



**HAL**  
open science

## Representation Styles

Stefano Camatarri, Marta Gallina

► **To cite this version:**

Stefano Camatarri, Marta Gallina. Representation Styles. Elgar Encyclopedia of Political Communication, 2025. hal-04724462

**HAL Id: hal-04724462**

**<https://hal.science/hal-04724462v1>**

Submitted on 7 Oct 2024

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

# Representation Styles

**Please note that this a preprint version.**

**Citation:** Camatarri, Stefano and Gallina, Marta (2025), Representation Styles. In Nai, A., Grömping, M., & Wirz, D. (Eds). *Elgar Encyclopedia of Political Communication*. Edward Elgar Publishing. Accepted version.

Stefano Camatarri, Autonomous University of Barcelona, stefano.camatarri@uab.cat

Marta Gallina, Catholic University of Lille, marta.gallina@univ-catholille.fr

*The debate around how representatives should take political decisions is a long-standing one in political studies, which traces back to philosophical disputes between supporters of independent judgment vis-à-vis those of politicians' delegate functions. During the 20th century, such normative debate gradually translated into an empirical stream of research focusing on the representative role orientations, more commonly defined as styles, of political candidates and representatives. This entry aims at summarizing such academic debate, stressing its relevance and future directions. The main take-home message is that representatives' role orientations are influenced by multiple factors, including individual, party and electoral system-level characteristics. In addition, representation styles have the potential to affect the quality of communications between voters and elites, as politicians holding specific styles have been found to be more accurate at understanding and reflecting their voters' policy interests. The entry concludes by mentioning recent studies exploring these issues from a transnational perspective.*

*Representatives; candidates; parliamentary roles; quality of representation; mass/elite communication; electoral democracy*

This entry provides an overview of how political elites—encompassing both candidates and elected officials—understand political representation. A central inquiry in this context revolves around whom politicians perceive as their primary 'principal' when engaging in parliamentary decision-making: e.g., national party supporters, specific interest groups, local electoral constituents, or their own judgment. These considerations, extensively discussed in scholarly literature, contribute to the delineation of distinct 'styles' of representation. Starting with an examination of representation as a communication process in politics, this entry proceeds to overview measurement methodologies and contemporary research findings concerning the antecedents and consequences of diverse styles of representation. The general picture that emerges is that representatives' role orientations are shaped by multiple factors at the individual, meso, and macro levels. Although these orientations may not directly influence parliamentary behavior, they appear to have an effect on certain political attitudes.

### **The background: political representation as a communication process**

As Pitkin (1967) eloquently said, representing is acting on behalf of someone else. This is a statement that, in the political democratic realm, translates quite intuitively into a binary framework where citizens are identified as 'principals' and politicians as 'agents' tasked with standing and implementing voters' policy aspirations and desires in the parliamentary arena. There is wide agreement in representation studies that the dual relationship between the citizenry and political elites constitutes one of the pillars of electoral democracy (to put it simply, representation would not exist without them). However, it must be said that such duality is also particularly relevant to political communication studies, since elections, on top of being an essential element of democratic rule, are also a communication process between citizens, on the one hand, and political elites, on the other hand (e.g., Converse, 1975).

Over the last few decades, a large number of studies have focused on the supposedly decreasing quality of elite-voter communicative dynamics, focusing on the increasing disconnection of political actors' policy positions and performances from citizens' desires and expectations. This process, notoriously resulting in a crisis of representation characterized by high levels of political dissatisfaction and disaffection among electorates, ultimately paves the way to the electoral success of political actors playing on anti-establishment chords (see e.g., Bakker et al., 2020). In addition to the quality of the communicative relationship between voters and elites and its consequences on voters' attitudes and behavior, there is generally little

focus on what politicians themselves think about their relationship to voters, and particularly about how they should represent them. This entry aims at summarizing how politicians (elected or not) understand the role of a representative and the communicative interactions involved in it, giving an overview of current findings and discussing future research directions.

