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)

This study addresses the question of how people incorporate increasingly prevalent nonelectoral political acts into individual-level repertoires of participation and how well represented different types of political participators are. At a time of growing concern about unequal representation in democracies, two conflicting global trends over the last several decades highlight the importance of these issues: a clear decline in voter turnout, especially among lower status groups; and evidence of increased nonelectoral participation, found more 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 (e.g., voting, protest, online activism) and representational outcomes, both objective and subjective.

PRD’s work packages employ a multimethod approach: **“Political acts and political participators” (WP1)** analyzes separate surveys and a harmonized dataset and includes methodological innovations using new techniques for identifying participation repertoires. **“Participation-representation connection”** **(WP2)** investigates the connections between the political acts and political participators analyzed in WP1 and 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 with the potential to produce more equal 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 attention to mechanisms that reduce inequalities of 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 combine increasingly prevalent nonelectoral political acts in their individual-level repertoires of political participation? And how well are different types of political participators represented in terms of both objective and subjective measures of representation? These two questions are of 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 conflicting trends in political participation worldwide over the past several decades highlight the importance of conducting robust empirical investigations of these matters: a decline 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). Research suggests that the increase in the forms and prevalence of nonelectoral political acts (e.g., protest, online activism) is at least partly motivated by participants’ interest in influencing representational outcomes. However, there is surprisingly little empirical evidence about how different types of political participation affect objective or subjective measures of democratic representation.

The PRD project’s primary objective 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 is responsiveness to the expressed will of the people, meaning that representational outcomes should reflect the messages communicated by the public. The second democratic ideal to be considered is equality of representation, even of those who are not politically active. Given the well-established finding that people who are the most politically active also tend to be advantaged socioeconomically (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 can potentially 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 the representation of the politically active, there is also a risk that it will worsen documented patterns of unequal representation of society at large, potentially eroding the public’s perceptions of democratic legitimacy. These central and potentially contradictory ideals of responsiveness and equality of representation lead to the third 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

To answer these questions, I propose four innovations in PRD’s theoretical framework in relation to political science scholarship’s central conceptual model of the “Chain of Responsiveness,” as articulated by G. Bingham Powell (2004: 92). Powell’s model focuses on 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 the fundamental theoretical, methodological, and empirical innovations that PRD introduces in relation to Powell’s classic model to fully investigate contemporary challenges and opportunities of democratic governance.

The first innovation entails going beyond the conventional focus on voting and considering individuals’ broader participation repertoires to fully investigate the chain of responsiveness in contemporary democracies. Second, to comprehensively assess democratic responsiveness, PRD integrates the literature’s standard focus on objective measures of public policies and representational outcomes with a focus on measures of subjective responsiveness. The third innovation, informed by research on the increasing centrality of online and digital behavior in social and political processes, incorporates online measures of political behavior and communication into a theoretical framework grounded in mainstream political science scholarship. A fourthinnovation, based on the linkages between political participation and representational outcomes in historical observational data, identifies causal mechanisms that may expand individuals’ participation repertoires, particularly of lower-status groups, with attention to potentially yielding more equal patterns of participation and representation. Together, these innovations of the PRD framework expand the theoretical and analytical field of vision in the contemporary study of representation in two ways: it extends the primary participatory focus on voting to encompass individuals’ broad participation repertoires, and it shifts the traditional representational focus on objective measures to also investigate subjective measures of representation.

This expansion of the standard conceptual model of the chain of responsiveness creates a theoretical framework that enables PRD to **synthesize 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 U.S., 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**, prominent in studies of nonelectoral participation by European scholars, is based on the observation that recent increases in nonelectoral participation may be attributable primarily 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** synthesize the theory-based expectations from these two heretofore unconnected strands of scholarship regarding how non-electoral participation relates to objective and subjective measures of representation, thereby clarifying the implications of increased nonelectoral participation in contemporary representational processes.

**I propose these innovations at a particularly consequential moment for representative democracies.** Political issues involving social inequalities, such as governmental responses to the COVID-19 pandemic and rapid developments in climate change, dominate global headlines. At this critical juncture, the leading political science research suggests that fundamental changes are underway in patterns of participation, whereby individuals with differing socio-demographic backgrounds express their political voices 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 availability of data and methods that can be further developed to conduct such an important investigation. Driven 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 lower status groups. In an era of growing concerns about the quality of representative democracy, the PRD integrated research design 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 importance of responsiveness was put in stark terms in Key’s (1961: 7) argument that “[u]nless mass views have some place in the shaping of policy, all the talk about democracy is nonsense.” Dahl’s (1971: 1) classic formulation on this sensitivity to the preferences of the mass public in relation to political equality posits that “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 revealed strong evidence of an **opinion-representation** connection in advanced democracies (Miller & Stokes 1963; Rasmussen et al. 2019; Soroka & Wlezien 2010). Nevertheless, the causal mechanisms underlying the link between “opinion” and “policy” are subject to debate (Shapiro 2011: 999). Building on this scholarship 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 majority of early studies on this topic focused on the U.S. during limited time periods. A conclusive answer to the question of whether voters are better represented than nonvoters was recently documented in Dassonneville, Feitosa, Hooghe, and Oser’s (2021) cross-national investigation of policy responsiveness. This study of 36 OECD countries between 1980 and 2017 established that governments are responsive to voters but not to all citizens. The study’s finding that voting is not necessarily a causal mechanism that induces policy responsiveness is consistent with Achen and Bartels’ (2016) argument that the electoral behavior of ordinary citizens does not 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, **the mechanisms by which voters obtain enhanced representation have yet to be identified**. A prominent theory long discussed in the literature, including Verba and Nie’s (1972) foundational *Participation in America*, is that people express their political voice through multiple acts of participation in addition to voting (Verba et al. 1995). Indeed, despite the literature’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 way that people 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 multiple political acts, in addition to voting, serve as pathways through which politically active individuals effectively secure enhanced representation has been described as a **communication hypothesis** (e.g., Griffin & Newman 2005; Schlozman et al. 2018); this causal reasoning has featured prominently in research on the U.S. (Bartels 2018; Dalton, in press; Schlozman et al. 2018; Verba & Nie 1972; Verba et al. 1995). Empirical support for the communication hypothesis would show that evidence suggesting a cross-national increase in nonelectoral participation in recent years is an encouraging sign of increasingly engaged citizenries worldwide that effectively communicate their political preferences to decision-makers. A contrasting idea on the role of grievance in motivating nonelectoral participation, which has been most prominent in the work of European scholars, has also recently gained attention (e.g., Bremer et al. 2020; Klandermans 2014). Empirical support for what could be considered a **grievance hypothesis** would show that the documented increase in nonelectoral participation is an expression of political frustration and perhaps anti-system sentiment that does not translate into representational outcomes, even with sustained efforts over time.

