



The virtuous circle of representation



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ABSTRACT

Theoretical and empirical research shows that political representation is a dynamic process repeatedly connecting citizens and political elites. However, less is known about how citizens alone experience the process of political representation and connect electoral participation with representation. This article combines different literature pertaining to the representative process in a dynamic framework. It explores causality between electoral participation and perceived responsiveness in citizens' minds using unique panel data. By arguing for two-way causality and the existence of a virtuous circle, the paper refines the concepts' relationship beyond traditional conceptions that currently dominate the literature on electoral behaviour and participatory democracy. The results indicate that the representative process may be a self-sustaining experience for citizens over time.

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1. Introduction

Representation is a dynamic process in which citizens participate in elections and representatives are responsive to citizen views and demands (see, for example, Dalton et al., 2011; Manin, 1997; Manin et al., 1999; Pitkin, 1967; Stimson et al., 1995; Wlezien, 1995). While electoral participation and responsiveness are each important on their own, they cannot be seen as mutually exclusive. Theoretical and empirical research shows that electoral participation is associated with responsiveness: political elites are responsive to those who voted (for example, Griffin and Newman, 2005, 2013; Wlezien and Soroka, 2010), and citizens' decisions to vote are also fuelled by political supply (for example, Adams et al., 2006; Geys, 2006; Plane and Gershtenson, 2004). While these existing literatures demonstrate a theoretical and empirical connection between responsiveness and participation, less is known about the precise causal relationship between the concepts in citizens' minds. Does the belief that the political system is responsive make citizens turn out to vote? Or does causality rather travel from the act of voting to feelings of responsiveness in citizens' minds? While perceptions are certainly not an objective reflection of reality, 'perceptions are reality to the voters' (Dalton et al., 2011, 27, emphasis in original) and impact their behaviour. Therefore, this study investigates the relationship between individual-level electoral participation and perceived responsiveness over time to

obtain a firmer grip on the dynamics of the representative process in citizens' minds.

Depending on the research interest, existing studies in the field generally take for granted the respective causal order between individual-level voter turnout and feelings of being represented. For example, the literature on electoral behaviour follows a strong tradition of explaining electoral participation with perceived responsiveness, operationalized through external efficacy (for example, Almond and Verba, 1963; Blais et al., 2014; Karp and Banducci, 2008; Wessels and Schmitt, 2008). Higher levels of perceived responsiveness are considered predictors of higher voting probabilities. Studies in the field of participatory democracy, on the other hand, differ in their approach and regularly argue that feelings of responsiveness are, in fact, a consequence of having casted a vote (see, for instance, Ikeda et al., 2008; Pateman, 1970; Schlozman et al., 1995). Here, the act of voting is thought to trigger feelings of being represented. Empirical studies in both strands of representation literature show time and again that electoral participation and perceived responsiveness share a positive relationship.¹

With these different pieces of theoretical and empirical evidence, existing research might even imply a more complex connection between voter turnout and perceived responsiveness in citizens' minds.

¹ Related studies in the field of vote choice, however, show that low levels of perceived responsiveness can still lead to voter turnout; yet they often result in a vote choice for a protest party (see e.g. Dassonneville, 2012; Southwell and Everest, 1998).

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Indeed, it is implausible that electoral participation and responsiveness as important elements of the representative process would share a simple relationship that predominantly runs one way in citizens' minds. Rather, the wealth of research supporting each of the above views implies a multifaceted and interlocked relationship between voting and perceived responsiveness. Recurring elections and regular efforts of making citizens feel represented suggest a dynamic conception of the positive relationship between voting and perceived responsiveness — a 'virtuous circle' (Brehm and Rahn, 1997; Norris, 2000; Putnam, 1993; Strömbäck and Shehata, 2010). However, this theoretically and empirically plausible dynamic relationship has not been put to test yet.

For the first time, this article more closely studies the constituting individual-level processes and the empirical evidence for a virtuous circle of representation. It tests popular but competing hypotheses from different literature, pertaining both to citizens' experience of political representation in essential ways. Previous studies were restricted by data limitations and were not able to model and test the competing hypotheses in accordance with their theories. Additionally, the article investigates the potential interaction of these hypotheses in a dynamic framework and thus considers them for the first time as compatible rather than competing predictions. To do so, a unique set of high-quality panel data from the Netherlands is used that spans four waves of data collection and two parliamentary elections over a period of only three years. This research design of multiple panel waves over a short period of time and using a probability sample provides the first opportunity to model the individual-level expectations simultaneously and to answer the research questions. The article adds to and integrates three existing literature in the field of political representation: those using electoral participation and perceived responsiveness as independent or dependent variables, those demonstrating the causal mechanisms at play, and those arguing for representation as a dynamic process. It thus also contributes to growing research endeavours in political science of generating dynamic individual-level theories and testing them with high-quality data.

