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:**

* Principal Investigator (PI): **Jennifer Oser**
* PI’s host institution for the project: **Ben-Gurion University (Israel)**
* Proposal duration: **60 months** (April 2023 – April 2028)

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

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

ERC Starting Grant 2022

Research proposal [Part B2]

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

Participation Repertoires in an Era of Unequal Representation

**Section a. CHALLENGE AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

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

The main goal of the PRD project is to investigate how individuals’ broad repertoires of electoral and nonelectoral participation relate to representational outcomes in an era marked by concerns for unequal representation. Two distinctive and potentially conflicting democratic ideals are at the heart of this investigation. The first ideal is responsiveness to the expressed will of the people, meaning that representational outcomes should ideally be formed in response to the messages communicated by the mass public. The second democratic ideal that must be considered is equality of representation, even to those who are not politically active. Given the well-established finding that those who are most politically active also tend to be socio-economically advantaged (Dalton 2017; Oser et al. 2013; Schlozman et al. 2012; Teorell et al. 2007; Verba et al. 1978), a strong link between non-electoral participation and representational outcomes has the potential to contribute to unequal representation. Thus, although the achievement of the democratic ideal of responsiveness to the expressed will of the people (through e.g., voting and additional acts of political communication) may enhance the representation of those who are politically active, the consequences for society at large could further contribute to documented patterns of unequal representation, with potential negative implications for the public’s perceptions of democratic legitimacy. With attention to these central and potentially conflicting ideals of responsiveness and equality of representation, the third and final main motivating question of PRD is: How can traditionally low-status groups be mobilized and organized to reduce identified inequalities in contemporary patterns of political participation and representation?

a.1. Theoretical Framework and Innovations

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

The first innovation I propose is that to fully investigate the chain of responsiveness in contemporary democracies, we must go beyond the conventional focus on the act of voting and take individuals’ broader participation repertoires into account. Second, to comprehensively assess democratic responsiveness, I argue for the importance of integrating the standard focus in the literature on objective measures of public policies and representational outcomes with a simultaneous 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, is the integration of online measures of political behavior and communication in a theoretical framework that is grounded in mainstream political science literature. Finally, with attention to the increasingly salient topic of unequal representation, I propose a fourthinnovation of identifying causal mechanisms that may broaden individuals’ participation repertoires, particularly among traditionally lower status groups. Thus, informed by the project’s analysis of the linkages between political participation and representational outcomes in historical observational data, PRD’s focus on causal mechanisms for broadening participation repertoires for lower status groups aims to identify pathways to level the participatory playing field, with attention to the potential of yielding more equal patterns of participation and representation in the future. These important innovations to the standard theoretical framework in the literature for studying participation and representation broaden the theoretical and analytical field of vision in the contemporary study of representation from the primary participatory focus on the act of voting to also encompass individuals’ broad participation repertoires; and from the traditional representational focus on objective measures to also investigate subjective measures of representation.

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

**I propose these innovations at a particularly consequential moment for representative democracies.** Headlines worldwide are dominated by political issues related to social inequalities, such as governing responses to the COVID-19 pandemic and rapid developments in climate change challenges. At precisely this important juncture, the best available evidence in contemporary political science research suggests that fundamental changes are underway in patterns by which individuals with differing socio-demographic backgrounds are expressing their political voice through electoral and non-electoral channels in contemporary democracies. Little is currently known about how these changing patterns of political participation relate to changing patterns of democratic representation—even though data and methods do exist, and can be further developed, to conduct this investigation. Informed by the urgency of these challenges, the broadened scope of PRD’s theoretical framework will yield a series of new empirical findings on the participation-representation connection while advancing new theorization of the mechanisms that link citizen participation and representational outcomes with particular attention to low-status groups. In an era marked by concerns about the quality of representative democracy, the scientific investigation conducted through the combination of these innovations has the potential to shed new light on questions of long-standing importance to scholars and practitioners alike.

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

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

 Several decades of empirical research using sophisticated research designs and analytical techniques strongly support the existence of an **opinion-representation** connection in advanced democracies (Miller & Stokes 1963; Page & Shapiro 1983; Rasmussen et al., 2019; Soroka & Wlezien 2010). Despite this evidence, the causal mechanisms underlying the link between “opinion” and “policy” remain a topic of debate (Shapiro 2011: 999). Building on this research on the opinion-representation connection, 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 **empirical evidence on the connection between voting and representational outcomes has been mixed**, with some work finding little evidence of legislative responsiveness to voters (Ellis et al. 2006), and others finding 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 spans. A conclusive cross-national answer to the question of whether voters are indeed better represented than non-voters was recently documented in Dassonneville, Feitosa, Hooghe, and Oser’s (2021) comprehensive investigation of policy responsiveness. Focusing on social policy, this study of 36 OECD countries between 1980 and 2017 established that governments are responsive to voters but not to all citizens. However, the study’s investigation of whether the act of voting is a causal mechanism that induces policy responsiveness supported Achen and Bartels’ (2016) argument that the electoral behavior of ordinary citizens does not seem to have an identifiable causal impact on policy.

