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 questions of how people incorporate increasingly common nonelectoral political acts into individual-level repertoires of participation; and how well represented are different types of political participants. At a time of growing concern about unequal representation in democracies, two conflicting global trends over the last decades highlight the importance of these questions: 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, Participatory Representation in the Digital Age (RPD)’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 high-quality data in separate surveys together with a synthesized dataset, and includes methodological innovations using new techniques for identifying participation repertoires. **“Participation-representation connection”** **(WP2)** investigates the connections between the political acts and participators analyzed in WP1 and representational outcomes and integrates these findings with qualitative fieldwork with activists, focusing 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 equitable representational outcomes in the future. By combining an original theoretical framework and methodological innovations, PRD will conduct a unique, comprehensive empirical investigation of participation repertoires, with a focus on mechanisms able to 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**

This study addresses how people incorporate increasingly common nonelectoral political acts into their individual-level repertoires of political participation; and how well-represented different types of political participators are in terms of objective and subjective representation measures? 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 questions: a clear 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, mostly among higher status groups (Dalton 2021, in press; Jenkins & Kwak, in press; Schlozman et al. 2018; Theocharis & van Deth 2018). Research suggests that the systematic increase, indeed, prevalence, of different forms of nonelectoral political activity (e.g., protest, online activism) is motivated, at least in part, by participants’ hope of influencing representational outcomes. However, there is surprisingly little empirical evidence about how different forms 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 affect representational outcomes in an era marked by concern over 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 demands of the wider 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 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 further deepen the documented patterns of unequal representation within the larger society, potentially eroding the public’s perception of democratic legitimacy. These central and potentially contradictory 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 in order to reduce identified inequalities in contemporary patterns of political participation and representation?

a.1. Theoretical Framework and Innovations

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

The first innovation I propose is going beyond the conventional focus on voting and considering, instead, individuals’ broader participation repertoires to fully investigate the chain of responsiveness in contemporary democracies. The second innovation involves integrating the literature’s standard focus on objective measures of public policies and representational outcomes with a simultaneous focus on measures of subjective responsiveness in order to comprehensively assess democratic 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. 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 lower status groups. Thus, drawing on the project’s analysis of the linkages between political participation and representational outcomes in historical observational data, PRD aims to identify methods for levelling the participatory playing field, with particular attention to the potential of producing more equal patterns of participation and representation in the future, by focusing on causal mechanisms for broadening lower status groups’ participation repertoires. These important innovations to the standard conceptual framework of participation and representation expand the theoretical and analytical perspective in the contemporary study of representation in two ways: first, they exapand the primary focus on participation through the act of voting to encompass also citizens’ broad participation repertoires; and second, they represent a shift from the traditional representational focus on objective measures to an investigation of subjective measures of representation.

Based on this expansion of the standard conceptual model of the chain of responsiveness, **I emphasize the importance of synthesizing two theory-based expectations in the literature** that have not yet been associated with each other in research on nonelectoral participation and democratic representation. The 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). The second, contrasting **grievance hypothesis,** which has dominated European studies of nonelectoral participation, is based on the observation that the recent increase 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** create an opportunity to synthesize the theory-based expectations from these two heretofore unconnected strands of scholarship and thereby 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 involving social inequalities, such as governmental responses to the COVID-19 pandemic and rapid developments in meeting climate change challenges. At precisely this critical juncture, the leading political science research suggests that fundamental changes are underway in patterns of participation, whereby individuals with diverse sociodemographic backgrounds express their political voices 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 patterns of 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 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.

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

A core concept 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) 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 elaborates on this sensitivity to the preferences of the mass public in relation to principles of political equality, positing 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; Page & Shapiro 1983; Rasmussen et al., 2019; Soroka & Wlezien 2010). Nevertheless, the causal mechanisms underlying the link between “opinion” and “policy” remain subject to 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, outlining an ideal process in electoral democracies through which the preferences of citizens are translated into policies that are implemented, represents the state of the art of scholarship on this topic.

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 clear evidence 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 periods. 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 finding that the act of 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 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) seminal study *Participation in America*, is that people express their political voice through multiple acts of participation in addition to voting (Verba et al. 1995; XX European). 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 act people choose for expressing 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 types of political participation, in addition to voting, may act as key pathways through 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 yet to be articulated in the literature as opposing hypotheses from a theoretical perspective. Accordingly, the relative strength of the evidence for each hypothesis remained untested 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, 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), together with the acknowledged importance of public support of 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 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). A new line of research on the participation-representation nexus has taken advantage of recent advances in data collection and research designs, and provides 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 unrelated to voting enhanced the congruence between participants and their representatives on the highly partisan and prominent 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 has 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; Gause 2022; Hooghe & Oser 2016; Wasow 2020; Wouters & Walgrave 2017). While this body of work provides some evidence supporting 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, drawing conclusion about the relative value of the communication and grievance hypotheses requires implementing research designs that account for the possibility raised in the literature that members of society with more social and economic advantages may exert greater political influence through their higher 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 in relation 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.”

The need for systematic and well-defined empirical inquiry on how unequal participation may have an impact on unequal representation has become even more pressing 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 higher status groups first documented in studies 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, current 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). Additional research has shown that social media plays an increasingly vital role in international politics through political content exposure and 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. Recent scholarship on the increasingly central 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 emphasize 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 how citizens’ broad participation repertoires and socioeconomic status affect 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 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 toolkits 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 with reference to the act of voting, PRD will break new ground by expanding the analytical field 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 focus on phenomena best studied through observational data already gathered and entail investigating how existing patterns of micro-level individual behavior relate to macro-level representational outcomes in specific national contexts. The third and final research question **(RQ3)—“How can traditionally low-status groups be mobilized and organized with attention to reducing identified inequalities in patterns of political participation and representation?”—**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 between unequal participation and unequal representation can be identified in historical observational data, prior findings clearly 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 and that may have a corresponding potential of diminishing patterns of unequal 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.