

When politicians feel pressure to represent: Evidence from South Africa

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This article explores whether representatives from minority groups feel under pressure to represent the group they are associated with. We use a representative survey experiment in South Africa ($N = 1,252$), combined with semi-structured interviews with elected representatives ($N = 25$). In the survey, there are clear expectations in the population that groups should be represented by a member of 'their' group. However, in the survey experiment which captures a behavioural response, members of the general population do not trust representatives of 'their' group more. In the interviews, the representatives confirm that they are aware of the expectations of the population, and to some extent feel under pressure to represent the group they are associated with and its interests. They often express a reluctance to represent groups because they want to focus on substantive issues. From their perspective, there is a tension between representing groups and norms against clientelism.

Keywords: political representation; representative burden; race; gender; trust.

1. Introduction

A significant body of literature has explored the political representation of women and ethnic and racial minority groups (Paxton and Kunovich 2003; Bird 2010; Hughes 2013; Mügge and Runderkamp 2024). These studies show a considerable variation in access to elected offices at all levels of government. We also know that

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the inclusion of groups in legislatures (descriptive representation) relates to the substantive representation of ideology and policy (Tripp and Kang 2008; Saalfeld and Kyriakopoulou 2010; Juenke and Preuhs 2012). Two explanations have been offered for this link between descriptive representation and substantive representation: representatives can follow electoral incentives and take positions that the constituents prefer to increase their chances of re-election, or representatives may be intrinsically motivated to represent certain groups (Broockman 2013; McClendon 2016; Sobolewska, McKee and Campbell 2018; Giger, Lanz and de Vries 2019; Jong and Mügge 2023). On a theoretical level, however, what appears to be 'intrinsic' motivation may not only reflect motivations from within but also pressures and expectations on elected representatives (Flinders *et al.* 2020). Put differently, ostensibly 'intrinsic' motivations may reflect non-electoral incentives and pressures from societal norms that shape representative behaviour, and conventional experiments fail to capture this difference. If motivations to represent based on 'intrinsic' factors are indeed shaped by pressures, efforts to improve the political representation of minority groups may fail to identify adequate measures, or indeed introduce measures that backfire if representatives do not differentiate 'intrinsic' from 'extrinsic' factor as readily as the literature assumes.

Here, we explore the nature of representation with an eye on pressures and expectations that elected representatives represent the interests of 'their' groups more generally—the group they are associated with by others. These groups can be defined in terms of political affiliation, socio-economic status, race, gender, minority groups, etc. We present a frame to integrate these pressures and expectations on representatives—increased representative burden—and provide empirical support that these pressures exist with a representative population survey, a survey experiment, and from semi-structured interviews with elected representatives to explore the nature of such pressures with a focus on two of these dimensions: gender and race. We examine the situation in South Africa because in this context, official classification of 'population groups' is particularly salient, which allows us to observe relevant phenomena along two dimensions in a context where we do not expect politicians to play down these identities for political or other reasons. In the interviews, the representatives highlight a tension between pressures to represent the interests of 'their' groups and norms against clientelism they subscribe to.

2. Theory: pressures to represent

In addition to intrinsic motivation, electoral incentives—typically related to re-election prospects—may lead politicians to represent minority groups, such as when representatives from a minority group represent a district where most constituents belong to this minority group (Sobolewska 2013; Nadler 2022). Other

non-electoral incentives also apply to women who are by definition spread across districts (Htun 2004): they may be concerned with political reputation independent of electoral incentives if they do not represent certain positions, but representatives may also have intrinsic motivation or conform to specific roles in line with group membership. What is more, minority groups and interest groups may lobby representatives to represent the interests of 'their' group (Wüst 2010; Broockman 2013; McClendon 2016). Here we refer to minorities of power: groups who are minorities in numerical terms, as well as groups who have less access to positions of power (who need not necessarily form a numerical minority in the population). The theoretical argument is deliberately broad and allows for context-specific pressures due to history or particular readings of the constitution that we will not develop here.

Pressure expectation: representatives feel pressure to represent the interests of their group

While the literature has not spelled out this expectation that representatives feel under pressure to represent 'their' group in a coherent frame, we have many indications from the theoretical and empirical literature: there are many potential sources for such pressures and expectations (Flinders et al. 2020). We define pressures to represent as openly stated or implicit expectations to act in the name of the group as a member of the group. These pressures include a claim that the representative in question is a rightful representative of the interests of the minority group (see Saward 2010). At their basis, these pressures stem from the fact that parliamentarians represent citizens in political decision-making and thus provide an important link between the population and government (Ezrow 2010; Rohrschneider and Thomassen 2020). Pressures to represent may come from the bottom (voters), from the top (government and party leadership), as well as from other representatives (lateral), and from the representatives themselves (Fig. 1, as discussed in the following). This frame is deliberately open so that it can refer to ethnic minority groups as well as women and other minorities of power. We expect the underlying influences to be the same for other groups defined by demographic variables, although the weight of the different channels may be different.

Starting with the population at the bottom of Fig. 1, voters and other members of the population may address a representative to lobby for purported group interests (Wüst 2016; Dinesen, Dahl and Schiøler 2021), such as when local businesses lobby for the exclusion of competitors, as is often the case in South African townships where business activities of foreign nationals are restricted (Piper and Charman 2016). Such lobbying may be more successful when the representatives are members of the business community. When it comes to socio-demographic groups, we can expect the pressure to represent to be larger where the group in question is larger, but also when the group in question is marginalized or

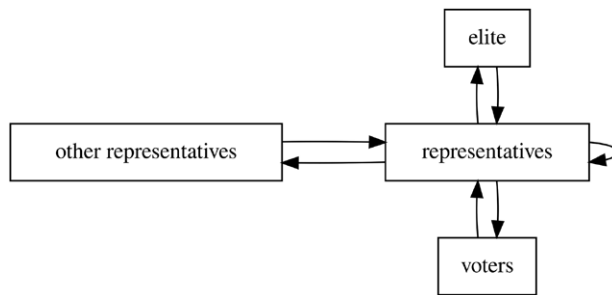


Figure 1. Different pressures (indicated as arrows) to represent from the elite, other representatives, voters, and the representatives themselves. The empirical analysis does not cover each source of pressures to the same extent, and indeed representatives may not always identify the source of pressures.

discriminated against (Jong and Mügge 2023) and has few other access points to formal politics. This implies that pressures to represent a large group that is historically marginalized will be larger than pressures to represent a relatively small group that is already well integrated into the mainstream.

