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# DIALOGUES SECTION ON INVESTIGATING SYMBOLIC REPRESENTATION

PETRA MEIER & TÀNIA VERGE

## Conceptual and methodological challenges in the study of symbolic representation – An introduction

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### Abstract

How is symbolic representation to be conceptualised and empirically examined? There is no unique answer to this question and indeed each of its answers raises particular methodological challenges. The Dialogues section “Investigating symbolic representation” explores new directions for theorizing about and empirically examining symbolic representation. This collection of contributions seeks to advance the study of the symbolic representation in three key ways. Firstly, we suggest that gender politics scholars need to conceptually clarify how symbolic representation should be understood. Secondly, the previous concern lead to also inquiring in a more systematic way what are the expected links between symbolic representation and the other two dimensions of political representation Pitkin distinguished, descriptive and substantive representation. Thirdly, we call gender and politics scholars to critically engage with the question about which methods and research tools may allow us to grasp effectively symbolic representation at the empirical level.

As Lombardo and Meier (2014) have underlined, symbolic representation is still the ‘Cinderella’ of the dimensions of political representation as defined by Pitkin (1967). Gender and politics scholars have indeed only very recently started to make new inroads into the study of such dimension, while the field has a long tradition of studying the gendered – and intersectional – dimension of descriptive and substantive representation. While some authors have sought to empirically measure the impact that women’s political representation has on the electorate, particularly regarding feelings of closeness to and satisfaction with political institutions and their levels of political involvement (see, among others, Lawless 2004; Schwindt-Bayer and William Mishler 2005; Wolbrecht and Campbell 2007; Dolan 2006), others have adopted a discursive approach to the study of gender as political symbols (Lombardo and Meier 2014), examined the power of symbols, rituals and non-written norms and practices in the daily operation of political institutions (Rai 2010; Puwar 2004) or analysed how women politicians’ self-presentations might enhance trust and support among voters sharing their descriptive characteristics (Brown and Gershon 2016). Also, while media presentations of women politicians have not been examined in the light of symbol creation several scholars have pointed out the potential of symbol annihilation (Tuchman 1978; Murray 2010; Verge and Pastor forthcoming). Hence, symbolic representation has been probably dealt with in a more diverse way than substantive and especially descriptive representation.

One of the reasons for the limited though diverse scholarly research on symbolic representation, Lombardo and Meier (2014) suggest, lies in the very complexity of its conceptualization and thus measurement. While Pitkin had a very traditional understanding of the agent in symbolic representation, in defining the latter she pointed at the hidden, evocative function of symbols as recipients of feelings, beliefs, attitudes and assumptions of people (Pitkin 1967, 99). Thus, the link between symbol and referent, the latter potentially being both the principal as well as the audience, relies on emotional responses ‘rather than on rationally justifiable criteria’ (Pitkin 1967, 100). In this vein, responses to the symbol depend on forming habits so that certain meanings are associated to a particular symbol and end up generating particular affective responses towards it.

A first important challenge in studying symbolic representation, then, is a clear definition of how symbolic representation is to be understood in each case: What makes a symbol a symbol? And what is symbolic within political representation? While many of the works on symbolic representation pay tribute to Pitkin’s work, one could say that symbolic representation is not always picked up conceptually in the same way, which is of paramount

importance for its operational definition. A crucial issue here is the question of how far symbolic representation can be stretched without losing its essence. In their respective contributions Lombardo and Meier, as well as Rai, deliberately take Pitkin's definition as a starting point, but broaden its scope, by emphasising the fact that symbolic representation also contains a discursive dimension. Words, expressions, discourses more broadly speaking, can be agents symbolically representing a principal, to the same degree as other symbols can. Rai further underlines the fact that symbolic representation contains a performative dimension. While Brown and Gershon approach symbolic representation from a totally different angle, they also point at its performative dimension when studying the representational styles of MPs.

Following from this, when asking what a symbol and symbolic representation scholars must clearly identify who the symbol makers and the audience are. Symbols are not given in themselves, they are constructed. So who make these symbols? However, symbols may only work if they are understood as such by both the principal they represent and by the broader environment or audience capturing or meant to capture this symbol. So who is the audience? The contribution by Franceschet, Annesley and Beckwith sheds new light on these matters, as well as on the conceptual and political challenges involved, in their assessment of the usefulness of the concept of symbolic representation in understanding the dynamics underlying cabinet formations. Selectors, they argue, are symbol makers, but the success of their undertaking very much depends on the audience of symbolic representation. On its part, in Espírito-Santo and Verge's contribution the audience are citizens that react differently to the symbols (women representatives) depending on how such symbols are being presented. Differences in the conceptualisation of symbols and symbolic representation do enrich the field insofar as scholars make explicit how they define and understand them.

The second challenge brought about in this Dialogues Section has to do with the need to inquiring in a more systematic way the expected links between symbolic representation and descriptive or substantive representation, which may require taking a variety of stances on symbolic representation. In doing so, gender and politics scholar should make explicit the different weight given to symbolic representation – is it conceptualised as the explanans or the explanandum? In this Dialogues Section, while Espírito-Santo and Verge as well as Brown and Gershon treat symbolic representation as a dependent variable, namely as the by-product of the descriptive representation of women and socio-demographic minorities, Lombardo and Meier, Franceschet, Annesley and Beckwith, as well as Rai make a plea for studying symbolic representation in itself rather than as an explanandum. These contributions define symbolic

representation as a dimension on its own right and put it on equal foot with descriptive and substantive representation, focusing on how it is produced and the challenges this poses. This clarification effort should not impose a unique perspective but rather identify a diversity of approaches which are differently entrenched with other sets of gender politics literature and studies of political representation and political institutions more broadly. Yet, the plurality of approaches brings about different ways to explore symbolic representation and to test the links between the different dimensions of symbolic representation.

This brings us to the question about which methods and research tools may allow us to grasp symbolic representation, the third challenged addressed in this Dialogues Section. Lombardo and Meier discuss the options of studying discursive symbolic agents, and explain their use of Critical Frame Analysis for this purpose. Brown and Gershon also look at discursive constructions expressing symbolic representation, analysing the content of websites and speech. Rai emphasises the usefulness of ethnographic research methods to grasp the performative dimension of symbolic representation, especially longitudinal in-depth interviews. Franceschet, Annesley and Beckwith also use interviews with political elites in their study the symbolic representation of cabinet formations but point as well at the usefulness of media studies. Espírito-Santo and Verge, starting from the limited possibilities public opinion surveys provide for studying symbolic representation, suggest survey experiments as a fruitful alternative.

Each of the contributors discuss their different research strategies to unravel symbolic representation, which provides the readers with a collection of different research questions and methods for the same broad object of study. This shows the plurality of approaches from which to examine the most under studied dimension of political representation in order to explore new directions for theorizing about and empirically examining symbolic representation.

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# **Capturing in Words What a Symbol Symbolizes? Challenges for Studying Symbolic Representation from a Discursive Approach**

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## **Abstract**

Studying symbolic representation is not only relevant, but also challenging. Hanna Pitkin (1967: 97) already warned us that ‘[w]e can never exhaust, never quite capture in words, the totality of what a symbol symbolizes: suggests, evokes, implies.’ We will discuss the opportunities and challenges we encountered in our study of symbolic representation from a discursive politics approach, where we took political discourse as the agent. A discursive approach has allowed us to study symbolic representation as a dimension of representation *per se*, and to unpack the relation between agent and principal in symbolic representation by revealing the activity of constructing meanings and ascribing them to the principal. Yet, a number of questions arise: what makes a symbol a symbol and what does this mean for a discursive approach to symbols? What makes symbolic representation different from substantive representation when the agent is of a discursive nature? And what methodological challenges does the broadening of the agent in symbolic representation to discourse include?