Importantly, these two theory-based expectations of the **communication and grievance hypotheses have yet to be articulated in the literature as opposing hypotheses**. 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 contend 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, this could be understood as a **“vicious cycle,”** whereby nonelectoral participation is driven by the frustration of those members of society who perceive their inability to influence political processes. This articulation of the potentially contrasting societal implications of increases in mean levels of nonelectoral participation clarifies the importance of investigating people’s subjective perceptions of representation along with the traditional focus on objective representational outcomes. While some research has suggested that mass critical political attitudes may be a sign of robust democratic norms for some aspects of contemporary democratic governance (e.g., Norris 1999; Geissel 2008), I propose that a positive interpretation of this attitudinal shift is more difficult to sustain if the best available longitudinal evidence shows that nonelectoral participation is associated with decreasing levels of **both objective and subjective representational measures over time**. Recent studies documenting declining support for democracy in Europe (Wuttke et al. in press), together with the acknowledged importance of public support for democracies worldwide if they are 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 well-identified scholarship on 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, providing 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, nonelectoral participation in addition to voting enhanced the congruence between participants and their representatives on the highly partisan and salient health care reform issue. Examples of cross-national research on this topic include Htun and Weldon’s (2012) findings that women’s mobilization in autonomous social movements affected policies to combat violence against women in 70 countries over four decades, and Rasmussen and Reher’s (2019) study that found that 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 illustrating scholarly tracing of the connections between a variety of political acts and representational outcomes (Ansolabahere & Kuriwaki 2021; Esaiasson & Wlezien 2017; Hooghe & Oser 2016; Wasow 2020; Wouters & Walgrave 2017). While this body of work provides some evidence supporting the communication hypothesis, a definitive assessment requires a systematic, structural investigation of the connection between political participation broadly defined and representational outcomes, including an analysis 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 accounting for whether individuals with more socio-economic status exert greater political influence through their higher levels of political participation. For example, focusing on voting, Lijphart (1997: 1) noted that “unequal turnout spells unequal influence”; and in relation to a broad range of additional 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.” I highlight that these classic arguments in the literature about the need for research on participatory inequality have become even more pressing in recent years due to new empirical evidence from two separate strands of emerging research. **First, recent scholarship on unequal representation** has concluded that the opinion-representation advantage of higher status groups first documented in studies on the U.S. (Bartels 2008; Gilens & Page 2014) is also evident in Europe and other countries (Lupu & Warner, in press-a, in press-b; Schakel & van der Pas, in press). **Second, new research on online participation and usage of social media** has established that the increased prevalence of online and digital media behavior reinforces existing socio-economic inequalities in political participation patterns (Oser & Boulianne 2020; Oser et al. 2013; Schlozman et al. 2010). Further, research has shown that social media plays an increasingly vital role in international politics through political content exposure by providing opportunities for online activism (Lotan et al. 2011; Tufecki 2017). Nevertheless, because the emergence of online and digitally networked political participation is such a recent phenomenon, it has received much less attention in mainstream political science research. Innovative studies on the increasing role of social media as a causal pathway through 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 also serve to emphasize the need for empirical studies to clearly account for the socio-economic status of diverse participators to identify the 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 individuals’ broad participation repertoires and socio-economic 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 offer new insights into these important topics.

a.3. PRD’S Three Main Research Questions

Integrating these literatures, the PRD project’s first research question is (**RQ1): “How do people combine increasingly prevalent nonelectoral political acts in 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 conceptual 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 in their individual “tool kits” of political participation (Oser 2017, in press) and will identify the key correlates of these different types of political acts and actors.

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 with reference to 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) as well as subjective measures (e.g., perceptions of political efficacy and perceived governmental responsiveness).

The first two research questions focus on phenomena best studied through observational data gathered in the past and entail investigating how existing patterns of micro-level individual behavior relate to macro-level representational outcomes in specific national contexts. The third research question shifts the analytical focus of inquiry to investigate possible future pathways at the micro (individual) or meso level (organizational) to mitigate existing patterns of unequal participation and, potentially, unequal representation. Regardless of whether a causal link between unequal participation and unequal representation can be identified in historical observational data, prior findings indicate that those with 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 reduce 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.

a.4. Theory-based Conceptualization of Key Constructs: Political Participation and Representation

To translate these three research questions into a well-specified research design, I first provide an overview of how the PRD team will conceptualize and operationalize the two most central empirical constructs of the project’s theoretical framework, namely: political participation and representation. For **political participation** measures and their interpretation, the PRD team will follow the common theory-based definition in the literature of two broad categories of political behavior (Brady 1999: 767; Grasso & Giugni 2019; Quaranta 2016; Vráblíková 2014). Electoral-oriented participation—also described as “institutionalized,” “traditional,” or “conventional”—includes voting and often encompasses party-oriented activities such as party membership. Nonelectoral participation—also described as “noninstitutionalized,” “extra-electoral,” or “unconventional”—is most clearly identified as elite-challenging activities such as protesting against institutions or petitioning individuals in power. In addition to this dichotomous (electoral vs. nonelectoral) categorization of political acts, several prominent studies have proposed and tested more fine-grained categorizations, often on the basis of cross-sectional data with a large number of diverse indicators (e.g., Ohme et al. 2018; Teorell et al. 2007; Theocharis & van Deth 2018; Verba et al. 1995). As the PRD project aims to maximize the cross-national and longitudinal scope of the investigation to robustly test the main communication and grievance hypotheses, the focus of the research on political acts will use the dichotomous “electoral vs. nonelectoral” distinction, with attention to more detailed categories when the relevant data are available.

Two central conceptual approaches will be used in the survey-based analysis of political participation measures: a political act-oriented investigation of individual **political acts** (e.g., variable-oriented analysis of the “vote” variable; and a separate analysis of the “protest” variable), and an actor-oriented investigation of different **types of political participators**, meaning how individuals combine multiple types of participation in distinct individual-level participation repertoires (e.g., individual-level patterns of combining “vote” + “protest” + additional political acts). Thus far, survey-based research on political acts is often conducted in discrete siloes, with experts on voting and experts on protest engaging in separate scholarly conversations. Informed by Charles Tilley’s research, social movement scholars have often used the term “repertoire” to describe a broad range of individuals’ political behavior (Bojar & Kriesi 2021; Gade 2020; Tilley 1995, 2006). However, this actor-oriented conceptual and analytical approach is not common in an analysis of large-N survey data. For PRD’s theoretical framework, an **actor-oriented conceptual approach** is necessary to gain an understanding of the implications of data indicating rising mean levels of nonelectoral political acts. For example, some have suggested that the documented increase in societal mean levels of nonelectoral participation is due to the emergence of a “protest specialist” class of participators who avoid electoral-oriented participation such as voting and party membership but choose to specialize in extra-electoral behavior such as protest and petitioning (Jenkins, in press). Yet, it is also possible that this growth in nonelectoral political acts over time is due to the expanded participation repertoires of individuals who are politically active through electoral channels and are adding nonelectoral acts to their individual-level participation repertoires, increasing the societal proportion of “all-around activists.”