### **Origins and first measurements of representation styles**

Interestingly, the issue of whether representatives should act according to their own free judgment while making political decisions or according to the will and desires of their own constituents traces back to a long-standing debate in normative political studies. In a research note published in the *American Political Science Review*, Miller (1967) clarified very well the substance of this debate in terms of a dichotomous 'either-or' scheme: legislators are either mere spoke-person for their constituents or they represent them as they believe best. The philosopher Edmund Burke is credited as the initiator of such a debate, ultimately taking a stance for the latter option. To quote him: "Your representative owes you, not his industry only, but his judgment; and he betrays, instead of serving you, if he sacrifices it to your opinion" (Burke, 1774, p. 14). On the opposite side, it was argued that a representative "is a continuously responsible agent of the electorate" (Bird and Ryan, 1930, p. 346), meaning that representatives should, in principle, always adhere to the views of their voters. After many decades, this debate has recently gained new momentum (especially on the 'pro-delegation' side) thanks to a populist rhetoric increasingly stressing the importance of representing the 'will of the people' over the interests of corrupt elites.

Empirical tests of such 'pro-free judgment' vs 'pro-delegate' debate already trace back to the 1950s and 1960s. Indeed, these were the years when political scientists first tested the extent to which politicians in the US conformed (or not) to any of these two alternative models or representation styles (Eulau et al., 1959). This work explicitly referred to the two models as a trustee and a delegate style, while also theorizing the existence of a third one, the so-called politico, incorporating characteristics of both the first two representation styles. As Meller later clarified, 'the Politico expresses an overlap of both orientations, so that representative types can be conceived of along a continuum, rather than constituting two polar positions, with the Politico placed toward the mid-point. In numerical frequency, as well, the Politico type was also found to fall between the other two' (1967: 474). With reference to Eulau, Wahlke, Buchanan and Ferguson's so-called 4-state survey, the Politico type was also found

to fall between the other two in terms of overall frequency, confirming its apparently intermediate character.

Although Eulau et al.'s seminal article found clear evidence that US representatives had different ideas about 'how' one should represent, additional authors over the following decades attempted to revise the original typology as they saw fit with the context on which they were focusing. One of the most noteworthy adaptations outside of the US is the one that Converse and Pierce (1986) performed in their book on political representation in France, where they propose to consider, along with trustee and delegate, a partisan style reflecting a politician's willingness to adhere to party instructions, namely a reference and information source not necessarily aligned with either one's own judgment or constituency interests.

### **Causes and consequences of representation styles: a review of findings**

Although not without its critics (see e.g., Andeweg and Thomassen, 2005), the trustee-delegate-partisan trichotomy constitutes nowadays a relevant operational definition for empirical analyses in this field of studies of comparative political behavior and communication (Önnudóttir and Van Shoultz, 2020; see also Önnudóttir, 2014 for more details on one of the most-used measurement strategies in this respect). In terms of empirical findings, such studies have clarified that leaning toward one style rather than the other can be explained by different factors at the individual, party, and electoral system level. At the individual level, studies have demonstrated that the more politicians can count on prior political experience (e.g., the more time they spent doing party service and/or received previous mandates), the higher their likelihood of developing a partisan style (Wessels and Giebler, 2011). Other scholars have shown that parties as meso-level actors can also make a difference, and particularly that partisan role orientations tend to be prominent among left-wing traditional parties, while trustees are more common within moderate, niche leftist parties (Gauja, 2012), as well as Greens and Liberals (Sudulich, 2020; Önnudóttir and von Schoultz, 2021). Some studies have also shown that candidates of parties where leaders have (almost) exclusive power are more likely to think that representatives should act as 'delegates' of their constituents, most likely in line with their party's populist claims (Close et al., 2022).