If we assume that representatives are partly motivated by the prospect of re-election, we can assume that expectations and pressures from voters and potential voters influence parliamentarians (Bailer *et al.* 2022). To the extent that this helps them to get re-elected, parliamentarians have strong incentives to represent the views and concerns of the voters. While non-voters and supporters of other parties may also have clear expectations of whom representatives should represent, it is less clear to what extent these can be considered pressures.

At the top of Fig. 1, the party elite and government may address women and minority representatives to speak in the name of these groups or act as symbols for the group (Murray 2016). They may recognize that a decision will affect the livelihoods of certain groups, and consult the representatives instead. Here the challenge for parliamentarians may be to represent the heterogeneity of the group. For instance, a parliamentarian with a privileged Black background may recognize that she lacks the experience of poverty the elite look for in a particular situation. Such expectations to represent certain roles have been noted for women (Reingold and Swers 2011; Clayton and Zetterberg 2021). Here we argue that these expectations equally apply to ethnic and racial minority representatives, where the involved dynamics may be easier to observe.

Research on the political representation of immigrants and their descendants implies that minority status can become a dominant political issue for affected parliamentarians. For instance, members of minority groups are more likely to ask immigration-related questions in parliament or sit on committees where ethnic minority interests are treated (Saalfeld and Daniel 2013; Mügge, van der Pas and

van de Wardt 2019). Indeed, the media emphasize the ‘origin’ of non-majority men, while for majority men political positions are highlighted more: media representation of minorities is gendered, racialized, and emphasizes class differences (Runderkamp et al. 2022). In this sense, it may be more important how a person is categorized by others than being born abroad or direct descendants of parents who were. For this reason, we can also assume that pressures on groups who are partly defined by visible characteristics like skin colour, accent, name, or dress, feel pressure to represent the group they are associated with. If electoral incentives align when the share of group members in the constituency is relatively large, we can expect clearer pressures. However, immigrant parliamentarians do not always feel at ease as representatives of minority interests rather than constituent interests in general, and in some cases consciously decide against representing immigrant interests (Wüst and Saalfeld 2011; Mügge, van der Pas and van de Wardt 2019). Here, we understand this unease and refusal as an expression of pressures that existing studies did not explore explicitly.

Indeed, as party elites increasingly choose women and members of ethnic minority groups (Kittilson and Tate 2004; Sobolewska 2013; Gerring et al. 2019), there often is an implicit understanding that they will stand for certain positions (Murray 2016). In other situations, however, the inclusion of women and ethnic minority groups in formal politics may be part of party strategies that could be classified as ‘tokenism’ where the primary goal is to signal the *fact* of diversity (Htun and Pablo Ossa 2013), and the party elite may not have the same expectations regarding the substantive representation of minority interests. The recruitment of minority representatives is often tied to electoral calculus (Caramani, Celis and Wauters 2014), and such recruitment may motivate immigrant candidates and parliamentarians to represent minority interests (Zuber 2015). A large minority population in the constituency may add to the pressure to represent, even in the absence of explicit expectations from the elite (Ruedin 2013).

Such expectations may also come from other parliamentarians, be this in the same party or in other parties (left of Fig. 1). Parliamentarians are likely to feel pressure to fulfil such expectations to some extent, as doing so can help their political reputation (Dinesen, Dahl and Schiøler 2021). Lublin (1997) highlighted how the creation of minority-majority districts actually reduced the substantive representation of Blacks in the USA. By having explicit districts where minority groups are in the majority, representatives from other districts were relieved from the expectation that they should also represent the racial minority within their constituency: now they could point to the representatives designated to represent the minorities. Because of the two-party system in the USA, Lublin did not pay attention to how the presence of left-wing parties could affect these pressures. Left-wing parties have a historical and relatively consistent record of championing the rights of disadvantaged groups in society (Mateo Diaz 2005). This means that

a strong presence of left-wing parties may reduce the pressure on minority representatives to represent their group.

From the presentation in Fig. 1, we can deduce that when there are other actors to share the burden, so to speak, and pressures are reduced (Kokkonen and Wängnerud 2017; Farrer and Zingher 2018; Höhmann 2020). This may be the case where many parliamentarians belong to the same group—something we observe for women, even in the many cases where they remain numerically under-represented. In this situation, the pressure on individual parliamentarians to speak on behalf of an entire group is reduced because others can do so, too. By contrast, if there is a single parliamentarian from a particular minority group, if she does not speak up, likely nobody else will. At the same time, we can expect that pressures are higher where groups are ‘cohesive’ and perceived as having relatively homogeneous interests.

A final source of pressure to represent may stem from parliamentarians themselves: their expectations of how and whom they should represent (Wüst and Saalfeld 2011; Mügge and Runderkamp 2024). Such expectations may be linked to an individual’s political career and how they were recruited into politics, attitudes on the proper role of representatives, having a strong minority identity, and an intrinsic interest in minority issues (Dancygier et al. 2021).

