Minoritized citizens' perspectives on political representation

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CHAPTER 6

Conclusion

"We don't care about politics in The Hague!
What did politics ever do for me?"

These statements by the Dutch community-driven platform "Represent Jezelf" [Represent Yourself] formed the introduction of this dissertation. Represent Jezelf emphasizes that parliamentary politics fails to represent youngsters, in particular those with bicultural backgrounds. Yet, they encourage young people to vote and make their voices heard. Like Represent Jezelf, this dissertation puts the spotlight on citizens. It centers their perspectives on political representation. Doing so, I aim to complement work that specifies conditions under which citizens should be represented (Pitkin, 1967; Mansbridge, 1999), and empirical representation scholarship that examines elected politicians. This research answers political theorists' call to treat citizens as the "arbiters of political representation" (Runciman, 2007, p. 108) who ultimately determine whether politicians speak or act for them. It examines how citizens make sense of "being politically represented," how they evaluate the political actors who are supposed to speak and act for them, and how they assess ways to influence political representation processes.

The dissertation focuses on ethnically/racially minoritized citizens with migration backgrounds in Western European countries who continue to face structural barriers in politics (Mügge et al., 2024). Migration background is a frequently used category in representation literature. Yet, it is an ascribed group label arising from the census (Monk, 2022). Group labels do not easily translate into how individuals identify in politics (Brubaker, 2012; Lee, 2008). I therefore ask: does a "migration background" matter to citizens' views on political representation, and if so, how? I use an intersectional approach (Crenshaw, 1989; Combahee River Collective, 1977) to uncover variation among citizens with migration backgrounds depending on their self-identification with crosscutting political groups, migration histories, and country contexts.

This final chapter is organized as follows. The first sections discuss key empirical findings. They provide the foundation for the contributions that the dissertation makes to the scientific literature, which I discuss next. Lastly, I reflect on limitations and policy implications.

Empirical findings

The question this dissertation set out to answer is: How do minoritized citizens perceive political representation? I selected focus groups as my main method to examine how individuals discuss what political representation means, when it succeeds or fails, and how political change could come about. The dataset consists of 29 focus group discussions with 143 participants across France, Germany, and the Netherlands. Based on the focus groups and Iris Young's (2000) work, I analytically distinguish three aspects of citizen perspectives on political representation: experiences, evaluations, and actions. Experiences refer to the range of intuitions, emotions, and situations that citizens associate with political representation. Evaluations are more reflexive and encompass the scope of interpretations that citizens form toward political representation. This includes interpretations of what one's political identities and interests are, or of what makes a good representative. Actions concern the political activities that citizens consider to effect change in political representation processes. The differentiation between these three aspects captures the varying ways in which citizens relate to representation and structures my discussion of the empirical findings below. In analyzing experiences, evaluations, and actions, I pay attention to variation by intersectional self-identification, migration history, and country context.

Experiences

How do minoritized citizens experience their representation in politics? Chapter 2 analyzes experiences of representation across France, Germany, and the Netherlands. I find that the initial associations and sentiments minoritized citizens express toward political representation are mostly negative. I build on insights from political psychological work on misrecognition and citizens' narratives to construct a typology of "not feeling politically represented." The bottom half of Figure 1 depicts this typology. "Non-representation" occurs when citizens' political identities and concerns are *invisible*, *ignored* later in the representation process, or *uncomprehended* by representatives. "Misrepresentation" happens when representatives speak on behalf of, or about, citizens in ways that are at odds with how they would like to be represented. Political representatives *deny* or *misconstrue* citizens' political identities, for example, by labelling them as unintegrated. They further *impose* group labels on them in contextually irrelevant situations.