Based on my prior research using this **actor-oriented conceptual approach** to analyze political participation repertoires in several different U.S. survey-based datasets conducted at single points in time, the main **types of participators** I have identified in the data include an “all-around activist” type who has a high probability of engagement in all possible political acts; several “specialist” participator types who participate in certain political acts but not others (e.g., electoral-oriented specialists; nonelectoral specialists; vote-only); and an “inactive” type that refrains from engaging in most, if not all, forms of political participation (Oser 2017; Oser, in press; Oser et al. 2013; Oser et al. 2014). In contrast to standard conceptual approaches to the study of political participation that analyze one political act at a time, or linear indices of multiple acts, this actor-oriented conceptual approach enables the empirical identification of participator types as mutually exclusive subgroups of the population that can be further investigated in terms of their socio-demographic and attitudinal correlates. This approach permits the comparison of all distinct subgroups of the population, including the “all-around activist” type, as well as the “inactive” type. For example, in my recent study using this approach to analyze U.S. data in 2016 (Oser, in press), the “inactive” group totaled a meaningful 17% of the U.S. population, and an analysis of its socio-demographic and attitudinal correlates compared to all other participator types revealed that it is a low-status group that scores low in all measures of pro-democratic norms and perceptions of subjective representation.

Another advantage of this actor-oriented conceptual approach is that it facilitates a robust empirical investigation of individuals’ broad repertoires of political participation that include political acts—such as online activism—that are often not clearly identifiable in survey data as either electoral-oriented or nonelectoral in nature (Anduiza et al. 2012; Gibson and Cantijoch 2013; Vaccari 2013). As detailed in the methodology section, this conceptual approach of analyzing both separate **political acts** and distinct types of **political participators** will be made possible through the PRD team’s development of methodological innovations to analyze distinct types of political participators in complex multilevel cross-national and longitudinal datasets. This innovative conceptual approach for studying survey-based data on political participation indicators will also be integrated with diverse methods used in other elements of PRD’s research design (e.g., including qualitative fieldwork and experimental research) to provide a comprehensive test of the communication and grievance hypotheses.

The second main construct of PRD’s theoretical framework, **representation,** will be investigated primarily through the analysis of left-right ideology, which is still considered the most salient policy dimension for individuals across polities (Dassonneville et al. 2021). An additional theory-based motivation for PRD’s main substantive focus on the left-right dimension is the project’s attention to unequal representation informed by the long-standing focus in the participation and representation literatures on individuals’ socio-economic status (e.g., measures of education, income) and on social and economic policy at the national level. Although some research has suggested limitations in the validity of the left-right ideology measure among survey respondents (Bauer et al. 2017), other studies show that research on the main left-right societal cleavage is still empirically valid and may also serve as a summary measure of the left-right spectrum of other more specific policy dimensions (Elsässer et al. 2018; Stecker & Tausendpfund 2016). Yet, as some recent studies have convincingly argued that policy dimensions beyond the left-right axis are likely to become increasingly salient over time, and other research has shown theoretically relevant variation in some specific policy positions beyond the left-right axis (e.g., Caughey et al. 2019; Lupu & Warner, in press-a, in press-b XX), we will also analyze additional policy dimensions when data become available for valid empirical analysis.

Two additional conceptual clarifications regarding PRD’s approach to the study of representation inform the project’s methodology. First, consistent with high-impact empirical research on representation, we distinguish between levels of **congruence** (i.e., similarity) between the preferences of the mass public and representational outcomes at a given point in time; and **responsiveness**, meaning the degree to which preferences of the public at a particular point in time are manifested in representational outcomes at a later point in time. Second, informed by PRD’s theoretical framework, an important innovation of our empirical analysis is to investigate **both objective and subjective measures of representation**. Here, we rely primarily on the key attitudinal measure of political efficacy and related measures, which date back to Campbell et al.’s (1954: 187) definition of efficacy as “the feeling that individual political action does have, or can have, an impact on the political process.” Despite the mounting scholarly evidence of multiple dimensions of socio-demographic inequality in objective measures of representation, little is known about whether members of under-represented social groups perceive themselves as less capable of effectively understanding politics or influencing political processes. While research on representational inequalities has focused primarily on objective measures of representation, recent research indicates that traditionally low-status social groups (e.g., women with low levels of education and income) are keenly aware of their relative powerlessness in the political realm compared to high-status groups (Oser, Feitosa & Dassonneville 2021). The following section details the project’s methodology, informed by these clarifications regarding PRD’s theory-based conceptualization of the key constructs of political participation and representation.

**Section b. METHODOLOGY**

In this section, I translate the project’s three research questions into a multi-study research design that comprises three work packages. The first work package, (RQ1) “**Political acts and political participators” (WP1)**, analyzes survey data to identify longitudinal trends and key correlates of political acts and political actors and includes methodological innovations that will enable us to identify distinctive participation repertoires in complex datasets. The second work package,(RQ2) **“Participation-representation connection” (WP2)**,investigates how the political acts and political participators analyzed in WP1 relate to objective and subjective representational outcomes and integrates these findings with qualitative longitudinal fieldwork with activists focused on unequal representation. The final work package, (RQ3) **“Mobilizing and organizing low-status groups” (WP3),** introduces novel experimental designs using Twitter panel data and cross-national field experiments to identify interventions that have the potential to broaden the participation repertoires of low-status groups with a strategic focus on yielding more equal representational outcomes in the future. The main **theoretical focus** of WP1 and WP2 is to test the relative strength of evidence in favor of the communication hypothesis vs. the grievance hypothesis, and the broad cross-national scope of the project’s inquiry is aimed at assessing the generalizability of the research findings across varied contexts; in WP3, the principal theoretical focus is to identify communication mechanisms that serve as pathways for mobilizing and organizing lower status groups.

**Section b.i. Work Packages**

The work package descriptions include the following three types of scholarly **contributions** that are numbered in the text (e.g., C#1, C#2), and integrated into a concluding Gantt chart: manuscripts for publication in peer-reviewed journals (n=16); findings reports (n=6) that will disseminate open access descriptive findings using data visualization along with replication files that use best practices for reproducibility (e.g., Alvarez & Heuberger 2022); and a harmonized dataset that will be maintained throughout the length of the project using best practices of active maintenance (Peer et al. 2021).