By outlining pressures and expectations in Fig. 1, we make no normative assumption whether minority parliamentarians *should* represent their minority group. Mansbridge (1999) argued, however, that in some situations it can be normatively desirable for group members to represent the interests of a particular group. She highlights situations where members of one group do not trust members of other groups to stand for the substantive questions—even though technically, substantive and descriptive representation need not be coupled. Put differently, there are situations in which shared group membership is taken as a symbol of shared interest and thus representation. The intuition here is that from the perspective of voters or the population, questions of substantive representation are fraught with uncertainty: voters rely on very broad party programmes or even heuristics like party labels to determine whom we trust to represent their particular interests (Mansbridge 1999; Jones 2016). In such a context, shared group membership can be a symbol of shared interests, which would increase trust in representatives. This may be particularly relevant for broad, uncrystallized interests—assumed to be—linked to minority statuses, where candidates and parties do not have readily formulated policies at hand. Drawing on notions such as shared experiences like a past of oppression or disadvantage may make minority voters feel heard. Mansbridge (1999) highlights that descriptive representation can therefore ensure effective communication between the population and representatives from the same group. The presence of different groups in a legislature thus ensures that different perspectives and interests are present, including interests

that are not yet fully articulated. For representatives from minority groups, this link between group membership and substantive representation is an additional source of pressures, but has a testable implication in terms of trust.

Trust expectation: People trust representatives of their own group more.

With the many potential sources for pressures outlined in Fig. 1, it can be difficult to identify where exactly expectations and pressures to represent come from, and this article does not attempt to do so. Nor it is the aim to identify which sources are more important in a specific context. Indeed, we assume that not all parliamentarians are intrinsically motivated to put purported group interests above other issues. In this sense, the situation for minority representatives is different from parliamentarians who are pressed to adopt policies in line with the party, for instance, because party membership is directly chosen, whereas minority status is not. Part of the analysis provides an exploration of different reactions, something absent in existing studies. We are interested in how representatives deal with the pressure and expectations to represent a certain position, especially as this may differ significantly from the personal aims and desires of the representatives in question (Wüst and Saalfeld 2011; Mügge, van der Pas and van de Wardt 2019). We also assume that expectations of and pressures on representatives from ethnic and racial minority groups may be stronger than for women because ethnic and racial groups may be perceived as more cohesive.

3. The case of South Africa

When it comes to political representation, South Africa may be best known for the enduring over-representation of Whites (Krook and O'Brien 2010; Ruedin 2013). However, the country offers an opportunity to study pressures to represent that may not be as clearly visible or tangible in other countries. Group membership in South Africa is both greatly salient—as reflected in political debates, not least since the creation of the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) in 2013—and at least publicly not controversial in the sense that few individuals refuse to identify with one of the official 'population groups'. Contrary to studying the political representation of immigrants in Western countries, for instance, identifying racial minority members is straightforward and avoids controversies like how children of immigrants should be classified. In the most recent census of 2022, only 0.4% of the population did not identify as a member of one of the population groups: Black, Coloured, White, or Indian/Asian. In the survey at hand, none of the 1,252 participants chose an 'other' population group or refused to identify with any of the categories provided. Historically, all parties in South Africa are aligned with racial divisions: for example, the African National Congress (ANC) represents the Black

African struggle against apartheid, or the Democratic Alliance (DA) is rooted in the White opposition to the apartheid government—but today all parties try to appeal across racial divisions. Put differently, South Africa is characterized by historically embedded racial divisions (Seekings 2008; Gordon 2023). While the share of women in the National Assembly of South Africa is high, there are continuing reports of marginalizing women in decision-making and sexism within parliament (Kgobe and Ramoroka 2024). In South Africa, immigration is a salient topic and cleavage, with the politicization driven by individual politicians rather than political parties as organizations (Ruedin 2019). For instance, the newly founded ActionSA explicitly regards the share of foreign citizens as unproblematic, but its leader—former Mayor of Johannesburg Herman Mashaba—is notorious for his radical stance towards Black African immigrants. Gradually, these exclusionary positions of the leaders find their way into the official party line, be this the case for ActionSA or the Patriotic Alliance led by Gayton McKenzie who calls for the deportation of ‘illegal foreigners’ in their most recent manifestos (Mahlati 2021; Banda 2022). What is more, there is increasing dissatisfaction with service provision (Ballard *et al.* 2024), which may translate into pressures on politicians.

4. Data and methods

For the quantitative analysis, we use data from a representative population survey, carried out in July and August 2017 in South Africa. Participants were recruited through the Qualtrics platform who use quality-vetted partners for data collection, and we obtained a sample of $N = 1,252$. Participants are remunerated and provide their answers in writing online or using mobile phones. As is common in the absence of a strict sampling frame, to ensure that all sections of society are represented, we used quotas for population group (Black, White, Coloured, and Indian/Asian), age (4 categories: 0–24, 25–39, 40–64, and 65+), gender (male, female), and province (9 provinces). Naturalized South African citizens are included in the sample (3% of the sample). Findings based on such online samples tend to generalize to the underlying population (Coppock, Leeper and Mullinix 2018).

We included two survey experiments as part of a questionnaire on political representation. The first presents the pictures of two politicians—one female, one male—and asks, ‘Assume these are your political representatives. Do you trust them to represent your interests?’ The outcome is measured using a slider from 0 (‘not trust’) to 4 (‘trust’) with intermediary positions allowed (steps of 0.1 on the scale). In this experiment, minority status is operationalized through visual features and captures gender and race in the sense of skin colour. We used pictures of real ‘mixed-race’ representatives in the UK, and manipulated their skin colour to appear ‘Black’ or ‘White’. Both representatives are relatively young, and both are shown with their head slightly from the side, speaking into a microphone. Because of the ‘mixed’-features, both versions were equally plausible, as we have

verified in pre-testing. Pre-testing was carried out in South Africa with a dozen of students, academic and administrative staff who were shown one of the images, told that it was digitally altered, and asked to guess what was altered (which they never guessed). Since we manipulated skin colour, all other aspects of the pictures are constant. The respondents were randomly shown a Black or a White version of the woman's picture, randomly with a Black or a White version of the man's picture. Each participant randomly saw one of these combinations (referred to as 'experiment 1' and 'experiment 2' in the corresponding figure). The experiment was designed before algorithms like StyleGAN2 were available (Karras et al. 2019) and we chose manual preparation to create plausible manipulations; stimulus sampling was not feasible with the resources available.¹

The second experiment asks 'Whom should [name] represent?', where a different name was shown at random. As answers, respondents could tick any of the following: men, women, Blacks, Coloureds, and Whites, with an open option at the end to provide any other answer (multiple answers possible). In this experiment, minority status is operationalized through words, but participants were given the opportunity to use alternative definitions. The order of the population groups (Blacks, Coloureds, and Whites) was randomized. The name was randomly one of three high-profile politicians in South Africa: Jacob Zuma (Black), Helen Zille (White), and Ebrahim Rasool (Coloured). Ebrahim Rasool is described as a Cape Malay, one of the population groups commonly referred to as Coloured.

