Minoritized citizens' perspectives on political representation

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

We don't vote
We don't care about politics in The Hague
What did politics ever do for me?
I didn't see anything
And yet there are opportunities
But then our generation must rise
Standing up to the people who make the rules
But fail to consider us
Because eh
How do you not vote
Maybe there's a party or a person amongst them
Which you can relate to
And if you don't vote for anything
Then vote against something
Vote against the people who don't represent you
Vote against the people you disagree with
Do something!
Make noise!
Coach your friends and represent yourself![1]

In the run-up to the 2021 national elections in the Netherlands, the community-driven platform Represent Yourself [*Represent Jezelf*] posted a video on Instagram with the above spoken text. The video was part of a broader social media campaign that called upon Dutch youth, mainly with bicultural backgrounds, to turn out to vote. The videos featured youngsters themselves and articulated political views in everyday language. The spoken text reveals skepticism toward established parliamentary politics. Young people do not always vote. They may not care about politics, because politicians do not seem to care about them. Yet, the campaign includes a call to action: a new generation can stand up to the status quo by voting en masse.

1 Represent Jezelf, Instagram, February 10, 2021. https://www.instagram.com/represent.jezelf/p/CLHaO_QBPqU/. Last accessed 15-12-2024. Translated from Dutch by the author.

Represent Yourself's campaign goes to the heart of this dissertation, which centers the perspectives of ethnically/racially minoritized[2] citizens on political representation. Citizens occupy a crucial role in political representation processes. Political representation is about "acting in the interest of citizens, in a manner responsive to them" (Pitkin, 1967, p. 209). However, politics is not equally responsive to the interests of all citizens. Citizens who have been historically excluded from electoral politics, including ethnicized/racialized minorities, are underrepresented in most parliaments and their voices are less heard (Williams, 1998; Mügge et al., 2024). Additionally, they are often the object of politicized, exclusionary debates about integration and Islam (Kešić & Duyvendak, 2019). Unequal political representation undermines democratic legitimacy, "the degree to which those affected by it [politics] have been included in the decision-making processes and have had the opportunity to influence the outcomes" (Young, 2000, p. 5). Unequal representation can fuel unequal participation. When people feel that politics only works for elites, they may disengage. A vicious cycle can arise in which citizens who vote less lose political influence and further withdraw from politics (Spierings & Vermeulen, 2023).

By centering how minoritized citizens think and feel about political representation, I complement scholarship that often privileges the perspectives of researchers or politicians. Political theorists have written extensively about what political representation means and under what circumstances citizens are, or should be, represented (Pitkin, 1967; Mansbridge, 1999; Saward, 2006). Empirical research predominantly focuses on minoritized politicians, documenting the obstacles they face in their trajectories toward political power (Hughes, 2011; Krook, 2009), and how they speak and act for the groups they are associated with (Lovenduski, 2001; Kroeber, 2017; Mügge et al., 2019). This dissertation contributes to this field by examining how citizens conceptualize representation, how their perspectives relate to established theoretical frameworks, and how they evaluate political representatives.

I build on constructivist and intersectional work on political representation (Saward, 2006; Squires, 2008; Rehfeld, 2011; Hardy-Fanta, 2013; Reingold et al., 2020). Constructivists conceptualize representation as a process in which political actors strategically create constituencies and frame citizens' concerns. Hence, how citizens are politically represented is not neutral, necessarily positive,

2 With "ethnically/racially minoritized" – hereafter "minoritized" – I refer to individuals who are positioned as the "other" based on perceived ethnic or racial difference. For more information, please consult the terminology section in this introduction.

or aligned with how citizens understand their own political identities and want to be politically represented. Intersectionality emphasizes within- and between-group difference based on, inter alia, ethnicity/race, class, gender, ability, age, and sexuality (Crenshaw, 1989; Hancock, 2007). Political representation can favor the relatively privileged within a group over the disadvantaged, depending on political contexts (Hughes, 2011; Strolovitch, 2007). These combined insights, I argue, require centering how citizens self-identify in politics and how they evaluate the political actors who speak in their name. Doing so, I consider variation within and between groups, and between country contexts. The overarching question this dissertation aims to answer is:

How do ethnically/racially minoritized citizens perceive political representation?

To answer this research question, the chapters in this dissertation explore different aspects of citizens' perspectives: experiences, evaluations, and actions. Experiences refer to the range of intuitions, emotions, and situations that minoritized citizens associate with political representation. Evaluations encompass the range of interpretations minoritized citizens form toward political representation. These include interpretations of what identities matter to citizens in politics, what their interests are, what it means to be represented, and what makes a good political representative. Actions comprise the range of activities that minoritized citizens consider to effect change in political representation processes, such as voting.

Building on the work of social movement scholars and deliberative democrats (Young, 2000; Weldon, 2011), this dissertation analyzes how citizens' perspectives emerge in interactive settings: in focus group conversations where citizens exchange and contrast their views. Empirically, it draws on a dataset consisting of 29 focus groups with 143 minoritized citizens across France, Germany, and the Netherlands. The analysis considers differences and similarities in how citizens talk about political representation, derived from self-identification with multiple, crosscutting social groups, migration history, and country context. This approach results in the following four sub-questions, which the combined empirical chapters of this dissertation answer:

i. How do minoritized citizens experience political representation?
ii. How do minoritized citizens evaluate political representation?
iii. How do minoritized citizens relate experiences and evaluations of political representation to their political participation?

iv. How do intersecting social categories, migration histories, and country contexts feature in how minoritized citizens perceive political representation?

A note on terminology: Race/ethnicity, gender/sex, migration background

In this dissertation, I use the term "ethnically/racially minoritized." "Race" does not refer to any biological reality, but to the outcome of sociopolitical racialization processes. This encompasses "the extension of racial meaning to a previously racially unclassified relationship, social practice, or group" (Omi & Winant, 2014, p. 111). Racialization is inextricably linked to colonialism, in which racial categorization provided justification for slavery and exploitation, categorizing white Western Europeans as superior and civilized vis-à-vis dehumanized "others" (Bonilla-Silva, 1997). Although race is socially constructed, it has real life implications. Individuals in dominant racialized categories have better life chances relative to people in disadvantaged categories. Minoritized Europeans face ethnic/racial discrimination in the labor market (Ramos et al., 2021; Thijssen et al., 2021; Quillian & Lee, 2020), housing (Acolin et al., 2016), health care (Rivenbark & Ichou, 2020), and everyday interactions (Special Eurobarometer 535: Discrimination in the EU, 2023).

After the Second World War, race became a taboo term in the European context. Its continuing salience is often denied (Goldberg, 2006; Stoler, 2011). "Ethnicity" is the more commonly used term, which refers to "the social system that gives meaning to ethnic differences between people — to differences based on origin, appearance, history, culture, language, and religion" (Wekker, 2016, p. 22). In practice, the distinction between race and ethnicity is often blurred. Ethnicity is commonly attributed to the "other", while whiteness remains an unmarked category (Wekker, 2016, p. 22). Like appearance, culture, language, or ancestry, religion can become a racialized marker of difference. In Europe, Islam and Muslims are often portrayed as categorically incompatible with the nation (Beaman, 2017). I use ethnicity and race interchangeably in this dissertation, as both describe similar processes of othering based on perceived difference (Wekker, 2016, p. 23–24; Hall, 1989). I use "minoritized" instead of "minority" to emphasize how individuals are actively made into a minority by the dominant society.

Like ethnicity/race, gender involves "a collection of institutions: a set of rules, norms, and practices" which construct "what it means to be or to belong to a particular sex group" (Htun & Weldon, 2018, p. 4-5). Earlier feminist work distinguished between "sex" and "gender," referring to physiological differences between men and women, and the different social meanings and values attached to female and

male categories (femininity and masculinity), respectively (Richardson, 2006, p. 10). Patriarchal gender institutions privilege masculinity and devalue femininity, which, among other things, result in women being seen as less worthy of dignity, more likely to be subject to sexual violence, and disproportionately carrying out underpaid and undervalued work (Htun & Weldon, 2018, p. 6). Postmodern thinkers emphasize that gender socially constructs sex (Butler, 2004; Haraway, 1991). Sex differences become legitimate social categories through gendered classification systems (Jackson, 2006, p. 41-42). Biologically, it is not possible to clearly distinguish physical characteristics that always apply to any sex group (Hawkesworth, 2013). I consider gender as socially constructed gendered categories that influence individuals' social status and experiences.

