

Capital and Perceived Representation by Candidates in India, Poland, Sweden, and the United Kingdom

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Note: The survey data gathered for this article will be made available via PURE.

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Abstract

Whether people feel like those they elect represent them can be an important factor in how they engage with legislatures. Indeed, one of the main ways that people engage with parliaments is by contacting their elected representatives, so whether or not they feel like they have common ground with parliamentarians is an important question. This is especially so in contexts where there is a prevailing view of a gap between the public and politicians, in which the latter are ‘out of touch’ with the former. Building on previous research about the characteristics that the public favour when electing representatives (Campbell and Cowley 2014; Campbell and Cowley 2018; Carnes and Lupu 2016; Vivyan et al. 2020) , this paper investigates whether candidates’ stocks of economic, social, and cultural capital (Bourdieu 2000) affect how descriptively representative and competent they are perceived to be by the electorate. Using a conjoint experiment fielded in India, Poland, Sweden, and the United Kingdom, the paper seeks to investigate whether the signals about their capital that politicians send, which act as indicators of their privilege, are a factor in how the public view them in a range of contexts. The paper is at the development stage so focuses on the theory and proposed methodology, including the survey instrument.

Keywords: representation, signals, capital, privilege, conjoint experiment, multi-country survey.

1 Introduction

In democracies, the importance of the representation of the public by those they elect is reflected in the wide range of literature on the topic (aili'mari'tripp'global'2008; Barbet 2020; Bartels 2018; Campbell and Cowley 2014; Dassonneville and McAllister 2018; Ezrow et al. 2011; Heath 2015; Heath 2018; Johnson, Oppenheimer, and Selin 2012; Lovenduski and Norris 2003; Reher 2021; Schlozman, Brady, and Verba 2020; Sobolewska and Begum 2020). The literature frequently draws on Hannah Pitkin's (Pitkin 1967) distinction between descriptive and substantive representation, and whether the former leads to the latter. When dealing with the descriptive form the focus is often on representation of demographic groups such as women (aili'mari'tripp'global'2008; Dassonneville and McAllister 2018; Lovenduski and Norris 2003), ethnic minorities (Johnson, Oppenheimer, and Selin 2012; Sobolewska and Begum 2020), and working class people (Heath 2015; Heath 2018). The representation of these groups is a key purpose of democracy, but we also need to take account of the signals that politicians send about whether they are like the public that they seek to represent.

In this article I argue that, beyond demographic traits, the signals that politicians send about their statuses and backgrounds are used by the public to make inferences about how descriptively representative they are. Specifically, I argue that people use signals relating to economic, social, and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986) to assess whether other people are like them (part of an in-group) or unlike them (part of an out-group). The three forms of capital, considered holistically, are widely overlooked in political science (Greenwood-Hau 2021) but the signals that politicians send about their financial circumstances, who they know, and their pastimes can reveal a lot about their statuses and backgrounds. These signals can assist the public in forming their sense of whether, and how, politicians are like or unlike them, and thus their sense of how descriptively representative they are. The public's sense of whether politicians are like them is important because it can shape their candidate preferences (Campbell and Cowley 2014), but also because it may have implications for their

views of how well the wider political system is functioning.

2 Representation

In her seminal work on representation, Pitkin (Pitkin 1967) differentiated between four different ways in which the public could be represented by those they elect. Formalistic representation relates to the systems that are in place to authorise representatives and hold them accountable. Descriptive representation covers whether elected representatives 'look like' their constituents in key respects, usually focusing on demographic characteristics. Symbolic representation focuses on whether representatives 'stand for' those who elect them in terms of the ways they speak and what they talk about publicly. Finally, substantive representation is concerned with the behaviour of representatives once they are elected, in terms of whether the legislation that they support or pass, and the topics that they spend their time on in the legislature, reflect the positions of the public or groups within it.

