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LA REPRESENTACIÓN POLÍTICA IDEAL DE L@S CIUDADAN@S EN ESPAÑA, REINO UNIDO, POLONIA Y MACEDONIA

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La representación política ideal de l@s ciudadan@s en España, Reino Unido, Polonia y Macedonia

Monica Threlfall

ABSTRACT

Studies of the roles of parliamentarians point out that there has been little research on their relationships with the residents of their district. Instead research is mainly focused on them as legislators and politicians, their public performance, their legislative effectiveness, their perceptions of their roles and duties, and the extent to which incumbents are able to secure re-election on the basis of their individual performance. Furthermore, research mainly covers single member plurality (SMP) systems, whether the US, France, Britain, Canada or Australia. In addition, though political representation has received renewed attention from the innovative approach of feminist scholars (from Sapiro 1981, to Phillips 1998, to Lovenduski 2005, among many others), echoing women's movement demands for the 'sociological' or 'descriptive' representation of women on elective bodies, this literature has not explored grassroots views of this form of representation. Thus there is little research on the representation system from a bottom-up perspective centred on what citizens and residents would like from their parliamentarians and regional and local councillors in order to feel politically represented in a satisfactory way. This is the innovative approach taken here.

Discussing how citizens might feel represented is not of the same order as studies of electoral preferences, so it does not engage the issue of voting intentions. Instead, feeling represented is about exploring what is arguably a fundamental citizenship right, the right to be represented in the sense of having political relations with specific parliamentarians as an individual experience. It stands in contrast to the more common and arguably instrumentalist practice of democracies where state institutions periodically request citizens to choose parliamentarians from candidates assigned to voting districts for the sake of spreading their provenance across a territory, without specifying whether any political links, rights, and duties arise in the process.

The citizen-centred perspective developed here explores two vectors. Firstly, how far the 'relations of representation' are worth developing in a democracy in order to provide a mutual feedback loop that both helps citizens feel more recognised and provides representatives with key political information. Secondly, how far successful 'relations of representation' are dependent on who the parliamentarian is personally as well as politically. In this vector, the citizens' visualisations of how they would ideally feel represented is explored by searching for the personal and political features of the ideal representative and representation system, instead of their party preference and voting intention. Particular attention is given to the questions of how far sociological or descriptive 'likeness' between representatives and the represented is a requirement for the latter to feel represented important, in contrast to technical competence or political characteristics. This tension in citizens' feelings around having representatives of the 'same-identity' as them is explored across gender, ethnic origin and religious difference.

The findings presented here are qualitative, arising from twenty discussion groups involving nearly 160 participants in ten locations in the UK, Spain, Poland and Macedonia.

1. Introduction

In 2009 the UK House of Commons set up an Outreach Office to raise the public's awareness of the work and processes of Parliament and encourage it to engage with the political process. Its own Modernisation Committee found 'that people increasingly distrust politicians as a group, and feel disconnected from the institutions of democracy. Around 67% of the [British] public feel they know nothing or very little about Westminster' (Stanley 2009). This occurred in a country with an established political culture of MPs devoting time and effort to constituency work, travelling regularly to their district, meeting local organisations and holding walk-in 'surgeries' open to the public without previous screening. 90% of MPs hold surgeries once a month, 60% every two weeks (Cain, Ferejohn, and Fiorina 1987: 62). If the district is well outside the London area, financial incentives encourage them to keep a second home in the constituency so as to spend more time there. Yet it is not enough for the public to feel a connection to the parliamentary system. Such difficulties suggest that the connections between citizens and parliamentarians need to be analysed afresh. The new Speaker of the House of Commons, John Bercow, has declared he is making outreach his personal mission and that MPs' links with constituencies need to be revitalised (2009).

Studies of the roles of parliamentarians point out that there has been little research on their relationships with the residents of their district. Instead research is mainly focused on them as legislators and politicians, their public performance, their legislative effectiveness, their perceptions of their roles and duties, and the extent to which incumbents are able to secure re-election on the basis of their individual performance. Furthermore, research mainly covers single member plurality (SMP) systems, whether the US, France, Britain, Canada or Australia. In addition, though political representation has received renewed attention from the innovative approach of feminist scholars (from Sapiro 1981, to Phillips 1998, to Lovenduski 2005, among many others), echoing women's movement demands for the 'sociological' or 'descriptive' representation of women on elective bodies, this literature has not explored grassroots views of this form of representation. Thus there is little research on the representation system from a bottom-up perspective centred on what citizens and residents would like from their parliamentarians and regional and local councillors in order to feel politically represented in a satisfactory way. This is the innovative approach taken here.

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The findings presented here are qualitative, arising from twenty discussion groups involving nearly 160 participants in ten locations in the UK, Spain, Poland and Macedonia. Section 2. reviews the relevant literature, pointing out how it informed the design of this study. Section 3 explains its methods, while Section 4 discusses a significant selection from its extensive findings. Section 5 presents the conclusions, arguing for an overhaul of the current formal political representation system by improving the relations between citizens and their representatives.ⁱ

2. The research background: parliamentarians and constituency work, public disengagement with politics, and sociological representation.