## **Keywords**

political representation; symbolic representation; discursive approach; framing; methodology

Symbolic representation was defined by Pitkin (1967) as the representation of a group, nation or state (the principal) through an object such as a flag (the agent) which ‘stands for’ that principal and to which a certain representative meaning is attributed. In our study of the symbolic representation of gender the agent is discourse, more specifically political discourse (Lombardo and Meier 2014). This discursive approach has allowed us to study symbolic representation as a dimension of representation *per se*, and to unpack the relation between the agent and the principal in symbolic representation by revealing the activity of constructing meanings and ascribing them to the principal. Yet, a number of questions arise: what makes a symbol a symbol and what does this mean for a discursive approach to symbols? What makes symbolic representation different from substantive representation when the agent is of a discursive nature? And what methodological challenges does the study of discourse as the agent of symbolic representation include? This contribution focuses on conceptual challenges as our main concern when studying symbolic representation was the need to define it as a dimension *per se*.

### **Symbolic representation as a dimension of representation *per se***

Symbolic representation is often conceptualized as a derived product of descriptive representation, ‘what do we get at the level of symbolic representation once we have descriptive representation?’. We think instead that symbolic representation is a dimension of representation *per se*, not to be subordinated to either descriptive or substantive representation, and that it plays as much a role as the other two dimensions. Starting from Pitkin’s (1967) definition means considering that symbolic representation is more than a simple effect of descriptive representation at a symbolic level. Symbols stand for a principal. Consequently, they impact upon the principal. Therefore, the agent in symbolic representation does far more than simply ‘stand for’ a principal. Through what the symbol embodies and evokes, it not only represents but *presents* the principal in a particular way. For instance, if currency is a symbolic agent of the nation, the predominance of male rather than female characters on banknotes presents the nation as one in which women have done little that is worth remembering. We argue that what symbolic agents do when standing for principals is to *construct* meanings and norms that present the principal in specific ways.

What is the agent then? Symbols tend to be objects such as flags, buildings, statues, images. In our book we start from the analysis of symbolic representation through discursive agents, such as laws, policy plans, or parliamentary debates. We consider discursive agents for two main reasons. Firstly, they are helpful to capture and make explicit the – otherwise invisible –

meanings and norms that symbols suggest or evoke. In our case, we were interested in gendered meanings. We see these at – at least – two levels. Men and women can be discursively constructed, thus gendering them as principals in a particular way. But discursive constructions of men and women also gender another principal, such as a certain institution or policy. By discursively constructing women and men in particular ways and by using these constructions to ascribe meaning beyond women and men, discourses reflect an underlying conceptualisation of gender.

In representing the principal, the agent in symbolic representation attaches meanings, norms, values, and beliefs to the principal. To express it in the language of Goffmann, by framing the principal in a particular way, for example male politicians with defence and female politicians with care policies, the agent renders ‘what would otherwise be a meaningless aspect of the scene into something that is meaningful’ (Goffmann 1974, 21). The principal is thus associated or identified with this meaning, making it difficult to change people’s association of men with defence and women with care, but also of conceptualizing defence differently from how it has traditionally been done. A discursive approach to the analysis of symbolic representation then not only helps to show that the meanings and norms attributed to the principal are constructed and not inherent to the principal. It also shows that: (i) the understanding of the meaning of symbols depends on the ‘schemata of interpretation’ or frames that social groups construct and which we are often unaware of (Goffmann 1974, 21); and (ii) meanings associated with a particular principal open up or close opportunities for the principal, thereby facilitating processes of domination and marginalisation.

Secondly, we consider discursive agents because the meanings of symbols are continuously contested in discursive processes, and through contestation new meanings can be attached to symbols, for instance when it comes to change traditional constructions of women, men, or families (Ferree 2012). For example, the debate that rose in 2008 when the seven-month pregnant Spanish politician Carme Chacón was appointed minister of defence revealed different interpretations of this gendered symbol. Feminist actors saw the relevance of the symbol in that it showed that women ‘can be and are everywhere’, even in the most male-dominated political areas (Abend 2008). By contrast, actors with traditional gender perspectives expressed scepticism about the capacity of a mother-to-be minister to manage the portfolio of defence (García 2008). A discursive approach is thus helpful in detecting and analysing such shifts of meaning and changes in processes of domination and marginalisation.

### **Conceptual challenges in the discursive study of symbolic representation**

While taking a discursive approach has improved our understanding of symbolic representation, we faced two main conceptual challenges. Firstly, what makes a symbol a symbol? Secondly, what makes symbolic representation different from substantive representation when the agent is of a discursive nature? The question ‘what makes a symbol a symbol?’ seems to arise less when it comes to visual agents of symbolic representation. Public opinion tends to more immediately recognize them, though the feelings and attitudes towards the principal this agent stands for might vary. For instance, public opinion tends to recognize the European Union (EU) when seeing golden or yellow stars on a blue background, though the appreciation of this institution and its project will not be the same for everybody. But what makes a symbol a symbol in the case of a discursive agent? Is it the word itself, its literal meaning? In most cases this might not be sufficient. It is rather the whole discursive construction in combination with the associations this evokes.

But will this discursive symbolic construction be as recognisable as other agents of symbolic representation? This is most likely not the case. A number of discursive agents do have the same strength as other symbols. This is for instance the case with national devices as the *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity* motto, which functions in similar evocative ways as the EU golden and blue colours because people socialized in European history have long been trained to associate it with France. This might not be the case, though, when speaking of the ‘caring parent’, a gender neutral construction of the care provider. Many will still assume this is a woman, some because they are convinced that this is a women’s role, others because they never thought about who should provide for care. The associations here might not only differ as discussed for the case of the European symbol, where the only difference was in people’s value judgment of the object. The very symbol might not necessarily be recognised as such in the care example. Imagine now the discursive construction of a ‘caring parent’ to be used in a policy brief in combination with ‘she’. Only those thinking beyond the traditional heterosexual couple of parents and/or who are in favour of a balanced sharing of care between both sexes, realise that such a combination of discursive constructions undermines gender equality. Due to the gendered socialization of roles, others will consider this discursive construction to be perfectly normal because, for them, women are (or should be) the care providers.

When yet some people do not even see a specific discursive construction as a symbol, what then makes a symbol a symbol? The fact that at least one social group identifies it as such. In the former example, those who are in favour of equal sharing of care between the sexes would

identify the apparently gender-neutral policy briefing as a symbol of gender inequality. The reason why this group of people can identify something as a symbol is because they dispose of frames suggesting associations of specific meanings with that symbol. Thus, the recognition and interpretation of symbols and their meanings vary depending on the different social groups we are socialised into. To understand why something is a symbol for some people 'ultimately one must look to frames' (Goffmann 1974, 569). It is precisely because of the importance of framing for social interpretation that the impact of discursive symbolic representation should not be underestimated.

The second conceptual challenge we face when the agent is of a discursive nature is how to distinguish symbolic from substantive representation. Substantive representation focuses on the representing act(ivity) itself, on what the agent does to represent the needs and interests of the principal. A typical agent-principal relation in this case is that between an elected member of parliament and her or his constituency. Acting on behalf of the principal mainly means making claims on behalf of the principal, speaking in their name, articulating their interests and needs. Whether orally, such as in parliamentary interventions, or in writing, when submitting a bill, substantive representation to a large extent materializes through discursive constructions. What then makes it different from symbolic representation whenever the symbol is discourse?

According to us, the main difference between substantive and symbolic representation lies in the degree of intentionality involved. In substantive representation the agent's act(ivity) represents the principal. A Member of Parliament (MP) may argue for the need of reconciliation measures so as to facilitate the combination of paid work and care provided for in the private sphere. Presenting this as a measure women need involves a representation of women as the primary care providers and labels care work as feminine. This might or not suit this MP's constituency, but it is an intentional act of substantive representation. The MP might not be aware of the way in which he or she genders reconciliation and thereby assigns different roles and tasks to men and women, but it is nonetheless an intentional act of substantive representation.

