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Beyond representativeness? Trends in political representation

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The ascendancy of proportional representation as the electoral system of choice, and pervasive concerns with the demographic representativeness of parliaments, both testify to the importance that is attached to 'descriptive' or 'microcosmic' representation in politics, despite persistent doubts about its desirability. This paper makes three points. First, representation as representativeness presupposes the existence of stable and meaningful social or political collectivities, which can be reflected in the composition of parliament, and this condition is undermined by the general trend towards individualization, which can be observed throughout Western Europe. Second, this trend necessitates a conceptualization of political representation not as a state, but as a dynamic relationship between the citizen and the representative. This relationship can be characterized both by its direction (from below or from above), and by the moment at which popular control is exercised (before or after the representative's period in office). Third, it is argued that both growing uncertainty about citizen preferences and the transformation of political parties into para-statal agencies push towards representation from above; and that both growing unpredictability of the political agenda and European integration push towards ex-post popular control. These developments call for greater attention to mechanisms of accountability in representative democracies.

1. '*The Mirror Cracked …* '

More than one third of all countries have chosen some variety of Proportional Representation (PR) as their electoral system. In Western Europe PR is used by

For an earlier version of my line of reasoning in this paper, based on the Dutch situation, see R. B. Andeweg, 'De Representativiteit van het Vertegenwoordigend Stelsel?' in M. C. Burkens *et al*. (1998) *Gelet op de Grondwet* (Deventer: Kluwer), pp. 28–43. For a version focusing more on European representation see 'Towards representation ex alto and ex post?, a paper presented to the Conference on Multi-Level Party Systems: Europeanisation and the Reshaping of National Political Representation, Schuman Centre, European University Institute, Florence, 16–18 December 1999.

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more than three-quarters of the countries[1] (as a percentage of the world's population, however, PR is considerably less important because of the use of plurality systems in countries such as India and the US). According to Andersen and Eliassen, 'The main tendency since World War I until 1990 has been towards more and more mathematically just representation'.[2] In line with that trend, the 1999 elections to the European Parliament were the first to be held using PR systems in all member-states. Notwithstanding a few reversals, the ascendancy of PR testifies to the importance that is attached to 'descriptive'[3] or 'microcosmic'[4] representation in politics.

Further evidence is provided by the permanent and pervasive concern with the demographic representativeness of our representatives: there is probably no parliament in the world that has not been criticized for the 'overrepresentation' of middle-aged males, university graduates, certain occupational backgrounds such as the legal profession or the public sector, a specific ethnic group, etc (although an interesting difference exists between 'political representativeness' and 'social representativeness': current systems of PR do not seek representativeness of voters, but of political parties. On this difference, see Ref. 5).[6] In a recent volume on 'Parliaments in the World', the only reference to representation is 'representativeness',[7] and a recent study entitled 'Parliamentary Representatives in Europe 1848–2000'[8] is devoted entirely to the outcome of legislative recruitment. 'Social representation' is a concern, even where elections are based on majoritarian principles, as in the US, where a presidential ticket should be 'balanced',[49] and even when an institution is not elective, such as bureacracy.[10] As with PR, a trend has been perceived: 'Adequate representation is increasingly interpreted as implying a more adequate representation of the different social groups that make up the citizen body, and notions of 'typical' or 'mirror' or 'descriptive' representation have then returned with renewed force'.[9] Microcosmic representation features prominently in studies seeking to combine representative democracy and globalised decision-making: in Held's cosmopolitan democracy, international organisations should have 'elected supervisory boards which are in part statistically representative of their constituencies'[12].