2.1. Parliamentarians: legislators or representatives?

Should representatives represent and legislators legislate? The answer would be obvious if they were not one and the same person; the fact that they are suggests either conflicting roles or an easy balancing act.ⁱⁱ Edmund Burke defended the "Member's Choice" to perform as a legislator rather than a representative: "*You chuse [sic] a Member indeed; but when you have chosen him, he is not Member of Bristol, but he is a Member of Parliament*" (Burke 1774). Though Pitkin (1967: 168) argues that Burke 'presented no consistent doctrine of representation', he nonetheless expresses the parliamentarian's dilemma passionately:

§ Certainly, Gentlemen, it ought to be the happiness and glory of a Representative, to live in the strictest union, the closest correspondence, and the most unreserved communication with his constituents. Their wishes ought to have great weight with him; their opinion high respect; their business unremitting attention. It is his duty to sacrifice his repose, his pleasures, his satisfactions, to theirs; and, above all, ever, and in all cases, to prefer their interest to his own. But, his unbiassed opinion, his mature judgement, his enlightened conscience, he ought not to sacrifice to you [...]. Your Representative owes you, not his industry only, but his judgement; and he betrays, instead of serving you, if he sacrifices it to your opinion.

Burke came down on the side of the well-judged, conscientious decision of the individual MP, which should prevail over the public's '*hasty Opinion*' consisting of '*local Prejudices*' (sic). Representing the views of constituents was not the priority. In a

representative, not a direct democracy,

"Parliament is not a Congress of Ambassadors from different and hostile interests; which interests each must maintain, as an Agent and Advocate, against other Agents and Advocates"

Instead Burke sees parliamentarians devoted to 'the general good', a point Manin (1997:163) endorses because it has been accepted since the 18th century that MPs represent 'the nation as a whole rather than their particular constituency'. The idea of common good has been repeatedly contested, for the way it veils existing class and gender contradictions rather than reconciling them as claimed. Liberal pluralistic perspectives have tended to refute such monolithic concepts, favouring democratic political competition around plural goals. But the legacy of these debates is important, for if parliamentarians are only independent legislators then arguably, citizens are deprived of a what is here termed a 'relationship of representation'. The labour movement thought it necessary to create labour parties to represent workers' interests and the women's movement has fought to be represented by women – both believe that what matters is who the representative is. Workers were not content to be represented by employers, nor women by men, believing the gap of interests and understanding was so great, they could not act for them. More recently, the need for parliamentarians from ethnic minorities has been widely discussed and organisations such as Operation Black Vote still campaign for the principle of like representing like. Against this background, the research for this article focused considerable attention on the issue of *who* is to be represented by whom, concentrating on citizens' preferences and identities as gendered, ethnicised or racialised subjects.ⁱⁱⁱ

Nearly all research on the relations between constituents and their representatives is based on countries with single-member plurality (SMP) systems, covers Anglo-Saxon countries and France. Bogdanor (1985) claimed hardly any empirical investigations of the topic had been carried out before his edited comparative volume. His hypotheses were a) the role of electoral system was key in determining the type of links between parliamentarians and constituents; and b) SMP systems provided for closer links, as multi-member constituencies would be too large. Yet the assumptions were not proven. His findings highlighted the ubiquitous presence of parties in party democracies with party parliaments, which meant that all 20th century parliamentarians focused on nationwide clienteles that were non-geographical, clustering around specific interest groups such as class. He concluded that the representative's constituency role only fitted into the interstices of party work. The Westminster system is therefore *not* naturally superior to proportional representation on account of closer constituency.

For Germany, Burkett (1985) found that the subject of parliamentarians' constituency service was not studied, despite the 248 constituency deputies in the *Bundestag*. Deputies have little incentive to develop a 'conscientious concern for constituents' problems' simply because local problems are a matter for the Land minister and assembly (*Landestag*), with deputies unable to do much to solve them. Even if the constituency representative did try to cultivate personal support in his/her district, the limited evidence available suggested s/he could not hold out against any national or regional political swing (Burkett 1985: 121, 124). In addition there were nationwide official legal channels for grievances that invalidated anything a parliamentarian can do. German electorates, even when choosing single-member deputies, must do so on party political grounds. German deputies are free to concentrate on legislating and do not suffer the Janus-headed dilemma of their UK or French counterparts. In the case of the Netherlands (Gladdish 1985) the whole country is one constituency. Citizens have no locality relationships with parliamentarians and 'there is no requirement that candidates live in the district or have any relationship with the district' (Beun & Irwin 1997). Yet in the Netherlands and Germany, the public is more interested in politics than in the UK

and discuss it more with their friends (European Values Survey 2005: p11 (Table 1E), p.13 (Table 2)).

These cases show that the constituency link, where it exists, is an artefact of constitutional provisions, and in the case of the UK, raises the possibility that support for individual citizens might befall the relevant local authority department, councillor, or the ombudsman. The actual prevalence of British MPs' constituency service is in doubt. Some 2007 sources state that MPs used to neglect their local duties *in the past* (House of Commons 2007), yet Bogdanor found for the 1980s that constituency service was not strong at that time. It is possible that constituency links of MPs are subject to mythmaking on some level. Others claim that it has risen over time as the result of *increasing popular demand* (House of Commons 2007: 6, Norton (1990:199), Norton & Wood (1993) and Dogan (2007: 454). Interestingly, this claim coincides with a period during which voter turnout has reached a plateau and then fallen both in the UK and other advanced capitalist democracies (Norris 2003). Thus it seems that whatever the effect of constituency service, it has not obviously led to voters becoming more engaged with supporting their representative. In such a context, a fresh perspective taking a different approach based on citizens' preferences is likely to shed further light on the problem.