In addition to this, representation styles can also be shaped by the characteristics of the electoral environment, such as electoral districts' competitiveness, with the delegate style being more likely in less competitive contexts and the trustee one in more competitive ones

(e.g., Eulau et al., 1959). As Close et al. (2022) nicely summarized, the existing literature has also explored other meso-level variables, including parties' parliamentary and/or electoral size (e.g., Gherghina, 2011) and government incumbency (e.g., Önnudóttir, 2016), although with inconsistent results so far.

When it comes to the consequences of representation styles, it is widely agreed that holding one style rather than another is basically inconsequential to politicians' parliamentary behavior (Önnudóttir, 2014), but it can affect certain political attitudes. Andeweg (2012), for example, showed that delegate representatives tend to have more cynical views about their own party voters, probably due to higher exposure to their requests and potential complaints, in turn resulting in stronger disillusionment. Moreover, studies have clarified that politicians' role expectations can influence their proximity to (or distance from) their voters over matters of public policy. In this regard, recent research on the European context has shown that partisan candidates tend to be ideologically closer to their party voters compared to delegates and trustees (Pedrazzani and Segatti, 2022). This finding has important implications for democratic representation. It implies indeed that the quality of communicative interactions between voters and elites, that is the extent to which elites recognize and convey their voters' actual policy interests to the parliamentary arena, can vary substantially depending on what they think they should follow while taking political decisions (i.e., their own judgment, their constituents' opinions or party instructions respectively).

### **Balance and future perspectives**

After more than sixty years of empirical research on the representation dilemma, political studies have shown that aspiring or elected politicians hold different understandings of what a representative is, or better, should be. In addition, it is widely acknowledged that such beliefs are substantively conditioned by personal characteristics and tend to have consequences on attitudes and behavior. Future exploration is needed in order to grasp more the implications of parliamentary role orientations, both in terms of politicians' understanding of citizens' policy interests and the other way around, specifically in terms of citizens' attitudes and satisfaction with political elites and the democratic process in general. Regarding the first aspect, recent studies have stressed that politicians tend to have a very biased reading of their voters' positions on issues (Walgrave et. al, 2023), and that this pattern is particularly outstanding in the case of issues that they do not 'own' (Camatarri and Segatti, 2016). Given the normative importance of voters' representation on issues for the functioning of electoral

democracy, the existence of such biased readings poses important questions regarding the quality of elections as communicative interactions between voters and elites and voters' subsequent satisfaction with the electoral process. Future research should enquire further into the scope and quality of elites' readings of public opinion, their variability across contexts, politicians' profiles and backgrounds, as well as their consequences on voters' attitudes and behavior.

From a political communication perspective, it would also be important to clarify further whether different representation styles correlate with specific communication patterns, such as the adoption of a populist rhetoric and/or personalized campaign styles. Interestingly, extant research seem already to indicate that holding different parliamentary role orientations can make quite a difference in terms of communication strategies, with delegates tending to privilege interactions with citizens and constituency-oriented activities relatively more than trustees, although without strong differences, at least in the Dutch context analysed by Andeweg (2012). Future research should expand its focus across various aspects and dimensions of political communication, for example, exploring the relationship between representation styles and aspects of negative campaigning, such as character and/or policy attacks (e.g., Maier and Nai, 2023).

In addition, most of the aforementioned works are focused on Western countries' national contexts. However, recent research has started analyzing styles of representation also from a transnational perspective encompassing both the Global North and the Global South. By focusing on the Italian case, for example, Østergaard-Nielsen and Camatarri (2022) noticed that candidates fielded in emigrant-specific environments spread across different continents (the so-called overseas constituencies) tend to develop specific patterns of representative role orientations compared to candidates at home. Future research will probably uncover more aspects related to the attitudinal and communicative correlates of representation styles from a transnational perspective.