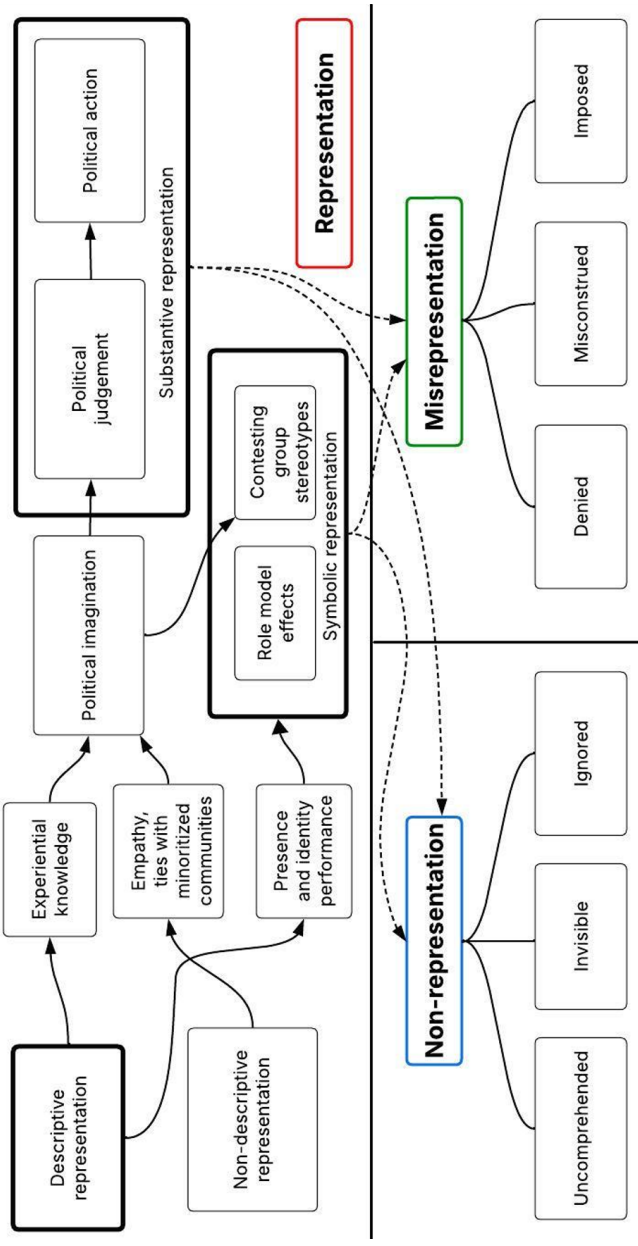

Figure 1: Citizens' experiences and evaluations of representation. Source: own work.

Citizens locate misrepresentation in parliamentary politics, where politicians speak about citizens in stereotyping ways to appeal to dominant groups. But misrepresentation also spills over into other domains, including media. Citizens consider misrepresentation as harmful in itself, but also find that it increases their non-representation. In their view, pervasive misrepresentation of their group as criminals, terrorists, or abusers of the welfare system distracts from real political issues, undermines minoritized politicians' ability to advocate for them, and hampers community political participation. Their analysis aligns with intersectional thinkers' (Crenshaw, 2015; hooks, 1991) observations that continuous distorting representation of minoritized groups comes at the expense of their ability to advance their own political claims.

Participants who identify with two or more disadvantaged groups, primarily minoritized women, often felt non-represented, while Muslims who are subject to exclusionary political rhetoric felt most misrepresented. Between countries, the intensity by which citizens did not feel represented differed, the Dutch being relatively positive compared to the Germans and certainly the French. The differing scope of negative experiences seems related to how citizens weigh negative experiences and positive experiences, informing future hope or pessimism. Citizens link expectations to electoral systems, and to a lesser extent integration regimes. Despite this variation, citizens experience misrepresentation across countries, which reflects the pervasiveness of anti-minority political rhetoric.

Evaluations

How do minoritized citizens evaluate political representation, and assess the representatives who stand, speak, or act for them? Chapters 3 and 4 focus on citizens' evaluations of political representation. Chapter 3 zooms in on citizens with Turkish, Moroccan, and Surinamese migration backgrounds in a single country: the Netherlands. It analyzes how citizens interpret their identities and interests in politics, their interpretation of what political representation means, and how they evaluate representatives inside and outside of parliament.

Chapter 3 shows that citizens often do not identify with Turkish, Moroccan, or Surinamese migration background labels. They emphasize broader identifications as minorities and shared race- and class-based interests, including racism, labor market discrimination, and access to social services. Citizens speak of representation when political actors constitute their political interests and speak or act on behalf of them. They also discuss politicians with whom they identify, and the positive impact that the presence of these politicians in white male-dominated

politics has on how their group is perceived. I interpret these aspects respectively as substantive, descriptive, and symbolic representation (Lombardo & Meier, 2014; Pitkin, 1967). Citizens discuss these aspects as a mélange (Celis & Childs, 2020). Yet, they clearly prioritize substantive representation, regardless of whether this happens through descriptive representatives or through other political actors.

Citizens' evaluations of political representatives are essentially ambivalent (Emejulu, 2022). Many hesitate between politicians and political parties that only partially resonate with them. Most feel partially represented by established parties on the left. These parties sometimes represent their class interests but do not have a clear enough anti-racist profile. Many see "ethnic minority interest parties" (Lubbers et al., 2024) and the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement as representative actors that make marginalized concerns visible, subsequently motivating established parties to take up these issues. Minoritized citizens evaluate representation in the political landscape at large, highlighting the interplay between elected and non-elected representatives. This finding reflects how historically excluded groups often depend on non-elected actors for their representation to put pressure on the parliamentary establishment to act.