**WP1**. **Political Acts and Political Participators**

In WP1, we will conduct the most comprehensive cross-national investigation to date of longitudinal trends and key correlates of individual-level repertoires of electoral and nonelectoral participation, with attention to correlates that provide evidence of the central communication vs. grievance hypotheses. We will do so by analyzing political acts in multiple cross-sectional and panel survey datasets (Objective 1a) and one originally constructed harmonized dataset (Objective 1b), as well as by analyzing political actors through advancing methodological innovations in latent class analysis (LCA) (Objective 1c). With attention to identifying comprehensive evidence in relation to the **communication vs. grievance hypotheses**, survey-based evidence in WP1’s analysis of political participation and political attitudes in favor of the communication hypothesis would indicate that nonelectoral participation indicators are positively associated with attitudes of pro-democratic norms and political efficacy and that over time, trends show that this positive association remains stable or increases. In contrast, evidence in favor of the grievance hypothesis would show a low association between nonelectoral participation measures and the attitudes of pro-democratic norms and political efficacy and that over time, trends show that the size of this positive association is becoming smaller or even negative.

All three objectives in WP1 include an analysis of survey-based data. These same datasets, which will also be analyzed in the first objective of WP2, include two types of extant observational data based on high-quality survey programs that comprise multiple indicators of political participation: cross-national cross-sectional surveys such as the European Social Survey (ESS) and the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP), as well as country-specific cross-sectional and repeated-wave panel data such as the American National Election Survey (ANES).[[1]](#footnote-1) The selection of the relevant universe of survey programs for harmonization and analysis will be largely informed by three sources: my coauthored article on social policy responsiveness to voting (Dassonneville, Feitosa, Hooghe & Oser 2021), which was based on an originally constructed dataset that harmonized variables of voting and other relevant socio-demographic variables (e.g., left-right ideology, gender); harmonized variables on political participation produced by the Survey Data Recycling project, which recently completed harmonizing a core set of political participation and socio-demographic variables across a comprehensive set of cross-national survey programs (SDR 2021; Wysmułek 2019); and input from PRD expert network member Professor Markus Gangl, PI of the ERC Advanced project POLAR that is currently creating a harmonized dataset focused on economic inequality and polarization, but does not include nonvoting political participation measures. In addition to voting, the analysis of specific political participation variables will begin with a core set of indicators that have already been harmonized by the SDR project but have not yet been integrated into a single harmonized dataset for analysis, including indicators of party membership, protest, petition, and boycott. Along with testing attitudinal correlates relevant for assessing evidence in favor of the communication vs. grievance hypotheses, our synthesis of the best available data on mean levels and key socio-demographic correlates of nonelectoral participation over time will constitute an important contribution, as the time series data available for the empirical investigation of nonelectoral participation are less consistent in question wording and less comprehensive in country coverage and time range compared to the data on voting.

**Objective 1a. Analyze political acts in multiple survey programs.** We begin WP1 by analyzing trends over time and key correlates of a core number of separate political acts that we plan to include in the harmonized dataset (i.e., the act of voting, separate from the act of protesting). In addition, in our analysis of each separate survey program, such as the ESS, we will also analyze nonelectoral acts that are uniquely available in each survey program (e.g., ESS: online participation in 2018), as well as more specific policy preferences beyond the left-right ideology axis (e.g., ESS: immigration policy preferences). We will analyze each political act as a dependent variable (i.e., Model 1 dependent variable = vote; Model 2 dependent variable = protest) using a standard analytical protocol for each survey program (i.e., ESS separate from ISSP) to assess the association between every political act and the four main sets of correlates necessary to test support for the communication vs. grievance hypotheses in WP1 and WP2: **(1) Socio-economic status (SES)**, e.g., education, income; **(2) Policy preferences,** e.g., left-right ideology and additional policy preferences as available; **(3) Pro-democratic attitudes**, e.g., trust, support for democracy; and **(4) Subjective representation,** including internal efficacy and external efficacy. Based on these analyses, we will produce three contributions in Objective 1a: Draft findings reports for separate survey programs (e.g., separate reports for ESS; ISSP) (C#1); a journal manuscript informed by these findings reports that tests the communication and grievance hypotheses (C#2); and final findings reports with accompanying replication files for each separate survey program to be disseminated publicly following the journal article publication (C#3).

**Objective 1b. Construct a harmonized dataset and analyze political acts.** Building on Objective 1a’s analysis of political acts in separate survey programs, in Objective 1b, we will extend this analytical focus on political acts to the construction and active maintenance of an original harmonized dataset that will represent the most comprehensive cross-national and longitudinal dataset to date for the study of electoral and nonelectoral participation (C#4). The starting point for PRD’s harmonized dataset is the harmonized dataset constructed and analyzed in Dassonneville et al. (2021) that retains survey program-years that include measures of nonelectoral participation in addition to the already-harmonized voting variable. The PRD team will extend this infrastructure by integrating additional relevant harmonized variables. Based on this originally constructed dataset, we will adapt the analytical protocol used to analyze separate survey programs in O1a to test the communication vs. grievance hypotheses in the harmonized dataset, i.e., the four sets of correlates of (1) SES, (2) Policy preferences, (3) Pro-democratic attitudes, and (4) Subjective representations. Informed by this analysis of the harmonized dataset, we will produce a journal manuscript that synthesizes trends over time of the harmonized political act variables and their association with key socio-demographic and attitudinal correlates, with attention to the correlates relevant for assessing the communication and grievance hypotheses (C#5). Informed by our investment in constructing the PRD harmonized dataset, we will conclude our work on this objective by producing a findings report (C#6) that documents our active maintenance protocols, which will include suggested protocols for updating the harmonized dataset annually as new data become available.

**Objective 1c. Analyze political participator types through methodological innovations in LCA.**

In the final objective of WP1, we will assess evidence for the communication vs. grievance hypotheses by using the actor-oriented analytical approach of LCA. This objective extends my ongoing collaboration with statistical methodologists Zsuzsa Bakk (Leiden University, Netherlands) and Roberto Di Mari (University of Catania, Italy), who specialize in latent variable and categorical data analysis statistical techniques. Through the advancement of methodological innovations that enable a valid cross-national and longitudinal analysis of complex multilevel datasets using LCA, we will identify individuals’ broad repertoires of participation through the analysis of data on separate political acts in multiple survey programs (O1a) and in the harmonized dataset (O1b). Through this analysis, we will provide robust evidence to test the project’s central communication vs. grievance hypotheses. Specifically, the **communication hypothesis** will be supported if participator types who score high on indicators of nonelectoral participation are positively associated with attitudes of pro-democratic norms and political efficacy compared to participator types who score low on nonelectoral participation and if this positive association is shown to remain stable or to increase positively over time. In contrast, the **grievance hypothesis** will be supported if participator types who score high on indicators of nonelectoral participation have a low association with pro-democratic and political efficacy measures compared to participator types who score low on nonelectoral participation and if it is shown that the size of the association has become smaller or more negative over time.