However, the unintentionally gendered representation of reconciliation falls under symbolic representation. The socially constructed gender norms that underlie the MP's speech were not intentional, but rather the result of a pre-existing context of values, assumptions, and meanings that symbolic representation studies. This prevailing normative context tends to symbolically associate women with care and therefore to unconsciously attach women meanings that make them more fit for care than men. We would speak of substantive

representation if this gendered representation were intentional. This does not imply that symbolic representation is never intentional. Many objects fulfilling the role of an agent standing for a principal have been chosen because of what they evoke. But when the agent is of a discursive nature, symbolic representation often does not contain the same degree of intentionality, at least not when an agent is speaking on behalf of his or her constituency. While in the end the result may be the same, analytically speaking substantive and symbolic representation differ from each other, because they place the focus on different aspects of political representation: the act of representation and the norms underlying this act.

### **Methodological challenges in the discursive study of symbolic representation**

In the previous sections we have made the case for a discursive approach to studying symbolic representation without stretching the concept. Such a study, nonetheless, entails a number of methodological challenges. The main question is how to grasp the discursive agent. Taking discourse as the symbol allowed us to examine the construction of meanings that are attached to the principal through the agent. We employed Critical Frame Analysis, a qualitative method studying policy frames by identifying the different dimensions in which policy problems and solutions are represented (Verloo 2007). Critical Frame Analysis proved useful because it allowed us to grasp the different symbolic representations found in political discourses by making explicit the ways in which policy issues are framed and the norms and values that underlie them.

The main challenge was to tie back the analysis of meanings of gender that emerged in policy texts to the concept of representation. For example, the frame analysis of policy documents revealed the discursive construction of men mostly as symbols of the public sphere (labour and politics) and of women mostly as symbols of the private sphere (domestic and reproductive activities). Through this construction, we argued, people's feelings and habits towards female and male politicians are trained, so that men are more easily symbolically associated with politics than women. Yet, a direct link between this discursive construction and gender representation cannot be established because the construction of gendered norms and meanings that trains people's habits is a long-term process that has been taking place prior to the act of representation and in a variety of social arenas. How can we link the unequal gender norms found in policy discourses that symbolically associate men with politics more legitimately than women with other inequalities in politics, such as vertical segregation or the marginalisation of equality issues on the agenda?

Research should develop methods to operationalize such links in the relation between an agent and a principal on a discursive basis. Such methods might require participant observations and interviews aimed at connecting the gender norms constructed in specific policy discourses with political practices and reactions to gendered discourses. Goffmann's ethnographic observation of everyday social interactions could be a source of inspiration.

## **Conclusions**

The vague character of symbolic representation has contributed to its being under researched by gender and politics scholars, and has produced interpretations of this dimension mostly from the perspective of descriptive representation. However, the study of symbolic representation as a dimension *per se* is important for making explicit the less visible norms and meanings that are constructed in processes of representation and which have consequences for the principal. Research should develop specific methodologies for analysing symbolic representation as a dimension *per se*, through discursive or other approaches, and for empirically studying it in relation with descriptive and substantive representation.

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## **What do Women Symbolize? Symbolic Representation and Cabinet Appointments**

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### **Abstract**

Women's presence in cabinets around the world has expanded considerably in the past two decades. All male cabinets are all but unthinkable in most countries today. Yet existing studies of cabinet formation pay little systematic attention to the representative dimensions of cabinets. We argue that the concept of symbolic representation is useful for analysing ministerial recruitment because cabinets are not mere collections of individuals with political skills or policy expertise. Cabinets are sites of representation, and ministers are often chosen in light of informal rules about which groups must be represented in cabinet. The concept of symbolic representation draws attention to both the symbol maker (in this case, the chief executive who selects ministers) and the multiple audiences to whom the symbol is directed. As such, the concept is well suited to reveal how gender plays out in cabinet formation, particularly when symbolic representation is contested by audiences.

### **Keywords**

women; gender; cabinets; ministers; executives; symbolic representation

One of the more striking trends around the world today is the dramatic increase in the number of women appointed to cabinet. In November 2015, Canadian Prime Minister, Justin Trudeau, made headlines around the world with his simple but powerful response to a journalist's question about why he prioritized gender parity in his cabinet: "Because it's 2015."<sup>1</sup> In appointing an equal number of women and men to his cabinet, Trudeau joined leaders like French President François Hollande and former Spanish Prime Minister José Rodríguez Zapatero, who likewise prioritized gender balance in their cabinet appointments. Leaders who appoint mostly male cabinets, like former Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott or Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras, who each appointed just one woman to their cabinets, are roundly criticized. Likewise, in his first government, British Prime Minister David Cameron was repeatedly called out for having a "woman problem" given his failure to reach the thirty percent target of female ministers that he had set out during the election campaign.<sup>2</sup>

Traditionally, gender scholars have used the concept of *descriptive* representation to capture women's numerical presence in political institutions. While useful for scholars wishing to report women's presence in legislatures and cabinets around the world, the concept of *symbolic* representation is perhaps more useful for revealing the gendered dimensions of cabinet appointments. Becoming a minister differs in critical ways from accessing elected posts: Ministers are usually chosen by a single selector, normally the president or prime minister, but sometimes the party leader of a coalition partner. The selector is effectively the *symbol maker*: Chief executives select individuals partly on the basis of representative criteria, like partisan identity, regional identity, ethnicity, and increasingly, sex, that they take to be most important. But there are multiple *audiences* who may or may not accept the intentions of the selector. Hence, the question of which group a female minister symbolically represents may be contested. These contests reveal much about how cabinet appointments are structured by gender. The rules, practices, and norms of ministerial selection affect men and women differently because of women's relative absence from elite party networks and because of ideas and expectations about the appropriate roles and behaviours of men and women in politics. Below, we outline how the concept of symbolic representation is helpful in studying gender and cabinet appointments, concluding with some strategies for research in this area.

### **Why the symbolic dimension of cabinet appointments matters**

Executive branch scholars have not paid much attention to the symbolic aspects of ministerial recruitment. Some scholars use game-theoretic models to explain the partisan composition of

cabinets, particularly where coalition governments are common (Amorim Neto 2006; Laver and Shepsle 1994). Others analyse ministerial backgrounds to determine what type of educational, professional, and political backgrounds are most likely to land someone a seat at the cabinet table (Kerby 2015; Rodríguez Teruel 2011). Gender scholars have investigated factors like party ideology, presence of gender quotas, and type of cabinet (i.e., generalist versus specialist) that are associated with women's descriptive representation among ministers (Claveria 2014; Davis 1997; Krook and O'Brien 2012). But in general, researchers of cabinet formation have not considered the centrality of representational criteria in ministerial recruitment. That said, many scholars have noted its importance: Both Borrelli (2002) and Davis (1997) find that women's presence among ministers is higher in a leader's initial government when compared with second terms or cabinet shuffles.

In our work on gender and cabinet appointment, we argue that qualifying for a ministerial appointment includes experiential criteria, like political skills and experience, educational and professional credentials, and representational criteria (Annesley, Beckwith, and Franceschet 2015). Representational criteria refer to ideas about which groups ought to be represented in cabinet. Individuals may qualify for a portfolio on the basis of relatively fixed ascriptive characteristics like sex, race, or ethnicity, or on the basis of membership in a party or party faction. This is best conceptualized by imagining that selectors have a checklist of representative criteria that must be fulfilled by their ministerial team. Some of the representational criteria can be considered rules, albeit normally unwritten and therefore not legally binding, while others will be more fluid, deriving from the political and electoral context.

