ERC Starting Grant 2022

**Research proposal [Part B1]**

**P**articipation and **R**epresentation in the **D**igital Age:

Participation Repertoires in an Era of Unequal Representation

PRD

**Cover Page:**

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* Proposal duration: **60 months** (April 2023–April 2028)

How do people incorporate increasingly common nonelectoral political acts into individual-level repertoires of participation? How well are different types of political participators represented? At a time of growing concern about unequal representation, two opposing trends worldwide over the past several decades highlight the importance of these questions: a clear decrease in voting, concentrated among lower-status groups; and evidence of increased nonelectoral participation, which tends to be concentrated among higher-status groups. To assess how these trends in political participation affect patterns of representation, PRD’s theoretical framework integrates new approaches for investigating the links between individuals’ participation repertoires (i.e., voting, protest, online activism) and objective and subjective representational outcomes.

A multimethod approach informs PRD’s work packages: **“Political acts and political participators” (WP1)** analyzes high-quality data in separate surveys and a harmonized dataset and includes methodological innovations that advance new techniques to identify participation repertoires. **“Participation-representation connection”** **(WP2)** investigates how the political acts and political participators analyzed in WP1 relate to representational outcomes and integrates these findings with qualitative fieldwork with activists focused on unequal representation. Finally, “**Mobilizing and organizing low-status groups” (WP3)** conducts novel experimental studies using Twitter panel data and cross-national field experiments to identify interventions that may yield more equitable representational outcomes in the future. By combining an original theoretical framework and methodological innovations, PRD will conduct a uniquely comprehensive empirical investigation of participation repertoires, with a focus on mechanisms to decrease inequalities in participation and representation.

ERC Starting Grant 2022

Research proposal [Part B2]

**P**articipation and **R**epresentation in the **D**igital Age:

Participation Repertoires in an Era of Unequal Representation

**Section a. CHALLENGE AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

How do people incorporate increasingly common nonelectoral political acts into their individual-level repertoires of political participation? How well are different types of political participators represented in terms of both objective and subjective measures of representation? These two questions are of the utmost importance in an era marked by concerns about unequal representation (Bartels 2018; Lupu & Warner, in press-a, in press-b; Schakel & Van der Pas, in press) and the erosion of democracy (Dahlberg et al. 2015; Kriesi 2020; Lührmann & Lindberg 2019; Waldner & Lust 2018; Wuttke et al. in press). Two opposing trends in political participation worldwide over the past several decades highlight the importance of conducting robust empirical investigations of these questions: a clear decrease in electoral-oriented participation, particularly among lower-status groups (Blais & Rubenson 2013; Kostelka 2017; Kostelka & Blais 2021; Scarrow et al. 2017), and an increase in nonelectoral political participation, which tends to be concentrated among higher-status groups (Dalton 2021, in press; Jenkins & Kwak, in press; Schlozman et al. 2018; Theocharis & van Deth 2018). Although research suggests that the systematic increase in the types and prevalence of nonelectoral political activity (e.g., protest, online activism) is at least partially motivated by participants’ intentions of influencing representational outcomes, there is surprisingly little systematic evidence about how different forms of political participation relate to objective or subjective measures of democratic representation.

The main goal of the PRD project is to understand how individuals’ broad repertoires of electoral and nonelectoral political participation relate to representational outcomes in an era marked by unequal representation. Two distinct yet potentially conflicting democratic ideals lie at the heart of this investigation. The first ideal is responsiveness to the expressed will of the people, meaning that representational outcomes should ideally be formed in response to the demands of the mass public. The second democratic ideal that must be considered is equality of representation, even of those who are not politically active. Given the well-established finding that citizens who are the most politically active also tend to be socioeconomically advantaged (Dalton 2017; Oser et al. 2013; Schlozman et al. 2012; Teorell et al. 2007; Verba et al. 1978), a strong link between nonelectoral participation and representational outcomes has the potential to contribute to unequal representation. Although achieving the democratic ideal of responsiveness to the expressed will of the people (e.g., through voting and additional acts of political communication) may enhance representation of the politically active, there is also a risk that it will deepen the documented patterns of unequal representation of society at large, potentially eroding the public’s perception of democratic legitimacy. These central and potentially counteracting ideals of responsiveness and equality of representation lead to the third and final main motivating question of PRD: How can traditionally low-status groups be mobilized and organized to reduce identified inequalities in contemporary patterns of political participation and representation?