I distinguish ethnicity/race and gender/sex as social categories from state, census, or policy categories. Countries routinely use "state categories" to gather data for administrative and policy purposes (Monk, 2022). State gender categories often assume sex and gender as binary and mutually determined, excluding trans people or individuals with intersex characteristics (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2022). State ethnic/racial categories vary widely among countries. Whereas the United States uses categories such as white, African-American, Hispanic/Latino, or Asian-American, many Western European countries distinguish based on "migration background." Migration background categories formally focus on the migration history of individuals and their descendants. However, migration background categorizations in political discourse and policy often contain ethnicizing/racializing logics, marking individuals with migration backgrounds from certain countries as a problem category (Mügge & Van der Haar, 2016; Yanow & Van der Haar, 2013) and placing them outside the national imagined community (Elrick & Schwartzman, 2015). Social categories and state categories do not necessarily correspond to individuals' self-identifications, which the theoretical framework discusses in more detail.

Theoretical framework and main arguments

This section sets out tools to analyze citizens' perspectives. The dissertation builds on political representation scholarship, intersectionality theory, and comparative work on ethnicity/race and migration. Based on insights from these scholarly fields, I argue why it is necessary to examine how citizens think and feel about representation. Lastly, I set out my approach to mapping minoritized citizens' perspectives.

Political representation

Political theorists have developed different views of what political representation means, when citizens are represented, and when representation succeeds or fails. Most empirical studies draw on Hanna Pitkin's (1967) classic work, in which she distinguishes four dimensions of representation. *Formal* representation refers to mechanisms of authorization and accountability that anchor representation institutionally. Citizens authorize politicians by voting for them during elections and hold them accountable during the next election cycle. *Descriptive* representation pertains to similarities in social background between politicians and citizens, like gender or class. *Symbolic* representation occurs when symbols like flags represent a group because people perceive it to be so by belief or custom. *Substantive* representation – which is the most important of the four, according to Pitkin (1967, p. 113) – involves "acting for others, an activity on behalf of, in the interest of […] someone else."

Who determines what citizens' interests are remains ambiguous. Pitkin (1967) distinguishes "delegates" who closely follow citizens' wishes, and "trustees" who act based on their own interpretation of citizens' interests. Politicians should act independently but should not structurally go against citizens' wishes (Pitkin, 1967). This classical view of substantive representation assumes that citizens have *a priori* interests, which politicians can know and advocate for. Much empirical scholarship subsequently studies the congruence between citizens' policy preferences and representatives' opinions or political decisions (Powell, 2004; Arnold & Franklin, 2012; Gilens, 2005).

In the 1990s and 2000s, feminist scholarship (Phillips, 1995; Williams, 1998; Mansbridge, 1999; Young, 2000) revisited representation. This work focused on historically excluded groups that continue to experience structural barriers in politics, such as women, and ethnicized/racialized minorities. Feminists criticized Pitkin's dichotomy between who politicians are and what they do – descriptive and substantive representation. Instead, they argue that who sits in parliament matters for whose interests are served. Politicians who belong to historically marginalized groups bring forward distinctive perspectives that further group interests (Phillips, 1995; Williams, 1998). Particularly when group interests are "uncrystallized" because political issues arise ad hoc, minoritized politicians' experiential knowledge can be decisive (Mansbridge, 1999). Descriptive representation also promotes communication between politicians and constituents in contexts of intergroup distrust (Mansbridge, 1999).

This theoretical work underpins the most central question in subsequent empirical research: whether minoritized politicians indeed champion group interests. Empirical evidence supports this expectation, although the institutional context seems influential (Bratton & Ray, 2002; Mügge et al., 2019; Murray, 2016). However, this research equates group interests with progressive ideals (i.e., gender and/or ethnic/racial justice) and overlooks how both minoritized and majority politicians can serve progressive as well as conservative agendas (Celis & Childs, 2012, 2018; Aydemir & Vliegenthart, 2016). Therefore, some scholars instead investigate which "critical actors" stand up for gender and/or racial justice, which can include men and majority politicians (Childs & Krook, 2009). Others put forward qualities that good representatives should have to represent historically excluded groups, regardless of identity (Dovi, 2007).

Irrespective of whether minoritized politicians promote group interests, feminist theorists also point to symbolic benefits of descriptive representation. The presence of minoritized legislators, mayors, or presidents in positions of power formerly reserved for white men acts as a "statement about citizenship" (Phillips, 2012, p. 517). It demonstrates that minoritized citizens belong to society and are equally capable of holding public office (Mansbridge, 1999). Presence provides a counterweight against negative stereotypes, like minoritized citizens being insufficiently integrated or low skilled (Puwar, 2004). Role model politicians in positions of power demonstrate to minoritized citizens that they too can become politicians. Equally important, their presence can sway the perspective of dominant groups, who positively adjust their image of minoritized groups (Mansbridge, 1999; Young, 2011). These ideas shift Pitkin's conceptualization of symbolic representation of flags to the meanings that representatives assign to groups, through presence or otherwise, and the gender, race and class relations that underlie those meanings (Lombardo & Meier, 2014).

Constructivist-inspired scholarship forms the most recent shift in political representation theory (Saward, 2006; Squires, 2008; Rehfeld, 2011; Severs, 2010). Most prominently, Michael Saward (2010) conceptualizes representation as a claim. Political actors claim to be representatives of a particular group. They creatively and strategically frame groups like "angry farmers" or "hard-working people" and posit themselves as championing their interests. Constructivist theorization breaks with the idea that citizens belong to *a priori* groups with fixed political interests. Witnessing politicians' claims influences how citizens see their political identities and interests. As a result, researchers can no longer simply measure congruence between what politicians do and citizens' *a priori* preferences. Citizens could agree

with how politicians represent their interests, even if they initially had different ideas (Celis & Mügge, 2018). Additionally, constructivists see representation as a process that takes place beyond elections and formal political institutions, such as parliament. Political actors, like social movements, equally claim to represent groups, falling within the scope of possible representatives (Squires, 2008; Weldon, 2011).

Studies that investigate how political actors claim to represent citizens demonstrate that representative claims are not necessarily positive (Squires, 2008; Childs, Webb & Marthaler, 2010; Schouteden & Wauters, 2016). Politicians sometimes speak about, or even against a group, without actually promoting its interests (Siow, 2023a, b). In Belgium, Muslim citizens felt "misrepresented" by political elites who talked about them in stereotyping and distorting ways (Akachar, 2018). Thus, the claims and actions of politicians do not necessarily correspond to how citizens want to be represented.

In this dissertation, I argue that the study of political representation should center the perspectives of citizens. As the preceding shows, representation has been approached from a theoretical perspective, or from the side of elected politicians. We know less about how citizens view representation, including how they evaluate politicians who share their backgrounds or who claim to act for them. How do citizens experience and evaluate representation? How does this relate to existing conceptualizations of representation as formulated in the literature, such as dimensions, qualities, or claims? Who do citizens consider represents them, and how do they evaluate the actions claimed or undertaken in their name? Studying citizens' views contributes by relating theoretical expectations about what representation is, when it occurs, and when it works or fails, to citizens' perspectives.

In addition, constructivist theory renders it uncertain that what politicians say or do corresponds to how citizens want to be represented. Therefore, I follow theorists who assign citizens a key role in determining whether representation takes place. According to Saward (2010, p. 145), representative claims can be seen as democratically legitimate when "there is evidence of sufficient acceptance of [a] claim by appropriate constituencies under reasonable conditions of judgment." Others argue that representation only takes place when citizens can, and do not object to how they are represented (Pitkin, 1967; Runciman, 2007; Disch, 2011). Yet not everyone has the resources to engage in politics, even more so when it comes to activities like lobbying, demonstrating, or organizing campaigns to

voice disagreement about representation. Structurally marginalized groups have fewer resources, and their voices are often taken less seriously (Collins, 2017). Researchers cannot assume that silence equals agreement (Celis & Mügge, 2018). Therefore, I study how and when people feel represented or not, looking beyond visible objections.

I adopt an open-ended approach to representation, taking how citizens themselves conceptualize representation as a starting point. In addition, when relevant, I make use of the existing conceptual frameworks I discussed above. In doing so I consider that citizens may have diverse views, which they form in a context of representative claims.

Citizen perspectives

Group categories play a key role in research on political representation. Research focuses on whether women or ethnically/racially minoritized politicians advance interests associated with their group (Bratton & Ray, 2002; Brown, 2014). This raises the question why group categories, rather than individuals, form the starting point. Massey's (2007) work is useful to understand the relationship between individuals, social group categories, and inequality in political representation. Social inequality stems from "the allocation of people to social categories, and the institutionalization of practices that allocate resources unequally across these categories" (Massey, 2007, p. 5-6). Through social categorization, meanings such as warmth and competence are successfully assigned to individuals (Massey, 2007, p. 5-6). Individuals often unconsciously rely on internalized social categories in their actions toward others. Such practices are systematically reproduced across generations, resulting in structural disadvantage (Williams, 1998; Tilly, 1998). Central to 1990s' representation theories (Phillips, 1995; Williams, 1998) is that social categories, primarily ethnicity/race and gender, systematically relate to privilege and disadvantage in political voice and influence.