However, providing a reflection of society is only one of the possible forms political representation may take, and compared with the alternatives that are discussed in the literature, it is probably the most heavily criticised form. The standard critique of representation as representativeness contains the following arguments:

(1) Microcosmic representation treats political decision-making as similar to direct democracy with only the scale reduced to manageable proportions: 'A particular legislator, according to this view, was not a delegate for those particular people who chose him or her, but all the legislators taken collectively would act as if the

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people themselves were acting since they were a reflection of the whole'.[13] This implies that representative democracy is a second-best solution, necessitated only by the problem of size. It ignores the Madisonian argument that representation is superior because it weds popular control to leadership, and it neglects the fact that, empirically, the roots of representation are aristocratic rather than democratic.[16] Recently, we have even formal proof that political representation is productive of more public-interested political outcomes than direct democracy.[15]

(2) Because of the reduction of scale, microcosmic representation cannot be fully representative: it is a simplification, perhaps even a distortion of reality. This gives rise to the question as to which traits are deserving of being mirrored, and which traits are not. President Nixon's nomination of Harold Carswell to the Supreme Court was defended by arguing that 'There are a lot of mediocre judges and people and lawyers, and they are entitled to a little representation, aren't they?' (*New York Times*, 17 March 1970). Many would think (and thought) that argument to be absurd, but why? 'When is a cleavage not a cleavage?'[47] or 'When are interests interesting?'.[17] And how do we deal with 'relevant' social categories that become rotten boroughs over time?

(3) Even if we find answers to those questions: so what? Why is representativeness important? There are two possible answers to this question. The first answer emphasizes the symbolic effects and argues that a parliament or a government would lack legitimacy if its composition would be too biased: 'Hunderdfünfzig Professoren: Vaterland, du bist verloren; hunderdfünfzig Advokaten: Vaterland, du bist verraten'. It may seem plausible, but there is no evidence in the very few studies that have looked at popular support for parliament.[11] The second answer stresses the policy effects on the crude Marxist assumption that a representative's background determines his or her views. Again, we lack convincing evidence. Reviewing the literature Matthews concludes that 'These scattered and inconclusive research results certainly do not add up to a finding that the social, economic, and gender biases of legislative recruitment result in a consistent policy bias of legislative institutions. The results are consistent with the lack of strong and consistent relationships between social background variables and the policy attitudes of other elite populations',[18] but this conclusion is contested by feminist scholars (see Refs 6 and 9).

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However, it is not my intention to join the debate on the pros and cons of microcosmic representation. My argument is empirical, it is that social developments increasingly render the idea of representativeness obsolete. Even if it could be shown to be, in principle, superior to other forms of representation, the preconditions for its existence are gradually disappearing. Representation as representativeness presupposes that there are meaningful collectivities in society that can be reflected in the composition of parliament (or of any other institution). This condition is fulfilled less and less. More than individual politicians, political parties have become the basic units of representation,[19] so let me start with them. The idea that parliament should be a 'fair' reflection of the distribution of party preferences in the population is built upon the underlying assumption that political parties are meaningful social or ideological categories of citizens. However, there is widespread consensus that the roots of political parties in society appear to atrophy, even when not every author agrees with each of the following symptoms:[20]

(1) In many countries political parties and their associated organizations once provided services (such as housing) directly to their members. Such political machines or 'pillarized' networks have all but disappeared, although there are still exceptions (such as Belgium). The parties' functions in this field have been taken over by the welfare state.
(2) Parties once socialized their members into citizenship and provided education and training for their cadres. This function has been made largely redundant by the much higher levels of education and the inclusion of some form of civics course in most curricula. The training of cadres has been replaced by recruitment directly from university.
(3) Parties were once a major source of information in both directions. Party meetings and the party press kept the rank and file informed, but the party press has folded or has seen its circulation drop to insignificance. Party meetings are staged to attract television coverage, rather than to distribute information. To the extent that meetings served to gauge the membership's opinion, opinion polls now perform that function.
(4) Parties once served to aggregate citizens' demands into more or less coherent political agendas, using ideology or group interest as a yardstick. Today, as the Dutch political scientist Tromp has complained: 'the only thing holding party programs together is the staple'. Royal commissions and 'think tanks' are supposed to have

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taken over the programmatic function, although it is also argued that interest aggregation has disappeared altogether.