Chapter 4 looks at how citizens evaluate individual political representatives. It analyzes if and how it matters to citizens that politicians resemble them: descriptive representation. The chapter takes Germany and the Netherlands as cases, comparing countries with historically different descriptive representation legacies. It corroborates Chapter 3's findings that citizens primarily look for representatives who advance their interests: substantive representation. Putting Pitkin's (1967) conceptual work in conversation with Hannah Arendt's (1978) theory of judgment, I disentangle subcomponents in citizens' evaluations of representation. Citizens see whether politicians (1) imagine their lived reality and related political concerns (political imagination), (2) propose a course of action that corresponds to their preferences (political judgment), and (3) achieve their political goals (political action). Although secondary to most, many value symbolic representation by representatives who (4) change negative meanings about their group, and (5) empower their community as role models.

The upper half of Figure 1 shows how the descriptive status of a politician matters for these five aspects. Most citizens agree that descriptive politicians' experiential knowledge enables them to better imagine their concerns. However, in practice, citizens often doubt that descriptive politicians share their political judgment and/

or can advocate for them within majority-dominated politics. They often regard these politicians as lacking autonomy, though most value their presence as role models. In some cases, majority politicians represent their interests or challenge derogatory group images that majority citizens hold. They acquire political imagination indirectly, through empathy and close contact with minoritized communities. More often, however, citizens see majority politicians as detached from their lived reality. This results in non- or misrepresentation: a negative relationship, as indicated by the dotted lines in Figure 1. The chapter concludes that increasing numbers of minoritized politicians in legislative bodies is necessary but not sufficient for representation to take place.

Chapters 3 and 4 show that citizens talk about their interests as intersectional. They consider interrelationships of ethnicity/race, class, gender, age, and religion to determine the extent to which a politician resembles and represents them. In both chapters, I find that young women of color in particular value symbolic representation by role models. Despite historically longer legacies of minoritized politicians in the Dutch compared to the German parliament, findings are mostly consistent between the two countries.

Actions

How do minoritized citizens discuss possibilities to effect change in political representation processes? Chapter 5 zooms in on how minoritized citizens discuss relationships between (not) being represented and voting. It relies on all focus groups in France, Germany, and the Netherlands. Research on electoral participation of minoritized immigrant-origin citizens often conflates voting and being represented. However, the focus groups suggest that this relationship is not clear-cut. Many citizens who vote are dissatisfied with their representation, while the motives of non-voters are diverse. The chapter distinguishes between *satisfied voters*, *partly satisfied voters*, *dissatisfied voters*, and *dissatisfied non-voters*. It lays bare the electoral choices citizens in each category make, and their relationship to perceived representation. Migration history-specific generational differences feature in these conversations. Whereas the Dutch see relatively many options in the open electoral system and Germans are in the middle, French discussions center on abstention or voting for the lesser of two evils. The chapter suggests that citizens' future expectations, which they link to country-specific electoral systems, influence the relationship between evaluations of representation and political action.

Contributions

This section reviews the contributions this dissertation makes to the scientific literature. I discuss contributions to political representation scholarship, and insights into measuring group categories in social research, and end with methodological notes on focus groups.

Contributions to political representation scholarship

This dissertation shows that scholars who aim to understand citizens' perspectives on representation benefit from integrating theoretical perspectives, rather than leveraging each separately as often happens at present, and by sometimes expanding representation frameworks with conceptual tools from adjacent fields. Pitkin's (1967) representation dimensions, as well as feminist theorization on links between its descriptive and substantive dimensions (Mansbridge, 1999), prove essential to conceptualize how citizens experience and evaluate representation. While classical representation studies tend to focus on legislative bodies (for an exception, see Weldon, 2011), constructivist theories (Saward, 2006; Squires, 2008) enable an appreciation of the role that extra-parliamentary representatives play in advocating for disadvantaged groups. Constructivist insights are further indispensable to understand how experiences of "not being represented" stem from power inequalities in the ability to define groups and ascribe (negative) meanings to them in politics. Conceptual work from political psychology and political theory (Arendt, 1978; Ryan et al., 2023) enabled me to interpret citizens' experiences that representation theories did not or insufficiently encompass.

The literature often equates "not being represented" with the invisibility of citizens' interests and identities in politics. However, my findings complicate visibility and highlight the influence of inclusion and exclusion processes on perceived representation. Chapter 2 shows that, next to invisible, citizens feel hyper-visible in politics. Politicians "misrepresent" their group in stereotyping ways that are at odds with their self-perceptions. Scholars mention misrepresentations or hostile representation of groups (Guasti & Geissel, 2019; Severs et al., 2013; Siow, 2023b), but such experiences have not been systematically investigated so far (for a notable exception, see Akachar, 2018). This research contributes by constructing an empirically grounded typology of forms of negative representation, including misrepresentation. To do so, it builds new theoretical bridges between constructivist representation literature (Saward, 2006; Squires, 2008) and insights on identity misrecognition (Hopkins, 2011; Ryan et al., 2023).