To collectively contest shared disadvantage, individuals can develop a sense of "linked fate" and come to see group interest as a proxy for their own interest (Dawson, 1994). This may lead people to pursue shared political aims, including voting for group member politicians (Kranendonk, 2019), or engaging in collective action on behalf of the group. However, race and migration scholars show that the relationship between a minoritized social position and shared political identification is not self-evident (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000; Yanow, 2003). Individuals form their own sense of self and frequently challenge how others categorize them (Yuval-Davis, 2006). More so, group representation measures are often based on

categories from census or social surveys, which not necessarily correspond to political self-identification (Lee, 2008). Critiques of taking social categories, and state categories in particular, as the starting point for how citizens want to be represented motivate me to shift the focus to citizens' perspectives. I ask citizens how they self-identify in politics, and how they prefer to be politically represented.

To approach "citizens' perspectives," I draw on Iris Young's (2000) work. Young bases her analysis on Sartre's (1976, cited in Young, 2000) concept of "serial collectivity." Individuals form a "series" when they "pursue their own individual ends with respect to the same objects conditioned by a continuous material environment, in response to structures that have been created by the unintended collective result of past actions" (Young, 2000, p. 724). An example of a series is a group of people waiting for the bus (Sartre, 1976; Young, 2000). Bus waiters have nothing in common, except that they occupy the same structural position. They follow the same socially accepted waiting rules and depend on the same bus times and costs to be transported. Young extends the idea of "seriality" to structural social class and gender positions. A social perspective comprises of the "different experience, history, and social knowledge derived from that positioning" (Young, 2000, p. 136).

The notion of "series" clarifies how a minoritized position relates to perceptions of politics, without essentializing individuals as necessarily sharing the same attributes, identities, or interests. I conceive of minoritized citizens as a series who share a social perspective because they occupy minoritized positions within ethnic/racial social structures. This way of thinking fits well with constructivist representation theories because it does not assume that citizens share fixed and stable identities and interests. This dissertation distinguishes three subcomponents of citizens' perspectives on political representation that guide the empirical analysis: *experiences*, *evaluations*, and *actions*.

By *experiences* I refer to the range of intuitions, emotions, and situations that minoritized citizens associate with political representation. By referring to a "range" of experiences, I forefront that people have unique biographies in which situations and interactions they encounter vary (Young, 2000, p. 101). *Evaluations* include the range of interpretations that minoritized citizens, based on their experiences, form toward political representation. Evaluations are more reflexive than experiences. They include interpretations of what political group individuals belong to, their political self-identifications. It also refers to interpretations of political interests and opinions: what is seen as important to individuals' life

prospects, or principles, values, and priorities regarding policy and political goals (Young, 2000, p. 134–135). In relation to political representation, evaluations include interpretations of what it means to be represented and what makes a good political representative. Evaluations involve more agency than experiences. They recognize that individuals themselves actively shape political identities and beliefs, and that evaluations can vary widely among people who share a social location (Lee, 2008). *Actions* encompass the range of activities that minoritized citizens, based on interpretations, consider in political representation processes. Political activities include formal political participation, but also activities that target official politics like protesting, or forms of civic engagement and community building (Van Deth, 2014).

Summarizing, I break "minoritized citizens' perspectives" down into the range of experiences that individuals who share a minoritized social position in ethnic/racial social structures discuss, the range of political interpretations they bring forward, and the range of courses of political action they envision. The distinction between experiences, evaluations, and actions should be seen as analytical. In practice, citizens' discussions about political representation can fall under several subcomponents, or one subcomponent can spill over into the other. Still, distinguishing these subcomponents is useful because it provides insight into different levels at which citizens relate to politics, and allows for analyzing variation at each level among citizens who share a social perspective.

Individuals cannot on their own provide a complete account of a social perspective (Weldon, 2011). In this dissertation, I analyze how experiences, evaluations, and actions emerge in interactive contexts between minoritized citizens. Through mutual exchange, women find out that unequal pay, sexual harassment, or gendered division of labor are shared experiences. Weldon (2011) uses the metaphor of a puzzle to clarify how social perspective emerges in interactive settings. Through social exchange, minoritized individuals:

> […] compare their puzzle pieces, and after seeing the puzzle pieces of others, each person gains a greater understanding of the larger puzzle to which she or he holds a piece. Thus, the process of putting together the puzzle pieces is interactive rather than simply aggregative (Weldon, 2011, p. 34).

That social perspective is exposed through discussion with others is consistent with social movement scholarship which shows that mutual exchange is essential

to construct collective identities, expose a full range of political views, and form shared aims (Polletta & Jasper, 2001; Della Porta, 2005).

Intersectionality

This dissertation adopts an intersectional perspective to unpack variation on representation perspectives within- and between social groups, and between contexts. Originating from a tradition of Black feminist activists, writers, and scholars (Combahee River Collective, 1977; Crenshaw, 1989), intersectionality refers to the idea that social categories, including ethnicity/race, class, gender, sexuality, age, nation, and ability, do not operate in isolation, but are mutually constitutive in shaping social inequalities. Considering social structures as intersecting does not mean that race, class, or other structures are equally salient; this remains an empirical question (Hancock, 2007; Collins, 1993).

Hancock (2007) describes intersectionality as an approach for empirical research but also as a normative paradigm with real-world implications. Intersectional thinkers and activists argue that considering gender or race separately leads to the experiences of prototypical or privileged group members being generalized to the whole group. In the words of hooks (1981, p.7) "When Black people are talked about the focus tends to be on Black men and when women are talked about the focus tends to be on white women." By relying only on the experiences of privileged women, discussions of sexism remain incomplete and distorted (hooks, 1981). Intersectionality calls for action, solidarity, and coalition building by broadening justice struggles beyond the experiences of privileged group members (Lorde, 1984; Hancock, 2007).

Political representation scholars working within the intersectional paradigm examine how intersections of ethnicity/race and gender influence politicians' opportunities to obtain elected office, including recruitment and selection (Mügge, 2016; Janssen, 2021), quotas (Celis et al., 2014; Hughes, 2011), and press coverage (Runderkamp et al., 2022; Ward, 2016). Studies find intersectional differences in how politicians appeal to constituents (Brown & Gershon, 2016) and represent their interests (Hardy-Fanta, 2011; Reingold et al., 2020). Recent work investigates sexuality and disability (Evans & Reher, 2023; Schotel, 2023).

Combined, this work offers several insights. Heeding intersectional variation yields a more nuanced understanding into who political representation processes favor or disadvantage compared to work that assumes homogeneous groups (Celis & Mügge, 2018). In the Netherlands, Mügge et al. (2019) show that minoritized women

politicians advocated more for the interests of minoritized women compared to majority women or minoritized men. Individuals with multiple subordinate identities can experience "intersectional invisibility" because they do not fit the prototype of their respective identity group (Hughes, 2011; Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008). In the United States, for instance, interest groups advocated less for poor and ethnically/racially minoritized women and took majority women's issues as their baseline for the entire group (Strolovitch, 2006). Intersectional research further shows that how intersections of ethnicity/race, gender, and other social categories matter depend on context. In Belgium, minoritized women benefitted from political party strategies to maximize representativeness on their list, which aided their chances of getting selected (Celis & Erzeel, 2015). In this situation, two or more minoritized identities proved advantageous.

I complement intersectional scholarship on politicians by examining within- and between-group dynamics in citizens' perspectives on representation. Specifically, I consider that ethnically/racially minoritized citizens may identify with various, cross-cutting groups (Young, 2000, p. 88), which could affect preferences for political representation. A university-educated minoritized woman may conceive of her political interests differently from a practically educated, minoritized man. Additionally, I pay attention to intersectional variation in the extent to which citizens feel represented. Citizens who do not fit the prototype of their respective group might be at risk of having their political concerns overlooked. The risk of intersectional invisibility highlights the importance of asking citizens themselves how they experience and evaluate representation, while considering variation within and between minoritized groups and across political contexts.

Methodology

This section describes my methodology. I discuss the research design, including choice of method and case selection. I then address the data collection and analysis. I conclude with reflections on positionality and ethics.

Research design

Focus group methods

To study minoritized citizens' perspectives on representation, this dissertation relies on focus groups. Focus groups are "a research technique that collects data through group interaction on a topic determined by the researcher" (Morgan, 1996,

p. 130). Focus groups, like this dissertation, rest on an interpretivist epistemological position. I assume that knowledge of the world cannot be gathered objectively or externally to us but is situated in context-specific experiences (Haraway, 1988). The aim is to study how research participants, in relation to the researcher, interpret social phenomena from their position (Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2015, p. 461).

