

**ERC Starting Grant 2022  
Research proposal [Part B1]**

**Multidimensional Representation: Enabling An Alternative  
Research Agenda on the Citizen-Politician Relationship**

**MULTIREP**

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Duration: 60 months**

Political representation – the relationship between politicians and citizens – is at the core of democracy’s legitimacy and functioning. Most empirical research in political science studies two aspects of representation: 1) whether politicians’ substantive policy preferences match those of the citizenry, or 2) whether representatives are “like” their constituents in terms of descriptive characteristics (e.g. gender or race).

However, recent research in political theory has highlighted additional dimensions of the citizen-politician relationship (e.g. whether citizens identify with politicians they have not voted for, how politicians relate to their party) and argued that citizens’ own views of how they want to be represented should be the starting point for studying representation. Yet, these insights have barely affected how representation is studied in quantitative political science, suggesting that we may currently neglect important aspects of representation. MULTIREP aims to ascertain whether citizens care about further dimensions of representation and develop the methodological tools to study them, thereby fundamentally reshaping the scope and depth of empirical research in the field.

First, it uses in-depth citizen interviews and survey-experimental techniques to determine how people think about representation and which dimensions are important to them. Second, for the most important dimensions, it develops novel quantitative survey and text-analytical tools to measure citizens’ preferences and politicians’ behavior. Third, it advances and operationalizes normative standards to assess the quality of representation on these dimensions on the basis of empirical data.

Thereby, MULTIREP will enable an alternative research agenda on the citizen-politician relationship that takes a broader perspective. Given citizens’ declining trust in democratic politics, we cannot afford to maintain an incomplete picture of what it means for citizens to feel “represented”.

## Section a: Extended Synopsis of the scientific proposal

### Overview and aims

**Political representation – the relationship between politicians and citizens** – is at the core of modern democracy’s legitimacy and functioning. However, concerns about a deep disconnect between citizens and political elites have increased in many democracies recently. Politicians and parties are said to have become less willing or able to represent the policy preferences of their constituents (e.g. Druckman and Jacobs 2016; Fiorina and Abrams 2012; Jacobs and Shapiro 2000; Mair 2013; Thomassen and van Ham 2014). This **“crisis of political representation”** is viewed as a major cause of decreasing levels of support for existing political institutions and the accompanying rise of populism (e.g. Aarts and Thomassen 2008; Castanho Silva and Wratil 2021; Dahlberg, Linde, and Holmberg 2015; Dalton 2007; Ezrow and Xezonakis 2011; van Ham, Thomassen, Aarts, and Andeweg 2017; Mayne and Hakhverdian 2017; Wratil and Wäckerle n.d.).

Although we still lack widely-accepted explanations for this crisis of representation, quantitative political science has rarely questioned how it studies political representation. Instead, it has continued to focus on whether citizens and politicians share the same policy preferences (i.e., *substantive* representation) or whether politicians resemble citizens on characteristics such as age, gender, race, or education (i.e., *descriptive* representation). But **what if citizens care about other aspects of representation?** Current work in **political theory highlights additional dimensions** of representation (e.g. Mansbridge 2003; Rehfeld 2009; Saward 2010) that citizens may care about and argues that the **study of representation must be more relational**, not assuming but eliciting what citizens want from representation and comparing it to politicians’ behavior (e.g. Disch 2015; Saward 2010).

The central aim of MULTIREP is to **enable an alternative, innovative research agenda on representation** that builds on these insights, closes the current gap between theoretical and empirical work and “resets” the quantitative study of representation to start from the viewpoint of citizens. This agenda will also provide new explanations for why many citizens withdraw support from and feel disenchanted with representative democracy, for representation may fail on hitherto neglected dimensions (e.g. *not* substantive/descriptive) that are outside of our field of vision. To achieve these aims, MULTIREP will engage with three core research questions:

1. **DIMENSIONS: Which aspects do citizens consider when they evaluate representation and which of these aspects are most important to them?** MULTIREP adopts an approach that draws on democratic theory as a resource and uses in-depth interviews with citizens as well as experiments embedded in population surveys to identify these dimensions of representation.
2. **MEASUREMENT: How can these dimensions be empirically measured on the side of citizens and politicians using quantitative methods?** MULTIREP will develop and validate novel survey instruments and scales to measure citizens’ preferences as well as quantitative, automated text-analytical models for parliamentary speech and social media data to measure politicians’ behavior on these representation dimensions. Bespoke software and tools will be made available to the academic community.
3. **STANDARDS: What constitutes normatively “good” representation on these dimensions and how can the normative quality of representation be assessed in quantitative data?** MULTIREP will specify and operationalize normative criteria (e.g. whether citizens’ views and politicians’ actions on representation match), engaging a close dialogue between democratic theory and empirical research.

### State-of-the-art and motivation

The study of representation is a large field in quantitative political science. However, most work broadly fits into two categories, most prominently defined by Pitkin (1967). First, work on *substantive representation* investigates whether, to what extent and under what conditions political actors adopt their constituents’ substantive policy views and try to implement them (e.g. Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002; Gilens 2012; Lax and Phillips 2012; Wlezien and Soroka 2010). Second, studies of *descriptive representation* ascertain to what extent and with what consequences politicians resemble citizens on various “descriptive” characteristics, such as gender, age, race, education, or social class (e.g. Bratton and Ray 2002; Dassonneville and McAllister 2018; Sobolewska, McKee, and Campbell 2018; Wängnerud 2009). In recent work (Wolkenstein and Wratil 2021), the Principal Investigator (PI) conducted a bibliographic analysis of a random sample of 246 research articles on political representation that employed quantitative methods and were published in leading U.S. and European political science journals between 2013 and 2019. The results were striking: Out of all references to theoretical conceptions of representation, substantive and descriptive representation (along with very few references to other conceptions coined by Pitkin) accounted for roughly 90% of all references in quantitative scholarship. Moreover, a large share of the literature that did not explicitly engage with descriptive and substantive representation used other terms that nevertheless are connected to these aspects of representation (e.g. “ideological congruence”, “policy responsiveness”, “representation of women”). This demonstrates that **current quantitative scholarship on representation is overwhelmingly about substantive and descriptive representation.**

This focus is problematic for at least two reasons. First, innovative work in **political theory has recently discovered novel dimensions of representation** that are *not* subsumed by descriptive and substantive representation but highlight additional aspects. The start of this development can be traced back to Mansbridge (2003), who presents four innovative forms of representation; most notably “gyroscopic representation”, which emphasizes that politicians can represent citizens by using their own judgment and without caring about their reelection, and “surrogate representation”, which highlights that representatives may choose to represent citizens that have not voted for them (i.e., in other electoral districts). Building on and critiquing Mansbridge, Rehfeld (2009) foregrounded three distinctions in representation: (1) whether representatives are more vs. less sensitive to sanctions, (2) whether they are self- or other-reliant in their judgment (e.g. relying on experts, interest groups), and (3) whether they aim at the good of the whole (e.g. society, the public good) or the good of a part (e.g. a certain group). Most radically, Saward (2006, 2010) put forward the idea that representation is a *claim* by an actor to be the representative of someone that is either accepted or rejected but not in need of any electoral relationship between citizens and politicians (e.g. celebrities or activists can be representatives). These **conceptual innovations suggest that we should study representation on more than two dimensions**.

Second, we know relatively little about whether citizens care about any dimensions of representation beyond substantive and descriptive. For instance, we do not know to what extent citizens prefer “surrogate” representation; if citizens expect representation from politicians in other electoral districts or from parties they did not vote for, the field’s focus on electoral relationships would not fully account for what “being represented” means to citizens. This is also problematic from the viewpoint of the “**constructivist turn**” in representation theory, which argues that representation is created and shaped by both the representative(s) and the represented (Disch 2015; Montanaro 2018; Saward 2018, 2010). A key implication for empirical research is that we should **study representation relationally**: Instead of assuming that citizens value a particular form of representation (e.g. strong substantive representation), we should study *how citizens want to be represented and whether representatives meet these expectations*. How much do citizens want representatives to focus on substantive, descriptive, or surrogate representation, to be sensitive to electoral sanctions, emancipate from their party, or aim for the public good? And do politicians precisely deliver on these wishes? As the PI has shown (Wolkenstein and Wratil 2021), most current research focuses on how politicians act, much less on how citizens want to be represented, and almost none is genuinely *relational* – comparing in one study how citizens want to be represented and whether politicians adhere to these wishes (for an exception, see Grose, Malhotra, and Van Houweling 2015).