In addition, we asked respondents 'Who best represents the interests of these groups?', with the interest of women (always first), Whites, Blacks (in random order), young, poor, immigrants, and business (in random order) as possible answer categories. These questions were closed, and only one answer could be chosen. As potential representatives, we provided the ANC and the DA as the main parties, the EFF as a new party, and civil society [one answer (actor) per group possible].²

4.1 Analytical strategy

For the experiments, we present raw differences (Ariel, Bland and Sutherland 2022), along with regression models where we adjust for a wide range of variables

¹The experiment did not provide additional context, so we can expect *absolute* levels of trust to be low (De Dreu 2018; Gereke, and Ruedin 2023). Given that the aim was to isolate group membership through skin colour, only a between-subject design was possible without revealing the manipulation. This setup has been used on pictures of Barack Obama (Caruso, Mead and Balcetis 2009; Willer, Feinberg and Wetts 2016).

²We interpret answers to these questions as a reflection of the norm of representation, although we cannot rule out that some respondents understand it as a question about the actual support base for these candidates—an interpretation that did not come up during pre-testing. Randomization can limit order effects, but it is possible that participants give socially desirable answers to these questions that do not reflect their norms.

that may influence the understanding of questions or expectations regarding political representation. Both survey experiments were pre-registered on OSF,³ as was the list of control variables. We use Bayesian models in Stan with non-informative priors (Goodrich *et al.* 2020).

To complement the survey experiments and to explore to what extent questions on political representation can reveal expectations and trust, and particularly to better understand the channel through which pressures work, we carried out twenty-five semi-structured interviews with representatives at the regional level: elected representatives from one of the South African provinces. We chose regional representatives for reasons of accessibility and assume that they may have a stronger link to the constituency than politicians at the national level. While party lists are used in South Africa, the politicians highlight constituency work as an important part of their work. They represent both urban and rural constituencies. With the qualitative complement, aspects of the theoretical frame in Fig. 1 can be addressed, which are not part of the quantitative analysis, though these data are not representative in the statistical sense. All major population groups and parties are covered in these interviews to capture varied experiences, although the sample includes a higher share of Whites than in South African parliaments (both at the national and regional level; see Table A1 in Online Appendix 1). The structure of the questionnaire was designed to avoid talking about ‘pressures’ before the representatives described them. We will make available data and replication material upon publication. Pseudonyms were assigned before analysis and identifying information was replaced by descriptions. While McClendon (2016) reports that elected representatives in South Africa are not very responsive to voter queries (behavioural response, although contacts by email as used in her field experiment are not that common according to the representatives we spoke to, so the reported responsiveness may reflect methodological choices), the interviews reveal the role representatives see for themselves and the experienced pressures to represent a specific group.

5. Results: population has clear expectations

5.1 Expectation that they represent ‘their’ group

In the first step, we establish a clear expectation in the population that representatives of different groups should represent ‘their’ group.⁴ Figure 2 draws on a survey

³<https://osf.io/vut9b/>.

⁴The survey included a question whether ‘In your opinion, do different population groups in South Africa have specific interests?’, with answers provided on a slider from 0 (‘no, not at all’) to 4 (‘yes, clearly’). The median response was 3.1 on this scale (mean 3.0, SD 1.0), suggesting that the population believe that group-specific interests exist.

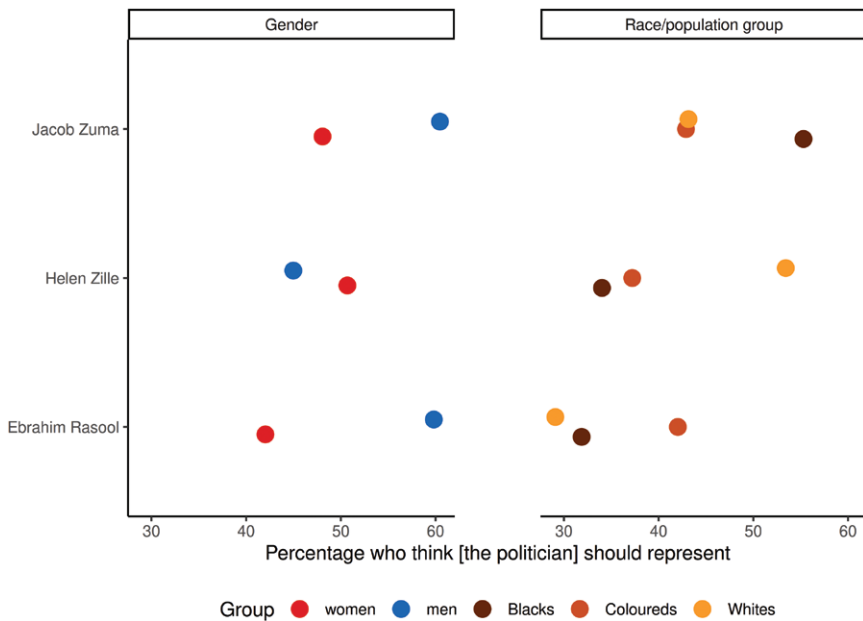


Figure 2. Expectation whom three well-known politicians in South Africa should represent. Wording: 'Whom should [this politician] represent?'. The politicians are given on the left, the groups offered as answer categories are given as points (divided by gender and race/population group for legibility). The points are not exactly aligned horizontally to avoid overprinting. Multiple answers possible. South Africa, 2017.