Searing (1994) interviewed hundreds of British MPs over a prolonged period and found their activities and priorities could be classified into 8 roles, yet only one of these meant they were involved with their constituents. The 'Constituency Member' role was only played by backbenchers, not parliamentary leaders.^{iv} Over three-quarters of constituencies were represented by MPs who did *not* prioritise the needs of the residents of their district but preferred policy advocacy, or were status seekers with ministerial aspirations (1994: 33). Searing also show that 'constituency work' consists mainly of the redress of grievances reminiscent of ancient petitioning for favours and righting of wrongs, though he believes that even trivial grievances can point to areas where policy is wrong (1994:122). So Searing's research largely undermines the notion that the British system is characterised by the strength of the MPs' constituency service, and where this does occur it deals with individual grievances, which are not overtly political. Indeed, most MPs did not believe in articulating the political opinions of their constituents because as one MP put it, with Burkean echoes: 'There's the matter of exercising my judgment' (1994: 154-5). MPs recognised the lack of substantive political communication, but believed constituents did not want to hear about policy, preferring to have somebody who will 'shout for them' when something goes wrong (Searing 1994:155). By contrast, 'most foreigners would associate representation mainly with political opinions' (1994:159). Too little is known about what kind of contact citizens in other countries might want – reinforcing the need for research that explores the nature of popular demands on representatives.

2.2. 'Local servitudes' and de-politicisation in France, Britain and the USA

Dogan (2007) analysed the French, British, and US practices of constituency service, termed 'local servitudes'. He paints a vivid picture of harried French representatives clutching numerous 'dossiers' while tirelessly making the rounds of the ministries to solve constituency demands, and then emphasising their devotion to their locality upon seeking re-election, but believes this detracts from parliamentarians' work as national legislators. His numerous examples highlight the repetitive nature over decades and dozens of locations of the exchanges between constituents and their parliamentarian: complaints and requests figure prominently while policy issues remain virtually absent. The research for this article sought to elucidate whether links between constituents and parliamentarians need be of a client-provider rather than a policy-oriented nature, and

questioned the underlying assumption of SMP systems that if they are the single member, parliamentarians will devote themselves to constituency work, whereas if they have five colleagues, they will ignore it.

Bianco (1994:50) studied more policy-oriented interaction between legislators and constituents yet reports that US legislators, representing about half a million people each spread over a wide area, were sceptical of the whole idea of explaining or trying to persuade constituents, believing these would be reluctant to accept their representative's explanations for action taken in Washington. Yet giving explanations was not pointless there where it was consistent with legislators making themselves accessible. If a representative cast a controversial vote, it was helpful if s/he had thus accumulated some political capital with their electorate, who would then accept a rational and reasonable answer even if they disagreed with it (Bianco 1994: 53). In other words, knowing and having contact with legislators increased trust and led to greater acceptance of their policy decisions.

Studies on 'the personal vote' where voters choose a candidate on personal grounds over and above the popularity of their party focus on the incumbent candidate's likely re-election. In the UK the 'personal vote' phenomenon had been found to exist in the 1970s, but not to be of great magnitude: only in a few cases had it led to major deviations in the swing (Steed 1975: 342-45). In other words, if a *party* ceased to be popular, it was difficult for an individual representative to stem their loss of votes. For Canada, Irvine (1982) again found that while representatives were virtually unanimous (90%) in saying that constituency work was very important, the amount of time they put in to it varied a great deal and was anyway unrelated to success: 'the disjuncture between electoral marginality and constituency service is striking' (Irvine 1982: 759). Neither did Congressmen and women in the US seem to become better known or more highly evaluated as a result of constituency work (Irvine: 760). Furthermore, in terms of what swayed voters the most - candidate or party - the importance of the candidate continued to recede over time in Canada (Irvine: 761). Instead, the party or party leader was mostly responsible for an incumbent's reelection (Irvine p.771), the candidate's own efforts seeming 'relatively futile' (p. 772). Cain, Ferejohn and Fiorina (1983, 1987) reopened this debate with their findings that individual MPs can affect their re-election. Yet Norton (1990) who set out to systematically prove the personal vote effect, found only limited evidence for it, arguing, crucially, that it was actually extremely complicated to calculate accurately.

Studlar and McAllister (1996:69) studying Australia, claim elected representatives' roles and their links with their constituents have remained largely unexplored, and find no personal vote effect either. On the contrary, dealing with constituents' grievances reduced a legislator's vote, mainly because it displaced other party-focused activities that were more advantageous in electoral terms. They also question the concept of a 'role' that can be picked by a representative, because other factors such as party hierarchy may mediate in a parliamentarian's behaviour, especially in political systems where the party is key to lawmaking (Studlar and McAllister (1996:71). However they note that others such as Taylor (1992) believe that even in party-dominated systems, legislators still face political choices over their role (1996:71).^v The 'delegate' role, in which citizens have some power to mandate their representatives over legislative decisions, was explored by Mitchell (2000) from the principal-agent perspective. Constituents are 'principals' who lack information in comparison to their representatives (agents), so experience difficulties holding them to account. An unsatisfactory parliamentarian may reappear at the next election as a candidate on the party list, having kept his/her credentials intact with the party, because it is parties not voters who police their parliamentarians. Party-centred political systems typical of representative democracies give parliamentarians

little incentive to seek a personal vote (Mitchell 2000: 348), as success is derived from parties offering voters their 'brand identity', so the lack of a direct link between the latter and their representatives is 'less consequential'. This is a view that evidently poses a challenge to any advocacy of parliamentarians' constituency links, a challenge that is taken up here by not viewing them instrumentally as a step towards re-election or partisanship, but as an end in itself: that of generating feelings of being represented or included among citizens.