A great deal of literature has focused on substantive representation, descriptive representation, and the links between the two. In relation to substantive representation, the key indicator is often how close politicians are to the median policy positions of voters (Bartels 2018; Ezrow et al. 2011), but work has also identified gaps between representatives and the public in terms of values (Bale et al. 2020), preferences for types of government (Bertsou and Caramani 2020), and the structuring of beliefs (Barbet 2020). In terms of descriptive representation, the focus has often been on key demographic cleavages such as gender (Aili Mari Tripp *Global* 2008; Dassonneville and McAllister 2018; Lovenduski and Norris 2003), ethnicity (Johnson, Oppenheimer, and Selin 2012; Sobolewska and Begum 2020), class (Bartels 2018; Heath 2015; Heath 2018), and disability (Reher 2021), as well as the links between those traits and substantive representation.

Beyond its contribution to substantive representation, descriptive representation also has implications for the political participation of groups within society. The decline in class-

voting (Lipset and Rokkan 1967) is often attributed to the movement of party positions (Evans and Tilley 2012) and the changing sizes of classes (Best 2011). However, in the context of the United Kingdom, it has also been shown to stem from declining social representation of working class voters, which has driven them away from the Labour Party and away from voting more generally (Heath 2015; Heath 2018). These findings fit within the wider literature on lower participation in politics amongst marginalised groups (Anwar 2001; Fox and Lawless 2010; Leighley and Vedlitz 1999; Lowndes 2004), which has also been linked to the resources that they have available to them (Schlozman, Brady, and Verba 2020).

Resources, and the lack thereof, not only influence whether and how people participate but can also act as signals about the profiles of politicians. If politicians are distinctive in terms of their financial circumstances, social connections, or pastimes, those signals can activate identities, such as those relating to class, and make them politically salient (Bourdieu 1986; Bourdieu 1987). This is especially so in the context of growing inequality (Burkhauser et al. 2016), which shapes perceptions of inequality (Lübker 2004) and has contributed to support for radical parties (Jay et al. 2019), particularly amongst people with a sense of low status (Gidron and Hall 2017; Gidron and Hall 2020).

The signals that politicians send about their resources also matter because people link politicians' characteristics to their abilities (Huddy and Terkildsen 1993) and have preferences regarding those characteristics (Campbell and Cowley 2018). In other words, it matters to the public whether those they elect represent their views, but also what the statuses and backgrounds of those representatives are. Particularly important considerations are the education, previous occupations, and local residence of politicians (Campbell and Cowley 2014), which relate to their qualification to navigate the world of politics, their experience of the world outside politics, and their ability to speak for those they represent. In other words, just as voters use party cues to infer the positions of politicians (Conover and Feldman 1982), they can use the backgrounds of politicians to infer how competent they are. Thus, it is important to consider the implication of politicians' stocks of capital both for whether they

are seen as descriptively representative and whether they are seen as competent.

3 Capital

The factors identified as relating to political participation in resource-based models (Schlozman, Brady, and Verba 2020) fit within the wider concept of capital, and specifically the three forms of capital identified by Pierre Bourdieu: economic, social, and cultural (Bourdieu 1986). The time and money that enable some people to participate in politics are components of economic capital, requests to participate constitute social capital, and psychological engagement with politics is a manifestation of cultural capital. Each form of capital is wider than those specific facets, and they are indicators of people's statuses and backgrounds. As such, people can also use signals about capital when making inferences about the statuses and backgrounds of others, including politicians.

The importance of capital as a manifestation of class, and as a factor relating to political participation has been observed in the United States (Katz-Gerro 1999; Friedland et al. 2007; Laurison 2015; Laurison 2016), United Kingdom (Mike Savage, Devine, Cunningham, Taylor, et al. 2013; Mike Savage, Devine, Cunningham, Friedman, et al. 2015; Michael Savage 2015), Denmark (Harrits et al. 2010; Harrits 2013), and France (Bourdieu 2000). Others have found that the capital possessed by people is related to characteristics including gender, ethnicity, and age (Bennett et al. 2009), and that it acts as a signifier of status rather than class (Shipman 2004; Tak Wing Chan and John H. Goldthorpe 2005; T. W. Chan and J. H. Goldthorpe 2006; Tak Wing Chan and John H. Goldthorpe 2007). Capital can also be viewed as a manifestation of the wider concept of privilege, which encompasses the different experiences and advantages that people have as a consequence of characteristics including age, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, and disability (**crenshaw'demarginalizing'2015**; Kimmel and Ferber 2017).