experiment where participants were asked whether three well-known politicians should represent different groups in society.⁵ On the left of the figure, we can see the percentages for gender. We can see a clear expectation that the men (Jacob Zuma, Ebrahim Rasool) should represent men (around 60% share this view), with a notably lower percentage expecting that they should represent women (around 45%). For the woman (Helen Zille), we see a higher percentage for representing women than for representing men. On the right of the figure, we can see the equivalent expectation for race/population group:⁶ the percentages are highest for the

⁵In addition to the five categories, respondents could also indicate 'other' groups. This open question was also included to give respondents the possibility to reject the notion that demographically defined groups are relevant for political representation. Only one of the respondents did so, by mentioning issue positions. Of the 201 respondents who provided their own answer, 71% chose a variant of 'everyone', with 16% apparently discontent citizens choosing 'nobody'.

⁶Official statistics and government in South Africa refer to 'population group', recognizing five racial categories: Black African (80.9% of the population in the 2021 census), Coloured (8.8%), White (7.8%), Indian/Asian (2.6%), and other/unspecified.

population group of the politicians: 'their' group (Blacks in the case of Jacob Zuma; Whites in the case of Helen Zille; Coloureds in the case of Ebrahim Rasool).

In [Figure A1](#) in [Online Appendix 2](#), we can see that these tendencies hold in regression models with a full battery of control variables ([Figure A2](#) in [Online Appendix 2](#) for regression models without control variables). In [Figure A3](#) in [Online Appendix 2](#), these expectations are shown by respondent characteristics by considering interaction effects. We cannot see clear patterns overall, so it is difficult to determine whether these expectations are particularly for representatives who share group membership with the respondents, or for representatives of 'other' groups. For instance, White respondents seem to expect Helen Zille to represent Blacks more than other respondents, and Jacob Zuma to represent Blacks less. The corresponding coefficients for representing Whites are inconclusive. For gender, men have less expectation that Helen Zille should represent women, but not higher expectations that Jacob Zuma should represent men. In sum, we can see clear expectations that representatives should represent 'their' groups, but not necessarily from group members.

5.2 Perception that they 'do' represent the group

In a separate step, we could establish that respondents have the impression that different parties represent different groups in society. Most of the options presented focus on representing groups in society—so the focus was deliberately different from questions of issue ownership or competence. In [Fig. 3](#) we can see different perceptions of whom different political parties (ANC, DA, and EFF) and civil society represent. We included civil society because we did not want to presume that only political parties can represent the interests of the population (compare [Montanaro 2012](#)). The ANC and the EFF are seen as representing the interests of Blacks, while the DA is associated with representing the interests of Whites. For women and immigrants, civil society is more often regarded as representative of interests than any of the parties.⁷

[Table A2](#) in [Online Appendix 2](#) cannot identify clear differences between men and women in whom best represents the interests of women. [Tables A3 and A4](#) in [Online Appendix 2](#) similarly do not identify clear differences between population groups in the assessment who best represents the interests of Blacks and Whites.

⁷The results for civil society seem to contradict [Levine \(2016\)](#) who found that community-based organizations are regarded as legitimate representatives. In the present case, compared to the main parties, civil society is mentioned less often for the main population groups and gender. The broad label 'civil society', however, might hide differences in organizations.

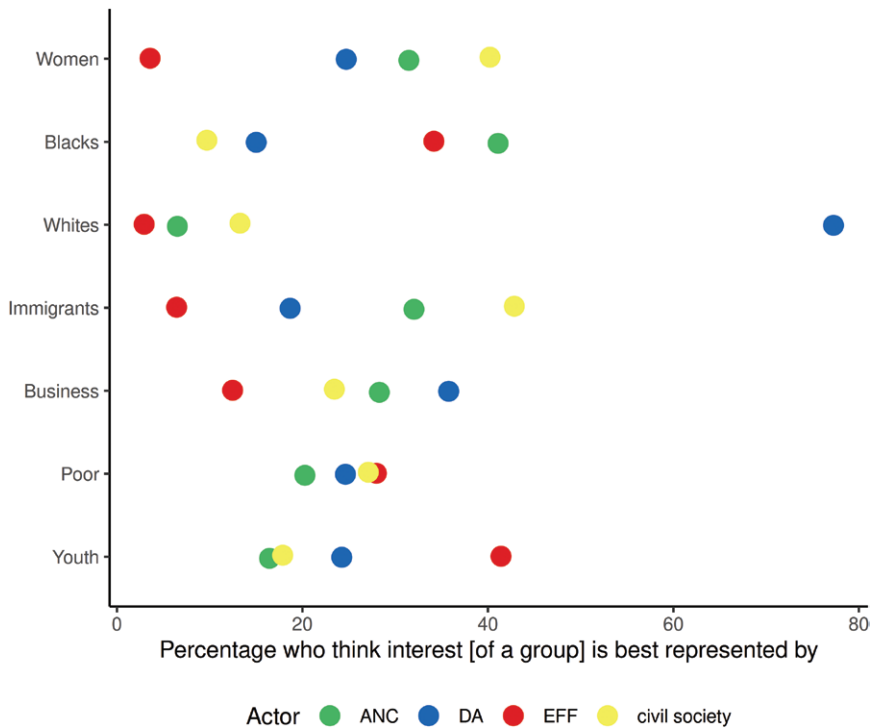


Figure 3. Percentage of respondents who think that the interests of a group in society are best represented by different political actors. Wording: 'Who best represents the interests of these groups?'. One answer (actor) per question (group). South Africa, 2017.