Focus groups reduce researcher control compared to one-on-one interviews. Though the researcher provides the conversation topic, participants may take the subject in directions the researcher did not anticipate beforehand. Focus groups are therefore a useful tool to explore theoretically unchartered topics, by "allowing participants to generate their own questions, frames and concepts and to pursue their own priorities on their own terms, in their own vocabulary" (Kitzinger & Barbour, 1999, p. 5). They are further an efficient method to obtain conversational data on politics in a short time period across research sites.

In focus groups, social interaction between participants constitutes the primary data, which matches the theoretical premises of this research (Wilkinson, 2011, p. 67). Focus groups assume that people form points of view in conversation with each other rather than having fixed or stable opinions as solicited through survey methods (Waterton & Wynne, 2011). They further align with the idea that social group perspective is revealed through conversations between individuals who share social locations. Scholars have successfully used focus groups to examine how individuals politicize identities and define common political priorities by contrasting experiences (Munday, 2006; Reisner et al., 2018).

The focus groups were semi-structured to provide space for citizens' own conceptualizations of representation, but also to contrast theoretical expectations with citizens' views. The topic list started by asking questions about situations in which citizens did or did not feel represented (Appendix 1). Subsequent questions asked about Pitkin's dimensions, the relationships among them, and representative claims. To illustrate, questions included, "How does it matter to you to have a representative who resembles you in politics?" The topic list was piloted, then finalized to ensure consistency across focus groups.

Focus group researchers sometimes work with pre-existing groups in which participants know each other and therefore may be more at ease (Prins et al., 2013). However, I invited participants who did not know each other beforehand. Participants who know each other's political positions may refrain from spelling out views they previously communicated to the others, and moderators can

struggle to understand the social dynamics between friends. Moreover, if people know they will see each other after the focus group, they may be apprehensive to enter into what they know are sensitive political topics (Newman, 2017). Not only do researchers lose relevant information, it also complicates the analysis (Duchesne, 2017). Finally, pre-existing groups allow for limited participant selection, which mattered to the research design, as the next section explains.

Intersectionality and theoretical segmentation

Focus group researchers often bring participants together based on shared theoretically relevant experiences (Morgan, 1996). Similarities include playing the same sport, having the same profession, or sharing a social class background. A factor of commonality facilitates conversation, mitigates power differences, and enables researchers to systematically compare focus groups based on a variable of interest. Theoretically, a minoritized ethnic/racial position matters in this study. I am interested in how group categories often used by representation researchers relate to how citizens want to be represented politically. Therefore, I put together focus groups based on ethnic/racial state categories: migration background. Migration background is defined in accordance with state categorization in the Netherlands: someone who was born abroad, or of whom at least one of their parents was born in another country.[3]

Participant selection further aimed to uncover intersectional variation. To operationalize intersectionality in the focus group design I draw inspiration from McCall's (2005) work. McCall (2005) distinguishes "anticategorical" intersectionality as the deconstruction of existing analytical categories, by examining how they emerged from historical power configurations. "Intercategorical" and "intracategorical" approaches to intersectionality, by contrast, involve provisionally adopting existing categories to examine relationships of inequality within and between social groups, and to see if inequality exists in the first place (McCall, 2005, p. 1785). The intercategorical approach involves crossing two or more social categories, studying privileged and disadvantaged groups simultaneously. Taking class and gender, scholars could study women and men belonging to the working and middle classes. The intracategorical approach concerns studying "the intersection of race, class, and gender in a single social group" (McCall, 2005, p. 1787).

3 As specified by Statistics Netherlands and Federal Office for Migration and Refugees Germany, https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/onze diensten/methoden/begrippen/migratieachtergrond. Last accessed 22-01-2025.

Based on McCall's intercategorical approach, I compare different minoritized migration background focus groups. I explore intracategorical complexity by studying how social categories operate within focus groups with participants who share the same migration background. To accomplish this, each focus group hosts participants who share the same migration background but differ in terms of gender, class, age, and religion.

Initially, the design aimed for an intercategorical approach, by crossing and simultaneously studying dominant and minoritized migration background and (binary) gender groups. Recruitment challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic – which I will discuss in more detail later – led me to limit the design. I compare only disadvantaged groups, and not the privileged group: citizens without migration background. Per "migration background" category, one group consisted of women only, but I was not able to conduct focus groups with men with migration backgrounds.

There were two reasons for conducting women-only groups. One motivation was that political concerns that ethnically/racially minoritized citizens face could be gendered (i.e., ethnic/racial profiling, harassment when wearing a headscarf). Such experiences might remain underreported in a heterogeneous gender focus group setting. Women-only groups provide insight into experiences of participants with two or more marginalized category memberships. Another motivation was to examine how the focus group composition influenced the political identifications and concerns that participants discussed, possibly leading people to overemphasize or downplay identifications. The "migration background" selection risks that participants emphasize shared migration history at the expense of other identifications. By organizing women-only groups, I gained insight into whether gender was more salient in women-only compared to mixed gender focus groups (see Bird, 2015). As the results show, gender was salient in mixed gender groups, while ethnicity/race remained significant in women-only groups. This may indicate that (intersections of) ethnicity/race and gender matter to how citizens view political representation independently of the focus group composition.

Country comparisons and case selection

In line with an intersectional approach, I compare across political (country) contexts. Cross-country comparisons help to map a broader universe of ways in which citizens view representation. It also allows me to analyze how people's attitudes are influenced by "the country's political culture and historical trajectory" (Van Bezouw et al., 2019, p. 2733).

France, Germany, and the Netherlands are selected as cases in this project. Each country received immigrants after the Second World War. They also share a political climate in which immigration, integration, and Islam are highly politicized, with far right parties on the rise (Martin, 2021). I treat the countries as "a conceptual spectrum of cases," in which "a scholar identifies two or three key characteristics presumed to be important for explaining a particular outcome or phenomenon. […] comparisons between cases speak to the importance of the underlying characteristics" (Bloemraad, 2013a, p. 40). In particular, two factors are thought to matter to the political representation of immigrant-origin minorities: integration models, and electoral systems. The selected countries differ on these key aspects.

Integration models involve policies toward "state accommodation of diversity and access to individual citizenship rights" (Ersanilli & Koopmans, 2011, p. 209). Multicultural policies, for instance, provide more room for ethnic/racial and religious group rights, compared to assimilationist regimes. Integration model approaches center the nation-state over other policy levels and assume that countries have ideologically coherent integration policies (Bertossi & Duyvendak, 2012). However, countries' reputation as "republican" or "multicultural" can influence how people think and talk about group-level politics (Bonjour & Lettinga, 2012). In the following, I discuss country-specific approaches to accommodation of diversity. This includes the extent to which countries allow religious expression in public office, demand cultural assimilation, and enable ethnic/racial and religious minorities to establish their own institutions (Ersanilli & Koopmans, 2011). I will specify access to citizenship rights when detailing my selection of citizen categories.

Based on integration policies between 1980 and 2008 – the time period in which many participants in this study resided or grew up in France, Germany, or the Netherlands – Ersanilli and Koopmans (2011, p. 213) categorized each country as closer to an ideal typical integration model. Germany resembled an ethnic-assimilationist regime, characterized by little accommodation of diversity. France approximated a civic-assimilationist type. It rejects group-based politics and restricts minority religious practice to the private sphere (Murray, 2016). Although Dutch policies were not multicultural by design, they relatively accommodated ethnic/racial and religious group differences (Uitermark, 2011). For instance, by subsidizing immigrant representative organizations (Vermeulen, 2006). Over the last decades, exclusionary discourses about national identity dominate across countries, casting ethnic/racial and religious minorities as threats and non-belonging (Kešić & Duyvendak, 2019). Exclusionary discourses impact minoritized citizens' feelings of belonging and political inclusion (Simonsen, 2016,

2021). So although the three countries have historically different approaches toward diversity in politics, political discourses converge.

Comparative politics scholarship has shown that electoral systems influence descriptive representation of women (Norris & Inglehart, 2001, p. 130). Proportional systems generally favor descriptive representation compared to majoritarian systems (Golder et al., 2017). Within proportional systems, again, there are many differences. For instance, some countries have flexible lists with personal votes (Schönwälder, 2013), which allows citizens to select descriptive candidates. District systems can favor minorities in cases of residential concentration if they mobilize for a preferred candidate (Sobolewska, 2013).