(5) Most importantly from the perspective of political representation as social representativeness, the party system that was to be reflected in parliament was itself a reflection of social cleavages. Parties mobilized large segments of the population on a relatively permanent basis. Their decline in this respect is best illustrated by the erosion of party membership.[21] Membership has never reached a majority of the population in most countries, but the trends on party identification or party attachment similarly point to a party de-alignment.[7]

It is symptomatic of the decline of parties as meaningful collectivities in society that, in most West-European countries, voter volatility in the 1990s was higher than ever before, and voter turnout lower than ever before.[14] Fewer and fewer voters decide months in advance that they *will* vote and for which party they will vote. Eventually, most people still vote, but their choice no longer reflects a stable political preference or social interest, it is merely a blurry snapshot.

Political parties are not the only social collectivities affected by individualization, and demographic representativeness ('the politics of presence' in Phillips' postmodernist jargon[9]) is undermined in a similar fashion as political representativeness (Phillips' 'politics of ideas'). Individualization is not only affecting political parties. Religion is increasingly expressed outside churches, interest promotion is taken care of outside interest associations, such as trade unions, physical exercise outside sports clubs (Putnam's famous 'bowling alone'[23]), work outside permanent employment, love outside marriage, and even gender differences are becoming divorced from sex differences.[24] Even in the four European democracies, where subcultural identities and organizations were once so strong as to necessitate consociationalism in order to safeguard stability, the once virulent social cleavages have eroded.[42] Meanwhile, representation as representativeness presupposes that there are collectivities that can be reflected in a parliament. Without such collectivities, by definition, descriptive representation cannot work. Van Gunsteren summarizes the problem:

> Many conflicts can no longer be adequately mapped in terms of the division of labor, religious affiliation, and level of education. Even when one knows people's social position in those terms, their behavior remains pretty unpredictable. People often are not what or who they seem to be. They may have multiple or mixed identities, use identities strategically, and change identities and roles at unexpected moments. The established ways of representing this social reality through elections and empirical social research often fail to capture what is going on. Interventions by rulers who have to rely on such representative schemes often misfire.[25]

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2. From 'standing for' to 'acting for'

What I describe is a trend that has advanced further in the western industrialized world than elsewhere, and even in the western industrialized world, notwithstanding the communitarian alarm bells ringing, it has not yet run its full course. But there are no signs of a slowing down, let alone of a reversal, and this means that representation as representativeness is doomed, that it is time to think about representation, in Hanna Pitkin's words, as 'acting for' rather than as 'standing for'.[3] In that more dynamic interpretation, political representation can be compared with the activities of a lawyer on behalf of her client, of a negotiator on behalf of a trade union, of a diplomat on behalf of a state, etc. Representation is a process, but little is known about the design of this process.

In their study of representative democracy in Sweden, Esaiasson and Holmberg make a useful distinction between 'representation run from below' and 'representation run from above'.[26]

In representation from below, the process starts with the citizens. They have views and the process of representation serves to translate their views as best as possible into government policy. The touchstone for representation from below is 'responsiveness', the degree to which representatives express the opinions of the represented. In representation from above, the process starts with the representatives (whether individuals or parties). They have developed their views and, in the process of representation, they put these views to the citizens. In representation from below popular preferences are exogenous, and the process can be described as populist; in representation from above, popular preferences are endogenous to the process of representation, which can therefore be characterized as elitist.

According to Esaiasson and Holmberg, the touchstone for representation from above is 'accountability' (in contrast to the 'responsiveness' of representation from below), but in their description of their showcase model of representation from above, the 'Responsible Party Model', they are more ambivalent. 'Parties compete for voters' support on the basis of programs summarizing the policies they intend to pursue during the coming mandate period … . At the next election, finally, the voters get the opportunity to hold the governing party or coalition accountable for what it has and has not done, and they take a position on the programs of the parties for the subsequent mandate period.'[26] The concept of a mandate later becomes the key defining element (ref. 26, pp. 310–313). It authorizes political parties to pursue certain policies in the years to come, whereas accountability forces the parties to seek approval for the policies pursued in the years past. Authorization is possible without accountability and vice versa. By confusing the two, Esaiasson and Holmberg assume that people

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		Moment	
		Ex ante	*Ex post*
Direction	*Ex alto*	authorization	accountability
	Ex fundo	delegation	responsiveness

Figure 1. A repertoire of modes of representation

vote prospectively (mandate) and retrospectively (accountability) at the same time.