The emphasis on invisibility in the literature may have to do with scholars' traditional focus on white women. This subgroup arguably suffers more from invisibility than misrepresentation. Politicians use them less as scapegoats for political gain. Possibly, (white) women's rights, while certainly not safeguarded in this day and age, may be more publicly accepted than the rights of other minorities. This would make their misrepresentation a more electorally costly strategy for politicians. The pervasiveness of misrepresentation in the focus groups, however, shows that white women's experiences may only partially translate to other minoritized groups. To deepen theoretical knowledge of disadvantaged group representation therefore requires expanding empirical studies beyond white women to include groups like disabled or trans people (see Evans & Reher, 2023; Schotel, 2023). Minoritized groups whose identities are highly politicized seem particularly at risk of misrepresentation.

The dissertation distinguishes different aspects citizens primarily look at when evaluating representation: whether representatives (1) imagine their lived reality and related political concerns (political imagination), (2) propose a political course of action that corresponds to their preferences (political judgment), (3) achieve their political goals (political action), (4) change negative group stereotypes, and (5) empower their community as role models. Distinguishing these subcomponents is useful because they reveal that citizens can feel represented in part – for example, by politicians showing that they understand their lived concerns even if they do not share the same political views. Additionally, this differentiation allows for a study of which subcomponents citizens value more. Disentangling these aspects thus provides more precise insight into how citizens feel represented, where this may fall short, and potential differences therein between (sub)groups or countries.

My findings indicate that, of the five aspects mentioned above, citizens prioritize substantive representation, and rank imagination and judgment above action. In Chapters 3 and 4, citizens mostly evaluate parties and politicians by whether they visibly speak out about their concerns, rather than by policy achievements. A focus on performance, visibility, and speech could imply that politicians who are outspoken get more support than those who achieve results behind the scenes. It might also render citizens vulnerable to manipulation by elites who successfully present images of substantive representation through speech, but do not deliver change or even go against citizens' wishes in their policies. Alternatively, citizens may care about policy change more than my findings suggest, but may be less aware of it, due to the lack of information on legislative or policy changes available to them.

In Chapter 4, based on Arendt's (1978) theory of judgement, I introduce the concept of "political imagination," which contributes to theoretical puzzles on the link between descriptive and substantive representation. Evidence shows that minoritized politicians' experiential knowledge enables them to understand and advocate for the interests of their group (Fenno, 1978). However, scholars ask, in Dovi's (2002) words, whether "just any woman, Black or Latino" in office will do. Minoritized politicians can be detached from their communities, or from subgroups (Dovi, 2002). In contrast, some majority politicians, who lack experiential knowledge, speak and act for minoritized groups (Childs & Krook, 2009).

"Political imagination," which refers to a representative's social knowledge of citizens' lived conditions, conceptually contributes by exposing the mechanism that enables politicians to speak and act for citizens. Minoritized citizens think that experiential knowledge is one important pathway to political imagination. Descriptive representatives can draw on their shared lived experiences with constituents to imagine their concerns. Yet, minoritized citizens see some majority politicians as acquiring political imagination indirectly (Chapter 4). A second pathway to social knowledge of their lived conditions is through empathy and close ties with their community. Political imagination refers to a quality, not an identity (see Staehr Harder, 2019). Therefore, it allows for a study of any politician's capacity to represent a minoritized group, regardless of descriptive status. Imagination conceptually accommodates the idea that citizens' interests are constructed in the representation process (Saward, 2010). Politicians cannot know citizens' interests objectively or *a priori*. Yet, they can imagine what citizens' concerns are based on social knowledge acquired though experience or otherwise.

Chapter 4 shows that when it comes to substantive representation, citizens prefer descriptive politicians with whom they share as many politically relevant experiences as possible. Given what was discussed earlier, this is not surprising, since these politicians have the greatest social knowledge about them and are the most capable of imagining their concerns. Yet, it stood out that when evaluating symbolic representation, citizens value politicians who, in their identity performance, deviate as much as possible from the white male norm. As such, these are not necessarily the representatives with whom they share the most lived experiences. The rationale seems that "space invader" (Puwar, 2004) politicians bring about the most symbolic change, rendering them the preferred choice in this respect. How citizens conceive of descriptive representation could thus potentially change depending on whether citizens evaluate substantive or symbolic representation. Future research could further explore these dynamics. For instance,

do lesbian citizens who identify with the LGBTQIA+ community prefer lesbian politicians to represent them substantively, but trans representatives symbolically?