Electoral systems vary between the countries. Germany has a mixed-member proportional system. Citizens cast a first personal vote for a candidate in their district and a second vote for a federal-level party list. Candidates who achieve a majority in their district are directly elected, while the second vote determines the number of representatives per party who are elected to the Bundestag. There is an electoral threshold of five percent. The Netherlands has party list proportional representation with preference votes. It has one of the most open political systems with no fixed electoral threshold. As a result, many political parties are represented – 20 at the time of this study. This includes new parties that specifically focus on anti-discrimination, colonialism, and religious rights (Lubbers et al., 2023). France relies on single-member constituencies. Voting takes place via a two-round runoff. French citizens vote for the President and the House of Representatives in different elections.

The selected citizen categories in this study are Dutch with Turkish, Moroccan, and Surinamese backgrounds, Germans with Turkish, *Spätaussiedler* [Resettler], and African backgrounds, and French with Turkish, Moroccan, and Senegalese backgrounds. As Bloemraad (2013, p. 28) writes, decisions over what to compare "drive the analysis as well as the type of conversation the researcher wants to have with existing theory." Theoretically, ethnic/racial minorization, migration trajectories, state ethnic/racial categories, and representation legacies guided the selection.

The selection included citizens who indicate facing racism and discrimination the most based on origin, skin color, and/or religion[4] (FRA, 2017). Yet the selected

4 Except for Resettler Germans and Turkish French.

citizen categories have different historical relationships to their countries, including former labor migrants and post-colonial citizens.[5] Historical relationship with majority society can feature in how citizens view politics. Postcolonial citizens have migrated to former metropoles in response to a history of violence and decolonization can develop a different relationship to politics compared to labor migrants or political refugees (Mügge, 2010; Bird et al., 2011). Resettler Germans emigrated to Germany after the collapse of the Soviet Union, claiming German heritage based on 18th century migration from Germany to tsarist Russia (Spies et al., 2022). Given their status as "ethnically German," it can be disputed whether they are a minoritized group. However, Resettler Germans do report not being seen as fully German (Wallem, 2020).

Having the nationality of the country under study – France, Germany, and the Netherlands – was a prerequisite for participation. Nearly all participants were entitled to vote.[6] This choice stemmed from the aspiration to investigate the relationship between electoral participation and feeling represented and to avoid further heterogeneity in the focus groups. Most participants either migrated in the last century or are born and raised in the countries under study. People who recently acquired citizenship were left out of the study as much as possible, to favor citizens who had experienced their country's politics for a longer time period.

There are some differences in how the selected citizen categories could access citizenship. These differences are related to the integration models discussed previously.[7] German citizenship claims were historically premised on descent from a German family. Hence, Resettler Germans who could claim ethnically German descent were immediately granted German citizenship and voting rights (Goerres et al., 2020). This privileged legal status contrasts with Turkish Germans, for whom access to citizenship was eased only around the 2000s.[8] A series of reforms provided long-term residence and ius soli as alternative routes to citizenship,

5 Though it should be noted that migration motives in each citizen category are diverse. Moroccan Dutch, for instance, migrated both for labor and for political reasons (Bouras, 2012). Next to labor- and family migration, citizens with a Turkish migration background arrived as refugees after the 1980 political coup.

6 There were a handful of exceptions. Some participants indicated that they held citizenship in the recruitment survey. During the focus group it turned out that they were not eligible to vote.

7 Given that most participants in this study obtained citizenship under former policies, I do not discuss recent developments in naturalization legislation in the three countries. Nowadays, the Netherlands, Germany, and France have similar MIPEX scores, a tool that measures and compares integration policies across countries. See: https://www.mipex.eu/. Last accessed: 02-04-2025.

8 Therefore, it should be recognized that having citizenship as a selection criterion for participating in this study excludes many German participants with a first-generation Turkish migration background.

while restrictions around dual nationality relaxed. Most French and Dutch could access voting rights through postcolonial citizenship, could access naturalization trajectories before the 2000s, or automatically obtained – in the case of second generations born in France (Vermeulen, 2006; Snel et al., 2003; Ersanilli & Koopmans, 2010).

To contrast ascribed labels commonly used in representation research with political self-identification, I selected participants based on state categories: migration background. Migration background is the default category to measure difference in Germany and the Netherlands (Schinkel, 2018). The French state formally rejects ethnic/racial categorization (Bassel & Emejulu, 2010). I nevertheless selected French citizens based on migration background to maintain consistency with the Dutch and German cases. The Resettler German and African German categories mix ancestral backgrounds. I decided this because Resettler Germans, undifferentiated by national backgrounds, are an established state category in the German census and in social research (Goerres et al., 2022).

The African German category includes people who identify as Black, African, or Afrodiasporic (Aikins et al., 2020). The research design initially assumed the ascribed state category sub-Saharan African migration background. However, potential participants criticized this category. Many Germans who identify as Black and/or with African roots fall outside official migration background statistics, because they have lived in Germany for many generations, have African American backgrounds or migrated from other European countries (ibid., 2020). I therefore included a self-identified category to still consider how anti-Black racism relates to German perspectives on representation. African Germans can be considered a "hidden" group that falls outside official categorization and must be identified bottom-up (Celis & Mügge, 2018, p. 210). Adapting the selection criterion in response to criticism reflects how, in migration research, the process of data collection "can force a researcher to modify a project's design" (Bloemraad, 2013, p. 38).

The presence of representative claim makers also played a role in selecting migration background categories. Historically the Christian Democrat party (CDU) advocated for the rights of Resettler Germans, but recently the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) has been actively trying to gain their votes (Spies et al., 2022). This differs from other migration background categories, which are historically represented by door leftist/progressive political parties (Michon & Tillie, 2010). At the time of the study, in the Netherlands, three political parties specifically addressed Dutch colonialism and racism and enjoyed relatively high

support among citizens of Turkish, Moroccan, and Surinamese descent (Lubbers et al., 2023). Selecting these citizen categories allowed me to study perspectives on representative claim making, vis-à-vis other categories for whom these types of claim makers are absent.

Levels of immigrant-origin differ between the citizen categories. The Netherlands has a long legacy of immigrant-origin representatives (Mügge et al., 2019). Numbers declined somewhat from the 2010s until 2021, the period in which this study takes place (Runderkamp et al., 2025, p. 17), Surinamese Dutch citizens being in particularly underrepresented. The German parliament historically lagged in terms of diversity. As of 2013, the number of immigrant-origin politicians slowly increased from 4.2 percent to the Dutch double-digit figures (Runderkamp et al.,, 2025, p. 17). Resettler Germans saw relatively many politicians with the same migration history compared to Turkish Germans (Goerres et al., 2022), despite the presence of some prominent politicians like Cem Özdemir (Green Party). In 2021, four African Germans entered the *Bundestag* for the first time. Immigrant-origin representation is lowest in the French parliament (Murray, 2016). Less than six percent of politicians had a migration background in the 2002 and 2007 legislative periods (Geese, 2022). To the best of my knowledge, information about later legislative periods in unavailable. France did witness prominent Moroccan French politicians such as Rachida Dati (liberal/conservatives) and Pap Ndiaye, with Senegalese roots, was appointed as education minister in 2022.

The selection thus focused on ethnic/racial minorization, migration trajectories, legacies of representative claim making and immigrant-origin representation, integration models, and electoral systems. To disentangle country- and category-specific factors, I selected citizens with Moroccan migration backgrounds in the Netherlands and France, and citizens with Turkish migration background in all three countries.

Conducting the research

The data collection of this project took place in three consecutive phases. The Dutch focus groups were conducted between October 2020 and February 2021. This was a few months after the Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests in June 2020, and before the Dutch national elections in March 2021. Data collection in Germany ran from April to June 2021. This was prior to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. In France, the focus groups took place between September 2022 and January 2023. The entire data collection period coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic (2020-2022).

Although COVID-19 was not a major conversation topic during the focus groups, the pandemic may have influenced how citizens view politics. With regards to politics, a "rally around the flag" effect may be relevant. This refers to a spike in political trust due to a disruptive threat, like a pandemic (Mueller, 1970). During the Dutch data collection, political trust was relatively high, although the peak had passed (SCP, 2020; Van der Meer et al., 2023). Trust was especially high among citizens who supported opposition parties, which is the case for most research participants. During data collection in Germany, political trust was already lower than in the first COVID-19 year, gradually dropping below pre-pandemic levels (Zoch & Wamsler, 2024). Based on this data, study participants might have been slightly more positive about politics during data collection in the Netherlands, and more negative at the time of the research in Germany and France.

COVID-19 also influenced how this study was conducted. The focus groups, which were originally planned to be held in community centers, had to be moved online. The online setting offered unexpected advantages. The following section discusses the data collection, paying attention to how the pandemic influenced the research when relevant.