LCA is an ideal technique for testing these hypotheses, as it conducts model-based clustering by identifying groups of respondents who share similar combinations of responses on multiple indicators (Ahlquist & Breunig 2012). Based on my prior research using this approach to identify political participator types in the U.S. analyzing cross-sectional data (i.e., single points in time) of various survey programs, I expect that the PRD team’s analysis will identify several main types of participators, including all-around activists, specialists in certain political acts (e.g., electoral-oriented only; nonelectoral only; vote-only), and a completely inactive group (Oser et al. 2013; Oser et al. 2014; Oser 2017; Oser, in press). This prior work has clarified that methodological innovations are required to conduct the kind of cross-national and longitudinal analyses that will test the communication vs. grievance hypotheses. Thus, the implementation of Objective 1c will yield methodological innovations as well as substantive contributions to the theoretical debates in the literature.

LCA methodological innovations: In my collaboration with Bakk and Di Mari, we have already begun to produce published research that provides the statistical underpinnings for conducting LCA in multilevel data structures with covariates using a stepwise approach in a coauthored article in *Structural Equation Modelling* (Bakk, Di Mari, Oser & Kuha, in press). For PRD, we will advance the following three primary methodological innovations. (1) Multilevel LC analysis: Develop statistically reliable and computationally efficient estimators for multilevel LC models to analyze complex datasets in diverse country contexts and over time. (2) Measurement equivalence in multilevel data for specific items/indicators: Estimators currently exist for assessing measurement equivalence of multilevel LC structures as a whole (Kankaraš, Vermunt & Moors 2011; Masyn 2017), but estimators to test differential item functioning have not yet been developed. For PRD, developing valid estimators to test DIF for specific indicators will allow the substantively important assessment of whether a single political act such as “protest” functions in a sufficiently comparable way in LC models across level 2 units (e.g., country or year) to be considered equivalent for next-step multivariate analyses. (3) Inclusion of covariates in complex multivariate datasets: Develop computational advances in software implementation to enable model convergence with the inclusion of covariates to take measurement error into account. These innovations will be documented in several methodologically oriented journal manuscripts (C#7). To accompany these methodological innovations, the PRD team will create and disseminate an open-sourced software package (in R) along with a computationally focused manuscript (C#8) that allows the implementation of these innovations for the broader community of empirical social science researchers investigating any topic that requires typological analysis with complex datasets. No such LC package is currently available in any open-source software, making this a unique contribution that will permit the dissemination and future refinement of these methodological innovations in alignment with contemporary academic peer review standards of transparency and reproducibility.

LCA applied contributions to PRD theory and hypotheses: These methodological innovations will inform a journal manuscript (C#9) that adjudicates between the grievance and communication hypotheses by analyzing three selected datasets prepared in Objectives 1a and 1b: one cross-national repeated cross-sectional high-quality dataset (e.g., ESS); one single-country dataset that includes repeated wave panel data (e.g., ANES) using latent Markov modeling approaches (Di Mari & Bakk 2018); and PRD’s originally constructed harmonized dataset. As part of this hypothesis-testing, the manuscript will include socio-economic correlates and will also assess cross-national distinctions and changes over time. An additional participator-type descriptive journal manuscript (C#10) will focus on the role of online and digital participation in individuals’ participation repertoires in datasets that include relevant indicators, including an assessment of whether this activity is concentrated in the profiles of only certain specialist types (e.g., all-around activists with high SES).

Taken together, the findings produced in WP1 will provide the most comprehensive findings to date on the communication vs. grievance hypotheses in terms of attitudinal correlates of nonelectoral participation over time. In addition, the analyses will identify the associations between different political acts and political participators with distinct policy preferences over time, creating the empirical infrastructure for WP2.

**WP2. Participation-Representation Connection**

Building on WP1’s testing of the communication vs. grievance hypothesis, which focused on cross-sectional attitudinal correlates of pro-democratic norms and subjective representation, WP2 will focus on **how well different participator types are represented in objective and subjective representational outcomes**. WP2’s first objective (Objective 2a) merges and analyzes the individual-level survey-based data with a series of country-level representational measures. The findings from O2a’s survey-based statistical analysis will be complemented by qualitative fieldwork that provides a unique opportunity to test PRD’s hypotheses through longitudinal interviews of activists in the global Occupy protest cycle that began in 2011 (Objective 2b).

**Objective 2a. Survey-based statistical analysis of the participation-representation connection.** An important research design consideration for this objective is to make informed choices about the **expected time lags**. For voting, the expected lag time is fairly clear: representational outcomes due to expressed preferences of voters should be evident following government formation. In contrast, for nonelectoral participation, the expected lag time between a proportion of individuals expressing their political preferences through participating in a certain political act, e.g., protest, at a certain point in time (t1), and a causally produced representational outcome at a subsequent point in time (t2) is much less clear. Some of the literature on the communication hypothesis regarding political activities (e.g., Verba et al. 1995) suggests a contemporaneous effect is probable, whereby the preferences of those who are currently politically active in nonelectoral activities are likely to be reflected in policy. However, scholars of social movements and organizational power-building observe that these types of activities can take years and even decades to influence outcomes, if they do at all (e.g., Della Porta & Diani 2020; Han et al. 2021; McAdams & Tarrow 2010; Wasow 2020). Our modeling strategy for Objective 2a will, therefore, begin with an analysis of the contemporaneous association between participation and representation measures (i.e., congruence), and when the data allow, we will proceed to examine participation at time t1 in relation to various representational outcomes at time t2, t3, and so on (i.e., responsiveness). The integration of the survey-based analysis with the qualitative fieldwork in (Objective 2b) will provide complementary evidence on the issue of participation-representation time lags for different types of political participators. The research design for O2a includes the following three steps:

Step 1: Merge and document relevant country-level objective responsiveness indicators with survey datasets analyzed in WP1 (i.e., multiple separate survey programs and the harmonized dataset). The main national-level policy indicator that we will merge and analyze with all relevant datasets is country-year data on welfare spending in OECD countries, adapting the approach used in Dassonneville et al. (2021) to assess whether welfare spending at the national level is more responsive to the left-right ideological position of all citizens or to voters. Specifically, in Objective 2a, we will create the data infrastructure to assess (in Objective 2b) whether national-level social policy is differentially responsive to distinct types of political participators (i.e., all-around activists; specialists in certain activities; inactives). In addition to OECD spending measures, examples of other national-level indicators of policy and ideology representation that we will assess for data merge compatibility include party and legislator policy position data from, e.g., the Chapel Hill Expert Survey, and legislator policy position data from Lupu and Warner (in press-a, in press-b); legislative agenda data, documented by the Comparative Agendas Project (Bernardi et al. in press; Traber et al. in press); and indicators of policy implementation for specific policy areas such as climate change (Climate Change Laws of the World Database 2021). The optimal merge of country-level representation indicators for each dataset will vary, depending on the individual-level data in each survey program. The literature review and data merge work completed in O2a will inform a systematic review journal manuscript (C#11) of the extant literature on participation-representation studies that merge individual-level data with various country-level representational measures.