2.3. Constituents' views and feelings about on their own representation

Though Pitkin was quick to say (1967:1) that her book was *not about the expectations that voters have* about their representatives, she advanced the notion that a psychological feeling of being represented can exist (1967:10) whether objectively verifiable or illusory. Forty years later, Rohrschneider (2005:851) claimed 'we know little about how mass publics in advanced democracies view the representative process'. The research for this article contains an exploration of such feelings and views on the grounds that they can express a degree of satisfaction (even if an illusory one in Pitkin's terms), and of feelings of connection to the political system. But Rohrschneider's argument was that, contrary to the more likely idea that *parliaments* would be the source of a feeling of being well-represented, the actual source is 'arbitrating institutions'—bureaucracies and judiciaries, but only if 'contacts involving personal matters' have take place with these institutions (Rohrschneider 2005: 853). The contact will give citizens the experience with which to judge the system. He concludes 'impartial bureaucracies and judiciaries increase citizens' confidence in the representational capacity of parliaments and governments' (p.865).

But Rohrschneider did not examine parliaments or legislators. Arguably the positive effects of bureaucratic agencies could reflect the situation in countries where parliamentarians are remote and rarely visit their district; therefore if they changed their behaviour, his findings could be different. There is the problem that 'bureaucracies' could well include local government offices and agencies, and therefore be associated with the local council and elected councillors in general. He conflates the local political system with the administration, so his key distinction between the two breaks down at the local level. This is an important flaw because the public is even more likely to conflate the two. Therefore the question is raised of whether local councillors (elected representatives, not administrators) can induce this sense of being well-represented among their residents, particularly where local government delivers educational and welfare services and amenities, or where local councillors (and even members of parliament) act as intermediaries between constituents, as they are expected do in the UK and France. Furthermore he does not claim that bureaucracies and judiciaries are *the only* source of satisfaction and feelings of representation for the public (p.871). Nonetheless Rohrschneider offers the insight that the individuals' *satisfactory contacts* with administrative bureaucracies and judiciaries are more significant than their objectively measured performance, accepting their satisfaction at face value. In line with this, subjective measures of satisfaction are explored in this article, given the scant knowledge of what citizens want in order to feel politically represented.

2. 4. Disaffection: the decline of trust and confidence in politicians

An understanding of the links between the public and their representatives can be part of the search for an antidote to the 'disease' of mistrust. Without going into Dalton's views on trust, the relevance here is that he recognises the component of 'affective feelings' (2004:8) in public reactions, citing Hardin (1998, 2002) who maintains that trust in politicians can arise only

when residents know them and how their interests relate to those of their constituents. The research for this article takes this from Dalton but departs from the literature on what has been called 'the politics of disappointment' (Carey 1995) in so far as it does not measure the prevalence of disaffection and distrust, but explores sources of affect instead.

Significantly, other studies critique the disappointment/disengagement theses by pointing to the rise in new forms of participation, such as in pressure groups, NGOs, and the internet, suggesting that the old party activism has been substituted by news forms of activism. Carey himself was already doubtful about the disengagement thesis in his follow-up book *Beyond the Politics of Disappointment* (2000) covering the later 1995 and 1999 US elections. Norris (2003) and Cain, Dalton, and Scarrow (edited 2003) found expanding opportunities for political participation, while Barnes, Newman, and Sullivan (2007) focused on increased participation in governance processes and public life. Yet such research emphasises engagement and activism from the perspective of what parties, politicians, and governments need in order for democratic processes to operate in a political environment that is more satisfying for political leaders. This perspective arguably puts the onus on citizens to change, which rather lets parliamentarians off the hook regarding change their own modes of operation. Studies around revived participation tend not to consider reviving the formal representation, only producing higher voter turnout and are little concerned with the voter-representative relationship.

This research therefore looks at what parliamentarians could do to help citizens feel more and better represented, which could also help generate trust. It looks at the existing representation mechanism rather than imagining different ones, exploring instead how it might function better from the citizens' point of view. Democracies maintain dense, multi-layered and time-intensive systems of representation, which ought, normatively-speaking, to be able to generate feelings of being represented, irrespective of whether or not citizens become joiners or decide to vote more often. This study fills a key gap in the literature as it explores the *sources* of citizens' and residents' satisfaction with politics from a bottom-up perspective.

2.5. Sociological representation: working class men, women, and ethnic minorities

No new study of representation could fail to address the issues raised by the extensive literature around 'group', 'descriptive', or 'sociological' representation of women that has arisen out of the feminist demand for greater presence in public office to be assured through a gender balance of a minimum of 40% and maximum of 60% of female or male representatives. As the gender-balance policy, also called parity democracy, is already being adopted worldwide with marked results (Dahlerup 2006, Krook 2009, Inter-Parliamentary Union annually updated count), there is no need to rehearsing now well-established arguments on the descriptive representation of women. A salutary reminder of previous gender-blindness is Bentham's earnest wish to '*maximise the happiness of the population as a whole*', for which '*there should be manhood [sic] suffrage [...] because only in this way would the personal interests of the whole [sic] population be reflected in the legislature*' (cited in Birch 1971:54). Universal male suffrage allowed the emergence of the first identity politics of working class people, during which the Labour Representation Committee was created to sponsor its own parliamentary candidates – a movement for sociological representation. Interestingly the later feminist bid for representation for women is still contested in the name of ensuring the 'quality' of the representative, even though few ever objected to working class representatives lacking such markers of 'quality' as an extensive education or a full command of the King's English. But it is not the arguments for sociological representation that this study was concerned with, but the preferences of citizen-voters for being represented in terms of gender and the

requirement of gender balance, with the aim of exploring public understandings of the notion.