a.1. Theoretical Framework and Innovations

Informed by these motivating questions, I propose four innovations in PRD’s theoretical framework in relation to the central conceptual model in political science scholarship on the “Chain of Responsiveness,” as articulated by G. Bingham Powell (2004: 92). Powell’s model, which has guided scholarship on political participation and representation, focuses on the act of voting to draw links between four stages of democratic responsiveness: (Stage 1) citizen preferences, (Stage 2) citizens’ voting behavior, (Stage 3) selecting policymakers, and (Stage 4) public policies and outcomes. In this section, I summarize a series of fundamental theoretical, methodological, and empirical innovations that the PRD project introduces in relation to Powell’s classic model to fully investigate contemporary challenges and opportunities in democratic governance.

The first innovation I propose is that to fully investigate the chain of responsiveness in contemporary democracies, it is necessary to go beyond the conventional focus on voting and consider, instead, individuals’ broader participation repertoires. Second, to comprehensively assess democratic responsiveness, I argue for the importance of incorporating measures of subjective responsiveness with the standard focus in the literature on objective measures of public policies and representational outcomes. The third innovation, informed by research on the increasing centrality of online and digital behavior in social and political processes, is the integration of online measures of political behavior and communication in a theoretical framework that is grounded in mainstream political science literature. Finally, with attention to the increasingly salient topic of unequal representation, I propose a fourthinnovation that identifies the causal mechanisms that may expand individuals’ participation repertoires, particularly among traditionally lower-status groups. Thus, informed by the project’s analysis of the linkages between political participation and representational outcomes in historical observational data, PRD’s focus on causal mechanisms for broadening the participation repertoires of lower-status groups aims to identify pathways to level the participatory playing field, with particular attention on the potential of yielding more equal patterns of participation and representation in the future. These important innovations in the standard conceptual framework of participation and representation expand the theoretical and analytical field of vision in the contemporary study of representation in two ways: first, from the primary focus on participation through the act of voting to also encompass citizens’ broad participation repertoires; and second, from the traditional representational focus on objective measures to also investigate subjective measures of representation.

Based on this expansion of the standard conceptual model of the chain of responsiveness, **I argue for the importance of synthesizing two theory-based expectations in the literature** that have not yet been brought into dialogue with each other in research on nonelectoral participation and democratic representation. First, the **communication hypothesis,** prominent in scholarly research in the United States, views participation beyond the electoral arena as a potentially effective channel of political communication that may enhance the representation of those who are politically active in multiple ways (e.g., Griffin & Newman 2005; Schlozman et al. 2018). Second, a contrasting **grievance hypothesis,** which has dominated studies of nonelectoral participation by European scholars, is based on the observation that the recent increase in nonelectoral participation may be primarily due to political frustration and anti-system attitudes that do not translate into enhanced representational outcomes for the politically active (e.g., Bremer et al. 2020; Klandermans 2014). The **innovations I propose in PRD’s theoretical framework** create an opportunity to synthesize the theory-based expectations from these two unconnected literatures and, thus, to clarify the implications of increased nonelectoral participation in contemporary representational processes.

**I propose these innovations at a particularly consequential moment for representative democracies.** Global headlines are dominated by political issues related to social inequalities, such as governing responses to the COVID-19 pandemic and rapid developments in climate change challenges. At precisely this critical juncture, the leading political science research suggests that fundamental changes are underway in patterns of participation, in which individuals with diverse sociodemographic backgrounds express their political voice in contemporary democracies through both electoral and nonelectoral channels. However, little is known about how these changing patterns of political participation relate to changes in democratic representation, despite the existence of data and methods that can be further developed to conduct this investigation. Informed by the urgency of these challenges, the broadened scope of PRD’s theoretical framework will yield a series of new empirical findings on the participation-representation connection while advancing new theorization of the mechanisms that link citizen participation and representational outcomes with particular attention to low-status groups. In an era characterized by growing concerns about the quality of representative democracy, the innovative scientific research proposed by the PRD has the potential to generate new insights into issues of long-standing importance to scholars and practitioners alike.

