

Summary: Political Legitimacy and Under-representation: How Do Citizens Evaluate the Political System?

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The erosion of political support (Dalton, 2004) as well as the decline in citizens' trust in governments and institutions (Bedock, 2017; Dalton, 1999, 2004; Norris, 2011; Pharr et al., 2000) is one major challenge for representative democracy. Indeed, scholars argue that support for democracy as a political regime is declining (Foa et al., 2020; Foa & Mounk, 2017), which questions to what extent representative democracies are able to resist democratic backsliding. Building on this literature, the doctoral thesis aimed at providing a better understanding of citizens' evaluation of the political system while engaging with recent scholarships linking unequal representation and citizens' political attitudes (Ezrow & Xezonakis, 2011; Marié & Talukder, 2021; Mayne & Hakhverdian, 2017; Reher, 2016).

The doctoral thesis investigated the question of (under-represented) citizens' evaluation of the political system through a different use of the traditional theoretical framework developed by David Easton (1965). The 'systemic approach of the political system' was preferred given its capacity to divide the political system into three distinct facets: *input* (the processes by which demands for public policy are absorbed), *throughput* (the procedures by which demands result [or do not result] in

public policy) and the *output* (the policies adopted by the political system) as developed in the works of Scharpf (1999) and Schmidt (2013). However, instead of looking at the political system and its three components from an external point of view, the research studied each dimension from a citizen point of view. Using the EoS RepResent Panel (Michel et al., 2023), the research examined citizens' evaluation of the *input*, *throughput* and *output* of the political system and the determinants of citizens' evaluation of these three facets of the political system. Additionally, building on the literature on unequal representation and the limited existence of studies investigating under-represented citizens' evaluation of the political system, the thesis focused on under-represented groups' evaluation of the political system as well.

The empirical results of the doctoral dissertation underlined three sets of elements that contribute to the literature on political dissatisfaction and political under-representation. First, the research allowed to identify a number of under-represented groups of citizens both in terms of descriptive and substantive representation in Belgium. Beside the identification of descriptively under-represented groups, the research highlighted the existence of measurement sensitivity when it comes to the operationalisation of substantive representation (see Talukder, 2023).

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Second, the research tested to what extent the distinction between the *input*, *throughput* and *output* matters for citizens. Using a latent profile analysis (LPA), the dissertation demonstrated that such a distinction makes sense and it uncovered six types of profiles among citizens when it comes to the evaluation of the political system. The results show that a significant portion of citizens distinguishes between the three dimensions and that some profiles of citizens tend to be dissatisfied by one or two dimensions of the political system. Under-represented citizens tend to belong to the most negative profile when it comes to the evaluation of the political system.

Third, the research analysed carefully the determinants of citizens' evaluation of the *input*, *throughput* and *output* of the political system and identified determinants based on the literature. A key element of those analyses shows that under-represented groups of citizens (i.e. women, citizens with lower level of formal education and citizens disadvantaged in terms of working conditions) tend to be less satisfied than their fellow citizens. However, and most importantly, the results show that the determinants of *input*, *throughput* and *output* do not differ for under-represented groups of citizens. Their negative evaluation of the political system is mainly linked to lower scores on the determinants of each dimension.

Finally, the dissertation showed that three sets of variables are decisive to explain citizens' evaluation of each dimension of the political system: political interest, the perception of political actors/institutions and opinion congruence. Political interest is significantly associated with each di-

mension of the political system and it almost entirely absorbs the effect of belonging to an under-represented group. The dissertation hence argued that any future study interested in assessing the legitimacy of the political system, including the feeling of being represented, should consider including this variable in its analyses.

The results of the various analyses showed that a negative assessment of elected representatives and/or the perception that institutions are biased in favour of certain citizens tends to contribute to a negative assessment of the various dimensions of the political system's legitimacy. It is important to take these factors into account when studying solutions aimed at improving citizens' perception of the legitimacy of the political system. Improving the accessibility of decision-making processes to the public and questioning the moral and ethical qualities of elected representatives would help improve citizens' perception of the legitimacy of the political system.

Congruence with the decisions taken by the government is the third key variable significantly associated with the evaluation of each dimension of the political system's legitimacy. Citizens tend to evaluate the political system more positively when the decisions taken align with their own position. While some might argue that congruence and/or outcome favourability is the main determinant, the results show that even when citizens share the government's positions, the other variables continue to be significantly associated with their evaluation of the political system.

As a conclusion, the research aimed at providing a better understanding of citizens' and under-represented citi-

zens' evaluation of the political system. Using survey data, the doctoral dissertation provided a useful contribution to the literature on democratic dissatisfaction and allowed to better grasp the determinants of each dimension among (under-represented) citizens. The research mobilised rich data collected by the EoS RepRepresent consortium in Belgium. However, one can question to what extent the results can be extended to other countries, specifically given the characteristics of the Belgian political system. Additionally, the use of survey data does not allow demonstrating strong causal mechanisms, yet it provides a basis for further studies. Further research needs necessarily to be comparative and should investigate to what extent the results found in the case of Belgium are corroborated in multiple countries. The aim would be mainly to determine, using comparative data, if citizens *effectively* make a distinction between *input*, *throughput* and *output* and to grasp their determinants in different institutional settings.

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