Step 2: Country-year analysis: Responsiveness to median **participators** (not only median voters). We will implement an innovative research design that extends the classic **median voter** theory (Downs 1957) that posits that in a representative democracy, the positions of elected representatives will converge to the viewpoint of the median voter. We will adapt this traditional focus on the “median voter” to assess how well the ideological positions of **median participators** of various kinds are represented. For example, if participator types with broad participation repertoires (e.g., the “all-around activist”) obtain higher levels of representation of their median ideology than the “vote-only” group, this finding would support the communication hypothesis. Importantly, the LCA analyses completed in WP1 will also allow us to validly assess levels of responsiveness to the policy preferences of those who are inactive in political participation relative to the other identified participator types, with the expectation that the inactive group will not be well-represented in governing outcomes because its policy preferences are not displayed in the public sphere. Based on these country-year analyses of the responsiveness to the ideology of median participators, we will report our findings in a journal manuscript (C#12) that synthesizes evidence in favor of the communication vs. grievance hypotheses.

Step 3: Multilevel analysis, including objective and subjective representation. As a complement to Step 2’s analysis of single country-year datapoints that represent the mean ideology of different types of participators, we proceed in Step 3 to conduct a multilevel analysis of individuals nested in countries. We will conduct these analyses using multilevel LC models, made possible through the methodological innovations produced in O1a. Importantly, this analysis permits the valid inclusion of individual-level covariates, including various measures of socio-economic status and attitudes. An additional advantage of the multilevel model structure for analysis of the repeated-wave panel data is that it will enable us to analyze subjective representation measures as a time-ordered outcome variable to address issues of causal direction in the relationship between political participation and perceived representation (Finkel 1985). Findings using this multilevel approach based on analyses conducted using all relevant datasets from WP1 will yield a manuscript for journal peer review (C#13) that tests the communication vs. grievance hypotheses focused on both objective and subjective representational measures. In addition, we will produce a journal manuscript (C#14) limited to the datasets that include online or digital participation measures to assess the role of this type of participation in the participation-representation connection when controlling for socio-economic measures. The limited data available on online political participation in these established survey programs will be complemented by the qualitative fieldwork conducted in Objective 2b

**Objective 2b. Qualitative fieldwork.** The case selected for qualitative fieldwork to test the communication vs. grievance hypotheses is the global Occupy protest cycle that began in 2010, also described as “anti-austerity protests” among European social movement scholars and the “Occupy Wall Street” movement among American activists and researchers. The global Occupy protests and their aftermath serve as a particularly useful case study to investigate PRD’s theoretical framework for several reasons. **First**, this cycle is the most recent significant wave of globally networked protest (Della Porta & Mattoni 2014). **Secondly**, while some major objective outcomes in the areas of representation, democratic procedure, and policy have been directly attributed to these protests (Della Porta et al. 2017), their perceived impact by those who were involved in leading and participating in them has not been systematically researched. **Third**, along with these protests’ salient economic underpinnings, protestors in most countries focused their claims on deficiencies in democratic systems, such as lack of representation and political corruption (Roos & Oikonomakis 2014). **Fourth**, the action repertoire that emerged from these protests has undergone significant transformations in the decade since they began, including the role of electoral-oriented and digitally networked political acts in activists’ broader participation repertoires (Della Porta et al. 2017). As the movements born in 2010–2011 were one of the first global protest cycles to use online social networks to mobilize a globally networked protest and whose leaders subsequently developed innovative digital activism tools (Della Porta 2013), this case offers a unique opportunity to study activists’ perceptions of the role of digital tools in their broad participation repertoires with a decade of retrospective insight.

Fieldwork objectives and contributions. The PRD team will launch qualitative fieldwork in Year 1 of the project, including an interview sample in Spain (n=25) and additional interviews in European and EU partner countries that had a meaningful amount of Occupy movement activity, including Germany, Greece, Iceland, Italy, Turkey, and the UK (an additional n=20). This fieldwork will be informed by the expertise of PRD team member Aya Shoshan, who has extensively researched the Occupy protests and their aftermath in Israel and Spain (Shoshan 2018; Shultziner & Shoshan 2018). As a research team member on my current Israel Science Foundation grant project (see B1 for details), Shoshan has already begun to conduct pilot qualitative longitudinal interviews (Hermanowicz 2013) in Israel (planned sample for the ISF project, n=25) that are designed to investigate the PRD theoretical framework. The pilot survey instrument uses a semi-structured protocol to examine Occupy activists’ perceptions of their changing participation repertoires over the past decade, including digital opportunities for political action, and of the effectiveness of their political activism repertoires in achieving representation. This qualitative fieldwork with a cohort of activists for whom we have access to data of over a decade ago on their political activism on topics of inequality is a key complement to the survey data analyzed in WP1 and WP2, which has limited data on the role of online and digitally networked participation in people’s broad participation repertoires. The research design provides unique access to sampling individuals who still consider themselves activists ten years after the peak of the Occupy protests, those who are no longer or only marginally politically engaged, and engaged younger activists who consider themselves the organizational successors of Occupy movement initiatives. With a focus on PRD’s theoretical framework, the qualitative fieldwork in Objective 2a will produce a findings report in Year 1 that reports on themes from the interview fieldwork in Spain and with activists in select European countries (C#15). The data from this findings report will be integrated with pre-PRD fieldwork in Israel to produce a journal manuscript (C#16) to assess the communication and grievance hypotheses based on the interview data. An additional journal manuscript (C#17) will focus specifically on the role of digital and online political participation in the participation repertoires of current and former Occupy activists.

**WP3**. **Mobilizing and Organizing Low-status Groups**

The final work package, **“Mobilizing and Organizing Low-status Groups”** **(WP3)**, shifts the theoretical focus of the project in WP1 and WP2 from assessing the relative strength of historical evidence in favor of the communication vs. grievance hypotheses to a future-looking focus on identifying communication mechanisms that serve as pathways for mobilizing and organizing lower status groups. Accordingly, WP3 comprises two principal studies that introduce novel experimental designs using Twitter panel data and cross-national field experiments to identify interventions that have the potential to broaden the participation repertoires of low-status groups with a focus on yielding more equal representational outcomes. The first objective (Objective 3a) investigates the causal effects of mobilizing political content on individuals’ participation repertoires and political attitudes by analyzing a newly constructed Twitter panel in conjunction with a representative survey that includes a field experiment component. Moving from the realm of social media to the domain of global civic organizations, the second objective (Objective 3b) will integrate a series of field experiments to investigate the effects of the creation of opportunities for meaningful civic action on individuals’ participation repertoires and political attitudes, including their pro-democratic norms and perceptions of representation.