The results highlight the joint importance of electoral participation and responsiveness as central elements of every representative process. Causality between them runs in both directions: (1) casting a vote activates perceived responsiveness, and (2) perceived responsiveness induces voter turnout. Neither relationship emerges as more strongly supported by the data. These findings also hold over two electoral cycles and, therefore, validate the long-running practice of using perceived responsiveness as a predictor of voter turnout as well as voter turnout as a predictor of perceived responsiveness in empirical studies. Additionally, the data support the idea of a virtuous circle of representation: feeling represented activates existing predispositions to vote, and the predispositions to vote prompt people to feel represented. These findings point towards a more dynamic and complex understanding of the relationship between important elements of representative democracy in citizens' minds. Moreover, the results indicate that representation can be a self-sustaining and positive experience for citizens.

The argument develops as follows. The next section elaborates on the theoretical base and argues for a theoretical model that conceives of two commonly used hypotheses as compatible rather than competing. Next, I present the panel data and methods used before analysing the data. The final section summarises the findings and reflects on their implications.

2. The dynamics of representation in citizens' minds

Political representation can be considered an on-going process,

only temporally and substantively structured by elections in which citizens express their preferences and hold representatives accountable for their actions (see, for example, Manin, 1997; Manin et al., 1999). Stimson et al. (1995, 543) famously argued for representation as a continuous, interactive process between citizens' preferences and policy output over time. Specifically, the authors showed that 'policy responds dynamically to public opinion change'. Ever since, theoretical and empirical studies have frequently corroborated the idea of representation as an interactive and dynamic process in which expressed citizen preferences and representatives that are responsive to them form important elements (see, for example, Dalton et al., 2011; Disch, 2011; Manin, 1997; Manin et al., 1999; Mansbridge, 2003; Wlezién, 1995; Wlezién and Soroka, 2010). Conceptualized on the individual level, citizens express their preferences primarily through their vote choice, which necessitates casting a vote in the first place. Additionally, they observe and experience representatives and their actions and form perceptions of responsiveness. The individual-level concepts of electoral participation and perceived responsiveness as well as their relationship are well researched and generally propose two seemingly contradicting causal directions: firstly, perceived responsiveness is a predictor of the probability to vote, and secondly, voting is a predictor of perceived responsiveness.

The causal relationship running from perceived responsiveness to voter turnout mostly finds support in rational theories of electoral behaviour. According to Downs' (1957) famous calculus of voting, the expected utility of voting is crucial for making the walk to the polling booth worthwhile. The expected utility of casting a vote is influenced by past experience and the choices on offer. Voters are more likely to cast a vote for a party or candidate, and hence turn out to vote, if their evaluation of the party's or candidate's past performance is positive (Blais et al., 2014; Clarke et al., 2004). Citizens estimate a higher expected utility if they benefitted from the party or candidate and its policies in the past. Past benefit is directly translated into expected future benefit and a voter then develops a view of which party or candidate is preferable to others. It means that a higher proximity of policy preferences between a voter and a party or candidate likely induces voter turnout (Wessels and Schmitt, 2008). This is because electoral participation entails a conscious choice for one candidate or party and against all others. Citizens cast a vote to express their support for a specific party or a specific candidate (Aarts et al., 2011; Blais et al., 2014). Conversely, research has also shown that citizens are more likely to abstain if the candidates are not close to their own preferences (e.g. Adams and Merrill, 2003). It means that it is not necessarily specific parties or candidates and voters' proximity to them that positively affect the expected utility to vote. Rather, it appears to be crucial whether *any* of the parties or candidates offer expected utility. In that sense '[v]oter participation is a rough, though consequential indicator of whether voters perceive elections to be meaningful' (Wessels and Schmitt, 2008, 21, emphasis in original). Therefore, the expected benefit of electoral participation depends, amongst others, on the extent to which citizens feel competing parties or candidates offer real alternatives, as well as on the perceived past benefit from existing parties.

Both of these factors relate to an individual's feeling of being represented or the level of perceived responsiveness. The perception of having at least one good option to choose from translates into a citizen's feeling of being represented. Similarly, if voters feel that they benefit from policy output, a high level of perceived responsiveness can be inferred. Both feelings have a positive effect on an individual's expected utility of voting.

From this perspective perceived responsiveness precedes electoral participation in citizens' experiences with the representative

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