MULTIREP proposes to “**reset**” the **quantitative study of representation** by fundamentally questioning what aspects of representation we should study and in what ways. It argues that quantitative scholarship cannot afford to continue to ignore recent political theory work, must be open to studying additional dimensions of representation, and should build up a new research agenda: one **starting from the citizens’ perspective**.

### Conceptual framework

Starting from the perspective of citizens, who can hold varied and partially unexpected views of how they want to be represented, implies that MULTIREP may **discover novel dimensions of representation** that are important to citizens but do not figure in scholarly literature. Nevertheless, MULTIREP will engage with citizens on the basis of six preconceived dimensions of representation to structure citizens’ thought process and ensure basic **operationalizability of concepts for quantitative research**. These dimensions encompass substantive and descriptive representation as well as four further dimensions, which the PI has recently developed (Wolkenstein and Wratil 2021), reconstructing those conceptual innovations in the political theory field that are feasibly operationalizable for quantitative empirical research. From a relational perspective, the dimensions are:

- **Substantive representation**: the extent to which citizens want politicians to realize their policy preferences and priorities, and whether politicians actually engage in this behavior. It is assumed that not all citizens always want strong substantive representation, for instance, because they may lack clear-cut policy preferences on some issues and want representatives to defer to other actors (e.g. experts).
- **Descriptive representation**: the extent to which citizens want politicians to “look” or “be like” them on various characteristics and politicians’ ability to be descriptively representative of citizens.
- **Surrogation**: the extent to which citizens expect politicians they did not vote for to represent them as well as politicians’ attempts to represent constituents that never cast their votes for them. Surrogation can occur because the citizen and the representative are in different electoral districts (*territorial surrogation*), or because “the constituent considers as her representative a specific elected representative of a party for whom she did not vote” (*partisan surrogation*) (Wolkenstein and Wratil 2021, 869).
- **Justification**: the extent to which citizens want representatives to advance their preferences with reference to the common good versus the goods of groups or individuals, and how politicians speak in this regard.

Justification is primarily about framing representation in terms of “republican” (aiming for the public good) vs. “pluralist” (aiming for the good of a group) terms (Rehfeld 2009).

- **Personalization:** the degree to which citizens want politicians to act independently of their party and representatives’ actual party independence (e.g. by speaking or voting against the party), spanning the whole spectrum from the representative-as-party-member, who acts in accordance with the party line, to the “independent leader”, “spokesperson of her constituents”, or even “party rebel” (e.g. Kam 2009).
- **Responsiveness:** how much citizens want their representatives to be concerned about electoral sanctions and politicians’ actual sanction sensitivity (cf. Rehfeld 2009). Note that responsiveness is not about whether representatives follow the views of their constituents *per se* (as the term is often used in the literature), but crucially about whether they do so to forestall electoral sanctions. It is therefore also distinct from substantive representation that can occur with or without sanction-sensitive representatives (e.g. by coincidence).