Unwritten yet widely recognized rules about representation in cabinet vary by country and are normally linked to a country's political and cleavage structure. In many federal countries, like Canada and Australia, regional representation is key: In Canada, there is a strong convention that each province be represented in cabinet. In Germany, religion used to be an important representational consideration, but its importance has declined over time (Annesley, Beckwith, and Franceschet 2015). In more recent years, particularly in countries that are becoming more diverse due to immigration, leaders signal their commitment to inclusion through cabinet appointments. When former French president Nicolas Sarkozy announced his initial cabinet following his 2007 election he said, "the diversity at the bottom of the country must be mirrored by diversity at the head of the country. This is not a choice, this is an obligation."<sup>3</sup> Likewise, when recently elected Canadian Prime Minister Trudeau unveiled his new cabinet, in which indigenous and ethnic minority ministers made up about a third of all

members, he said that he was proud to have a cabinet that “looks like Canada.” In selecting ministers based on representative criteria, prime ministers and presidents are acting as symbol makers: They are signalling to citizens that certain social identities, based on region, ethnicity, gender, and sometimes party faction, are so important that they must be represented in cabinet.

Yet as Jean Blondel, the classic scholar of cabinets, acknowledged, cabinet ministers are both representatives as well as managers of complex political and policy processes (Blondel 1988). Using the concept of symbolic representation can expose two potential tensions between the representative and administrative aspects of cabinets. Both derive from gendered power hierarchies.

First, although the selector is effectively a symbol maker who selects (some) ministers on the basis of representative criteria, audiences may not accept those ministers as their symbolic representative. Cabinets are small, sometimes as small as a dozen individuals and normally no larger than twenty-five (although some Canadian cabinets have reached almost forty members). Hence, at least some of the ministers have likely been chosen to satisfy multiple boxes on a selector’s checklist of representational criteria. Sometimes, there may be a disagreement between the symbol maker and the audience about which representational boxes ministers fill. A good example is Chilean president Michelle Bachelet’s initial cabinet in 2006. During the election campaign, Bachelet promised to appoint an equal number of male and female ministers. Yet when selecting them, she also had to adhere to a complex array of other informal rules (Franceschet and Thomas 2015). In Chile, coalition governments are common and existing rules about representational criteria relate mainly to party and party faction. While President Bachelet complied with the informal rule of allocating portfolios according to party membership, there were some cases where audiences (party elites) rejected the idea that certain ministers represented the party. Instead, party elites believed that these female ministers represented women, and therefore satisfied the box of gender representation, but did not satisfy party representation. The refusal, in some cases, of the audience (party elites) to accept the intentions of the symbol maker (president) owes to women’s relative absence from the party elite. Party leaders expect that “their” ministerial allotment in a president’s cabinet will include individuals drawn from the party’s inner circle. Women’s absence from the party elite makes it unsurprising that some of the female ministers appointed by Bachelet were not considered appropriate representatives for their party in cabinet (Franceschet and Thomas 2015).

A second potential tension that the concept of symbolic representation reveals is between representation and *power*: Are women more likely to qualify for cabinet based on representative criteria while men qualify based on their political trajectories? If men qualify with experiential criteria like service or loyalty to the prime minister or president, while women qualify based on representative characteristics like sex, race, or ethnicity, there is a danger that a power hierarchy based on gender will be maintained. This is problematic for two reasons. First, it means that female ministers may play less central roles in policymaking, and therefore, face fewer opportunities to engage in the substantive representation of women. Second, it means that female ministers may face greater difficulties in their portfolios, and possibly be more vulnerable to being shuffled out of cabinet. Anecdotal evidence lends some credibility to these possibilities. In former French President Sarkozy's cabinet, some of the ethnic minority women did not last very long as ministers. In Canada, Trudeau's 2015 cabinet, where both ethnic minority men and women (some also indigenous and ethnic minority) are well represented, there were some criticisms that the most powerful portfolios (like finance and foreign affairs) remain in the hands of white men. Men's ongoing prominence in cabinet was revealed in an early study that found that male ministers spoke more often during question period than female ministers.<sup>4</sup>

### **Researching symbolic representation and cabinet**

Addressing knowledge gaps about why certain ministers are selected requires closer examination of the dynamic and procedural dimensions of cabinet appointments, particularly the informal rules about how to qualify for ministerial office (see Annesley, Beckwith, and Franceschet 2015). Most constitutions are silent on the criteria for cabinet appointments, thus researchers need to excavate the unwritten yet often deeply entrenched rules, norms, and practices surrounding ministerial recruitment using qualitative methods. There are various strategies for this. First, researchers can conduct interviews with political elites—former ministers, advisers, and party leaders— who know how the process works. It is important to note, however, that informal rules often have a taken-for-granted quality that makes them invisible to political actors who simply know “how things are done around here” (Waylen 2014; Lowndes 2014). Thus, researchers must take care to devise an interview guide that can put into words what is often unspoken. For instance, if interview respondents say that certain individuals were selected for cabinet because they are considered loyal, trustworthy, or influential, it is important to try to unpack the deeper (and gendered) meanings of these terms: How does one demonstrate loyalty? What does it mean to have political influence?

The media is a second source of qualitative data about cabinet appointment. Between an election and the announcement of cabinet, newspapers are full of analysis and commentary about who is likely to be in cabinet and why. Media reports, and particularly the commentary provided by leading experts and political columnists, contain a wealth of information about the informal rules that guide leaders as they assemble their ministerial team. But precisely because few, if any, of the rules are written and legally binding, researchers will likely be confronted by an array of expectations and norms, some of which are potentially incompatible. Thus, researchers must use their judgment, along with the data they gain from interviews, to piece together a narrative about why a specific ministerial team is constructed. Most important, scholars of gender and politics must work to reveal how the informal rules of cabinet appointment affect men and women differently, leading to some cabinets with few women and others with gender balance.

## **Conclusion**

Despite the importance of cabinets in governance and policymaking, researchers know surprisingly little about how ministers are selected and why some individuals are selected while others are not. Most of the scholarship on ministerial recruitment uses quantitative approaches, constructing large data sets of ministers to determine what kind of education, political trajectory, and career paths are most common among ministers. While most of these studies include gender, they rarely include other representative criteria like ethnicity, race, or party faction. Researchers also take individual ministers as the unit of analysis rather than cabinet as a whole, masking what we consider a central aspect of the appointment process, namely, that selectors seek to create a “balanced” cabinet. “Balance” is defined in reference to things like a country’s cleavage structure, the factions within a party (or coalition), and whatever rules about experiential and representational criteria exist in that country. The concept of symbolic representation can help shed light on the gender and power hierarchies in cabinet formation by drawing attention to the representational criteria for cabinet. Doing so will allow cabinet scholars to gain deeper insight into why particular individuals are selected as ministers while others (even with the same credentials) are overlooked.

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# **The Elusive Measurement of Symbolic Effects on Citizens' Political Attitudes: Survey Experiments as Alternative Avenues**

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## **Abstract**

In examining what the presence of female politicians symbolize to citizens, especially to women, scholars have sought to empirically prove whether it enhances the legitimacy of, closeness to and satisfaction with political institutions, as well as levels of political efficacy and participation. By taking stock of the burgeoning quantitative research examining the symbolic effects of women's descriptive representation on citizens' political attitudes and behavior, we will discuss the main empirical and methodological challenges that may have led scholars to reach at best mixed results, to identify merely modest effects or to not find any trace of them. These challenges include difficulties in properly establishing the causal effects and in operationalizing the dependent variable as well as a dearth of adequate data. Our contribution discusses the advantages provided by new methodological avenues, such as survey experiments vis-à-vis standard public opinion surveys, to circumvent the shortcomings identified.

## **Keywords**

women's symbolic representation; women's descriptive representation; survey experiments; causal inference; political attitudes and behaviour

Women politicians become a *symbol* arguably by evoking two powerful ideas to citizens, namely that women are just as capable of governing as men and that the political system is inclusive of all social groups (Mansbridge 1999). The *audience* is then the people observing and reacting to increasing numbers of women in politics. Within the gender and politics literature, scholars have sought to empirically prove whether women politicians might instil a role model effect upon female citizens (Reingold and Harrell 2010) thereby increasing the latter's levels of political efficacy, competency, and participation. Scholars have also examined whether the presence of female politicians enhances citizens' attitudes toward the legitimacy of, closeness to, and satisfaction with political institutions (High-Pippert and Cromer 1998; Lawless 2004). Therefore, from this perspective, symbolic representation is not considered to be a dimension on its own right but rather the *by-product* of descriptive representation. In other words, the symbolic effects on both political engagement and system evaluation rest on women's numerical presence.