Preparatory stage

I started this project with a basic knowledge of French and German and improved my language skills over time. Although I can follow conversations in both languages well, I lacked the language proficiency to facilitate group discussions. Therefore, in each country I worked with a team of three to five paid research assistants who spoke the language of the respective country fluently. In the Netherlands and France, I was physically present to collaborate with the research team; in Germany, unfortunately, the pandemic made this impossible. The research assistants were advanced students in the social sciences. They had prior experience with qualitative research and/or group moderation. Most had a minoritized migration background, though not necessarily the same migration background as the participants (see positionality section). Women moderated the women-only focus groups, while I was present in every focus group.

To kick off the data collection, I organized a training day, during which we reviewed the foundations of the study and practicalities, and planned practice sessions to fine-tune moderation. In France and Germany, the research assistants translated the focus group topic list and other research materials. In comparative focus groups, standardization in design and data collection between countries matters to

facilitate contextual interpretation (Van Bezouw et al., 2019). Therefore, we tried to keep phrasing and questions as consistent as possible in each language.

Throughout the data collection, I asked the team to keep a research diary. A research diary allows for reflection during all stages of the research process (Mügge, 2013). Team members wrote down their research experiences, including thoughts on key findings, design, positionality, and interactions with participants. We held weekly team meetings to ensure that we worked consistently. The meetings also served to exchange strategies for contacting participants, reflect on what we learned after each focus group, share interpretations, and discuss our role as researchers.

Assembling the focus groups

In each country, we used a range of strategies to reach potential participants. We distributed a call within our external networks, ensuring that the moderator did not know the participants personally. We contacted community centers and other local organizations. Social media, including Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn, were also an important source for reaching people. Some social media groups linked to neighborhoods where many citizens with migration backgrounds live gave us permission to share our call. We visited religious organizations and community stores. Some helped us get in touch with acquaintances or hung our flyer on their door. We reached more people through snowball sampling. We adjusted outreach strategies when we noticed that some profiles were underrepresented in the sample.

When COVID-19 regulations allowed, we recruited participants on the streets of Amsterdam and Paris, and to a lesser extent in Berlin. For example, we went to markets in Amsterdam selling products used in Surinamese dishes and talked to people there. In addition to finding participants, these experiences gave us valuable insights about political representation and categories. Many people we talked to were cynical about politics. People often said they would not be a suitable participant because they never felt represented. Some also doubted that research would change anything or were suspicious of researchers. In France, many people were relatively positive about the research. Some commented that it was not surprising that this was a Dutch research project. They were convinced that research related to racism would not be conducted in France.

We offered a 25-euro coupon as a financial incentive to reach people who were not interested in politics. We sent participants a short online survey (Appendix 2), in which we asked for demographic information, including migration background,

age, education, self-identification, party preference, and political engagement. Based on the surveys, the moderators and I assembled the groups in line with the study design. We suggested dates to participants, sent them a link and instructions for the online setting. In total, 143 citizens participated in the research (Appendix 3).

Our sample reflects that finding participants was extremely challenging. In many cases, the pandemic made it impossible to visit people in person. Potential participants indicated that, understandably, they had too much on their minds. Political cynicism played a role in reluctance to participate in the research, as did the idea of talking about politics with strangers. Individuals with university education and with left/progressive political orientations are strongly overrepresented in the sample. I discuss this limitation and its implications in Chapter 6.

Organizing group discussions online allowed us to include geographically dispersed individuals. People with certain disabilities and caring responsibilities could also more easily join us. Yet, the online setting meant that participants required a stable internet connection, a device to access the meeting, and some technological skills. Within these constraints, we tried to include underrepresented participants. Between lockdowns, we organized two additional in-person focus groups in community centers: one in Amsterdam with first-generation Dutch women with Moroccan migration backgrounds[9], and one in Paris with French women with different migration backgrounds.

Online moderation and conversation dynamics

We organized the focus groups via the video conferencing tool Zoom. Participants joined via a computer because Zoom on a phone or tablet does not display all attendees at once. These demands were not feasible for participants who did not have a computer, lived in cramped housing situations, or were pressed for time. We found some solutions for these cases. Through a community center, some participants could borrow a computer. Others blurred Zoom backgrounds for privacy reasons. With less technically proficient participants we talked them through Zoom in advance. Some joined via their phone, in which case the moderator more actively gave the floor to those who could not see each other. We asked participants to join the online meeting ten minutes early so we could troubleshoot connection issues. These measures limited technical glitches. Since

9 Due to a COVID-19 related last-minute replacement, an Egyptian Dutch woman joined this conversation.

data collection began when the pandemic started, we improved our protocols along the way.

In line with Lobe (2017), we observed the best conversational dynamics in smaller, in-person focus groups. We aimed for four to six participants, ideally five. The meetings lasted 1.5 to 2.5 hours. After each focus group, the moderators and I separately wrote down our observations. This included notes on key findings, group dynamics, moderation challenges, and positionality. We compared notes, writing down consensual and diverging interpretations.

The online setting drastically changed the moderation dynamics.[10] In offline focus groups, moderators are, to some extent, "on their own." They are solely responsible for making quick decisions about the order of questions and how to follow up (Hennink, 2017, p. 72). A major advantage of the online setting was the possibility to use the live chat function. Zoom offers the possibility to send private messages to single attendants or to the entire group. Moderators and I used private live chatting to reconsider the order of topics, weigh which questions should receive more attention, remind each other of previous participant statements, and ask for a second opinion if the group conversation went off topic. We also used the chat to divide tasks: the moderator continued to guide the conversation, while I privately integrated latecomers, and dealt with connection issues and privacy-related concerns.

Participants equally put the online chat to use as an additional outlet to express their views. In a Surinamese Dutch group discussion on the presence of politicians of Color, Brigitte[11] wanted to speak:

> Benny: If you look at the representation of our dark-skinned fellow Dutchmen then you see that the representation is below par. [...] I've always encouraged young people by saying, you have to choose for more color.

10 Some parts of the text on online focus groups in the introduction and conclusion chapters of this dissertation are adapted from: De Jong, J. C. (2021). Talking about politics online: Conducting sensitive focus groups during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Newsletter of the American Political Science Association's Organized Section on Migration and Citizenship*, 8(1), Spring 2021.

11 Pseudonyms are used throughout the text to guarantee anonymity. I reflect on the use of pseudonyms in the ethics section.

Zoom chat, from Brigitte to everyone: They certainly are there [MPs of Color] and they are vocal, too.

Benny: You have to vote. Those are the kind of values I have also taught my children: "Well, boys, you always have to vote. Make sure your voice doesn't get lost because you need to be represented, too."

Zoom chat, from Brigitte to everyone: I certainly want to respond to this. [FG9_Surinamese Dutch, mixed gender]

The Zoom chat rendered participants less dependent on the moderator to step in and allocate them a turn. Despite the online setting, participants seemed relaxed and engaged in the discussion relatively quickly. With participants' approval, conversations often went on longer than planned. Some participants exchanged contact details or made plans to meet up post-pandemic. After the meeting, many participants indicated that they had valued learning from the others. We also had the impression that the online setting decreased social desirability. In a Turkish Dutch focus group that had involved several heated debates, participants commented:

Hatice: You do have a buffer in front of you, which makes you dare to be more honest or more open. Whereas if you're all sitting together, maybe you're afraid of provoking certain discussions or that it's going to get too heated –

Sarah: Nobody can hit each other. [everyone laughs]

Hatice: Which you might hold back then, if you're in a certain neighborhood for example… [FG4_Turkish Dutch, mixed gender]

Even though participants in this group did not know each other beforehand, living in a neighborhood where people might run into each other could affect what participants are willing to share. Especially in these kinds of situations, conducting focus groups about political topics online may be advantageous.

The aforementioned conversation relates to a contested issue among focus group researchers: how citizens' opinions in this setting translate to other situations. Data from focus groups cannot be considered completely "natural" because participants tailor their responses to the social setting in which they find themselves (Kitzinger,

1994). Participants' contributions constitute a "performance" in the focus group context (Prins, 2014, p. 47). The presence of others can prompt participants to share information but can also encourage conformity or groupthink (Morgan & Krueger, 1993). However, concerns about how authentic opinions expressed in focus groups are assume that fixed, private opinions of individuals are the most "real" form of data (Wilkinson, 1998). Constructivist researchers, however, argue that opinions, constructed in focus groups, interviews, surveys or other settings, always address a particular audience, and are context- and interpretation-sensitive (Hollander, 2004). Hollander (2004, p. 627) therefore suggests that focus group researchers should pay attention to the kinds of disclosures the research context facilitates or discourages and recommends triangulating focus group observations with results obtained in other settings.