### Enabling an alternative research agenda with new methods

We currently **lack the methodological toolbox to study representation in a relational understanding on most dimensions of representation**. While significant work on the citizens’ side has engaged with citizens’ preferences for representation (e.g., Bøggild 2020; Bowler 2017; Campbell et al. 2016; Carman 2006; Eulau et al. 1959; Harden 2015; McMurray and Parsons 1965; Rosset, Giger, and Bernauer 2017; Wolak 2017), most of this work deals with substantive/descriptive representation or aspects that cannot be easily related to current theorizing on representation (e.g. the trustee-delegate distinction). Moreover, most research relies on single questions about representation rather than carefully **validated batteries of survey items that can precisely gauge citizens’ preferences on multiple dimensions of representation**. On the politicians side, many approaches have been used to study substantive (and descriptive) representation, but we mostly **lack standardized and widely applicable quantitative approaches to measure politicians’ behavior on other dimensions**. For instance, the few studies that measure surrogate representation use strategies that work for their specific question and context but are hardly applicable across contexts (e.g. Angevine 2017; Broockman 2013; Clark Wilson and Curtis Ellis 2014). Even for personalization, perhaps the most measured dimension of representation beyond substantive/descriptive, we mostly lack measures beyond those based on politicians’ voting records against their party (e.g. Kam 2009), which are less reliable across systems, given varying levels of party discipline. To enable researchers to measure representation on various dimensions and on both the citizens’ and the representatives’ sides, MULTIREP will **develop a novel, comprehensive and unified toolbox of survey instruments and text-analytical models** that can be used across various contexts.

### Work packages of MULTIREP

MULTIREP will be divided in three work packages (WPs) that collect data and develop tools for **eight democracies**: Denmark, Germany, Hungary, France, Italy, Poland, UK, U.S. To ensure the universal applicability of the developed concepts and tools across contexts, the country case selection represents the full diversity in terms of factors expected to be related to multidimensional representation,

such as electoral systems (e.g. proportional vs. majoritarian, open vs. closed lists), party systems (two- vs. multi-party), or political system support. For instance, many parties in a system should enable more pluralist/particularistic vs. republican justification, and majoritarian electoral systems should incentivize more responsiveness.

**WP1. DIMENSIONS: What aspects of representation do citizens care about?** WP1 will explore how citizens think about the concept of representation, which dimensions of the practice are important to them, and how these dimensions are cognitively connected to political system support (e.g. satisfaction with democracy, populist sentiment). The aim of WP1 is to identify and define key conceptual dimensions of representation that political scientists should study from a constructivist perspective on representation – because they are important to citizens. In a first step, MULTIREP will inductively explore what aspects citizens think about when they are asked to assess whether they “feel represented” by some political actor using mass online surveys with open-ended questions on representation in a subset of the countries ( $n = 10,000$ ) as well as follow-up video-call interviews with some respondents ( $n = 200-250$ ). Interviews will provide in-depth information about how citizens think about representation, whether their understanding relates to MULTIREP’s preconceived dimensions, and how their representation preferences are related to their evaluations of the political system. All interview data will be anonymized where possible and personal contact information will be stored securely and deleted after data collection. The open-ended survey responses and automatically-transcribed interview data (Proksch, Wratil,

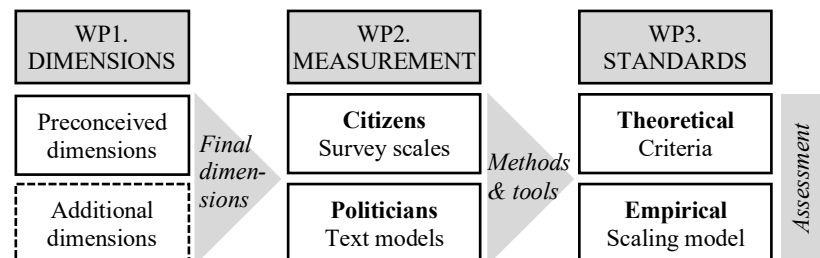


Figure: Overview of project structure

and Wäckerle 2019) will be analyzed with structural topic models (Roberts et al. 2014) and human hand-coding. This will yield a set of “**candidate**” dimensions of representation that respondents perceive to be important to them. In a second step, a set of **stated-preference survey experiments** will be designed (Hainmueller, Hopkins, and Yamamoto 2014) in which choices vary on all candidate dimensions identified to validate which dimensions are actually important for citizens’ representation preferences (see pilot design in Figure 1 in B2). For instance, respondents could be presented with the choice between two politicians that vary on all dimensions of representation and asked which one better “represents them in politics”. The experiments will be fielded in a subset of countries ( $n = 10,000$ ). The results will reveal **which dimensions of representation causally affect citizens’ representation preferences** as well as if and how this varies between countries and groups of citizens.