5.3 No clear differences for trusting 'their' representatives

Using an experiment with manipulated images, we capture whether respondents stated to trust representatives of their own group more. In [Fig. 4](#) we can see that levels of trust in unknown politicians are generally low (ranging from 1.6 to 1.9 on a scale from 0 to 4), and that the female politician evoked higher levels of trust. While for the female politician skin colour did not affect levels of trust, for the male politician Black skin is associated with slightly higher levels of trust than White skin. Given the long history of racialization in South Africa, this result does not reflect our prior expectation. The question is about trust in general, not specifically about trust to represent interests.

In [Tables A5–A10](#) in [Online Appendix 2](#) we cannot see systematic differences in that Black African or White respondents would automatically trust politicians of 'their' group more just based on a picture. The regression model in [Figure A4](#) in [Online Appendix 2](#) shows higher levels of trust for women, and lower trust for White men compared to Black men. These findings are robust to different control

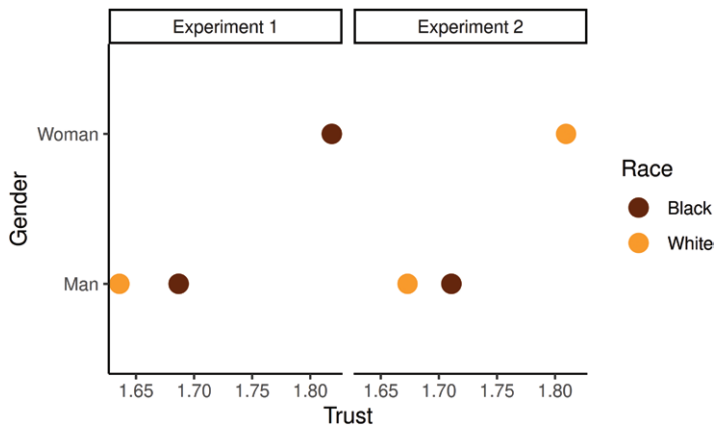


Figure 4. Differences in trust in politicians by gender and skin colour of the politician. Wording: ‘Do you trust this politician?’. Note that the scale runs from 0 to 4, so the differences shown are substantially small. In experiment 1, the woman was fixed to be Black, and in experiment 2, the woman was fixed to be White. One answer (per experiment). Assignment to experiment 1 and experiment 2 was random. South Africa, 2017.

variables (Figure A5 in Online Appendix 2). Figure A6 in Online Appendix 2 shows that White respondents do not trust White representatives more—or vice versa, trust Black representatives substantially less. Similarly, while the interactions in Figure A7 in Online Appendix 2 may hint at differences in trust, these differences do not suggest higher levels of trust in representatives of the same gender. These results contradict assertions by Mansbridge (1999), who argued in favour of trusting members of one’s ‘own’ group. While we used an experimental approach that allows relatively strong conclusions, it should be borne in mind that the results hinge on the particular images used to signal difference in gender and skin colour.⁸

6. Results: representatives are aware of expectations

Drawing on twenty-five interviews with representatives of one of the South African provincial legislatures, it is clear that representatives are aware of the expectations to represent the interests of ‘their’ group and feel pressure to represent these

⁸We have no reasons to doubt the results, but for reasons of research economy and because we lacked a sufficient number of suitable pictures we could not implement a design with stimulus sampling. Using a single name per ethnic group rather than pictures, Alecu (2020) provides a contrasting view in Norway, where they report that the majority population trust Pakistani general practitioners just as much as they do Norwegian general practitioners, though the Pakistani respondents trusted the minority Pakistani doctors more.

interests. Even though we left it open in the questionnaire, the representatives talked about racial differences in almost all cases, while female representatives also occasionally mentioned gender. Indeed, the focus on race in the following paragraphs emerged from the participants and not the interview guide: it was the participants who chose not to talk much about social class or gender, for instance. Yet, despite the salience of race/population groups in South Africa when it comes to perceptions of pressures to represent, we often sensed initial reluctance to talk about difference between racial groups—in post-apartheid South Africa the image of a ‘rainbow society’ is well rehearsed. Notwithstanding, most representatives we spoke to volunteered different group interests for racial groups, embracing the notion that racial/population groups have specific interests. They mentioned issues like the ownership of land, or historical reasons linked to apartheid. The representatives differed in the extent to which they regarded these interests as ‘fixed’, but none suggested that these group differences would be inherent or unchangeable. For example, Sarah suggested that race and class continue to be intertwined:

Race [is] still a proxy for class in South Africa [...] but because of [...] the evolving Black middle class and Black professionals, race is no longer 100% synonymous with class. You can now see different class interests evolving. [Sarah]

Thomas, by contrast, provided more concrete interests of Whites and Blacks in South Africa:

You will be surprised (laughs)... robots⁹ that are not working, grass that is not cut, pot holes. [Whites] make a fuss about silly things. But you go to [my (Black) constituency], you won't find a person complaining about a robot even if it stands there by the street for the whole month not working, they won't even care about that, as long as they have a shelter and have employment to provide for their kids. [Thomas]

This is in line with Brendan, who regards the priority for Black Africans to overcome underdevelopment. By contrast, David recognized historical differences, but stressed similarities:

People may have differences based on language groups, racial groups, cultural lines etc., but at the end of the day everybody wants to live a healthy life, a happy one, with a roof on top of their heads, have secure jobs and have their kids educated. [David]

⁹South African word for traffic lights.

Across the interviews, the politicians make it clear that these racial group interests, whether real or purported, whether caused by history or for other reasons, translate into expectations that as group members they 'should' represent the interests of the groups they are members of. The associations outlined based on the population survey are vocalized in everyday conversations and sometimes simply 'felt' by the way individuals and representatives of groups come to certain politicians with their issues rather than others. Roger and Nelson refer to 'high' expectations, while Ebrahim explains how expectations in the population may not align with personal priorities:

There is a certain expectation particular from White voters that if you are a public representative, you should represent their interests. There is a high number of White people I interact with who believe that I should be opposing the Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) because I am a White representative and some Blacks also think that I am opposed to it, yet in actual fact I am in support of it considering the impacts of apartheid on Black communities. [Ebrahim]

In the interviews, the politicians indicate that electoral incentives are complicated in the sense that there are pressures to represent different groups and interests, and it is not obvious for the representatives we have talked to what this means. Put differently, in an abstract world consisting of clearly defined groups and interests, electoral incentives may constitute a clear goal. For instance, Danielle notes that 'We are losing some seats with each election. We are worried about [the next election]'. In the messy world in which real politicians operate, however, there are different—at times contradictory—incentives for politicians to chase. In this world, many politicians express interest in being re-elected or ensuring that their party retains their seat, but it is not evident to them what this means in terms of representing group interests. The strong notion that they should represent 'everyone' only adds to this confusion.