To avoid this confusion, a further distinction can be based on rational-choice theories of delegation.[22,28] Here, the central question is how the represented (the 'principal' in this jargon) can prevent the representative (the 'agent') from actions (or from inactivity) that are not beneficial to the represented. Instruments to this end can either precede the period of representation (*ex ante* controls, such as the screening of potential candidates or parties on the basis of their election manifestos) or follow the period of representation (*ex post* controls, such as reporting requirements). *Ex ante* controls have, as the ultimate sanction, the decision by the principal not to enter into this representational relationship; *ex post* controls have, as the ultimate sanction, the decision by the principal not to renew the representational relationship.[29,30] This distinction refers to the *moment* of popular control over the political representatives.

Together, the two distinctions constitute not so much a typology of mutually exclusive possibilities, but a repertoire from which the represented and the representatives may make constantly varying choices. Nevertheless, a political system's design of the process of representation may favour one mode over the others, and the repertoire can thus be used as a tool for comparison. Representation *ex fundo/ex ante* may be the ideal-type of democratic delegation, but it may also be unusable. Representation *ex fundo/ex post* is best illustrated by analyses of political representation in the US, with its extreme emphasis on responsiveness (or 'dynamic representation'[31] or 'hyperresponsiveness'[32]). An example of representation *ex alto/ex ante* is the 'Responsible Party Model' in which cohesive political parties present distinct programmes to the voters, who then form their preference for one programme or another and express this preference by voting for the relevant party. Through these votes, the party is mandated to (try to) implement its manifesto.[33] Representation *ex alto/ex post* is not often recognized in the literature, but in the remainder of this paper, I shall argue that we should expect this to become the dominant mode of representation, if it is not so already. In it, the representative (party or politician), like a political entrepreneur, 'is essentially proactive, identifying and promoting policies that she believes will be appreciated *ex post* rather than preferred *ex ante*'[15]

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3. Towards representation *ex alto* and *ex post*

This expectation is based on the observation of two developments that push towards representation from above, and two developments that push towards representation *ex post*.

Factors pushing towards representation from above include the following.

Uncertainty about preferences

In representation from below, the representatives are assumed to know, or to be able to ascertain, the preferences of those they represent. In their study of political representation in France, Converse and Pierce[34] concluded that the two most important factors affecting the accuracy of the representative's knowledge of his constituents' opinions are constituency homogeneity and issue longevity (i.e. the knowledge of voter sentiments is better with regard to longstanding political cleavages and for constituencies that are overwhelmingly on one side of such a cleavage). It is exactly these two conditions that are challenged by the de-collectivization that has been discussed above as undermining representation as representativeness. In desperate efforts to find out what is wanted of them, politicians turn to opinion polls and focus groups. This is in vain, because public opinion lacks the stability that allows prediction, and because public opinion is often formed only in reaction to the words and deeds of politicians.[35] In market research, surveys are being increasingly replaced by 'trial and error'. In politics, representatives increasingly resort to flying kites!