**WP2. MEASUREMENT: How to measure representation on the citizens’ and the politicians’ sides?** WP2 will develop instruments to measure citizens’ preferences and politicians’ behavior on the dimensions identified in WP1. It will provide easy-to-use, generic tools that can be employed for any future research project on representation. On the side of citizens, MULTIREP will develop and validate **survey scales** (consisting of a battery of items in all seven languages covered by the country sample, see example in Figure 2 in B2). A large set of potential survey items measuring representation on each dimension will be pretested to determine a battery of items with high measurement validity and reliability. Subsequently, the developed batteries will be validated in a **multinational survey** on high-quality, representative samples ( $n = 1,000$ - $2,000$ , depending on country) in all eight countries (e.g. with YouGov, Kantar). A variety of validity tests will be employed (e.g. predictive validity: do partisans value party-independence less?) and the survey will also describe the relationship between preferences for representation and measures of political system support (e.g. satisfaction with democracy). This will provide key corollary results on **how citizens’ preferences for representation on overlooked dimensions are linked to support for democracy** (e.g. what kind of representation want those that have withdrawn support from democracy?).

On the politicians side, MULTIREP will develop **quantitative text models** that allow researchers to automatically measure politicians’ behavior on different dimensions of representation from their word usage in political texts. These models will be calibrated for all seven languages covered as well as for legislative speech and social media data, and made publicly available in an **R software package**. In a first step, all publicly available **legislative speech data** (Gentzkow, Shapiro, and Taddy 2018; Rauh and Schwalbach 2020) and all historic **Twitter and Facebook posts** by current and previous legislators in all countries will be collected. In a second step, text models for each dimension will be developed using **advanced quantitative text and machine learning methods**. As the set of dimensions of representation is determined over the course of the project (see WP1), the exact text-analytical approaches will have to be developed in due course. However, the four preconceived dimensions that currently escape empirical measurement could be measured as follows: *Territorial surrogation* could be measured by relying on new technologies of **location extraction** from texts (e.g. the CLAVIN software) to see how often politicians talk about places and people outside vs. inside their district. *Partisan surrogation* could be measured by relying on **supervised machine learning methods** (e.g. neural networks, random forests) and hand-coding a sample of speech paragraphs and social media posts for whether they contain cross-partisan appeals. *Justification* in terms of the use of republican vs. pluralist frames could be captured by developing bespoke word dictionaries with a **word embeddings** approach (see pilot model in Table 1 in B2; Rheault and Cochrane 2020; Rodriguez and Spirling n.d.). *Personalization* could be measured through **sentiment analysis** (Proksch et al. 2019), scoring whether politicians mention their party and its leadership personnel in a context of positive vs. negative words. A key observable implication of *responsiveness* (i.e., the sanction-sensitivity of the politician) is that legislators should change their positions when electoral sanctions are looming. Therefore, it is crucial to track changes in positions over time, especially around election dates. A **dynamic text scaling model** could be developed on the basis of standard scaling algorithms (Lauderdale and Herzog 2016; Slapin and Proksch 2008) and Bayesian dynamic factor analysis (cp. Martin and Quinn 2002; Schnakenberg and Fariss 2013) that allows researchers to see whether politicians change their positions more strongly before elections. All quantitative text models developed will be validated against hand-coding as a “gold standard”.

**WP3. STANDARDS: How to identify “good” relational representation in data?** WP3 will engage with how empirical researchers can make reasoned judgments about the quality of representation from a relational perspective and on multiple dimensions. In recent work (Wolkenstein and Wratil 2021), the PI has suggested that a normative criterion to evaluate representation is the extent to which citizens’ views of *how representatives should act are congruent with representatives’ actual actions* (**congruence criterion**). This criterion will be scrutinized and further developed in view of normative and empirical objections to deliver robust and operationalizable normative standards. The PI will invest about 25% of his work package time in WP3. Wherever WP3 engages with normative questions, the PI will collaborate with Fabio Wolkenstein (University of Vienna), a political theorist with leading expertise in normative questions of representation and close collaborator of the PI, who has fully committed to his involvement in the project. In a first step, the PI will ask 10 **leading scholars**