Demands for descriptive or sociological representation have led to the issue of ethnic representation. Williams (2000:24-5) argues that the problem of identifying the politically relevant groups that are to be represented is key, and whether representatives have any obligations towards the minorities in their district. *Who* receives representation is a political issue because it cannot be simply individual inhabitants; for Williams (2000:25-26) these can only be represented in so far as they have identifiable interests, which must be group interests or communities of interests, expressed by pressure groups, trade unions, sub-national (ethnic) groups characterised by having a minority language or religion, and even ideological aggregates with allegiances to a party. For these he raises the merits of 'like representing like'. Shepherd, Garvey and Cavanagh (2001) see that achieving one kind of sociological representation can eclipse another: the first elections to the Scottish parliament, the alleged start of a 'new politics', produced an Assembly with a historic 48 women MSPs (37.5%). Out of 81 male MSPs, none was from an ethnic minority^{vi}, and only 2 had a 'blue collar/industrial' background. Yet a majority, 46 of the 81 males, were trade union members (Shepherd, Garvey and Cavanagh 2001: 94). Arguably, the working-class no longer has any sociological representation in Scotland, but may claim to have political representation by 'workers by brain' with sufficient links to the life of working people to be accepted as advocates for them.

Arguably, gender parity representation is insufficient, though by mirroring a good 50% of the population it considerably advances sociological representation within each state. But as women are not a unified category, being cross-cut by class, race,^{vii} and religious identities, and national ethnic minorities also demand^{viii} to be reflected in national parliaments, the question of ethnic representation also requires investigation from the subjective perspectives of ethnic minority citizens. The issue is compounded where representation is by one member only, and stable pluralities (worse still, majorities) lead to long-standing incumbency by men - making descriptive representation of diverse populations impossible by definition. This raises the question of whether multi-member lists alone can allow certain kinds of group representation to be performed. With these considerations in mind, the number of representatives was included as a topic in the group discussions of this study, which listened *separately* to the voices of women and men, race or ethnicity-based minorities, religious gender minorities, cultural minorities and migrant minorities, so as to be able to reflect differences, and for diverse needs for feeling politically represented to be voiced. Advocates for descriptive representation of minorities who are interested in constituency relations include Fenno (1978), Mansbridge (1999) and Banducci, Donovan and Karp (2004), while many others mainly focus on the performance of legislators.

While elements of three discrete literatures thus shaped the parameters of this study, not all themes in representation studies could be covered and the most evident sidelining is the traditional interest in class in favour of a considerable diversity of voices. Even so, other categories of difference that manifest a politics of identity could not be broached particularly people with disabilities and those for whom their sexual orientation is a political identity.

3. The study: specific methods

This study was qualitative and inductive as opposed to deductive and did not set out to prove a hypothesis. Clear initial assumptions were a) the viability of the discussion group^{ix} for the topic of political representation after a profile triage process but with no screening for verbal ability nor political knowledge, in other words, that people with varying levels of education and social status would be able to talk with sufficient ease and fluency to sustain an in-depth discussion; and b) that quantitative research could not have explored people's feelings and opinions adequately in comparison; and c) The discussion group method was preferable to the in-depth individual interview because the political topic was considered by social research professionals to be unfamiliar, inviting the likelihood that, interviewed alone, they would have felt intimidated and found little to say. Instead, the 8-person group discussion gave participants safety in numbers and sufficient interaction to be able to be stimulated by each other and by the moderator's questions, while not being obliged to answer all of them.^x

3.1. Exercises and Topics of the discussion groups

Nevertheless, the standard oral discussion was complemented by a) a summative multiple-choice individual exercise on the topics already discussed (see Appendix) and b) a freestyle individual comment sheet; c) An *aide-memoire* consisting of a list of names of parliamentarians for their locality to aid identification of those they knew of. The discussion covered three main themes: firstly, the amount and type of desirable contacts and interaction that participants would prefer to have with representatives; secondly, the cultures of political representation (summarised as: 1. Mandating: informing/pressuring an representative to act as a delegate; 2. Interacting: exchanging views with a 'listening' representative, who nevertheless has the right decide which way to vote in parliament; 3. Trusting the representative to decide without them and to get on with the job; 4. Using a parliamentarian as a resource and helper for their problems); and thirdly, preferences around being represented by someone 'Like me or different from me', or 'close to me' or 'distant from me'. 'Likeness' was examined in terms of similar background, political identification (priorities or values associated to a party), gender, ethnicity, religion, nationality, and migration status. 'Distance' was expressed in terms of higher education levels, greater knowledge of world or national problems, and more experience and training than the participant. Gender difference included questions on quotas and of the acceptability or not of gender imbalance in parliaments. Race and ethnicity included the possibility of party or legal quotas for ethnic minorities and the need for some guaranteed representation in parliament.

As to the summative multiple-choice exercise, each participant defined her/his preferences by choosing 8 options from 30 choices, spread across 8 different types of personal and political features of representatives and the representation system. Chosen options were then ranked by each participant in descending order of importance from 8 to 1. In this way researchers can aggregate the preferences of group members into a numerical result, despite the qualitative nature of the previous discussion. Each sociological group can be compared across countries or aggregated to the other groups from the same country.^{xi}

3.2. Participants and locations

Discussion groups were structured by gender, ethnicity and religion, resulting in five groups per country in 10 locations: 1)

White ethnic majority women nationals residing in Madrid, London, Warsaw and Skopje); 2) White ethnic majority men nationals residing in Glasgow, Bilbao, Gdansk and Skopje; 3) Muslim women nationals and non-nationals residing in Leicester, Barcelona, Bialystok and Skopje. 4) Ethnic minority female and male nationals and non-national residents of London, Madrid, Warsaw and Skopje. 5) Other EU nationals with limited voting rights, residing in London, Barcelona, Warsaw and Skopje. Countries were chosen to cover Western, East-Central and Southern Europe and one Non-EU country (Macedonia), and included two with gender quota representation (Spain, Macedonia) and two without (UK, Poland), all with a variety of class, ethnicity and values-based parties or party-systems; and SMP or PR D'Hondt electoral systems.