In this contribution we reflect on the empirical and methodological challenges that may have led scholars to reach at best mixed results, to identify merely modest causal relationships or to not find any trace of them. We also discuss the opportunities that survey experiments set up for testing the existence of such causal effects as well as for unfolding the underlying causal mechanism(s). We conclude by calling gender and politics scholars to diversify their research strategies in order to provide better answers to the questions underpinning symbolic representation.

### **Empirical and methodological challenges**

Extant quantitative research on symbolic representation has failed to reach conclusive results for the existence of symbolic effects instilled by increases in women's representation. Taking stock of the burgeoning scholarship in this field, which usually draws on public opinion surveys, we outline the main empirical and methodological challenges underpinning the study of the symbolic value of descriptive representation, more specifically causal inference problems, the operationalization of the dependent variable, and data limitations. These challenges warrant serious attention for the evaluation of symbolic effects on citizens' political attitudes and behaviour.

Firstly, concerning data limitations, standard public opinion surveys tend to lack relevant variables to undertake a successful study on symbolic representation. In general, these surveys include a limited number of suitable independent variables, be it legitimacy of, closeness to, and satisfaction with political institutions or levels of political efficacy, competency, and

participation. More importantly, most surveys do not include any or enough questions that would allow linking – either directly or indirectly – descriptive representation with symbolic representation. As a result, existing surveys do not enable to identify the causal mechanism(s) underlying the expected symbolic effects brought about by women’s numerical presence in political institutions.

Secondly, the operationalization of the dependent variable — women’s presence in political positions — is by no means straightforward: *when* to set the cut-off point and *where* – which institutions – to examine it. Most studies use either cross-sectional or single-case data and segment the analysis into one period in which political representation was strongly skewed towards men ( $t$ ) and another one in which proportions are more equilibrated or even gender-balanced ( $t+1$ ). However, cut-off points are only clear where reforms in the electoral system such as the adoption of electoral quotas have enacted change overnight, with incremental progress being more common. Selecting the political institutions where women’s presence occurs posits another dilemma. May reaching parity in parliament produce symbolic effects on citizens living in a town governed by a female mayor – who may have already set up a role-model effect? Countries with a strongly masculinized parliament but where women have served as prime ministers or presidents present a similar conundrum. Some scholars have clustered all institutions together, but this strategy still fails to identify who instilled the effect and when it started (see, for example, Reingold and Harrell 2010). Furthermore, most scholarship is built upon the assumption that the majority of citizens are aware of the gender composition of political institutions, which should be problematized.

Thirdly, studies on women’s symbolic representation are riddled with causal inference problems (see Schwindt-Bayer and Mishler 2005). As noted by Wolbrecht and Campbell (2007, 927), “what appears to be an effect of the presence of female MPs may actually be the effect of a political or social context that facilitates both female representation and women’s political activity” (see also York and Bell 2014). Besides the risk of spurious correlations, the existence of reverse causation between women’s representation and the particular symbolic effect(s) under examination along with reciprocal effects cannot be discarded (Stockemer and Byrne 2012). Indeed, variation in the percentage of women in parliaments and changes in female citizens’ beliefs in their ability to govern may be part of a virtuous cycle where both variables are mutually reinforced (Alexander 2012, 446). Also, while a low gender gap in political engagement might well lead to a higher presence of women in political power, increases in women’s presence may also stir women’s political engagement.

## **Survey experiments as alternative avenues**

Alternatives to standard public opinion surveys in quantitative research on symbolic representation include longitudinal and panel studies (Mariani et al. 2015; Uhlaner and Scola 2015) and quasi-natural experiments (Bhavnani 2009; Clayton 2015). These research designs help to solve some of the shortcomings discussed above but their expansion is limited, with longitudinal surveys including enough relevant questions being scarce and quasi-natural experiments being rare events. We argue that survey experiments are a fruitful alternative avenue. Despite having mushroomed in political science research over the past few years, this methodological approach is still rather limited among gender and politics scholars. In the field of women's political representation, survey experiments have mainly looked at the pervasiveness of negative stereotypes in evaluating women candidates and politicians (see, among others, Streb et al. 2008; Schneider and Boss 2014). Our browsing of the literature on symbolic representation has only identified two works using this type of surveys (Wolak 2015; Verge, Espírito-Santo and Wiesehomeier 2015).

In survey experiments, to infer how public opinion works, the form or placement of survey items is manipulated and respondents are randomly assigned to control and treatment conditions or stimuli (cf. Gaines et al. 2007, 3–4). Survey experiments, which may or may not rely on nationally representative population samples, include various techniques such as list experiments, item count technique, conjoint analysis, vignettes, and different forms of framing and priming. Besides their relatively low cost, especially when using internet-based interviewing, these surveys are particularly well suited for dealing with sensitive social topics that may otherwise be subject to social desirability issues, such as gender equality issues (Streb et al. 2008). Most importantly, they are extremely useful to overcome the empirical and methodological limitations discussed above.

The advantages of survey experiments in terms of data collection are straightforward. Since they are designed to test a specific hypothesis or a small set of hypotheses, the key treatments and relevant questions are invariably included. Also, while observational studies require a large number of questions to rule out spurious relationships (Mutz 2011, 18), an experimental design requires fewer questions. Survey experiments also allow overcoming limitations affecting the operationalization of the dependent variable. Through the random assignment of respondents to treatments, the researcher controls the stimuli each individual is exposed to. While one may argue that survey experiments face contamination from the real world – for example, that respondents' prior exposure to levels of women in politics in the real world might interfere with the treatment – most researchers assume that if no systematic differences

between the control and treatment sub-samples are found, observed variance in responses are caused by the stimuli (Gaines et al. 2007, 10–17). Most importantly, the use of survey experiments is particularly recommended to tackle causal effects as well as to unfold their direction and the underlying mechanism (Mutz 2011, 15).

Vignette treatments seem to be a particularly useful technique for studying symbolic representation. Using words, pictures or both, vignettes allow “to evaluate what difference it makes when the actual object of study or judgment, or the context in which that object appears, is systematically changed in some way” (Mutz 2011, 118). This technique thus relies on framing by leading individuals to focus on particular considerations when forming their opinion (Druckman 2001). It is precisely framing through vignettes the technique used in the two existing survey experiments run in the field of symbolic representation.

Wolak (2015) departs from problematizing the fact that engendered political engagement may not just be based on candidate gender but rather on a wide range of factors that cannot be controlled for in standard public opinion surveys, including variance in candidate’s self-presentation, type of media coverage or differentiated routes to political office by women and men candidates. By holding candidate traits and campaign information constant for a special election contest (an open congressional seat), Wolak investigates the link between candidate gender and respondents’ vote intention and their feelings of political efficacy. Respondents are assigned to four treatments, using different vignettes (in the form of a newspaper article) about a race between two female candidates, two male candidates, a Democrat man and a Republican woman, and a Republican man and a Democrat woman. After reading the article, respondents are asked about their probability to vote in this election, which candidate they would vote for, and their feelings of political efficacy. Wolak’s results contradict the general expectation that women will be more politically engaged with more feminized political competition.