This research contributes conceptually by separating voting and representation, analyzing links between the two from citizens' points of view. In Chapters 3 and 5, I show that citizens range from ambivalent to highly dissatisfied with their vote. Although minoritized citizens do not always vote for politicians who resemble them, most find diversity in politics important to feel represented and included (Chapter 4). This finding indicates that taking voting as a proxy for representation – often assumed in research on immigrant and minority electoral participation – risks overlooking aspects of representation that matter to citizens but are infrequently decisive for vote choice. Therefore, I recommend treating voting and representation as separate constructs, rather than using one as a stand-in for the other.

My results expose serious obstacles to minoritized citizens' substantive and symbolic representation. Citizens forefront structural barriers by dominant society that lead to poor or failing representation, including misrepresentation, established parties that fail to take up their issues, assimilationist pressures on descriptive representatives, and majority politicians being out of touch with their communities. Misrepresentation, in particular, hampers citizens in advancing their own political claims. This finding is at odds with ideals of representation as an interactive relationship between political actors and citizens (Saward, 2010; Runciman, 2007) in which citizens can reject representative claims they disagree with. Citizens' perceived inability to advance counterclaims underscores the need to examine how citizens feel about representation. It further requires researchers to examine when the dominant establishment provides space for minority rights and political influence. Particularly, future studies could explore established political parties to understand the conditions under which they facilitate or frustrate the link between descriptive and substantive representation.

This dissertation reveals within- and between-group differences in how citizens want to be represented, by whom, and how, complementing intersectional research on politicians (Severs et al., 2016; Brown, 2014). Intersections of ethnicity/race, age/generation and gender feature in citizens' experiences of not being represented (Chapter 2), in how they perceive their interests (Chapter 3), in whom they count as a descriptive representative (Chapter 4), and to a lesser extent, in evaluations of representation (Chapters 3-5). Young Women of Color specifically value role models, sometimes leading to voting tradeoffs (Chapters 3 and 4). Symbolic representation particularly matters for citizens who face intersectional invisibility.

Comparing across cases – immigrant-origin groups and countries – offers insight into which representation dynamics may apply more broadly. Despite historical migration trajectories and country differences, experiences of misrepresentation were widespread across the board. Recurring negative experiences point to the pervasiveness and impact of anti-minority political rhetoric. Moreover, despite historic legacies of minoritized politicians in the Dutch relative to the German parliament, many Dutch as well as Germans think that there are too few (descriptive) politicians who defend their interests. This comparative finding underlines that presence by itself does not necessarily improve perceived interest representation. Studies beyond a single case also enable researchers to obtain insight into context specificities in citizen narratives. Migration trajectories as a former worker, Resettler, or postcolonial citizen, legacies of descriptive representation, representative claim makers, and integration models feature in citizens' conversations. Electoral systems seemed key to understanding how citizens link evaluations of representation to their political actions, specifically voting (Chapters 3-5).

Contributions to the use of categories in social science research

This dissertation offers insight into measurements of group categories in social science research. I examine how people relate to the "state categories" derived from the census or social surveys (Monk, 2022) that researchers often rely on in their measurements. In the Western European context, a commonly used state category is "migration background." I investigate how citizens prefer to be represented (based on which political identities) and how migration background featured in their discussions.

The research shows that self-identification is preferable to ascribed categories in several ways. Self-identification offers more accurate insights into how identity matters or not in politics, and if so, which identity. Chapters 3 and 4 find that, while Dutch and Germans sometimes adopt migration background labels, most see themselves as part of a broader group of minoritized citizens, based on ethnic/racial and class disadvantage, rather than migration history. This identification informs how they see their political interests, and who they qualify as a descriptive representative. Some participants, especially Resettler Germans, do not see themselves as minoritized and do not feel that they share political interests. In these cases, ascribed migration backgrounds reveal little about how these citizens relate to politics.

Focusing on self-identification allows researchers to include citizens who are rendered invisible by state categories. In this study, Black, African, or Afrodiasporic Germans constitute a "hidden group" (Celis & Mügge, 2018) who fall outside migration background categories because they have resided in Germany for generations, have African-American roots or Western European migration backgrounds. Many more groups are rendered invisible by state categories, such as non-binary persons, and are thus quickly missed in research that relies on state categories. Additionally, research that takes political self-identification at its starting point does justice to the agency of individuals to define their own sense of self, which can counteract misrepresentation (see Chapter 2).

However, this study simultaneously demonstrates the salience of state categories. Dutch and German participants in this study do relate to migration background labels. Even though most participants emphasize ethnic/racial and class minoritization, rather than migration history, they sometimes adopt migration background as a convenient term that is accepted in society at large. Although some ridicule or criticize the term, migration background is intuitive to participants in the sense that they feel addressed by it. This is further illustrated by the observation that while soliciting participants in France – where migration background is not a default descriptor – potential participants did not always understand migration background as a selection criterium (Chapter 1). Adding to this, self-identification may not always provide insight into how individuals want to be categorized by others. Though many participants in this study feel minoritized, they do not want to be identified as such in all cases, or by all actors like researchers. These considerations, in addition to practical dependence on categories used in externally obtained datasets and continuity in longitudinal measurements, may be reasons to still opt for state categories.