4. Preliminary results

The group discussion format proved very productive for people to explore their feelings about their political representation and to imagine the ideal representative that would make them feel represented or politically included. Levels of fluency and interaction between participants were very or moderately high in all groups. Despite the anticipated hesitancy regarding political discussions, none of the 20 groups failed to speak meaningfully on the list of topics, nor dried up before 2 hours were over, nor failed to finish the multiple choice exercise at the end. This lack of technical and procedural difficulties, together with the positive comments on the experience expressed aloud by participants, can be taken as an indication that a wide range of people can, in a deliberative atmosphere, quickly become stimulated to discuss politics constructively.

4.1. Overall tenor of feelings and preferences

Of the total 159 participants, less than a handful started by stating they felt in any way represented by the political system. In the initial free-ranging discussion, the overwhelming majority expressed criticism of politicians and political leaders, some forcefully denouncing their corruption and self-interest. What was remarkable was not so much the prevalence of negative feelings, but the similarity of the sentiments expressed and of the vocabulary used across ten locations in four countries, irrespective of gender, religion, or ethnicity. The reasons for such a widespread homogeneity of expression is in itself worthy of investigation, though not the topic of study. The only overtly and enthusiastically stated expression of feeling represented came from a Spanish-Moroccan woman resident in Barcelona who felt well represented by Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero and the policies of the Socialist party.

Despite such initial disaffection, all but four of the participants were able and willing to formulate ideals for their political representation, could express detailed preferences, appeared keen to see the system work better for them, made suggestions about improvements, expressed awareness that other people's preferences might differ radically from their own, and in many cases were self-reflexive and self-critical about their being insufficiently aware of what was on offer in terms of opportunities (to elect representatives, to participate in politics, and to receive policy information). Some were aware of making excessive demands of politicians without offering to be pro-active themselves.

Revealingly, an overwhelming majority of participants expressed a preference for a greater degree of contact with their formal representatives. This was formulated in a number of different ways, but significantly, when asked to choose between four options on forms of contact, the preferred options were *not* the predictable ones from people who have stated that they do not

feel represented ("[I prefer] infrequent contact: I trust the representative to legislate on my behalf"^{xii}), nor "Intermittent contact: I would prefer to have contact only when I need it"). Such choices would have avoided having to show interest in any policy dialogue. Instead the options implying greater interaction were chosen ("Frequent contact: my representative should behave as if s/he were my delegate" and "Periodic contact: I would like to communicate my views and receive regular information from them"). From this one can deduce that there is a hidden, underlying demand for political representation of a personal kind that is currently not being met in at least three of the four countries studied. Yet even the UK participants mostly gave similar answers to the others, even though about half of them knew that MPs hold surgeries and spend time in the constituency.

The overall message of participants regarding the functions of parliamentarians is that they should *represent and not just legislate*. Representing included reporting back periodically about their legislative activity to those who have requested to be on their mailing list - this was deemed sufficient by many, perhaps because only a handful of participants had heard that this was possible in the UK, and most participants in Poland, Spain and Macedonia were convinced that their deputies were not offering such reports and were unlikely ever to offer, so they viewed it as a considerable step towards 'inclusion'. Yet a substantial number warmed to the idea of a dialogue with their representatives on issues supported by a easy ways of writing back in response to the report and receiving an answer. In particular, those who said they had written to someone in the past said they had been disappointed when they received no reply, but those who had received a communication of any kind expressed pleasure saying they felt acknowledged or recognised. Some others took satisfaction out of receiving election leaflets at home. However, there was fairly-widespread critical comment about representatives only visiting their area before elections and then 'disappearing' again, as well as about the difficulty of even finding out their name, let alone their coordinates.

To sum up, there seems no doubt that a personal exchange with one's representative, even a one-off one, makes people feel more included and more represented politically. Less than a handful of the 159 participants wished to dissociate from their representatives, though one should bear in mind that they probably would not have agreed to participate in a discussion group of this type if they had. The implications are considerable: even the participants' preferences for modest levels of interaction require a stark change of behaviour among Polish, Macedonian and Spanish elected politicians^{xiii}. Such a conclusion is echoed by the belief of the US Democratic Party's National Democracy Institute in Skopje that interaction between representatives and citizens is key to consolidating democracy in Macedonia.^{xiv} However, the responses of participants do *not* imply a wholesale export of the British constituency service culture (whether in fact limited or widespread). On the contrary, a change of culture would also be needed in the UK, because a focus on *service* by the representative was *not* the demand of participants, some of who thought it would be a waste of the representative's time, given the burden of their parliamentary work, whereas engaging in a dialogue about issues was an appropriate use of their time. Thus parliamentarians in these four countries, and most likely many more, face the challenge of amending their ways.