Therefore, in the analysis, I paid attention to differences in individuals' stories and report "how accounts are articulated, censored, opposed and changed" (Kitzinger & Barbour, 1999, p. 5). Sometimes, I reached out afterwards to participants who spoke less during the session to ask if they wanted to add anything outside the group setting. Participants' views in the focus group often did not differ from answers they provided in the pre-recruitment survey, individual conversations, or during phone calls after the meeting. Participants' accounts, however, seemed richer because of the interaction, as they built on each other's opinions, came up with new ideas while listening to each other, and sometimes changed their minds. Research assistants and participants sometimes indicated that the focus group conversations corresponded to conversations that took place in their own social circles.

Data analysis

The data consists of 29 focus groups, Zoom chat histories, research diaries, and notes from the team meetings and focus groups. The research diaries and team reflections provided important starting points for the analysis (see Mügge, 2013). In the Netherlands, the research assistants and I transcribed the focus groups verbatim. The German and French conversations were transcribed by Amberscript, a company with which the University of Amsterdam has a privacy agreement. Transcripts included non-verbal communication in parentheses, such as nodding, pointing, and smiling. The transcripts were analyzed in their original language, with the meaning of words and phrases checked with a native speaker in case of doubt. Words that were difficult to translate are displayed in parentheses.

I used recent advances in qualitative data analysis[12] (Deterding & Waters, 2021; Timmermans & Tavory, 2012; Vila-Henninger et al., 2022). These approaches aim to answer specific research questions in large-scale datasets, using qualitative data analysis software. They arose from the observation that qualitative research projects often rely on a form of grounded theory (Vila-Henninger et al., 2022). Central to grounded theory is inductive concept building, derived from close reading and line-by-line coding of transcripts (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Charmaz, 2006). Yet, the scope of many contemporary qualitative projects complicates such a detailed approach. Studies, including this dissertation research, frequently involve multiple researchers and lots of material spanning several countries. Besides feasibility, scholars criticized the idea that researchers start studies "empty headed" (Yanow, 2014). Researchers are sensitized by existing theories, disciplinary training, their positionalities and personal biographies, while research materials often relate to previous literature (Deterding & Waters, 2021, p. 713-714).

Timmermans and Tavory (2012, p. 169) advocate an abductive approach aimed at theory innovation, which entails "the cultivation of anomalous and surprising empirical findings against a background of multiple existing sociological theories and through systematic methodological analysis." To appreciate anomalous or novel insights requires in-depth knowledge of existing theories (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012, p. 173). This is consistent with this dissertation's aim of putting existing theories into conversation with citizen perspectives, highlighting conceptual similarities and divergences. Timmermans and Tavory (2012) develop methodological steps to apply abductive analysis, including revisiting the phenomenon, defamiliarization, and actively searching for deviant cases.

The data analysis consisted of several phases and was performed in ATLAS.ti. A first phase involved data preparation. I linked participants' personal attributes to their statements in the transcript using ATLAS' auto coding tool. This included demographic information, such as participants' age, generation, education, migration background, gender, political orientation, and so on. This was followed by a close reading of each transcript in which I applied broad codes to index the transcripts, aiming to create a "table of contents" that could later be used for analyzing different research questions. These codes covered a broad list of

12 I discuss my general approach here. The analysis of specific research questions is discussed in the methods section of each empirical chapter.

theoretical concepts, recurring conversation themes, and the identities, political concerns, political parties, politicians, and non-elected representatives people mentioned.

Unlike grounded theory-inspired line-by-line codes, index codes move from broad to narrow, achieve data reduction, and allow "subsequent rounds of reading to be more focused and analytic coding to be more reliable" (Deterding & Waters, 2021, p. 726). While creating an index, I used memos to link eye-catching quotes, conceptual ideas, and methodological aspects to the conversations. In the next phase of analytical coding, I only covered text in each transcript that was relevant to the specific research question I was working on. I started with a deductive codebook, which I expanded with inductive codes to identify surprising or outlier cases (Vila-Henninger et al., 2022, p. 981). By contrasting conversations and transcripts, I identified attributes of concepts that differed, leading to splitting or broadening of analytical codes. New theoretical perspectives were incorporated when relevant to shed light on previously overlooked aspects of the data (Vila-Henninger et al., 2022, p. 976). For example, during analysis for chapter 4, I noticed that substantive representation was conceptually too broad, covering relevant variation in how citizens viewed this construct. Arendt's (1978) theory of judgment helped to expose different aspects of substantive representation according to citizens. I applied final abductive codebooks systematically to all transcripts.

In a final step I explored how the various index, demographic, and analytical codes relate to each other to answer the research question. In doing so, I used "code equations:" a theory-driven combination of codes to operationalize phenomena that span individual codes (Vila-Henninger et al., 2022, p. 983). Code equations make use of ATLAS.ti's Query Tool, which provides functions to determine whether codes in the text are mutually exclusive, co-occur, and sequence, among other options. These tools were useful to identify patterns and negative cases, refine concepts, and test intuitive observations. For example, during the analysis for Chapter 3, I noticed through co-occurrences that participants discussing role models were nearly all women, and that mostly young women talked about voting dilemmas between interests and role models. I treated this as a working hypothesis, revisiting these conversation segments and contrasting them with discussions involving men or senior women. In other cases, detailed analyses of code equations led me to reject initial ideas.

I included procedures to keep track of the interactive nature of the data and conversation flow. For example, I used charts to map shifts in the various positions

participants took during the course of the focus group. In addition, I paid close attention to "sensitive moments" that were often revealing, such as conflict, emotion, or discomfort (Kitzinger & Farquhar, 2011). Within journal constraints, I sought to portray conversations or provide insight into how positions held by individuals related to the spectrum of positions taken, and reported debates, consensus, and other relevant dynamics.

Positionality

An interpretivist approach recognizes the "inescapable subjectivity of the researcher as well as of the researched, along with the intersubjective making of situated meaning" (Yanow, 2014, p. 133). Researchers are implicated in the knowledge they produce. To increase transparency, it is essential to reflect on how researchers' social positions, life histories, and ideological assumptions have shaped the study. I employ Soedirgo and Glas's (2020) strategies for doing active reflexivity. They entail documenting positionality throughout the process, bringing other actors into the research, and showing reflexivity in project output.

As described previously, I reflected and documented researcher positionality, the position of research participants, and their relationships as they evolve throughout the research process through the research diary (Soedirgo & Glas, 2020). I am a young-looking white woman. Because of how I was raised and grew up, I am committed to the belief that democracy is essentially a failed project if it does not manage to guarantee the equal political rights and influence of minorities in politics. My positionality and ideological convictions affected how I approached this research and how research participants perceived me. Given my white privilege, I often felt uncomfortable conducting this research. I was afraid of reproducing colonial dynamics by "extracting" the knowledge of minoritized citizens for personal career interest. These concerns motivated me to take the following actions.

To start, I tried to center citizens' own voices as much as possible. This is reflected in the research design. Focus groups assume less hierarchical relationships between the researcher and participants. As Wilkinson (2011, p. 70) states, "simply by virtue of the number of research participants simultaneously involved in the research interaction, the balance of power shifts away from the researcher." After moderators ask a question, they leave participants to determine the direction of the conversation. Traditional focus group literature often regards this lack of control as a problem (Krueger & Casey, 2014; Morgan, 1996). Yet, feminist scholars celebrate focus groups for allowing participants to co-shape the research agenda. I intentionally tried to leave a lot of room for citizens' priorities in the design by

opting for a non-directive moderating style and by asking participants what had mattered most to them in the conversation. I further attempted to make the results of this research useful to participants whenever possible, e.g., by discussing my results with policymakers and activists, and through policy-oriented side projects that focused on problems that participants had raised.

Another strategy that Soedirgo and Glas (2020) mention is bringing other actors into the process. I have no lived experiences of ethnic/racial minorization, which makes it more difficult to understand minoritized citizens' experiences. I am grateful that research participants, other researchers, and the research assistants aided in contextualizing results through expertise and (experiential) knowledge, which broadened the interpretation process.

In focus group literature, commonality or difference between moderator and participants is a debated issue (Kitzinger, 1994). Social positions are complex and fluctuate, which means we should not assume fixed researcher identities (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012, p. 173). Yet, most focus group studies show that shared identities between participants and moderators contributes to participants' feelings of safety (Farquhar & Das, 2011; Chiu & Knight, 2011). I recognize that my presence as a white person influenced the setting. However, I felt I needed to be there to be transparent to participants that I was the principal researcher, to be able to step in during difficult situations, and to interpret the conversations afterwards.