a.2. Scientific Background: From **Opinion**-Representation to **Participation**-Representation

A core idea in political theory is that democratic governance should be sensitive to the will of the people (Dahl 1961; Mill [1861] 1962; Pitkin 1967). The fundamental importance of responsiveness was emphasized in stark terms in Key’s (1961: 7) claim that “[u]nless mass views have some place in the shaping of policy, all the talk about democracy is nonsense.” In Dahl’s (1971: 1) classic formulation, this sensitivity to the preferences of the mass public is elaborated in relation to principles of political equality, as “a key characteristic of a democracy is the continued responsiveness of the government to the preferences of its citizens, considered as political equals.”

Several decades of empirical research using sophisticated research designs and analytical techniques have found strong evidence of an **opinion-representation** connection in advanced democracies (Miller & Stokes 1963; Page & Shapiro 1983; Rasmussen et al., 2019; Soroka & Wlezien 2010). Nevertheless, the causal mechanisms underlying the link between “opinion” and “policy” remain a topic of debate (Shapiro 2011: 999). Building on this research on the opinion-representation nexus, research on the **participation-representation** connection has focused primarily on the single political act of **voting**. As noted, Powell’s classic (2004) “Chain of Responsiveness” model represents the state of the art of scholarship on this topic by outlining an ideal process in electoral democracies through which the preferences of citizens are translated into policies that are implemented.

Yet the **empirical evidence on the relationship between voting and representational outcomes has been mixed**. Some studies find little indication of legislative responsiveness to voters (Ellis et al. 2006), while others find that voters are better represented by their elected leadership (Griffin & Newman 2005). The vast majority of early studies on this topic focused on the U.S. context during limited time spans. A conclusive cross-national answer to the question of whether voters are indeed better represented than nonvoters was recently documented in Dassonneville, Feitosa, Hooghe, and Oser’s (2021) comprehensive investigation of policy responsiveness. Focusing on social policy, this study of 36 OECD countries between 1980 and 2017 established that governments are responsive to voters but not to all citizens. However, the study’s investigation of whether the act of voting is a causal mechanism that induces policy responsiveness supported Achen and Bartels’ (2016) argument that the electoral behavior of ordinary citizens does not seem to have an identifiable causal impact on policy.

Thus, recent cross-national and longitudinal research based on the best available evidence indicates that while voters are better represented than nonvoters, **researchers have yet to identify the mechanisms by which voters obtain enhanced representation**. A prominent theory discussed for decades in the literature, including in Verba and Nie’s (1972) foundational study *Participation in America*, is that people express their political voice through multiple acts of participation in addition to voting (Verba et al. 1995; XXEuropean). Indeed, despite research’s primary focus on the democratic representation of voter turnout, **expectations about a participation-representation link extend beyond the act of voting**, with extensive research on political behavior demonstrating that voting is not the only act people deploy to express their political preferences (e.g., Barnes & Kaase 1979; Esaiasson & Narud 2013; Gibson & Cantijoch 2013; Grasso & Giugni 2019; Han et al. 2021; Oser et al. 2014; Robison et al. 2018; Schlozman et al. 2018; Theocharis & van Deth 2018).

The idea that diverse political participation, in addition to voting, may act as a key pathway by which politically active individuals effectively obtain enhanced representation has been described as a **communication hypothesis** (e.g., Griffin & Newman 2005; Schlozman et al. 2018), and this causal reasoning has featured prominently in research on the United States (Bartels 2018; Dalton, in press; Schlozman et al. 2018; Verba & Nie 1972; Verba et al. 1995). Empirical support for the communication hypothesis shows that the cross-national increase in nonelectoral participation in recent years is an encouraging sign of increasingly engaged citizenries worldwide who effectively communicate their political preferences to decision-makers. In contrast, another body of research on the role of grievance in motivating nonelectoral participation has also gained traction, figuring most prominently in the work of European scholars (e.g., Bremer et al. 2020; Klandermans 2014). Empirical support for what could be described as a **grievance hypothesis** shows that the documented increase in nonelectoral participation is an expression of political frustration and perhaps even anti-system sentiment that does not translate into representational outcomes, despite sustained efforts over time.