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

The idea that political participation in addition to voting may act as a key pathway by which politically active individuals effectively obtain enhanced representation has been described as a **communication hypothesis** (e.g., Griffin & Newman 2005; Schlozman et al. 2018) and this causal reasoning has featured prominently in research focused 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 would show that evidence suggesting a cross-national increase in non-electoral participation in recent years is an encouraging sign of increasingly engaged citizenries worldwide who are effectively communicating their political preferences to decision-makers. Yet, a contrasting idea has also gained attention in recent literature of the role of grievance in motivating non-electoral participation, which has featured 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** would show that the documented increase in non-electoral participation is an expression of political frustration and perhaps even anti-system sentiment that does not translate into representational outcomes, even with sustained efforts over time.

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

Despite 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 non-electoral 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 connection has leveraged recent advances in data collection and research designs to provide some evidence in favor of the “communication hypothesis”—at least for some types of political acts, certain policy issues, and in specific country contexts. For example, in U.S.-focused research, Gillion’s (2012) study of minority protest between 1961 and 1991 revealed the impact of this activity on congressional roll call votes; and Leighley and Oser (2018) showed that in 2012, participation beyond voting enhanced congruence between participants and their representatives for the highly partisan and salient policy issue of health care reform. Examples of cross-national research on this topic include Htun and Weldon’s (2012) findings that women’s mobilization in autonomous social movements has affected policies to combat violence against women in 70 countries over four decades; and Rasmussen and Reher’s (2019) study which showed 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 that illustrates how scholars are increasingly tracing the linkages 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 these studies provide suggestive evidence in favor of the communication hypothesis, a definitive assessment of the generalizability of this conclusion requires a systematic, structural assessment of the connection between political participation broadly defined and representational outcomes, including an assessment of whether the participation-representation connection has changed in recent decades as the electoral and non-electoral participation trends have shifted.

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

Systematic and well-identified empirical research on how unequal participation may relate to unequal representation has become even more urgent in recent years due to two separate lines of recent research. **First, recent research on unequal representation** has concluded that the opinion-representation advantage for high-status groups first documented in research on the United States (Bartels 2008; Gilens & Page 2014) is also clearly evident in Europe and worldwide (Lupu & Warner, in press-a, in press-b; Schakel & van der Pas, in press). **Second, recent research on online participation and usage of social media** has accumulated to clearly establish 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 is increasingly playing an important role in international politics through political content exposure and through opportunities for online activism (Lotan et al. 2011; Tufecki 2017). Yet, due to the fairly recent emergence of online and digitally networked participation, it has received much less attention in mainstream political science research. Recent research on the increasingly central role of social media as a causal pathway by which political communication affects individuals’ attitudes and behaviors (e.g., Bail et al. 2018; Bond et al. 2012) also suggests the importance of integrating research on political content exposure on social media into mainstream scholarship on patterns of political participation and representation. These two recent and growing lines of research clarify that empirical studies must clearly account for the socio-economic status (SES) of participators of various kinds in order to identify the independent contribution of individuals’ participatory behavior to representational outcomes.

Taken together, this synthesis of literature on patterns of 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 shed new light on these important topics.

a.3. PRD’S Three Main Research Questions

Integrating these literatures, the first research question is (**RQ1): “How do people combine increasingly common non-electoral political acts in their individual-level repertoires of political participation?”** A robust test of the contribution of non-electoral participation to representational outcomes over time and in diverse contexts requires a broad perspective of individuals’ expanded repertoires of political participation—including voting and non-electoral 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’ distinctive combinations of electoral and non-electoral political acts in their participation repertoires. The investigation of RQ1 will therefore 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 identified participant types over time and across contexts.

 Research on individuals’ participation repertoires leads directly to the second research question **(RQ2): “How well are different types of political participators represented in terms of both objective and subjective representational outcomes?”** As the participation-representation question has been studied primarily for the act of voting, PRD will break new ground by expanding the analytical field of vision to also include an integrated analysis of electoral and non-electoral 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 (RQ1 and RQ2) focus on phenomena that are best studied through observational data gathered in the past, and require investigating how existing patterns of micro-level individual behavior relate to macro-level representational outcomes in specific country contexts. The third and final research question (RQ3) shifts the analytical focus of inquiry to investigate future possible pathways at the micro level (individual) or meso level (organizational) to mitigate existing patterns of unequal participation and potentially also unequal representation. Regardless of whether a causal link is identified in historical observational data between unequal participation and unequal representation, prior findings clearly indicate that those who have higher social status are more likely to participate in all ways, and are also more likely to have their policy views represented by decision-makers. The final research question therefore focuses on identifying causal mechanisms that may decrease inequalities in participation that seem to also have a meaningful potential to affect 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 in order to transition from these research questions to the project’s methodology.