Perspectives that do not draw on Bourdieu's work have emphasised the importance of

economic and social capital for political participation (Lewis-Beck, Nadeau, and Foucault 2011; Partheymüller and Schmitt-Beck 2012; Putnam 1995; Solt 2008) meaning that, beyond education (Kam and Palmer 2008), cultural capital in particular has been overlooked in the study of public opinion and political behaviour. This may be because critics argue that focusing on cultural capital takes attention away from key issues of economic inequality (Dorling 2013), and that it is theoretically and empirically unsound to treat cultural capital as constitutive of class (Mills 2015). However, these critics do not argue that capital is not a manifestation of privilege, nor that it cannot act as a signal of status and background. Thus, whether it is reflective or constitutive of class, the capital held by politicians can be used by the public to inform their views of how descriptively representative those who stand for election are.

Capital may also act as an important signal because it is related to mobility into elite occupations (Friedman, Laurison, and Miles 2015) such as being an elected representative. Thus, alongside characteristics such as age, gender, ethnicity, education, and prior occupation, the capital possessed by politicians may be used as signifier of whether they are like those who they seek to represent. In other words, when constituents assess how well a candidate can represent them, it is useful to know whether they earn £100,000 working as a lawyer or £25,000 working in a call centre, have social circles including investment bankers and IT consultants or shop workers and waiting staff, and spend their spare time going to cricket games and the opera or football matches and the pub.

4 Signals and Groups

If we think of the decision about whether or not to support a candidate in terms of the calculus of voting (Riker and Ordeshook 1968), the voter's view may be influenced by both the policy positions and the characteristics of the candidate. In the case of the latter, we are dealing with the expressive element of the calculus, or the 'D' term (Blais 2000; Blais, Young,

and Lapp 2000; Hamlin and Jennings 2011), though it may also have implications for the benefits that voters estimate they will receive if the candidate is elected (or the 'B' term). In other words, voters may take some expressive satisfaction from supporting someone 'like me,' but they may also think that someone 'like me' is more likely to deliver benefits to them.

Given that voters often do not have full information on the options available to them, they may use the characteristics of a candidate as a heuristic (Simon 1985; Lupia 1994) to create a simplified view (Caprara, Barbaranelli, and Zimbardo 2002) of what they are like, and what they will do if elected. Such heuristics are more likely to be used by people with lower levels of interest in politics, who are less likely to have strong party identities and more likely to be 'movers', which is to say more likely to update who they support based on new information (Arzheimer and Schoen 2016).

When dealing with expressive motivations and heuristics we are in the domain of System 1 (Kahneman 2003; Kahneman 2011), or the disposition system, which makes quick and sometimes biased decisions that are more likely to be influenced by emotion (Marcus, Neuman, and MacKuen 2000). This contrasts with the slower, more detached and considered processes of System 2, which may be triggered by the surveillance system when habitual behaviour is not appropriate to the circumstances. These two-system accounts of human decision-making allow for the reconciliation of the 'as if' models of rational choice and the 'black box' models of political psychology (McGraw 2000).

Within the 'black box,' people use signals to make judgements about other people and themselves (Bem 1970; Conover and Feldman 1982). The perceptions that people form based on signals are often inaccurate (Duffy 2019), and much of that inaccuracy stems from systematic errors in human estimation (Landy, Guay, and Marghetis 2018). Amongst those systematic errors is a heightened attention to negative signals (Lau 1982), which implies that signals of the difference of politicians from the public will have more impact than signals of their similarity. Given that people do not retain all of the information that they receive in

detail but instead sustain impressions of politicians (Lodge, Steenbergen, and Brau 1995), they are likely to adjust impressions to a greater extent when negative signals are received, for instance about the economic, social, and cultural distinctiveness of politicians.

Such signals activate identities and shape whether others are seen as members of an in-group or an out-group (Tajfel 1982; Bourdieu 1985; Bourdieu 1987). Once activated, identities can be powerful drivers of how people react out-groups and their behaviour (Major et al. 2002) and to inequality (Roex, Huijts, and Sieben 2019), partly because of beliefs about their own statuses and the reasons for them (O'Brien and Major 2005). Given that inequality reduces social trust and cohesion (Jay et al. 2019), indicators of politicians being in a high status out-group are likely to lead to them being viewed less favourably. This also implies that people are less likely to project other positive characteristics onto them (Sherrod 1971; Martinez 1988). This is especially likely to be the case amongst people with low-status identities, who are more likely to be alive to inequality and privilege in various domains (Rosette and Tost 2013).