Importantly, these two theory-based expectations (i.e., “communication” vs. “grievance”) regarding the expected connection between nonelectoral participation and representational outcomes have not yet been articulated in the literature as opposing hypotheses from a theoretical perspective. Accordingly, the relative strength of the evidence for each hypothesis has not yet been tested empirically using comparable data and methods. Whether the available evidence best supports the “communication” or “grievance” hypothesis has important implications for our understanding of contemporary democratic governance. If the communication hypothesis is supported empirically, I observe that the recent evidence of increased nonelectoral participation could be seen as a **“virtuous cycle,”** whereby effective nonelectoral participation motivates people to increase their political engagement through nonelectoral channels of political communication. In contrast, if the grievance hypothesis is supported empirically, I propose that this could be understood as a **“vicious cycle,”** whereby nonelectoral participation is motivated by frustration among those members of society who perceive that they are unable to influence political processes. Recent studies documenting declining support for democracy in Europe (Wuttke et al., in press) and the importance of public support for democracies worldwide to survive and thrive (Claassen 2020) highlight the real-world implications of empirically grounded research to test these opposing hypotheses.

Despite the clear consensus in the literature about the importance of the participation-representation connection, leading scholars have noted a **surprising lack of systematic research on how nonelectoral participation relates to representational outcomes** (e.g., Bartels 2009: 168; Campbell 2012: 347; Norris 2007: 644; Schlozman 2002: 460; van Deth 2020: 482; Verba 2003: 666; Verba & Nie 1972: 2). Yet a new line of research on the participation-representation nexus has leveraged recent advances in data collection and research designs to provide some evidence in favor of the “communication hypothesis”—at least for some types of political acts, certain policy issues, and in specific country contexts. For example, in U.S.-focused research, Gillion’s (2012) study of minority protests between 1961 and 1991 revealed the impact of this activity on congressional roll call votes, and Leighley and Oser (2018) showed that in 2012, participation beyond voting enhanced the congruence between participants and their representatives for the highly partisan and salient policy issue of health care reform. Examples of cross-national research on this topic include Htun and Weldon’s (2012) findings that women’s mobilization in autonomous social movements has affected policies to combat violence against women in 70 countries over four decades and Rasmussen and Reher’s (2019) study that found civil society engagement has strengthened the relationship between public opinion and public policy across 20 policy issues in 30 European countries. These studies represent a growing body of literature that illustrates how scholars are increasingly tracing the linkages among a variety of political acts and representational outcomes (Ansolabahere & Kuriwaki 2021; Esaiasson & Wlezien 2017; Gause 2022; Hooghe & Oser 2016; Wasow 2020; Wouters & Walgrave 2017). While these studies provide suggestive evidence in favor of the communication hypothesis, a definitive assessment of the generalizability of this conclusion requires a systematic, structural analysis of the connection between political participation broadly defined and representational outcomes, including an evaluation of whether the participation-representation connection has changed in recent decades in response to shifting electoral and nonelectoral participation trends.

Recalling the two potentially conflicting **democratic ideals of responsiveness and equality of representation** central to PRD’s theoretical model, adjudicating between the communication and grievance hypotheses requires implementing research designs that account for the possibility raised in the literature that members of society with greater social and economic advantages may exert greater political influence through their elevated levels of political participation (Bartels 2018; Dalton, in press; Schlozman et al. 2018). For example, focusing on the political act of voting, Lijphart (1997: 1) noted that “unequal turnout spells unequal influence;” and with attention to a broad range of diverse civic and political activities, Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995: 14) proposed that “inequalities in activity are likely to be associated with inequalities in government responsiveness.”