I therefore argue that adopting self-identification, external labels, or a mix should be made contingent on the research purpose. In addition, I recommend researchers to critically reflect on the tradeoffs involved in their choice, to think about how to overcome the drawbacks of chosen categories in the research process, and to detail their considerations in written work.

This dissertation shows that an intersectional analysis (Crenshaw, 1989) leads to more fine-grained insights compared to studies that assume single group categories. This research zooms in on privilege and disadvantage within intersectional self-identified groups. Based on insights from colorism research,

Monk (2022, p. 13) argues that attributes such as skin color act as "cues" that activate ethnic/racial stereotypes along a continuum of perceived typicality. Black women belong to the same intersectional group, but the racism they experience can differ, depending on how dress, hair, skin tone, or accent activate mental stereotypes (Carbado & Gulati, 2013). This dissertation finds empirical evidence for the value of these approaches. Experiences of non- and misrepresentation among citizens who identify as minoritized differ depending on skin color or having a perceived "foreign-sounding" name (Chapter 2). Citizens value descriptive representatives who explicitly perform rather than downplay stigmatized cues of categories (Chapter 4). A politician who wears a headscarf or dresses in perceived feminine ways carries more symbolic weight than someone who renders difference invisible. These results invite researchers to move beyond discrete, intersectional categories to investigate variation stemming from identity performance and perceived typicality.

Methodological insights on focus group methods

This dissertation methodologically contributes to focus group research in two areas: first, it provides insight into how intersectionality theory can be operationalized through focus groups, and second, it contributes to knowledge on online focus groups in research on politicized topics with minoritized research participants.

I operationalized intersectionality in focus group design through McCall's (2005) approaches. In "anticategorical" intersectionality, researchers do not assume an existing category, but inductively examine if and how race, gender, or other categories operate in a research context. In "intercategorical" and "intracategorical" intersectionality, researchers provisionally use existing categories to systematically map power relations. The intercategorical approach involves crossing two or more social categories, studying privileged and disadvantaged groups simultaneously. The intracategorical approach concerns studying how race, gender, and other social categories operate within a single social group. I adopted intercategorical and intracategorical principles by comparing different "migration background" focus groups, and analyzing gender, class, and other differences among participants within each group.

The intercategorical approach fits with the "golden rule" of focus group practice to assemble individuals based on a shared characteristic, like education level or profession (Barbour, 2007). Sharing a trait provides a starting point for the conversation and reduces power inequalities between participants. This approach

worked well. Comparing focus groups with Moroccan Dutch, Turkish Dutch, and Surinamese Dutch in Chapter 3, for instance, allowed me to identify intercategorical variation in how citizens talked about feeling represented by the Black Lives Matter movement. I would hypothesize that this variation would have been less apparent in focus groups that mixed migration backgrounds. Citizens with Turkish and Moroccan migration backgrounds might have felt that it was not their place to speak or to feel represented by BLM.

I expect that operationalizing intercategorical intersectionality through focus group segmentation easily translates to other research contexts (e.g., if gender and age are thought to be of theoretical interest, differentiating the groups into young/senior women, men, and non-binary/diverse). Here, researchers are advised to think ahead about which intersections are most theoretically promising. Focusing on many intersections requires resources to achieve saturation, which would involve three to four separate focus groups for each additional social group.

The intracategorical approach requires focus groups to be diverse, which is in tension with focus group guidelines that treasure socially homogenous groups. In this study, focus groups involved people who differed in gender, age, education, and religion. To still minimize power differences, we aimed for at least two women, young, or practically educated persons. The idea was to not have someone without education in an otherwise university-educated group. This balancing act had mixed results. We indeed observed intracategorical variation. Participants often picked up on differing experiences between them that were associated with their social position. Having a single senior person in an otherwise young group was enough for age/generation to become a conversation topic. However, the intracategorical approach also fell short. This was partly related to recruitment problems. It was very difficult to reach practically educated citizens during the pandemic. Because of this, we sometimes had to find last-minute replacements who did not meet our initial criteria.

To leverage the intracategorical approach through focus groups, enough time, resources, and a project network is indispensable to ensure that underrepresented profiles of citizens can be reached more easily, so that they are not "alone" in a focus group. One option would be to start fieldwork with a large-scale, representative survey, after which citizens are invited to future studies. Having potentially interested people available, including their demographics, might facilitate a better focus group sample. During the conversation, moderators can encourage individuals who speak less. If this proves insufficient, researchers can apply

more segmentation. In online projects, breakout rooms could facilitate additional splitting of subcategories of participants along gender, age, or other axes.