**Objective 3a. Twitter panel and field experiment on the effects of mobilizing content.** Recognizing the growing role of social media as a pathway for exposure to political content, a number of studies have identified the causal effects of exposure to politics on social media on political behavior and attitudes (e.g., Bail et al. 2018; Bond et al. 2012). In relation to the PRD theoretical framework, an important and unanswered question in this line of research is the differential effects of content exposure on political attitudes and behavior for different types of content and for different subgroups of the population. To answer this question, Objective 3a will extend my ongoing collaboration with Nir Grinberg (Ben-Gurion University), a computational social scientist, in a project that uses a unique Twitter panel to identify distinct and prototypical types of political content exposure on Twitter (Oser, Grinberg & Feitosa 2021; Shamir, Grinberg & Oser 2022). More specifically, in Objective 3a, we will focus on what types of mobilizing messages may have a causal effect on people’s political behavior and attitudes, with particular attention to the effects on low-status groups. An empirical key to our capacity to contribute new answers to these questions is the innovation of a newly constructed Twitter panel by Grinberg and colleagues, as documented in Grinberg et al.’s (2019) *Science* article that used a pilot version (comprised of ~16,000 individuals). Importantly, the panel links public voter registration data with public Twitter profile information, and the resulting Twitter panel is representative of the U.S. population on a variety of socio-demographic measures, including education and income (Hughes et al. 2021). The currently expanded panel of ~1.8 million registered U.S. voters provides an unprecedented view of the heterogeneity of exposure to political content on social media for distinctive socio-demographic groups, which we leverage in the following two methodological steps.

Step 1: Identify types of mobilizing content using machine learning models and active learning. This study will build on our current research that comprehensively identifies all main types of political content exposure on social media in the Twitter panel (Shamir, Oser & Grinberg, 2022) by developing and validating a state-of-the-art BERT-based machine-learning classifier (Devlin et al. 2019). Based on the literature, the relevant types of political content that we expect to identify include, for example, affective (emotional) mobilizing content, which may have a stronger effect on low-status groups (Iyer & Achia 2021) and informational content related to journalistic “horse-race” reporting (Westwood et al.’s 2020), which is expected to have a stronger effect on higher-status groups. Our classifier will identify distinct types of **mobilizing political content** such as these using several interactions of active learning and crowdsourced labels (Settles 1995). We will report the results of our observational analysis in a journal manuscript (C#18) that will identify distinct types of mobilizing political content and provide first-of-its-kind knowledge of the levels of exposure to mobilizing content for different socio-demographic groups, with particular attention to low-status groups.

Step 2: Test of the causal effect of mobilizing content on political behavior and attitudes. Informed by this observational analysis, we will conduct an experiment to test the causal effect of exposure to different types of mobilizing content during the 2024 U.S. presidential elections, following a design similar to the field experiment used by Bail et al. (2018). Our experiment will introduce experimental interventions by exposing consenting, randomly assigned participants to mobilization messages on their Twitter accounts and measuring the average treatment effect on key variables of political behavior and attitudes as collected via additional survey waves. Specifically, we will contract with a professional survey firm to recruit a nationally representative sample of active U.S. Twitter users who will be asked to follow bots that we will design to retweet messages that represent the different types of mobilizing content identified in the observational analysis. The survey design includes several waves that will verify compliance and ask a standard battery of questions about participation repertoires and political attitudes. The experiment will include a control group and at least two additional groups that experience experimental interventions based on the relevant parameters of content exposure identified in the first step (e.g., affective valence; horse-race content). We will pay special attention to low status groups by oversampling this population and by developing additional treatment conditions that test mobilization content that low-SES groups experience based on our analysis of the Twitter panel data in Step 1. In addition to a journal manuscript that reports the findings of this field experiment survey (C#19), we will produce a findings report (C#20) that summarizes our results with a focus on informing public debate and policy over the regulation of modern information systems, including future mitigation strategies and regulation regarding social media.

**Objective 3b. Field experiments on opportunities for meaningful civic action.** Given ongoing concerns about democratic erosion, PRD’s final empirical study focuses on a currently missing component in scholars’ understandings of **what transforms people from being politically apathetic to politically engaged**. In contrast to the common approach in the field of democratic studies that focuses on identifying communication strategies for convincing people that their participation matters, in Objective 3b we will investigate how different types of meaningful opportunities for civic action may allow people to expand the sphere of influence in which they experience autonomy to act.

This study will be conducted in the context of my ongoing collaboration with Hahrie Han (Johns Hopkins University) and will investigate how different opportunities for concrete individual-level civic action, “micro-practices,” may prompt people to become actively involved in civic and political action to **communicate their political voice** in the public sphere. Informed by Danielle Allen’s arguments in defense of equality (e.g., Allen 2014; Allen & Somanathan 2020), we hypothesize that these micro-practices may foster people’s sense of **political agency** by expanding the sphere of influence in which they experience the autonomy to act, subsequently strengthening their support for democracy. Our research design is based on the expectation that micro-practices of civic associations can play two key roles in equipping the mass public in the art of democratic self-governance: first, they can foster people’s ability to express choice; and second, they can teach participants how to negotiate power sharing, even among people who disagree in their ideological and political commitments. Thus, investigating micro-practices in this framework will allow us to identify effective ways to teach people to be their own agents of change (Han & Kim, in press) and, thereby, to potentially strengthen societal support for pro-democratic norms.

Consistent with PRD’s theoretical framework, our experimental designs will pay particular attention to micro-practices that are effective for mobilizing and organizing lower status groups and to digital and online opportunities for political engagement. We have designed a pilot empirical study that tests our theoretical model through a novel survey experiment that assesses whether inviting people to participate in meaningful civic action boosts their sense of political agency and support for pro-democratic norms (Feitosa, Han & Oser 2022). This survey experiment is designed to inform a broader research agenda with the aim of collaborating with civic organizations to conduct field experiments that will assess the effect of a series of concrete civic skills or micro-practices on participants’ subsequent political behavior and attitudes.

As evident in the integrated work plan (see Gantt chart), Objective 3b will be launched in Year 3 of the project in concert with an integrative workshop (W#1) with PRD expert network members. We have already identified an ideal potential partner organization for launching PRD field experiments, the Tectonica Organizing Network, that supports civic and political organizations with some level of digital literacy. For example, they currently support WeMove, a digital-first, multi-issue organization that runs campaigns across Europe with the goal of building solidarity and trust. Consistent with PRD’s theoretical interest in testing the potential behavioral and attitudinal effects of “micro-practices,” WeMove aims to cultivate democracy understood as daily practice, in contrast to the infrequent act of voting. The organization offers a wide spectrum of engagement opportunities, from signing online petitions to talking directly with a member of the European Parliament, and they also aim to bring citizens closer to mayors and councils in cities. In Years 1 and 2 of the project, we will work with organizations such as Tectonica and WeMove to identify the ideal organizational context in which to launch our experimental fieldwork at the beginning of Year 3.