4.2. Preferences by social groups: who should represent whom?

Space constraints allow only a brief summary of findings on the question of 'who should represent whom'. These results are derived from analysing 12 groups, 4 each of: white ethnic majority men from former shipyard towns, white ethnic majority women from capital cities, and Muslim women from four different locations. Their preferences from among 30 types of features

of the representation system (as explained above; see also Appendix 1.) are highlighted. Participants converged on one major characteristic of the person most likely to make them feel politically represented: someone who is very 'knowledgeable, experienced and well-trained'. The discussion had revealed that politics was seen as a difficult business requiring a person to possess political management skills and learning (such as via higher education) to inspire confidence. By contrast, hardly anyone declared they would feel represented by the 'charismatic' option of 'someone who is appealing and communicates well, even if not very experienced'. Notable in this rationalist convergence is the distance between the quasi Nietzsche-an superior person and the average participant. It implies that being close to the represented, as in sociological representation, is not the simple answer to the problem of generating feelings of being adequately represented. One important exception is the UK, the only country where participants did not choose the 'knowledgeable, experienced and well-trained' person above others. Instead, the three UK groups analysed ranked this ideal feature second to having a representative 'who understands the life of people like me even though their background is different' (see details below). Furthermore, knowledge and training was only the most highly ranked characteristic of the ideal representative, but many other lesser-ranked features were chosen, with these being subject to considerable variation.

Capital city women, while having this same top-ranked ideal characteristic as the men from Spain, Poland and Macedonia, were more inclined than them to feel represented by 'someone who understands the life of people like me even if they have a different background'. The women's second-ranked choice suggests their lesser attraction for the 'distant' rationalist/technocratic option and a need for a representative to have some social closeness to them, yet interestingly, hardly any woman wanted to be represented by someone close to their own profile, the 'most like me' option of 'someone like me, with the same background as me'). And the London white women, like the Glasgow men, preferred a person who 'understands the life of people like me, even if their background is different' over other options. London women stood out from the other women for being the only ones to like a dual system of representation with one male and one female representative for each constituency, and to prefer female to male representatives, and to prefer, in terms of ethnicity, people from mixed backgrounds even though they were white themselves. In other words, London women did warm to aspects of sociological representation on gender grounds, and showed an awareness of the multi-ethnicity of their city (currently consisting of 30% racial minorities and 12% white foreigners) but they did so without wanting a 'mirror' representative just like them from their own social background and their own ethnicity. This could be interpreted as different order of responses, in which they looked beyond themselves and saw the needs of others, with men having the same number of seats as women, and representatives being 'mixed' so as to represent everyone.

Another set of variations among women was the way Madrid women were clearly keener than others on frequent contact with a representative who would act as their delegate, whereas at the opposite end, Macedonian women preferred intermittent contact with representatives only when needed above options for closer interaction. In addition, the Skopje women would only feel represented by an Orthodox Macedonian, showing some religious sectarianism given the dual-religion, multi-ethnic composition of their newly constituted democracy. Yet 'same religion as me' mirroring as a factor for feeling represented was not highly ranked overall (excepting in the way the 'no religion' option can also signify 'like me'). Rather, participants converged around a weak preference for their ideal representative to not manifest any religious attachment even if they have one. This is significant in the context of locations that have experienced previous religion-based tensions and even strife (such

as Communist/Catholic in Poland, Protestant/Catholic in Glasgow, Orthodox/Muslim in Skopje; and Catholic/non-believer in Spain) and could be interpreted as a desire to get away from such divisions. It is therefore coherent with the rationalist preference for technical expertise, but contrasts vividly with the preferences of the Muslim women groups as seen below.

When analysing the four groups of Muslim women, consideration must be given to their coming from very different situations and heritages, not just countries, with those of FYR Macedonia and Poland being indigenous European Muslims unconnected to current waves of migration.^{xv} In aggregate, these groups of Muslim women were the only to feel that the chief characteristic of anyone who would help them feel represented would be their Muslim faith. This was significantly more important to them than to have a knowledgeable and well-trained representative, though this feature remained their (aggregated) second preference. What differentiated the four groups was that the Leicester Muslim women, like their white London counterparts, also ranked the knowledgeable and experienced person below 'someone who understands the life of people like me even if though their background is different'. But in contrast with the more feminist London women, all the Leicester Muslim women preferred being represented by a man. This in turn contrasts with the Skopje Muslim women who all preferred to be represented by a woman, albeit for both groups it is their fourth or fifth ranked preference. Finally, it was notable to find that the religion of an ideal representative was much more important than his or her ethnic origin for Muslim women in Skopje, Barcelona and Leicester, but not for the Polish Tatars in Bialystok, for whom a Tatar representative was their top preferred characteristic and a Muslim their second. In other words, there are clear contrasts to be found within a preference for 'same-identity' representation. Nonetheless, Muslim women in all four countries were the only ones to express a clear preference for sociological representation mirroring their own religion and ethnic origin, and, for half of them, their gender.

5. Conclusions

In terms of their ideal representative, participants would feel more represented by people with technocratic rationalist competencies than by people like themselves. This characteristic was ranked highest overall by groups who could have chosen 'like me' features in a bid for sociological or same-identity representation, such as working class men, women and Muslims. Secondly, it shows that the UK groups were exceptional in this regard, something that requires further investigation with a full country-comparative analysis of all the data.

Overall, the rational-technocratic preference for representation suggests the weakness of historic labour and class identity politics, since few male participants chose the 'like me'/same identity options, not even by preferring a man over a woman. The striking exception was the UK, as mentioned, where the Glasgow men rejected the technocratic rationalist feature in favour of someone who 'understands the life of people like me' together with a preference for the local level and for Scottish representatives – in short a genuinely local councillor, with spatial closeness replacing other features.

