speak is constructed within the framework of the "representative claim." Furthermore, substantive representation should, according to Saward, be considered "a market of claims," an interactive process of interest articulation during which a multitude of interests and perspectives can be formulated by many actors and during which the representative and the represented respond to one another in an iterative fashion.

This dynamic, deliberative, and process-oriented conception of representation makes sense in today's societies marked by diversity and in which meaningful social or political collectives are evaporating and representative democracies face high levels of party dealignment and electoral volatility. It is also better fit to deal with complex and intersecting identities. Nevertheless, responsiveness, the key component of Pitkin's "old" definition, remains a *sine qua non*: substantive representation fails without firm linkage between what politicians do and what citizens want and need. Responsiveness should, however, also be understood dynamically, as it can be established by elected representatives' claims echoing preexisting claims (classic responsiveness) or by the represented's acceptance of their elected representatives' claims (*a posteriori* responsiveness) (Severs 2010).

Increasing descriptive representativeness as Phillips (1995) asserts in her politics of presence theory, establishing structural ties with civil society, hearings, women's policy agencies, the participative-democratic model of gender mainstreaming: these are some of the ways in which the political system could operationalize reflexivity. But in order to tap into the diversity of women, it is important to have women present in all political parties and their parliamentary groups and to establish relationships and linkages with different kinds of women's movements (feminist and

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X12000542 Published online by Cambridge University Press

nonfeminist ones, minority women's organizations, LGBT groups, and organizations anchored in different age and class groups). This is because we need for the substantive representation of women to be responsive to a diversity of women, and to do so, it must be able to reflect diverse, competing, and conflicting claims about women's issues.

If the representative process lacks diversity, competition, and contradiction in terms of the claims that are included, then the chances of the representative process being responsive are low, except when the political system's attempts to capture diverse and competing claims have proven that there are none (although that seems quite unlikely). The absence of a diversity of claims is most probably a sign of the representative system's lacking or slacking efforts to engage with society, of its low mobilizing powers, and thus of incomplete substantive representation. Diverse, complementing, and conflicting claims about what is in the interest of women — a true political debate about what is good and advantageous for women — however, point to the elected assembly's capacity to take into account societal demands through reflexivity leading to classic responsiveness and to produce representations that resonate with specific groups in society through reflexivity leading to *a posteriori* responsiveness.

Karen Celis is Research Professor in the Department of Political Science at Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Brussels, Belgium: karen.celis@vub.ac.be

REFERENCES

Baldez, Lisa. 2011. "The UN Convention to Eliminate All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW): A New Way to Measure Women's Interests." *Politics & Gender* 7 (3): 419–23.

Celis, Karen. 2009. "Substantive Representation of Women (and Improving It). What is and Should it be About?" *Comparative European Politics* 6 (4): 95–113.

Celis, Karen, and Sarah Childs. 2012a. "The Substantive Representation of Women: What to do with Conservative's Claims?" *Political Studies* 60 (2): 213–25.

——. 2012b. "Diversity and Substantive Representation: Conservatives Representatives Representing Women." *Presented at ECPR Joint Sessions of Workshops, April 11–15*, 2012, Antwerp.

Celis, Karen, Sarah Childs, Johanna Kantola, and Mona Lena Krook. 2008. "Rethinking Women's Substantive Representation." *Representation* 44 (2): 99–110.

Childs, Sarah, and Joni Lovenduski. 2013. "Political Representation." In *The Oxford Handbook on Gender and Politics*, eds. Georgina Waylen, Karen Celis, Johanna Kantola and Laurel Weldon. New York: Oxford University Press.

Disch, Lisa 2011. "Towards a Mobilization Conception of Democratic Representation." *American Political Science Review* 105 (1): 100–14.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X12000542 Published online by Cambridge University Press

McBride, Dorothy, and Amy Mazur. 2010. *The Politics of State Feminism. Innovation in Comparative Research*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
Reingold, Beth, and Michele Swers. 2011. "An Endogenous Approach to Women's Interests: When Interests are Interesting in and of Themselves." *Politics & Gender* 7 (3): 429–35.
Saward, Michael. 2010. *The Representative Claim*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Severs, Eline. 2010. "Representation as Claims-Making: Quid Responsiveness?" *Representation* 46 (4): 411–23.
Phillips, Anne. 1995. *The Politics of Presence*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.
Verloo, Mieke. 2011. Gender Equality Policies as Interventions in a Changing World. Keynote lecture at the Second Gender and Politics ECPR Conference, January 13, Budapest. http://www.ecprnet.eu/sg/ecpg/documents/keyNotes/Gender_equality_policies_as_interventions_in_a_changing_world.pdf (Accessed February 20, 2011).

Toward an Integrated Perspective of Minority Representation: Views from Canada

Karen Bird, McMaster University

doi:10.1017/S1743923X12000554

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

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X12000542 Published online by Cambridge University Press