Expectations may come from the constituency, as Julia explains: 'My constituency is rural, so I specialize in agriculture'. However, the expectations from other parties also influence these expectations, as Arnold outlines:

The racial card game that is always played by opposition parties who are always stressing that the DA is a party which only aims to promote the interests of the White minority has also led to higher expectations from party supporters (especially Whites) to have their interests represented. [Arnold]

The party leadership also plays a role by defining what candidates they consider most promising in elections, as Ryan explains: 'I am old, I am White and male,

which is not what the party is looking for'. Similarly, the representatives discussed outside interests like the business community, voters of their party, and several women mentioned expectation to stand for (vague) women's issues—especially younger women whom we interviewed. None of the representatives mentioned intersectionality in the sense of specific interests for Black women, for example, but we did not prompt this in the interview. Future research should explore this.

Even though we have chosen South Africa because both gender and race are salient, the interviews did not reveal much on intersectionality. Ryan, cited in the previous paragraph, was the only one to discuss the combination of racial identity and gender, but less in terms of particular pressures than in terms of a profile that is less in demand because it is over-represented in politics. Nicola mentioned how intersectionality plays more of a role in meetings and commissions than in constituency work, but when elaborating presented pressures from gender and from race separately, as did other interviewees. We also note clear undertones in several interviews that associate race/population group with social class, but typically the representatives did not have much more to offer than highlighting that in reality there is a wide variety of experiences within groups. While this means that the lived realities of different minorities vary, at least in this case the intersection of minority statuses did not lead to specific experiences (that were formulated by the participant). In the words of [Weldon \(2008\)](#), the interviews suggest that when it comes to pressures to represent, there may be no clear interaction between identities, fitting neither the description of intersectionality-plus nor intersectionality-only: pressures and expectations from a larger number of identities or groups, but not necessarily additional pressures from the subgroup defined by the combination of identities.

6.1 Reluctant representatives

Even though the representatives identified expectations and pressures to take specific positions, the interviews identified clear tensions between group representation and clientelism. Overall, we often had the impression that the representation of group interests was regarded as 'negative' and not in line with the liberal take on an inclusive society as reflected in the 'rainbow nation'. In this sense, we were given many rejections of group representation that correspond to party lines, like 'I do not operate along ethnic lines' [Ali]. We did not sense that other potential reasons like preventing radicalization or political strategies led to these rejections. Indeed, there were many allegations that other parties engage in clientelism and represent only the interests of a particular group in society. Arnold identifies this both among the (other) party and Black voters:

The ANC will paint the DA as a White party that does not care about Black people. [...] [Black voters] believe that the DA is not willing to provide services and improve the lives of the Black people. [Arnold]

One way around these tensions is to insist on individual rights and needs, which allows the representatives to reject notions of group interest—irrespective of the fact that the same representatives could identify potential group interests earlier in the interviews.¹⁰ Indeed, many representatives emphasized specific (economic) needs, and how these trump group perspectives.

People have interests and these may not be based on ethnicity but on economic differences. [Olivia]

However, race can be a proxy of social class because of historical reasons and because of how contemporary society is organized. Yet, those who presented such a position were of the opinion that these differences should be overcome by focusing on individual needs. This allows representatives to focus on common interests like housing, security, jobs, or overcoming corruption. At the same time, an individualistic perspective allows representatives to avoid using race ‘as a proxy for class’ [Sarah].

7. Discussion and conclusion

We argue that elected representatives feel pressures to represent the interests of ‘their’ groups from different directions: the party leadership, from voters, and from other representatives. Using evidence from a survey and survey experiment in South Africa—a context well suited to examine such pressures—we could establish that the expectations behind such pressures are real and clear for gender, race, and social class. These pressures the representatives perceive are not only driven by members of the different groups but reflect expectations shared across the population. Counter to our expectation, the representatives never mentioned that ‘sharing the burden’ to represent group interests with other representatives of the same group (or party members with interests in doing so) would alleviate pressures to represent (Lublin 1997). Future research should examine this possibility specifically because it has direct implications on pressures on numerically large minorities of power like women in parliaments versus numerically small groups, like sexual minorities or specific ethnic minority groups (Ruedin 2013; Kolpinskaya 2017). With its focus on gender and race in South Africa, the present study is in a poor situation to draw conclusions for minority groups that may

¹⁰Analysis on how representatives cope with pressures can be found at: <https://osf.io/3jvyt/>.

be largely hidden or invisible, including sexual minorities or groups defined by political preferences. While we argued in the theoretical part that pressures may equally apply, they may be more difficult to capture empirically.

In this respect, aspects of intersectionality also deserve more attention, something we did not insist on much in the interviews and rarely came up. Based on the interviews, we have the sense that when it comes to expectations and pressures to representation, we could not identify the necessary interaction between minority statuses highlighted by [Weldon \(2008\)](#) as central to intersectionality. Put differently, minorities are exposed to additional sources of expectations and pressures—which means that the sum of these pressures is likely higher for Black women than for White women. However, we could not find specific (additional) pressures for sub-groups defined by these intersections like Black women. Still, we must emphasize that the interviews did not probe this aspect much, and it is possible that such expectations exist but were not formulated in the interviews or that the representatives have not reflected on these interactions of statuses. For this reason, additional research is needed focusing on this intersection, notably in the form of intersectionality-plus as outlined by [Weldon \(2008\)](#). Future research may also be interested in differentiating the influence of different sources for the pressures we identified, probably paying attention to variation across contexts and depending on intrinsic motivations to represent (minority) group interests.