Research team members agreed that participants viewed the moderators as relative insiders, and me as outsider. Participants sometimes addressed moderators as part of their group. Sometimes this led participants to assume prior knowledge of the moderator; in these cases, having an outsider role, I could ask follow-up questions. In some focus groups, participants commented that they appreciated that I mostly listened. Others wanted to hear my political views on the subject, to assess whether I could be trusted. In the African German group, some participants indicated that they felt less free to express their opinions because of my presence. After we discussed this, everyone agreed to continue the discussion about political representation. My sense was that self-censorship did not take place in the other groups, but this possibility should be considered when interpreting the results.

Team positionality varied during the conversations, with age and gender sometimes intersecting with ethnicity/race or being more salient. In a Moroccan Dutch women-only group, a participant became emotional when discussing racism. Another participant comforted her, stating, "That's perfectly fine, we are among

women." During debriefing, another participant said that she had appreciated getting to know a group of strong women. It was furthermore common for senior participants to address us team members as generational peers. They urged us youngsters to go into politics.

As a final strategy, Soedirgo and Glas (2020) recommend researchers practice reflexivity in their written work. In addition to this section, I include pushback and critical questions from participants as part of the results in the empirical chapters.

Ethics

"Migration background" is a contested term, used in everyday language mainly for ethnicized/racialized minorities, and not for white citizens with a migration background. It also perpetuates "us versus them" distinctions up to multiple generations (Klarenbeek, 2021). I nevertheless chose this selection criterion because, as stated earlier, a central idea behind the research design was to contrast a state category (migration background) with how citizens identify themselves in politics. In doing so, I wanted to center possible diversity, keeping in mind that participants might have different opinions about "migration background" categories.

In Germany and the Netherlands, some people reacted disapprovingly to our selection based on "migration background." Some were offended. They emphasized being Dutch or German, respectively, reflecting the exclusionary nature of migration background labels. In the Netherlands, a research assistant was puzzled by a participant with a Surinamese Moroccan migration background. Which focus group would we have her participate in? In France, "migration background" made no sense to many people. Rather than Moroccan backgrounds, many French felt we were better off selecting "French Arabs" or French with Maghrebi roots. Some Algerian Frenchmen signed up despite not meeting our criteria. In Chapter 7, based on this study's empirical findings, I provide recommendations for selecting participants in future focus group studies.

Several ethical considerations emerged during participant recruitment. In addressing people on the street, we were careful not to "profile" based on appearance. Instead, we spoke to everyone. When participants did not have a migration background or did not have the migration background we were looking for, we asked them to spread our call within their network. We told potential participants in advance that participation would involve entering a group discussion about political representation with people of the same migration background.

Transparency about the topic and set-up was deemed necessary because politics can be a sensitive subject that not everyone is comfortable discussing in a social setting. I recognize that this choice may have resulted in mostly politically interested people signing up. We tried to mitigate this effect by explicitly inviting people who were apolitical or indicated they knew little about politics to join.

Prior to the focus group discussions, we sent participants an informed consent form embedded in a Qualtrics survey detailing what information would be collected, and how the material would be used. This information sheet included instructions about the online setting. We asked participants to sit in a quiet space without the presence of others, not to make private recordings, and to respect each other's privacy. We reiterated issues such as anonymity and recording at the start of the focus group meeting. In the few in-person conversations, we presented participants with physical consent forms. With participants' permission, we videotaped the meetings. The use of video recording in in-person focus groups was not part of the original design, as participants can experience this as intrusive (Barbour & Kitzinger, 1999). However, this seemed less the case for online video recordings (see Lobe, 2017). We used Zoom in adherence to university requirements at the time.[13]

Overall, participants indicated that they experienced the group conversation as a safe and supportive environment. One conversation fell short in terms of providing a safe environment. We organized this focus group early in the data collection process with Turkish Dutch citizens. At the start, two senior men participants turned out to be friends. They were dissatisfied with politics, and they related their dissatisfaction to discrimination they had experienced personally. One young woman, however, repeatedly voiced a different opinion than the senior men. The moderator and I tried to give her the floor, but we were not very successful. After some time, the young woman suddenly exited the call. Fortunately, we were able to reach her afterwards. Following this episode, we improved our protocol by better observing power differences in conversations. For example, we discussed ground rules more extensively at the start of the meeting.

Though ideally prevented, this experience demonstrates that the online format allows participants to quickly opt out. In a physical space, it may have required more nerve to overcome the social pressures involved in getting up and walking

13 For a comprehensive overview regarding the use of online platforms in relation to privacy concerns, see Lobe et al., 2020; Morgan & Lobe, 2015.

out. In an online setting, leaving the meeting is only a click away and does not require one to provide any reasons for abandoning the group. While departures in online focus groups have been denoted as troubling (Morgan & Lobe, 2015, p. 222), they also provide participants with more agency, an advantage that has also been identified in text-based focus groups (Tates et al., 2009).

After transcribing the focus groups, names were replaced by pseudonyms and personally identifiable information was removed. Allocating pseudonyms, as an act of labeling people, is no neutral practice (Brear, 2018). I followed Lahman et al.'s (2023) procedure of using culture-specific baby name lists which I cross-checked with researchers who identify with the same culture. However, in future studies, I consider it preferable to ask participants to choose their own pseudonym. The focus group recordings, consent forms, and other personally identifiable information were encrypted using the program VeraCrypt, with only the project leader and I having the key. The university data manager had an encrypted copy of the data. Both copies were stored on secure university servers.

Outline of the dissertation

This dissertation consists of four chapters that together form the empirical basis of my analysis. Each chapter provides insight into one or several aspects of citizens' perspectives on political representation: experiences, evaluations, and actions. Together, all chapters build on the focus group dataset I assembled.[14] The chapters analyze citizens' views intersectionally and between country contexts.

Chapter 2 unravels and classifies how minoritized citizens experience political representation. It compares across groups and countries to capture a wide range of experiences. Most citizens experience their political representation as negative. Although representation literature often conceptualizes negative representation as the absence of citizens' interests and identities, the chapter shows that citizens feel both invisible and hyper-visible in politics. Hypervisibility stems from a continuous stream of misrepresentations of their group in politics that are at odds with how they see their own identity. Drawing on citizen narratives, constructivist representation theory and political psychology literature, the chapter creates a typology of "not being represented" and "being misrepresented," and dissects its causes and consequences according to citizens. The chapter explores who

14 This dissertation is article based. The methods sections of the chapters overlap somewhat.

feels particularly affected by invisibility or hypervisibility. It discusses the role of integration models and electoral systems in citizens' perceived opportunities to make their political concerns visible, and to counter misrepresentation. The chapter contributes by drawing attention to discursive obstacles that impede substantive representation.

Chapters 3 and 4 center citizens' evaluations of political representation. Chapter 3 investigates how citizens evaluate their representation by the political system. Integrating classic and constructivist representation theories, it asks how citizens want to be represented, how they evaluate political representation, and who represents them. To delineate such broad questions, the chapter focuses on the case of the Netherlands, a country with a highly open political landscape. The chapter shows how citizens construct political identifications and interests in relation to "migration background" categories. It centers the trade-offs citizens make between aspects of representation and between political representatives. The chapter proposes intersectionality and experiences of ambivalence as analytical lenses to illuminate citizens' complex evaluations. Additionally, it demonstrates the importance of considering representation as a phenomenon that happens through an interplay of political actors inside and outside parliament.

Chapter 4 examines how citizens evaluate political representatives, zooming in on identification. This chapter asks the following question: Does it matter to citizens that politicians share their social background, and if so, how? The chapter compares Germany and the Netherlands. These countries historically differ in their legacies of politicians with migration backgrounds in parliament. To make sense of the conditions under which citizens find that individuals represent them, I integrate representation scholarship and Hannah Arendt's (1978) theory of political judgment. I find that citizens value representatives who can imagine their lived reality and related political concerns. Although most see descriptive representatives as theoretically more capable of this through their experiential knowledge (Fenno, 1978), in practice, citizens critically examine whether this is the case. These findings contest myths that minoritized citizens simply pick politicians "like them" or that lived experiences do not matter in politics. The chapter discusses the importance of role models for intersectionally minoritized citizens and shows continuity in findings across countries.

In Chapter 5, I focus on how citizens discuss political action, zooming in on voting. Literature on electoral participation often implicitly equates voting with preferences for political representation, and abstention with not being represented. The chapter studies how minoritized citizens themselves link voting and representation. It analyzes the reasons why many minoritized citizens who vote often feel unrepresented and clarifies diverse motives of non-voters. Based on the analysis, I argue that representation and voting should be treated as different constructs, and measured side by side. The chapter examines the role of migration history and electoral systems in the political trade-offs citizens made in France, Germany, and the Netherlands.

Chapter 6 discusses the key findings, the contributions of the dissertation, limitations, and avenues for future research.