On the other hand, Verge, Espírito-Santo and Wiesehomeir (2015) examine whether exposure to distinct vignettes about greater women’s representation and its concomitant effects has an impact on citizens’ political engagement and on their evaluation of the political system. In this case, the authors are not interested in measuring symbolic effects per se but rather in identifying the causal mechanism. The stimuli to which respondents are randomly assigned consist of vignettes emphasizing positive and negative effects of women’s increasing levels in political institutions concerning changes in the way in which politics works, female politicians’ competency, and the promotion of women’s interests. A control group receives no treatment. These vignettes also adopt the form of a newspaper article that precedes the

questions of interest – those related to political engagement and evaluation of the political system. The results suggest that framing women’s representation and the outcomes of their presence in particular ways shape symbolic effects with regards to how citizens evaluate the political system but do not affect their political engagement.

It should be noted that, for survey experiments to be effective and produce reliable results, the stimuli must be perceived as posing a credible – and not merely hypothetical – situation (Druckman 2001, 1042). Likewise, adequate control variables must be included to enable attributing the effect to the stimuli and sampling issues need to be taken into account. For identifying causes and effects, socially representative samples of respondents are not always needed, but the use of university student samples, while cheaper, lacks external validity – i.e. might not allow generalizing the findings (Mutz 2011, 57). Lastly, survey experiments may present ethical issues that need to be adequately tackled by researchers – e.g. debriefing respondents when using deception.

## **Conclusions**

Several layers of factors separate women’s numerical presence from citizens’ political attitudes and behaviour. Given that gender is only one of the many characteristics of politicians, who simultaneously integrate complex political and social systems, it is reasonable to expect modest impacts. However, in tracing such symbolic effects, paying attention to empirical and methodological issues is crucial. As has been argued, survey experiments present several advantages vis-à-vis standard surveys for quantitative analyses of women’s symbolic representation. The virtues of this innovative exploration make a strong case for the use of multiple methods by gender and politics scholars whose selection should be advocated on the grounds of their effectiveness in addressing their research questions.

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# **Examining Intersectionality and Symbolic Representation<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Abstract**

This contribution highlights the need and benefits of a mixed methodological approach in intersectional studies of symbolic representation. Existing research concerning symbolic representation among traditionally marginalized groups such as women, racial and ethnic minorities focuses on the role either gender or race/ethnic identity plays in shaping symbolic forms of representation such as communication or presentation of self. However, the literature tells us very little about the experiences of elected officials who are both women and racial and/or ethnic minorities, which are substantively different from those of either Anglo women or minority men. We will argue for the benefits of an intersectional approach to studying symbolic representation in the U.S. that uses both quantitative and qualitative methods. As scholars with very different methodological training and different identities, we will also detail the ways in which the practice of working together expanded our own understanding of how to identify and measure symbolic representation among diverse members of Congress.

## **Keywords**

symbolic representation; research methods; intersectionality; race; ethnicity; gender

The proportion of the U.S. Congress members belonging to historically marginalized groups, such as women, racial and ethnic minorities has risen significantly in recent decades, culminating in 2014 with the most diverse Congress to date. As the face of government continues to change, scholars must increasingly explore the intersections of identity in examining the ways in which these women, minorities and minority women represent their constituents. In doing so, scholars face a number of challenges in considering the ways in which elected officials navigate their multiple identities and in empirically identifying their unique representational styles. By “identity,” we are referring to the social categories in which an individual claims membership and the personal meaning with which a person imbues these categories (Ashmore et al. 2004). Intersectional approaches highlight the ways in which social and political forces manipulate the overlapping and traversing inequalities *within* marginal groups (Crenshaw 1989). This line of inquiry allows researchers to investigate political representation and examine the ways in which identity can be situational, changing both over time and across different contexts.

In this contribution, we first discuss the value of an intersectional approach to the study of identity and symbolic representation. We then outline the empirical challenges associated with this line of research, arguing that a multi-methodological approach may assist scholars in generating generalizable, yet nuanced data. We conclude by discussing the value of collaboration among scholars with different experiences and identities in researching this critical subject.

### **Identity, Symbolic and Descriptive Representation**

The term symbolic representation is somewhat abstract and has been used to refer to a wide variety of behaviours that elected officials engage in outside of government, such as speech or non-material political actions. This style of representation—described by Pitkin (1967, 102) as symbolically ‘standing for’ different constituents—is marked by activities such as communication, constituent service and other non-legislative behaviours that build constituent trust and positive affect towards elected officials (Fenno 1978; Pitkin 1967). Moreover, scholars have shown that elected officials often consider symbolic behaviours to be critical to the representational process and their re-election prospects, increasing constituent support and satisfaction (Fenno 1978).

Symbolic representation and identity have been linked by scholars studying descriptive representation for women and minorities, often in exploring whether it is meaningful for historically marginalized groups to be represented by elected officials sharing their identities

(Brown 2014; Burns, Schlozman and Verba 2001; Mansbridge 1999). For women, racial and ethnic minorities, having elected officials bring attention to their interests serves a critical function in the representational system. As Tate (2003, 15) puts it, “descriptive representation remains potently symbolic to Blacks today. It represents their inclusion in the polity, the progress achieved in America’s race relations, and their political power in the US system”. Scholars have found that symbolic representation lowers political alienation, and positively impacts efficacy and engagement among women and minority groups (Sinclair-Chapman 2006; Pantoja and Segura 2003; Bobo and Gilliam 1990; Stokes and Dolan 2010).

Scholarship in this field has explored the differences in symbolic messages on the part of women and minority representatives. Much of this research has focused on communication emanating (via press releases, speeches and websites) from elected officials. This work typically finds that women and minority elected officials emphasize unique political messages that communicate their particular identities as well as those of their descriptive constituents, and more often highlight issues connected to race and gender – e.g. women’s health, discrimination, civil rights (Canon 1999; Gershon 2008; Niven and Zilber 2001; Kahn 1996). However, some research in this field has found few differences among female and minority elected officials in communication styles (Gulati 2004; McIlwain and Caliendo 2002).

In contrast to the body of studies focusing on the representational styles of women (and to some extent minority) elected officials, work on minority women is limited. Theories regarding women of colour and presentation of self may be informed by the literature on (largely White) women and (largely male) minorities. However, we cannot expect that minority women’s representational styles will mirror that of other elected officials. Scholars have demonstrated that women of colour often take unique approaches to politics (Brown 2014; Hardy-Fanta 1993) and attend to the needs of their descriptive constituents in their legislative behaviours (Bratton, Haynie and Reingold 2006). Just as in their substantive behaviours, it is likely that minority women navigate their intersecting identities by creating unique ‘home styles’ of representation. For example, research demonstrates that gender and race affects the political attitudes of minority women (Gay and Tate 1998; Mansbridge and Tate 1992; Simien and Clawson 2004) as well as their representational behaviours (Brown 2014).

### **Examining Symbolic Representation and Identity Using Content Analysis**

To explore the link between identity and symbolic representation, our study uses a detailed content analysis of U.S. Congress members’ website biographical pages (Brown and Gershon

forthcoming). Utilizing both quantitative and qualitative analysis, we provide a comprehensive picture of how minority congresswomen draw from their race/gender identities to present themselves as effective legislators, communicate with constituents, and narrate the importance of their experiences for the creation of legislation. Our quantitative content analysis focused on representative's discussion of identities (both their own and that of their constituents) as well as issues connected with race, ethnicity and gender.<sup>2</sup> We found that minority women mentioned both gendered and racial identities more frequently than their Anglo female and minority male peers, and that these differences persist even when we controlled for district and member characteristics. With regard to issue discussion, we found minority women distinct from their Anglo female counterparts in the attention they paid to issues related to gender. However, there was little difference between minority women and men in their attention to race-related issues.

The use of quantitative analysis allows for a broad, generalizable measure of the content of Congress members' websites – highlighting distinct differences and similarities among the groups examined. Furthermore, the quantitative analysis enabled us to examine these differences while controlling for other variables that likely shape symbolic communications, thus isolating the differences among these women and minority Congress members. However, these results yield a somewhat incomplete picture of representation, failing to identify differences in the *type* of identity and issue discussion occurring across these groups.