The way we designed the population survey, we could establish expectations that representation (should) take place according to race and gender. Further research in this direction should explicitly include the intersection, to ask about representing Black women, etc. Similarly, for the trust experiment, a more targeted design is needed to make headway on intersectionality. The design of a survey experiment as such is well suited, because with a large enough number of participants we can use interaction effects as described in [Weldon \(2008\)](#). These interaction effects, however, require relatively large numbers, and future research should include stimulus sampling to avoid reliance on single names or pictures,¹¹ and with that implement within-person designs that were not possible with the material available here. The results are consistent with the interviews in that maybe the intersection may largely be defined by the sum of identities.

Moreover, we could show that the population thinks that groups have specific interests, and that different parties represent the interests of specific groups in society better. In this sense, according to the perspective of the population—and with that voters—different parties and representatives do represent different group interests. These are (unspecified) interests associated with demographically defined groups and not issue positions. In the case of South Africa, the population

¹¹Advances in the so-called artificial intelligence mean that creating such material at scale has become much more feasible.

believes that civil society (rather than any of the major parties) best represents the interests of women. Such expectations, however, do not appear to be stronger among voters of the 'same' group. Future research should seek experimental approaches to capture representative norms and likely behaviour, such as by using mock votes in vignette experiments. Other cleavages beyond race and gender should also be examined for a fuller understanding of the expectations and pressures outlined in this article. Drawing on the theoretical frame we introduced, we expect the findings of this article to apply to other cleavages and contexts, but we readily acknowledge that there may be reluctance to talk about some minority statuses—an expectation that guided case selection in the present article.

The outlined expectations that politicians represent 'their' groups, however, do not necessarily translate in increased trust in the setting of a survey experiment. This lack of clear association—both for gender and race/population group—contradicts a central argument by [Mansbridge \(1999\)](#) in favour of descriptive representation that descriptive representation is required because members of minority groups trust minority representatives more. Further research is needed to re-evaluate this argument and understand under which circumstances trust in representatives from the 'same' group is effectively higher. For instance, [McGregor et al. \(2017\)](#) report that ethnic minority voters prefer ethnic minority candidates in Canada, but finds no such evidence for women, while [Fisher et al. \(2015\)](#) suggest that the pattern may not be universal. Our results are in line with the latter, and call for research figuring out the contexts and situations under which trust and preferences are group-specific. Moreover, we believe that the link to political participation deserves more attention, especially given results by [Poertner \(2023\)](#) that suggest that minority representation can increase minority participation—but it is important to replicate such findings with self-declared group membership for a full understanding under which circumstances representation, trust, and participation are linked. Pressures of the kind we have discussed here may encourage *expectations* and *claims* to representation, but not necessarily substantive representation (behaviour).

Drawing on qualitative interviews with elected representatives, we could establish that representatives are aware of expectations to represent specific groups and positions—and we could show that there is a wide variety of expectations and pressures. To some extent, the fact that representatives report pressures contrasts with a comparative study by [Walgrave et al. \(2023\)](#), which suggests that representatives are not well aware of voter preferences on issue positions. Here we find broad agreement on the expectation that representatives do and should represent 'their' group, consistent with [Jong and Mügge \(2023\)](#)'s observation that minorities prefer delegates to trustees when it comes to styles of representation. However, we also find that representatives are conflicted about what they perceive as pressures. Such tensions exist because there are different pressures and expectations from different

groups because not all pressures align with electoral incentives, and because there is a conflict with the normative expectation that they should represent everyone (in their constituency). In this sense, the interviews revealed a tension between expectations to represent groups and norms against excluding other groups or engaging in clientelism. Studies of descriptive representation—and the substantive representation of demographically defined groups—tend to ignore such factors, which may constitute a norm that such groups should be ignored. This leads to a partial understanding of political representation and may lead to efforts that increase the political representation of minority groups that are ineffective.

Future research should explore these pressures to represent groups (and positions) in more detail. On the one hand, we need to know how different institutional settings like electoral systems or party organization affect these pressures. This includes contexts in which parliamentarians and politicians have stronger links to represent their consistency because of the electoral system or party politics. Given that we examined a case where party lists are used, rational choice would predict stronger incentives to please party selectors to ensure re-election. Yet, in the interviews, the representatives talked much more about pressures to represent from voters and constituents than from the party, something likely to be stronger in systems with personal vote. On the other hand, we need to understand whether the pressures to represent what we outline here may differ depending on the experience of discrimination, or the historical stigmatization of groups which may increase reluctance to represent group interests. In this sense, the role of so-called invisible minorities like sexuality or some forms of disability merit investigation. In particular, we see merit in exploring and testing more specific expectations, drawing on the relatively broad understanding presented in this article.

In the interviews, we did not find much sign of 'intrinsic' motivations or pressures that representatives should represent 'their' group. Instead, all the politicians highlighted a recognition of minority needs. It is the awareness and acknowledgment of these minority needs that may come across as 'intrinsic' motivations in field experiments like Broockman (2013). Put differently, future research needs to replicate these field experiments with representatives of the majority group, and find ways to differentiate between awareness of minority needs and motivations to represent the interests of 'their' group. In this sense, we may want to re-evaluate what we call 'intrinsic' motivations in light of the finding how the world of the representatives is much more complex and at times contradictory than what we would expect from electoral incentives (e.g. Sobolewska, McKee and Campbell 2018; Giger, Lanz, and de Vries 2019; Mügge and Runderkamp 2024). To better understand the behaviour of elected representatives and the nature of political representation, we need a better understanding of how representatives are often caught up in multiple and conflicting expectations and pressures that involve different actors and cannot be understood in a simple frame of a 'rational' self-interested focus on re-election.

Supplementary data

Supplementary data is available at *Parliamentary Affairs* online.

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