Future studies might also try to operationalize an "anticategorical" approach through focus groups. This could have certain advantages. Methodologically, selecting by ethnicity/race assumes that this predefined category matters the most (Christoffersen & Siow, 2024). It also raises the question whether ethnicity/race would be equally salient outside the focus group setting. Another issue is that participants can feel misrecognized if they do not identify with the selection category. One way to operationalize anticategorical intersectionality would be to first determine which categories are salient through ethnographic methods, participatory research, and communication with grassroots movements. Researchers could then assemble focus groups, including new relevant groups if they emerge throughout the research process.

This dissertation further offers insight into online focus groups. The COVID-19 pandemic led me to an online medium: Zoom. Surprisingly, the online setting proved to have particular advantages in terms of moderation. The Zoom chat feature reduced the dependence and responsibility of a single moderator by providing the research team with an entirely separate medium to touch base in real time. We used Zoom chat to discuss and reconsider the order of topics, weigh which questions needed more attention, remind each other of participants' previous statements, notify the moderator that someone wanted to speak, and ask for a second opinion if the group discussion strayed off topic. Researchers further used the chat to divide tasks: the moderator facilitated the conversation, while the note taker privately integrated latecomers, and helped participants who had connection problems. Both researchers could also discuss how to intervene in a sensitive situation.

Participants equally put the public chat to use as an additional outlet to express their views, notify the others that they wanted to respond to something or when other participants were talking over them. Once the meeting has stopped, Zoom automatically saves the chat transcript in a document folder, including participant names and time stamps. The Zoom chat allows for a detailed analysis afterwards of how moderators intervened and their considerations for doing so, which can improve future moderation and data analysis. Using the Zoom chat could be included in research team training sessions. A drawback of the online setting was that moderators found it more difficult to figure out why some participants were

relatively quiet or seemed disconnected. A post-focus group survey, phone call, or follow-up interview would be helpful in these situations.

Not only the moderators, but also the participants mentioned certain benefits of the online setting. Most indicated being comfortable online and the research team had the impression that the online setting decreased social desirability – possibly because interviewees had a screen in front of them rather than physical people, which might have made them less reluctant to voice (bold) opinions. Participants can also more easily exit an online meeting when they experience discomfort. While this is not ideal from the researchers' perspective, easy exits do provide participants with more agency by decreasing social pressures to not leave.

Limitations

This study has a number of limitations that invite follow-up research. The main limitations have to do with the sample, as the COVID-19 pandemic strongly influenced who we reached.

The absence of ethnically/racially majority citizens as a sort of "control" group makes it more difficult to assess which findings relate to a migration background or minoritized position, and which hold across the board. Participants themselves did link ethnic/racial minorization to perceived representation, in line with other studies among citizens with disadvantaged class and age backgrounds (Bastedo, 2015; Noordzij et al., 2021). Recent quantitative research (SCP, 2024; Street & Schönwälder, 2021) confirms that support for immigrant-origin politicians is widespread among immigrant-origin citizens, especially among those who feel discriminated against, relative to citizens with privileged European backgrounds, or without migration backgrounds.

This study's findings suggest that particularly subjective perceptions of disadvantage matter for experienced representation, which often but not necessarily coincide with "objective" disadvantage as defined by researchers. Resettler Germans in this study, arguably relatively privileged in terms of historical legal status and symbolic boundaries with the dominant majority, were divided on whether they considered themselves members of a disadvantaged group. Some felt disadvantaged compared to recent immigrants. Majority citizens, moreover, can also feel disadvantaged and deprived (Gest et al., 2018; Hochschild, 2016).

Future research could further zoom in on how self-perception as disadvantaged relates to perceived political representation. It would be interesting to disentangle and measure types of perceived disadvantage and how they relate to citizens' political evaluations and voting behavior.

Several profiles of citizens are underrepresented in the sample, including individuals with right-wing/conservative political views, practical education, and the less politically engaged. It is plausible that the mostly left/progressive participants in my sample care more about diversity in politics. In German cities, Street and Schönwälder (2021, p. 2661) find that far- and center-right voters are less supportive of immigrant-origin representation compared to left/progressive voters, although political views only partially explain varying attitudes.

Recent studies (SCP, 2024; Geurts et al., 2025) show that theoretically educated citizens with migration backgrounds noticeably feel less represented than the practically educated. The "integration paradox" could explain this finding: experiencing upward mobility, theoretically educated individuals could be more aware of exclusion by majority society and politics (Geurts et al., 2021). Since theoretically educated persons are overrepresented in this study, they may have been more negative about political representation. It should be noted that participants did not talk about themselves as having social class privilege in all respects. Many were the first in their families to attend university. As such, they experience socioeconomic worries such as access to affordable housing, student debt, and labor market discrimination (intersecting with ethnicity/race), rendering socioeconomic inequality an important political issue to many.