## References

- Andeweg, R. B., & Thomassen, J. J. (2005). Modes of political representation: Toward a New Typology. *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, 30(4), 507-528.
- Andeweg, R. B. (2012). The consequences of representatives' role orientations: attitudes, behaviour, perceptions. In M. Blomgren & O. Rozenberg (Eds.), *Parliamentary Roles in Modern Legislatures* (pp. 66–84). Oxon: Routledge.
- Bakker, R., Jolly, S., & Polk, J. (2020). Multidimensional incongruence, political disaffection, and support for anti-establishment parties. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 27(2), 292-309.
- Bird, F. L., & Ryan, F. M. (1930). *The recall of public officers: A study of the operation of the recall in California*. New York: Macmillan.
- Burke, E. (1774). *Mr. Edmund Burke's Speeches at His Arrival at Bristol: And at the Conclusion of the Poll*. London: J. Wilkie.
- Camatarri, S. and Segatti, P. (2016) 'Stili di rappresentanza politica' In A. Di Virgilio & P. Segatti (Eds.) *La rappresentanza politica in Italia. Candidati ed elettori nelle elezioni politiche del 2013* (pp. 265-294), Bologna, Il Mulino.
- Close, C., Legein, T., & Little, C. (2022). Party organisation and the party-delegate style of representation. *Party Politics*, Online First.
- Converse, P. E. (1975). Public opinion and voting behavior. In F. I. Greenstein & N. W. Polsby (Eds.), *Handbook of political science* (Vol. 4, pp. 75-169). Reading, MA, Addison-Wesley.
- Converse, P. E., & Pierce, R. (1986). *Political representation in France*. Cambridge, Mass; London, Harvard University Press.
- Eulau, H., Wahlke, J. C., Buchanan, W., & Ferguson, L. C. (1959). The Role of the Representative: Some Empirical Observations on the Theory of Edmund Burke. *The American Political Science Review*, 53(3), 742–756.
- Gauja, A. (2012). Party dimensions of representation in Westminster parliaments: Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom. In M. Blomgren & O. Rozenberg (Eds.), *Parliamentary roles in modern legislatures* (pp. 121-144). Abingdon, Oxon, Routledge.
- Gherghina, S. (2011). MPs' Role Orientations in Newly Emerged Democratic Legislatures. *The Journal of Legislative Studies*, 17(1), 45-64



- Maier, J., & Nai, A. (2023). Mapping the drivers of negative campaigning: Insights from a candidate survey. *International Political Science Review*, 44(2), 195-211.
- Meller, N. (1967). Representational role types: A research note. *American Political Science Review*, 61(2), 474-477.
- Önnudóttir, E. H. (2014). Policy congruence and style of representation: Party voters and political parties. *West European Politics*, 37(3), 538-563.
- Önnudóttir, E. H., & von Schoultz, Å. (2021). Candidates' representational roles. In L. D. Winter, R. Karlsen, & H. Schmitt (Eds.), *Parliamentary Candidates between Voters and Parties: A Comparative Perspective* (pp. 120–141). London, Routledge.
- Pedrazzani, A., & Segatti, P. (2022). Responsiveness when parties are "weak": A candidate-based analysis of voter-party congruence in Europe. *Party Politics*, 28(1), 149-162.
- Pitkin, H. F. (1967). *The Concept of Representation*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Sudulich, L., Trumm, S., & Bridgewater, J. (2020). Parliamentary representation: A cross-national study of candidates' views. *Parliamentary Affairs*, 73(3), 522-542.
- Walgrave, S., Jansen, A., Sevenans, J., Soontjens, K., Pilet, J. B., Brack, N., ... & Loewen, P. J. (2023). Inaccurate Politicians: Elected Representatives' Estimations of Public Opinion in Four Countries. *The Journal of Politics*, 85(1), 209-222.
- Weßels, B., & Giebler, H. (2011). Choosing a Style of Representation: The Role of Institutional and Organizational Incentives. Paper presented at the 6th Annual Conference of the European Consortium of Political Research, Reykjavik, 25-27 August.