Political parties as para-statal agencies

In most political systems, political parties have replaced individual politicians as representatives. As such, parties are supposed to link society and state, but we have already pointed out the many symptoms of the erosion of the parties' position in society. Paradoxically, amidst a growing literature on the 'decline of party' and claims that 'The Party's Over',[43] we hear warnings of a '*Parteienstaat*' (Germany), '*partitocrazia*' (Italy), '*particratie*' (Belgium), '*fractiecratie*' (The Netherlands), etc. Now that their roots in society are withering, political parties seem to cling all the more desperately to the state. Mair[14] summarizes the three main symptoms of this trend. First, parties have not abandoned the one function that, in most definitions of a party, distinguishes them from other organizations: political recruitment. On the contrary, the parties' grip on the selection and recruitment of office-holders has been reinforced in some countries with the 'politicization' of appointments to quangos, administrative agencies, public enterprise, and courts. In addition, parties present themselves increasingly as

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(potential) governing parties, not content with mere representation in parliament. As Mair puts it, parties have become more office seeking. Second, perhaps to compensate for their decrease in membership, parties increasingly rely on state resources. Although the extent of public funding of parties varies considerably, there is now no European country in which parties are not subsidized in one way or the other by the state. Money is not the only resource involved: free or privileged access to the electronic media, staff resources made available to the (parliamentary) parties, etc. Third, in many countries there is now legislation on the role and function of political parties. Ostensibly, such rules and regulations constrain the parties, but they also protect the established parties against innovative new rivals and, most importantly, they formally distinguish political parties from other organizations, giving them state recognition. Again, this is a trend and not all of its symptoms are visible everywhere, but if parties have taken up a position closer to the state than to society, then obviously they are less well equipped to provide representation from below. Parties may even stop providing a link with society altogether, as would seem to be the case with the so-called 'parties of power' in the former Soviet Union,[36] rather like an aristocracy that has lost its feudal role in representing the regions and has become a court clique, waiting for the guillotine. To the extent that parties continue to be involved in representation, it would seem that representation from above is the only option left.

Factors pushing towards representation *ex post* include the following.

Unpredictability of agendas

In representation *ex ante* the voters select the representative from whom they expect policies with which they agree most, which assumes that election manifestos and campaign promises are reliable screening instruments for voters. Programmes can only guide the representatives' actions if the problems and opportunities that they will encounter after election can be predicted when the programmes are written. However, the future is becoming less and less foreseeable. First, the pace of social, economic and technological change is accelerating, outdating information, invalidating forecasts, and presenting unforeseen problems. Second, nation-states are becoming less autarkical, in a social as well as in an economic sense. On the one hand, developments elsewhere in the world spill over (environmental pollution, organized crime), while on the other hand the impact of public policy leaks away (brain-drain, capital flight). Increasingly, models such as the 'garbage can' and terms such as 'windows of opportunity' are apt descriptions of the political agenda. In such a volatile and open situation, election manifestos and coalition agreements are extremely perishable goods. Such trends reinforce the development towards less distinct party programmes noted earlier in this paper. As Strøm points out, information

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decay is undermining the effectiveness of traditional mechanisms of ex ante agent control.[37] The effects are not only felt in political representation.

Governments are giving more autonomy to bureaucratic agencies, while at the same time reinforcing mechanisms of accountability through inspectorates, ombudsmen, auditors, internal regulators, etc., amounting to what has been called an 'audit explosion'.[45] Voters seem to realize that they can rely less on plans and programmes. In studies of political cynicism, statements such as 'Politicians knowingly promise more than they can deliver' or 'One can never trust a party to keep its promises' provoke the highest levels of distrust, even in countries such as the Netherlands, where other items contradict beliefs in a widening confidence gap.[48] This would lead one to expect a growing importance of 'retrospective voting',[44] despite inherent inclinations to vote prospectively[29] and despite the blurring of accountability in multi-party government. Retrospective voting simply seems to be the only option left to voters if they want to control their representatives: 'The age of voting on the candidates' platforms is probably over, but the age of voting on the incumbents' records may be beginning'.[16]