Taking direction from the quantitative findings, we were able to locate specific themes and differences that were used to guide the qualitative content analysis. For instance, we found that women were more likely to connect their gendered identities to their legislative decision-making on several military interventions. The majority of the congresswomen in our sample championed global women's issues, yet only minority women made explicit connections to their gender and the importance of humanitarian efforts, calling attention to human rights violations that uniquely impacted women and children. This is in stark contrast to White congresswomen who used a gendered lens to remark on defence spending and homeland security but did not make distinct connections with the lived experiences of women in war-torn areas. Thus, the qualitative results reveal key differences in how descriptive and symbolic representation interact for Congress members.

### **Different Scholars, Different Approaches**

As scholars, we were trained in different methodological approaches to analysing political communication (Sarah Gershon typically uses quantitative methods while Nadia Brown

employs qualitative methods). Given the relative strengths and weaknesses of both of these approaches, we decided to collaborate in a comprehensive study of the link between descriptive and symbolic representation. Combining our approaches in this study was challenging, but ultimately resulted in novel findings and served as an educational experience for both scholars.

In addition to methodological expertise, researchers' own gendered, ethnic and racial identities may shape data collection and analysis (Brown 2012). Scholars must be cautious to not exaggerate their familiarity with the subjects they study as "native researchers," as homogenous culture cannot be assumed (Moffat 1992) and because 'insider' status may result in observational bias (Greene 2014). Scholars note that the insider/outsider researcher position is not fixed, but rather shifting and permeable vantage points for studying identity groups (Naples 2003).<sup>3</sup> Working together on this project demonstrated that neither Nadia nor Sarah had a "monopoly on advantage or objectivity" (Chavez 2008, 476). Rather, we believe that in this case, the interaction between scholars with "insider" and "outsider" status led to a more developed exploration of the relationship between identity and symbolic representation. Below, we use a brief example to explore the role of researcher identity in interpreting symbolic communications and illustrate the value of collaboration among scholars of different backgrounds.

In our study, Nadia used her raced/gendered insider status as a Black woman to alert Sarah to culturally based experiences that the Black congresswomen elected to highlight in their biographies. Specifically, two Black congresswomen in our sample highlighted their work with Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc. as an example of their commitment to positively impacting the lives of women and girls through social justice and activism. This African American sorority was founded in 1913 on the campus of Howard University. The newly formed organization participated in the Women's Suffrage March in Washington D.C. on March 3, 1913.<sup>4</sup> This public act set the foundation for the sorority's mission of social justice as well as advocacy for Black women and other marginalized groups. As Deltas, these representatives continue the Founders' commitment to publically championing the rights of Black women. As a form of substantive representation, elected officials who are members of this sorority take public positions on issues that advance the interests of Black women. The decision to become Deltas and highlight it on their websites demonstrates the congresswomen's connections to Black women as a constituent group. This subtle but important cueing, alerts voters to an attachment to Black communities as well as to the Congress members' support of Black women's issues. A researcher who was not familiar with

the cultural significance of the organization may have missed this form of symbolic communication or failed to distinguish it from other mentions of organizational membership. Empirically identifying identity group-specific communication is critical to fully capturing the relationship between descriptive and symbolic representation for different populations. This collaboration led to different results, which could not be reached independent of one another. Thus, the value of partnership between scholars with different experiences, training and identities served to enhance the quality of the data collected and theories developed from that data.

## **Conclusion**

Existing research concerning the intersection of gender, race, ethnicity and symbolic representation is limited, yet our data suggest that there is much to study in this field, highlighting the distinct gendered, racial and ethnic differences among Congress members. Second, our research and experiences point to the value of collaboration among scholars with diverse methodological training and identities in researching symbolic representation through the lens of race, gender and ethnicity. The combined methodological approaches presented here improved our evaluation of symbolic representation in Congress members' presentation styles by integrating different ways of knowing. We encourage other scholars to consider the mixed method approach and collaborative work described here.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> The names of the authors appear in alphabetical order and imply that this contribution is completely collaborative.

<sup>2</sup> For details on the coding procedures, please see Brown and Gershon, *forthcoming*.

<sup>3</sup> We do not mean to argue that scholars should or should not share the identities of the populations they research. Rather, we include this discussion to highlight the value of collaboration among scholars who are diverse in their experiences, training and backgrounds.

<sup>4</sup> For a deeper discussion of the significance of membership in and mention of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, as well as its symbolic distinction from other organizations and institutions, please see Brown and Gershon, *forthcoming*.

## **Performance and Politics: An approach to symbolic representation**

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### **Abstract**

Building on my work on the Indian, South African and UK parliaments, the article argues that the symbolic is integral to the descriptive and the substantive; that the symbolic can be studied not only as the visual and the discursive but also through paying attention to its performance. The symbolic is also dialectical – it emerges through the interaction between the performer and the audience. Performance of representation can be studied through ethnographic and aesthetic approaches. Ethnographies depend on close/thick description of the subject and sites of research and pay close attention to the value that is attached, promoted, reproduced through forms of performance of politics. As such ethnography is inductive in its approach to data collection and analysis. It is a dialogic and holistic approach which has the potential to co-produce meanings and to capture the context in which it sits. The contribution captures symbolic representation in these different registers.

### **Keywords**

performance; ceremony and ritual; ethnography; aesthetic; symbolic politics

As Lombardo and Meier (2014) argue, symbolic representation contains not only a visual dimension, expressed through symbols but also a discursive dimension such as found in metaphors, stereotypes, often expressed in policy discourses. By arguing that the symbolic is integral to descriptive and substantive representation I push this approach further. The symbolic is not only visual and discursive but also performative and dialectical – it emerges through the interaction between the performer and the audience. Symbolic representation can thus be studied through both ethnographic and aesthetic approaches.

Through analysing rituals we can trace the circulation of meanings, the particularity of institutional cultures and the sedimentation of power in political institutions. Ceremony and ritual are symbolic performances of the social and the political, and they mobilize specific symbols to highlight particular facets of political culture. This contribution reflects on my previous work on the importance of ceremony and ritual in parliament and highlights the methodological challenges arising from the application of an interdisciplinary approach to the study of the symbolic in its different registries.

### **Representation and claim-making: The performative in the symbolic**

The symbolic is a wide spectrum of objects, events and performances – assemblages – that together allow us to understand the complexity of our social and political life. For example, the attire worn in parliament by the speaker and members – black gown, wigs, traditional dress – or objects such as the mace that is placed in the House of Commons before proceeds start. Similarly, the opening of parliament has a ceremony attached to it which is both spectacular and ritualistic, with a particular form of performance marking inauguration. Seeing ceremony and rituals as performances allows us to reflect on the importance of political aesthetics (Bleiker and Hutchinson 2014; Rai 2010; Virmani 2016): What do public buildings attempt to project? Why are they decorated the way they are? This of course leads us to ask questions about the role that emotions rather than reason play in politics: Why do certain objects, rituals or sites evoke nationalism, solidarity or revulsion?

