

Abstract

This dissertation sets out to develop analytical frameworks to understand and study the performances of political representation. It asks three main questions: 1) how the context in which a performance takes place governs, enables, and restrains the claim-making repertoire that a particular claim-maker can access, 2) how claims need to be substantiated in order to resonate among relevant audiences, and 3) how the increasing mediatisation of politics is shaping politicians' claim-making repertoires and performances. These three questions investigate three core elements of how I define representation – its context, substantiation, and visibility – and the fourth element – power – serves as an overarching framework guiding the exploration of the three other research questions.

Each of these questions resulted in a theoretical contribution: the Representative Archive, theorising implicitness, and the spotlight, which are explored both theoretically and empirically within the chapters of this dissertation. Chapters 3 and 4 expand on the Representative Archive, the first theoretical contribution, as an analytical framework to capture how representative claims and their performances are nested within a specific socio-cultural setting, and especially how the referent is embedded within it. In chapter 3, I develop the concept of the Representative Archive as: 'the *depository* of culturally shared *references* which is *accessed* by claim-makers and audiences in the *(de-)construction* of representative claims' and theorise each of its four core elements. In chapter 4, I illustrate how the Representative Archive allows us to investigate the impact of somatic norms and institutional settings on the construction of a representative and legitimate subject-position, through the empirical case of Assita Kanko.

Chapter 5 then turns to the second theoretical contribution of this dissertation, namely its theorisation of implicitness in representative claim-making beyond a binary account (implicit-explicit). I conceptualised claims as existing on a continuum from explicit to implicit, depending on whether the Maker, Subject, Object, and Audience are absent, obscured, or vague. To study this, I developed a novel coding scheme to systematically examine implicitness in representative claim-making, building on the Representative Claim-Analysis framework.

Chapters 6 and 7 then turn to the third theoretical contribution of this dissertation: the spotlight. It serves as a framework to conceptualise the logistics of audiences' capacity to see and understand a performance, and the dynamics of how performers negotiate this visibility, both practically and psychologically. Through the spotlight we can explore how the increasing mediatization of politics is shaping, enabling and restraining politicians' claim-making repertoires and performances. In chapter 6 I argue that the metaphor of the "stage" is unable to account for the blurring of the boundaries between the front- and backstage of performances, as well as the diminishing separation between what is public and private. So instead of performances playing out on a stage, they play out in a spotlight. I then employ this metaphor analytically to study how Conner Rousseau and Sammy Mahdi, the party leaders of the Flemish Socialists and Christian Democrats respectively, self-presented visually on Instagram.

The spotlight also allows us to theorise how claim-makers negotiate the pressures of being seen or needing to be visible to perform their role. Chapter 7 therefore draws on interviews with young parliamentarians to understand how they experience and navigate the pressure to be visible online, and how it has changed how they perform their role as representatives. We find that parliamentarians experience 'influencer creep' (Bishop, 2025b), meaning that influencer tactics have become part and parcel of online self-representations of politicians, and we unpack how this influences their performance on- and offline.

This dissertation thus studies the different repertoires of representation. It captures how representation is performed visually, discursively, and conceptually across different empirical cases, and develops theoretical frameworks that draw on a rich interdisciplinary foundation of political theory, theatre and performance studies, sociology, and archival studies. In doing so, this dissertation contributes to the performative and constructivist accounts of political representation by developing an analytical approach to understand and study the performance of representative claims.