**of representation** to provide critiques of the congruence criterion that will be addressed to make the developed normative standard appeal to the scholarly community. The PI is already aware that the congruence criterion can be criticized as too minimalist, not taking into account wider democratic values (e.g. if politicians undermine democratic values, but this is congruent with citizens' wishes) and is underspecified with regard to concerns about causality (e.g. what if politicians make citizens want something through propagandistic means?). Empirically, WP3 addresses the problem that citizens' preferences for representation and politicians' representative practices are measured on different scales (i.e., a survey scale and an output from a text model), making it hard to compare them directly (for the congruence criterion and similar criteria). This problem will be addressed with **"anchoring" or "bridging vignettes"** (e.g. Bakker, Jolly, Polk, and Poole 2014; King, Murray, Salomon, and Tandon 2004): text examples from speeches or social media for a certain dimension of representation are rated by citizens in a survey that includes the survey scale on this dimension. Citizens' and politicians' positions can then be rescaled in a common space using citizens' rating of the text examples as a "bridge" between their own preferences and outputs of the text models. Methods will be developed and made available in *R*.

### High risk, high gain

MULTIREP is basic research that will provide **fundamental knowledge** about how citizens think about representation as well as new methods that enable researchers to study representation multidimensionally and relationally – starting from the citizens' viewpoint. MULTIREP is expected to significantly **change the direction of the field of quantitative representation research**, freeing it from its focus on substantive and descriptive representation and the behavior of politicians, replacing the set of key concepts and methods that have dominated this field for decades. The long-term gains of such a reorientation are vast and hard to predict, given the nature of basic research. However, MULTIREP definitely will provide new impulses for important debates in political science and practice, wherever representation plays a role but a focus on substantive and descriptive representation may be too limiting or assumptions about citizens' preferences may be inaccurate. This includes debates about whether deficient representation is a key cause of diminishing political system support, legitimacy beliefs, feelings of disconnect, affective polarization, and populist sentiment in Western democracies (e.g. see Mair 2013). If citizens value dimensions in the citizen-politician relationship we are not studying at the moment (e.g. surrogate representation, ways of justification), it will be hard to make progress on these debates without a **full picture of what it means for citizens to feel "represented"**. MULTIREP will provide exactly this.

The major risk associated with MULTIREP stems from its ambition to start from the citizens' viewpoint. In WP1, it may turn out that citizens do not care about several of the preconceived dimensions of MULTIREP's conceptual framework. In this case, WP2 will focus on potential sub-dimensions of those dimensions identified in WP1. For instance, if citizens cared a lot about descriptive representation, WP2 would develop instruments that can capture differences in citizens' preferences and politicians' behavior on sub-dimensions, such as descriptive representation by gender vs. age vs. education. MULTIREP would also revisit the constructivist notion that citizens can be represented in all ways they want to and consider whether some theoretical dimensions of representation may be normatively important, even though citizens might not perceive them as important. Crucially, if MULTIREP found that citizens indeed only care about a small set of representation dimensions, this would make a significant contribution guiding any future research on representation.

### Dissemination and schedule

MULTIREP will produce > 9 journal articles targeted at top outlets (e.g. *American Journal of Political Science*, *American Political Science Review*) as well as a monograph with a leading publisher (OUP, CUP). To kick-start a new research agenda on representation, the project team will also organize a special issue together with interested colleagues using the new framework and tools, a series of free online workshops for researchers introducing the developed *R* software package as well as present outputs at international conferences. Moreover, the PI will apply for inclusion of the developed survey scales on citizens' representation preferences in large-scale social science surveys (e.g. European Social Survey, Comparative Study of Electoral Systems) and disseminate the tools to his third-sector network (e.g. Bertelsmann Stiftung, UK Electoral Reform Society). These activities are detailed in B2.

### Team

MULTIREP will be developed together with a team of doctoral and postdoctoral researchers as well as research assistants, who will be involved in different work packages.

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