Europeanization

The above three factors can be observed in most western industrialized democracies. Arguably, European integration provides an added impetus to all three factors in the member-states of the European Union. At the EU level, the uncertainty about citizen preferences is greater, not less. Holmberg[38] has shown that perceptual accuracy is lower among MEPs than among members of national parliaments on all issues studied, whether standard Left–Right issues such as employment, or, typically, European issues such as the common currency. As the EU is not a state, the transnational parties cannot become the para-statal agencies into which national parties are transforming, but we can observe some of the same symptoms. The EU parties have neither members nor an (EU-wide) electorate of their own, and in the eyes of the voters, they are not distinctive with regard to concrete issues.[39] In addition, the parties are well-funded and well-staffed through EU public money, while the EU party system is clearly influenced by the rules of the European Parliament (in particular, the minimum size to be recognized as a parliamentary party). European integration also has not improved the predictability of the agenda, even if we interpret European integration as a regional project to retrieve some political control over internationalizing activity. The EU has not replaced the nation-state as the highest authority but has produced 'multi-level governance' in which it is hard to predict at which level (if any) who will have how much say over what.

Scharpf offers a further argument of why representation of citizens at the EU level can only be *ex alto/ex post.* He draws a distinction between input-oriented

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legitimization (in which political choices are 'derived from the authentic preferences of the members of a community') and output-oriented legitimization (in which political choices are legitimate because they 'effectively promote the common welfare of the constituency in question').[40] There is an obvious resemblance between Scharpf's output-oriented legitimization and representation *ex alto/ex post,* especially with regard to the role of elections: 'In contrast to their function in input-oriented concepts, however, [in output-oriented concepts] elections are not meant to express the "will of the people" with regard to policy choices, for which they would indeed be poorly suited under most conditions. Instead, they are important as the infrastructure of political accountability which institutionalizes and reinforces the normative orientation of office holders toward the public interest'.[40] In his version of the familiar consociationalists' argument, Scharpf goes on to argue that input-oriented legitimacy requires a 'thick' collective identity when no consensus can be achieved, because majority decisions are only acceptable when the minority can trust the majority not to trample on its interests. The socio-cultural conditions for such trust are simply not available in the European Union, nor are they likely to develop soon. The solution to the democratic deficit must therefore be sought in strengthening output-oriented legitimization because 'In principle, at any rate, output-oriented legitimacy has no difficulty in allowing for the coexistence of multiple, nested or overlapping, collective identities defined by specific classes of problem-solving concerns, and organized according to territorial as well as functional criteria'.[40]

4. Conclusions

This paper consists of three parts. In the first, it argues that the erosion of stable and collective identities in society is rendering representation as representativeness obsolete. Given the dominance of 'microscopic representation' in thinking about political representation, in particular in continental Europe, this is likely to be the most controversial part of my argument. Assuming that I have not lost the reader at that hurdle, I argue next that the erosion of representation as 'standing for' necessitates a revival of thinking about representation as 'acting for'. The literature on this form of political representation is still dominated by the 'mandate-independence' controversy, going back to Burke and Mill,[46] and famously operationalized for empirical research as 'delegates v. trustees' by Eulau and Wahlke.[41] Using both recent behaviouralist and rational-choice work on representation, I developed a new two-dimensional repertoire of modes of political representation. In it, representation is seen as a relationship between the citizen (the principal) and the representative (the agent). This relationship is defined by its direction (from below or from above) and by the moment at which it is created (*ex ante* or *ex post*). In the third part of the paper, I argue that both

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uncertainty about citizen preferences and the transformation of the representatives (i.e. political parties) into para-statal agents push towards representation from above, and that both the unpredictability of the political agenda and Europeanization push towards representation *ex post*.

If it is true that political representation is already, or is becoming increasingly, *ex alto* and *ex post*, it opens up new questions of constitutional design. Strøm asserts that the parliamentary system of government (which is the most common form of representative democracy, certainly in Europe), relies more heavily on *ex ante*- than on *ex post* controls.[37] The shift towards representation *ex alto/ex post* without the development of more and better mechanisms for accountability will result in a blurring of the distinction between this, admittedly most elitist, form of democracy and oligarchy. In this respect, it is worrying that most current proposals for political reform (with the exception of the abrogative referendum or popular veto) do not address the need to strengthen *ex post* controls.

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