Systematic and well-defined empirical research on how unequal participation may relate to unequal representation has become even more urgent in recent years due to two separate strands of emerging research. **First, recent research on unequal representation** has concluded that the opinion-representation advantage of high-status groups first documented by research on the United States (Bartels 2008; Gilens & Page 2014) is also clearly evident in Europe and other countries worldwide (Lupu & Warner, in press-a, in press-b; Schakel & van der Pas, in press). **Second, recent research on online participation and usage of social media** has clearly established that the increased prevalence of online and digital media behavior reinforces existing socioeconomic inequalities in political participation patterns (Oser & Boulianne 2020; Oser et al. 2013; Schlozman et al. 2010). Furthermore, research has shown that social media plays an increasingly vital role in international politics through political content exposure and opportunities for online activism (Lotan et al. 2011; Tufecki 2017). Nevertheless, the relatively recent emergence of online and digitally networked political participation is such that it has received much less attention in mainstream political science research. Recent research on the increasingly central role of social media as a causal pathway by which political communication affects individuals’ attitudes and behaviors (e.g., Bail et al. 2018; Bond et al. 2012) also suggests the importance of integrating research on political content exposure on social media into mainstream scholarship on patterns of political participation and representation. These two new and growing lines of research underscore the need for empirical studies to account for the socioeconomic status (SES) of diverse participators to identify the independent contribution of individuals’ participatory behavior to representational outcomes.

Taken together, this synthesis of the literature on political participation and representation in the digital age highlights the urgency of assessing the connection between citizens’ broad participation repertoires and socioeconomic status with objective and subjective representational outcomes. The theoretical framework and research design of PRD will systematically integrate findings from a series of empirical studies to shed new light on these important topics.

a.3. PRD’S Three Main Research Questions

Integrating these literatures, the first research question is (**RQ1): “How do people incorporate increasingly common nonelectoral political acts into their individual-level repertoires of political participation?”** A robust test of the contribution of nonelectoral participation to representational outcomes over time and in diverse contexts requires a broad perspective of individuals’ expanded repertoires of political participation—including voting and nonelectoral political acts. In contrast to the dominant theoretical and conceptual approaches to the study of political behavior that investigate separate political acts or linear indices, PRD will use an actor-oriented approach to investigate individuals’ distinct combinations of electoral and nonelectoral political acts in their participation repertoires. The investigation of RQ1 will focus on how people combine different types of political action within their individual tool kits of political participation (Oser 2017, in press) and will identify the key correlates of these identified participant types over time and across contexts.

Research on individuals’ participation repertoires leads directly to the second research question **(RQ2): “How well are different types of political participators represented in terms of both objective and subjective representational outcomes?”** As the participation-representation question has been studied primarily for the act of voting, PRD will break new ground by expanding the analytical field of vision to include an integrated analysis of electoral and nonelectoral participation. Specifically, the project will assess the connection between the preferences of different types of political participators and representational outcomes in terms of a series of objective measures (e.g., responsiveness and congruence) and subjective measures (e.g., perceptions of political efficacy and perceived governmental responsiveness).

The first two research questions (RQ1 and RQ2) focus on phenomena that are best studied through observational data gathered in the past and require investigating how existing patterns of micro-level individual behavior relate to macro-level representational outcomes in specific country contexts. The third and final research question (RQ3) shifts the analytical focus of inquiry to investigate possible future pathways at the micro level (individual) or meso level (organizational) to mitigate existing patterns of unequal participation and, potentially, unequal representation. Regardless of whether a causal link is identified in historical observational data between unequal participation and unequal representation, prior findings clearly indicate that those who have higher social status are more likely to participate politically in all ways and are also more likely to have their policy views represented by decision-makers. The final research question, therefore, focuses on identifying causal mechanisms that may decrease inequalities in participation with a corresponding potential of diminishing patterns of unequal representation. Thus, the final research question asks **(RQ3): “How can traditionally low-status groups be mobilized and organized with attention to reducing identified inequalities in patterns of political participation and representation?”** In the following section, I discuss how PRD will conceptualize key constructs in the theoretical framework to transition from these research questions to the project’s methodology.