In the study of ceremony and ritual temporality matters – it is mobilized by both citizens and by state power. While some symbolic rituals are part of history, like the ‘dragging’ of the UK Speaker to her chair at the time of the Speaker’s election, others are relatively new but powerful (Armitage et al. 2014). Take for example the Indian parliament: the singing of the national anthem, sung at the start of each session, and the national song, sung at the end, hold an important place in the ritual of parliamentary working. This ritual was introduced only in the 1990s by the then Speaker Shivraj Patil, who found this an attractive feature of the

Australian parliament, when he visited that country. As historians Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) argue, traditions are invented and are not necessarily dependent on time to take root in our imaginations. Symbols also need to resonate. Representation and representativeness are key concepts in any discussion of the symbolic. In the post-apartheid South African parliament, for example, the mace was not only kept on as an object whose presence in the chamber marked the start of parliamentary proceedings, but was redesigned and crafted at considerable expense to ‘reflect the history, tradition, diversity, culture and languages of South Africa. The mace also celebrates the country’s natural beauty, its plant and animal life and its rich mineral resources’.<sup>1</sup>

The symbolic and the performative not only help us understand the histories and culture of institutions but also the everyday performance of their members. As Goffman (1977, 324) points out, institutionalized practices discipline individual behaviours; for example they “do not so much allow for the expression of natural differences between the sexes as for the production of that difference itself” – individuals, both men and women, are encouraged to ‘fit in’, ‘be good’ and ‘not make a scene’ through such disciplining. Similarly, when Butler (1990, 140) famously invoked de Beauvoir’s claim that, “one is not born, but, rather, becomes a woman” and argued that “[i]n this sense, gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time – an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts”, she suggested that gendered power reproduces itself through repeated acts (rituals) which have an affective resonance and in turn normalizes particular gender orders. The symbolic (dress, speech and ritual) makes for this normalization.

It should also be noted that symbolic politics is performed in a dialectal relationship with an audience – without an audience there is no performance, no memory and no sedimentation of politics. As I have argued elsewhere, “actors anticipate an audience, bring it into play, respond to its reaction, shape and reshape the performance in the light of their reading of the audience and many times make the audience part of the performance” (Rai 2015, 1182). The audience too can make performances happen – through insisting on performance of political rituals, for instance (Finlayson 2014). In this way, it is the interaction between the audience and the performer that gives performance its affect. Unlike more conventional approaches to politics, which centre the mobilization of bias and competition of interests, a symbolic approach helps us understand how the mobilization of affect works in political life.

Representation is about claim-making (Saward 2010), but we need to understand *how* these representative claims are made and what makes them legitimate; we cannot simply read these

off from institutional practices and norms. Contestations over the aesthetics of politics – flags, songs, buildings, paintings, statues – are all important clues for our study of politics (Virmani 2016). For example, in post-independence India the state's claim to authority was not only made through declaring statehood, writing a constitution, or securing borders. It was also made by reclaiming parliamentary space, through commissioning of murals, portraits and statues which reflect India's history and its aspirations for the future (Rai 2014). Social inequalities of gender and caste, class and region are reflected in the portraiture in parliament. Among the twenty-three portraits of 'distinguished Indians' that hang in the Central Hall we can find the first and only woman Prime Minister of India, Mrs. Indira Gandhi, and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, national leader, India's first Law Minister and a key member of the Constituent Assembly and a stalwart of the movement of the lower castes in India. Symbolic rituals are also mobilized to challenge state power. Resistance to representative claim-making takes different forms: demonstrations and disruptions of political proceedings; "mimicry", where hegemonic codes are challenged but through words that are recognized by the hegemon; overlooking, ignoring, disregarding or not paying attention to claim-making through staging of political spectacles. Such challenges undermine the smooth narrative of power. For example, the claim to representation is often challenged through cartoons, the telling of jokes and teasing those who make such claims (Shehata 1992, 75).

### **Interdisciplinarity in the study of the symbolic**

A symbolic approach to politics can only ever be interdisciplinary. The study of politics has not been particularly sensitive to the aspects of everyday life that have engaged anthropologists, sociologists, historians (as above) and theatre and performance studies scholars. As feminist scholars, while we also seem to respect disciplinary boundaries far too much, we *can* range widely across these disciplines to enrich our analysis – after all, the history of feminist analysis is rooted in a social movement that traversed many fields. For example, social anthropology can help us examine the micro stories of politics through what Geertz (1973) has called 'thick description'. Similarly, the 'historical turn' within performance studies marks a point of overlap that emphasizes a comparative and a historically contingent approach to performance as surrogation through which 'dead' traditions are brought again to life; where through performance memory is renegotiated and cultures reinvented (Roach 1996).

We are lucky as political scientists that most disciplines today have a rich stream of feminist work available to us, which makes interdisciplinary conversations possible. However, as I

found out, doing interdisciplinary research is not easy. Covering a literature, understanding the debates in the context of disciplinary movements and making an intervention is a difficult intellectual project. An important challenge I faced was to keep feminist inquiry, method and approach firmly in my sights – developing new avenues of research often meant that feminist insights got obscured and had to be brought in at a later stage. A particular challenge is that of method: How do we bridge the divide between what we as political scientists do – hypothesize, investigate, aggregate data and analyse – with say, anthropologists, who insist on letting the research site speak for itself, generating questions for us and giving direction?

My research on parliamentary ceremony and ritual builds on a growing interest in studying modern democratic societies and institutions amongst anthropologists (Abeles 1988; Crewe 2007; Crewe and Muller 2006) and an increasing use of ethnographic methods by other disciplines, including politics (see for example Bevir and Rhodes 2006). Textual and discourse analysis also increasingly engages with political institutions such as parliament through examining rhetoric and speech (Illie 2003) as does the work of sociologists to understand social relations in the everyday as well as institutional contexts (Goffman 1977). In my work, I used narrative research methods – long, detailed interviews over a ten year period to develop a longitudinal approach to women in politics (Rai 2012; Rai and Spary forthcoming). By keeping the focus open, by listening carefully to the narratives of women MPs, and by using some anthropological techniques such as detailed field notes and thick descriptions of the context of interviews and interviewees I felt able, for example, to re-examine dominant discourses of ‘political families’ as the route of women’s entry into parliamentary politics (Rai 2012).

Both, openness to the symbolic in politics and to an interdisciplinary approach led me to develop a framework for understanding politics, which I have called ‘performance and politics framework’ (Rai 2015). Politics can, I have argued, best be analysed through a performative lens, which allows us to make judgements about the authenticity, legitimacy and liminality of both political claim-making and claim-makers. It does so by holding together in one frame, rather than separately – the body, stage, speech and performative labour that go into institutional and individual performance through which claims are made. I argue that such a framework seeks to reveal the historical arch (Corrigan and Sayer 1985) that connects deep political and discursive power to its immediate performance; that certain discourses, performances and representations find greater resonance, reception and recognition than others, depending upon the dominant ideas of historical time.

Still, one of the issues that was particularly difficult to research in the context of parliament was: Who were the MPs performing for? Who was their audience? In the context of parliamentary politics, the audience is also the represented – the MPs make claims to represent, be representative of, as well as to convince their constituents through their performance. The constituents (audience) also judge the performance of the MP by the measure of efficacy, performance and mimesis that the MP's performance is able to convey. But MPs have other audiences too – their peers in parliament, the party bosses upon whom they depend for their progression as professionals, and citizens at large who make or break their reputation and can therefore affect the MPs' career as a politician. Similarly, as an institution parliament is also affected by the audience. What reputational damage, for example, accrues when citizens view on their television screens members of parliament behaving badly – when the Speaker of the house cannot discipline MPs or when stories of corruption wash over the effective work of most parliamentarians? These are important issues that affect and are affected by the performance of both individual MPs and parliamentary ceremonials as well as the expectations of citizens at large.

## **Conclusion**

If politics is its performance, how can we then make visible these links? In this contribution I have suggested that even though political performance is tethered to recognizable patterns of power it is also dynamic and unstable – in part because of the interpretive mode of performance and in part because the moment of performance is itself inherently liminal and fluid. By analysing parliamentary or other political institutions through the lens of performance we are able to see the dynamic, the unexpected as well as the structural frames, allowing us a more nuanced analytical framework to study politics. As I have argued elsewhere, “a study of political performance then allows us to open up the field of political analysis at the level of individual and institutional representation to a more creative, connected and critical gaze” (Rai 2015, 1195). The building in of the symbolic and the performative in our analysis, I suggest, can enrich the study of politics itself.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Parliament of the Republic of South Africa, 'Our symbols', on the National Assembly Mace:  
[http://www.parliament.gov.za/live/content.php?Item\\_ID=90](http://www.parliament.gov.za/live/content.php?Item_ID=90)