As to gender, the study shows mixed results for sociological and same-identity representation: as many of the women preferred to be represented by a man as by a woman, but this feature was a low priority. Similarly, religion only mattered for Muslim women, whereas other groups could hardly feel represented by any representative who manifested a religion whether inherited or practised. At the same time, participants' overall tendency to eschew 'same as me' likeness in their

representatives was tempered somewhat by the fact that it was the municipal level of local government in preference to the national level which helped participants of the women's and men's groups (but not the Muslim women) to feel represented, in other words, distance/superiority was balanced in these cases with the possibility of gaining a sense of personal efficacy by dealing with a local councillor or with local problems, coupled with the anticipated satisfaction of being able to actually observe the local improvements.

Finally, the literature review showed that a study of citizens' perspectives on political representation and their individual preferences for different kinds of representatives would represent original research and fill a gap in the scholarly literature. Previous research on representation is limited to studying parliamentarians as political individuals and to the question of how they might maximise their chances of being re-elected – an instrumental approach. To conceptualise citizens and residents as individuals who have a subjective need to be represented is thus a novel approach, and the material presented shows that is a fruitful one. As the start of discussion, the near totality of participants felt politically un-represented, some to the point of feeling disenfranchised, marginal and unheard. Yet all but 3 out of 159 participants gave articulate responses and warmed to the possibility of having flow of information and even a two-way dialogue about policies and public matters of concern to them. Poorly identified representatives who might only be contacted when a resident has an important problem, the basic UK model, were not the preferred option.

The study was also motivated by the question of how EU member-states can create more satisfying systems of political representation in countries with increasingly diverse populations of gendered, pluri-ethnic subjects aware of their differences in a context where large sectors of the majority population also expresses difficulty in identifying with the mainstream political class of their country, and took sociological representation as one solution. But in Poland, Spain, Macedonia participants were primarily concerned with rational efficiency, in contexts where they had experiences of ineffective and uncommitted politicians who were unable to make the required changes and improvements. Yet different kinds of representatives who can speak to ethnic, religious, gendered and local identities over and above their party politics were also visualised, and as these are qualities that by definition be found in one person, the study point towards the desirability of multi-member electoral districts as a starting point for instituting a culture of political responsiveness by a more diverse body of political representatives.

While this article reports only on a section of the findings, the message is clear: from the perspective of the person in the street, legislators are not seen to be acting as representatives, being mostly nameless and invisible, yet to feel represented, citizens would like them to perform as *legislators and representatives* in inclusive ways: not to service individual constituents' needs on a clientelistic basis, but to provide informed support as a last resort, engaging in political conversations or reporting back on their activities in such a way as to generate the feeling that they are doing work that justifies their elected and salaried positions.

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ⁱⁱ This article uses the terms 'representative' to refer to the person whom citizens understand to have been elected for their district, 'legislator' only when referring to parliamentary activity, 'parliamentarian' for either function, and MP for the UK.

ⁱⁱⁱ It also explored representation by legal status (national citizens, non-national residents and EU voters but these findings are not reported in this article.

^{iv} . Of the 329 backbenchers interviewed that he was able to classify as paying a typical role, only 81 -- just under a quarter -- ended up classified as 'Constituency' MPs (Searing 1994:144).

^v These roles are reduced to 'delegate', 'trustee', and 'party' (meaning party person, voice of the party, or party careerist), but in this study, 4 types of interaction are defined.

^{vi} Seven candidates were placed too low on their list or in un-winnable seats (Shepherd, Garvey and Cavanagh 2001: 92).

^{vii} Notions first argued for in the UK in the early 1980s by Kum-Kum Bhavnani and Gail Lewis amongst others and later by Patricia Collins (1990).

^{viii} See for instance Operation Black Vote in the UK.

^{ix} Discussion groups select participants with similar but slightly different profiles and a series of focus groups with different categories of participants provides the setting for a wide range of experiences and preferences to be aired. These are never representative in a quantitative way. They may happen to express views of the bulk of the population or of a substantial minority, but this would not be known until a representative sample survey had been carried out. They may express a series of opinions and preferences that are each reflected in small numbers within the population, but together reflect something akin to a 'majority of minorities'. Or, the individual opinions may happen to be quite unrepresentative of those of the general population.

^x The style of moderation was chosen to encourage interventions, draw out key points and engender creative thinking to the point of deliberation, while keeping to the topic guide throughout. All 20 groups covered the whole range of set topics in a comparable way for two hours each.

^{xi} Participant were given time to write down (long-hand, freestyle) the single most important 'thing' (prompts given were: characteristic of the representative; feature of the electoral system; event; new policy; policy reform; change in the country, etc) that would help her/him feel more politically represented, but the analysis in this article does not draw on this material.

^{xii} This had previously been clarified as meaning 'I prefer or expect to let them get on with the job' or 'I am confident s/he will do their job', or 'I presume they know how to do their work', depending on the group and language used.

^{xiii} In Spain there is anecdotal evidence that this is already changing.

^{xiv} To this end they are provisioning Macedonian parliamentarians of all political parties with offices spread across all regions of Macedonia, so as to persuade them to travel there and engage with residents and voters (Chris Henshaw, Director, personal interview, September 2008).

^{xv} The groups from Leicester and Barcelona were familiar with the Islam of migrants from earlier (South East Asian) or current (Moroccan) migrations, respectively. The majority had already acquired British and Spanish nationality and the right to vote. Those from Skopje and Bialystok, by contrast, are not migrants at all, respectively representing a large, historic population of ethnic Albanians with place-specific identities within the territory of FYR Macedonia, and a small community of a specific ethnicity, Lipka Tatars, who settled in what was the Polish Lithuanian Commonwealth of the 16-17th centuries, in another words, both indigenous European Muslims.