In the expert workshop in Year 3, we will integrate the survey-based and qualitative fieldwork findings from WP1 and WP2 to finalize a series both of experimental field designs that will be conducted in digital and online frameworks and of field experiments that will take place in at least three European country contexts from the perspective of the political participation levels of low-status groups. PRD expert network members in several European countries that vary in relevant ways have already expressed their interest in advising the PRD project, including Swen Hutter of the Freie Universität Berlin and the Center for Civil Society Research in Germany, Kateřina Vráblíková at the University of Bath in the United Kingdom, and Aina Gallego at the University of Barcelona in Spain. The integrative workshop in Year 3 will, therefore, serve to finalize experimental designs and determine the ideal theory-informed country context in consultation with the PRD international expert network members. The implementation of experimental designs in varied settings and an analysis of the findings will contribute knowledge on how the kinds of opportunities for civic action that people have can shape their capacity and willingness to engage in pluralistic, democratic processes. By focusing on micro-practices of civic action, the studies will serve to more deeply theorize the venues for civic and political action that have the potential to teach people how to put their hands on the levers of change and act as architects of their own future. The findings from these studies will produce a journal manuscript that reports on the digital and online experimental studies (C#21) and a journal manuscript that will present the cross-national field research (C#22). Additionally, we will produce a concluding findings report as a public-facing document to inform civic organizations that are focused on combatting the challenge of the erosion of democracy (C#23). Along with the academic contributions produced in WP1, WP2, and WP3, this final findings report will be a focal point of the concluding PRD workshop (W#2) for final review by the expert network in preparation for general dissemination to the public.

**Section b.ii. Impact Assessment and Integrated Work Plan**

The main **theoretical risk** the proposed project must address is integrating scholarship on electoral and nonelectoral participation that are generally treated as discrete and even unrelated topics. My publications show that I have a proven track record in producing and integrating scholarship on these topics using a variety of methodological approaches. An additional **operational risk** for feasibility is that the complex work plan requires a relatively large and skilled research team, including researchers at the MA, PhD, and Postdoctoral levels. As noted in the scientific leadership narrative, I have laid the foundation to address this challenge by collaborating with BGU colleagues to strengthen the recruitment and training of students and by my active participation and leadership roles in national and international conferences and research workshops. Through these activities, I have identified highly qualified candidates who are motivated to join the project; thus, the main challenge at the current juncture is to obtain sufficient resources to launch the project’s work plan.

The high-gain nature of the project is evident in the Gantt chart in Table 1, which provides a five-year Integrated Work Plan for the production of the project’s 23 contributions. These contributions are distributed as follows: the **harmonized dataset** [C#4]; open-access **findings reports** [n=6: C#1, C#3, C#6, C#15, C#20, C#23]; and a series of **journal manuscripts** [n=16; all other contributions].

**Table 1.** Gantt Chart: Integrated Work Plan

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Year 1** | **Year 2** | **Year 3** | **Year 4** | **Year 5** |
| **WP1. Political Acts and Political Participators** |  |  |  |  |  |
| Objective 1a. Political acts, multiple survey programs | **C#1** | **C#2** | **C#3** |  |  |
| Objective 1b. Harmonized dataset |  | **C#4** | **C#4** | **C#4,5** | **C#4,6** |
| Objective 1c. Political actors, LCA | **C#7** | **C#8** | **C#9** | **C#10** |  |
| **WP2. Participation-Representation Connection** |  |  |  |  |  |
| Objective 2a. Survey-based statistical analysis |  | **C#11** | **C#12** | **C#13** | **C#14** |
| Objective 2b. Qualitative fieldwork | **C#15** | **C#16** | **C#17** |  |  |
| **WP3. Mobilizing and Organizing Low-status Groups** |  |  |  |  |  |
| Objective 3a. Twitter panel and field experiment survey | **C#18** | **C#19** | **C#20** |  |  |
| Objective 3b. Field experiments on civic opportunities |  |  | **C#21** | **C#22** | **C#23** |
| ***Integrative workshops with expert network members*** |  |  | ***W#1*** |  | ***W#2*** |

As noted, the first integrative workshop (W#1) in Year 3 will play key a key role in informing PRD’s experimental field research. Similarly, the second and concluding integrative workshop (W#2) in Year 5 will be crucial for presenting the projects’ contributions for feedback and revision, as well as for informing next-step research beyond PRD’s five-year scope. The work of the PRD team in these workshops and throughout the project will be informed by the PRD’s **international expert network** (listed in B1). Consistent with the high ambitions of the PRD project, this network of colleagues includes leading international scholars for all key theoretical, methodological, and empirical areas of the project; they will enrich the work of the PRD team in several additional ways, including contributing to research team workshops and targeted trainings via videolink and traveling to Israel as visiting scholars to provide comments and training at key junctures. Two next-step research areas are beyond the scope of PRD but will be a central focus of the concluding workshop: (1) **Experimental research with politicians and decision-makers** to identify how distinct parameters of political participation of the mass public can most effectively influence representational outcomes from the perspective of elites, including survey experiment vignette designs for elite panels; and (2) An analysis of **country-level contextual factors** that may play a moderating role in the relationship between individual-level participation and representational outcomes. Building on PRD’s broad geographic focus aimed primarily at testing the generalizability of the communication and grievance hypotheses across different contexts, the project will create a strong theoretical and empirical infrastructure to investigate more specific contextual effects in next-step research.

Taken together, the theoretical and methodological innovations of the project and the implementation of the three work packages will constitute the most comprehensive empirical investigation to date of the connection between nonelectoral participation and representation from the perspective of the mass public. In an era of unequal representation and the decline of democracy, the project will shed new light on the implications of changing patterns of electoral and nonelectoral participation worldwide. In line with the ambitions of an ERC Starting project, the theoretical, methodological, and empirical contributions will directly inform a vibrant research agenda and will influence public debate and praxis about pathways for strengthening democratic practices and democratic norms in the years to come.

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1. Additional examples of relevant cross-national cross-sectional survey programs are the European Values Survey (EVS), the World Values Survey (WVS), select modules of the Comparative Study of Electoral Studies (CSES), Eurobarometer (EB), and XXXX. Additional examples of country-specific cross-sectional and repeated wave panel surveys include XX in Belgium, XX Canada, XX Germany, XX Sweden, XX in the UK, and the Cooperative Election Survey in the U.S.). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)