The selection of migration backgrounds may have influenced the findings. In this dissertation, I mainly selected citizens with a migration background who are negatively discussed in politics and public discourse. In the Netherlands, these citizens evaluate representation more negatively but also vote more (Spierings & Vermeulen, 2023). Citizens with refugee biographies, who participated little in this research, evaluate politics more positively (SCP, 2024). I therefore expect that participants in this study may evaluate politics more negatively. However, my findings suggest that how this relates to electoral participation might differ across countries. The presence of ethnic/racial minority parties in the Netherlands offers citizens an opportunity to express their negative evaluations politically, while this option is limited or unavailable in France and Germany.

This research has a number of methodological limitations linked to focus groups. Focus groups are suitable for conceptual innovation and provide insight into the range of positions individuals in a social category take. But they are less useful to determine the relative importance of the various opinions in the broader population. Therefore, it would be interesting if positions taken by participants in this research were translated into indicators that were tested among a representative sample through survey or experimental methods, while considering intersectional and country specificities. Another limitation is that the makeup of the focus groups may have made ethnicity/race more salient for participants. Two observations suggest that this priming effect may be limited. Ethnicity/race seemed equally salient in women-only focus groups, while participants in some focus groups (e.g., Resettler Germans) rejected the idea that migration background was relevant to political representation. Lastly, the group setting, and the presence of a white researcher, might have affected how citizens expressed themselves. Future research could mitigate social desirability by combining focus groups with interviews and by increasing research team diversity.

Policy implications

This dissertation has several implications for policies that focus on inclusive and equal representation processes. My findings suggest that politicians can play an important role in breaking with, and standing up to, stereotyping and exclusionary speech. Minoritized citizens are dissatisfied with politicians who represent their identities in negative ways. Hostile statements trigger feelings of non- and misrepresentation, but they are also seen as distracting from "real" political problems. Influential majority politicians who are part of established political parties can play a positive role in countering this negative trend. They could forefront society's diversity through inclusive language and norm-setting statements. To achieve this, majority politicians require awareness of the lives of citizens who fall outside their range of experience through regular contact. Only incidental contact, like visiting community centers during election time, is insufficient. Long-term policies could focus on countering segregation as the underlying cause of deficiencies in social knowledge among the dominant society.

According to most minoritized citizens, the presence of minoritized politicians remains indispensable to be politically represented. Many value minoritized

politicians as role models who better grasp their political concerns. However, this dissertation research shows that political parties can significantly promote or frustrate these positive influences, depending on the space they provide minoritized politicians to express themselves in authentic and uncensored ways. When citizens perceive minoritized politicians as "assimilated", increasing numbers do not necessarily increase perceived representation, and could even backfire. In addition to selecting and retaining a diverse pool of candidates, political parties could improve inclusiveness within their parties. This encompasses showing solidarity with minoritized politicians who speak out, fostering respect for difference, and encouraging conversations about the party's direction, with space for dissenting opinions.

This dissertation demonstrates that deliberative settings can provide a rich source of knowledge about (minoritized) citizens' perspectives on politics. They help to identify political concerns, provide insight into how citizens evaluate political proposals, and clarify how citizens are differently affected by implemented policies over time. They complement the knowledge of minoritized politicians who, by themselves, cannot represent all opinions within ideologically and intersectionally diverse communities. Deliberative platforms may thus be fruitful to enhance responsiveness at different stages of the representation process.

In practice, deliberative practices could be integrated into existing political infrastructures. For women, Celis and Childs (2020) propose introducing a new set of actors: the "affected representatives of women." Selected from outside of formal politics, the affected representatives introduce women's concerns in order to enhance the social knowledge available to elected representatives during the parliamentary deliberative process and to facilitate accountability after they reach decisions (Celis & Childs, 2020, p. 137-140). Installing affected representatives in parliament could benefit minoritized groups beyond women, depending on who a policy issue concerns (Christoffersen & Siow, 2024). Political parties are another site where deliberative platforms can flourish. Political parties could establish intersectionally and ideologically diverse networks of underrepresented groups and actively involve them in formulating election manifestos and policy documents. Extra-parliamentary actors and civil society, too, are important deliberative sites, complementing formal politics. Promoting and funding subgroup-specific art, media, grassroots movements, and other initiatives would enhance minority representation.

Writing this in the political context of early 2025, this seems far away from the direction we are headed. Yet now seems the right time to build inclusive coalitions across difference. Only when political representation processes include the perspectives of all citizens can democracy truly work for everyone.