Receiving information about a politician's status and background, in the form of signals about their economic, social, and cultural capital, is a form of emphasis framing (Cacciatore, Scheufele, and Iyengar 2018), and people can use that information to make inferences (Huddy and Terkildsen 1993), including about the descriptive representativeness and competence of candidates. Indeed, people are particularly responsive to framing that highlights a divide between them and an elite out-group (Bos et al. 2020), such as politicians. That such frames relate to expressive motivations that function through System 1 is also reflected in people's heightened responsiveness to expressive rather than utilitarian frames (Maio and Olson 1995). The effects of frames are also moderated by people's traits, and they have a greater effect amongst people with moderate or lower levels of political knowledge (Arzheimer and Schoen 2016; Lecheler and Vreese 2011), as well as amongst those whose political beliefs predispose them to be sympathetic (Marx and Schumacher 2016; Cacciatore, Scheufele, and Iyengar 2018). Finally, people's responses are shaped by context, and frames are more influential

when people are cross-pressured by material conditions and therefore open to competing perspectives (Ardanaz, Murillo, and Pinto 2013).

5 Hypotheses

In light of the role of economic, social, and cultural capital as signals of status, and thus of in-group or out-group membership, I expect that candidates with high-status capital will be seen as less representative. Specifically:

- **Hypothesis 1a:** Members of the public perceive candidates with high economic capital as less descriptively representative than candidates without high economic capital.
- **Hypothesis 1b:** Members of the public perceive candidates with high-status social capital as less descriptively representative than candidates without high-status social capital.
- **Hypothesis 1c:** Members of the public perceive candidates with high-status cultural capital as less descriptively representative than candidates without high-status cultural capital.

By contrast, given that high status is seen as a result of things such as hard work by a significant portion of the population, I expect that candidates with high-status capital will be seen as more competent than candidates without high-status capital. Specifically:

- **Hypothesis 2a:** Members of the public perceive candidates with high economic capital as more competent than candidates without high economic capital.
- **Hypothesis 2b:** Members of the public perceive candidates with high-status social capital as more competent than candidates without high-status social capital.
- **Hypothesis 2c:** Members of the public perceive candidates with high-status cultural capital as more competent than candidates without high-status cultural capital.

In light of the above, and stemming from the links between descriptive representation and powerful group identities, I expect:

- **Hypothesis 3a:** Members of the public are less likely to vote for candidates with high economic capital than for candidates without high economic capital.
- **Hypothesis 3b:** Members of the public are less likely to vote for candidates with high-status social capital than for candidates without high-status social capital.
- **Hypothesis 3c:** Members of the public are less likely to vote for candidates with high-status cultural capital than for candidates without high-status cultural capital.

I expect the effects of candidate capital on the likelihood of being voted for by members of the public to be mediated as follows:

- **Hypothesis 4a:** The negative effects of candidates holding high economic and high-status social and cultural capital on the likelihood of members of the public voting for them are mediated by perceived descriptive representativeness and perceived competence.
- **Hypothesis 4b:** The positive effect of perceived descriptive representativeness on the likelihood of members of the public voting for candidates is larger than the positive effect of perceived competence on the likelihood of members of the public voting for candidates.
- **Hypothesis 4c:** The negative effects of candidates holding high economic and high-status social and cultural capital on their perceived descriptive representativeness amongst members of the public are larger than the positive effects of candidates holding such capital on their perceived competence amongst members of the public.

Finally, given that the above effects are argued to function on the basis of psychological processes relating to group identities, I expect them to be observed in India, Poland, Sweden, and the United Kingdom:

- **Hypothesis 5:** The preceding hypotheses hold in all four countries under study.

6 Methodology

To test the effect of signals regarding candidates' economic, social, and cultural capital on perceptions of how descriptively representative and competent they are, a conjoint experiment (Hainmueller, Hopkins, and Yamamoto 2014) will be included in online surveys fielded by YouGov in India, Poland, Sweden, and the United Kingdom. Such survey experiments have some of the benefits of field experiments (Rooij, Green, and Gerber 2009), in the sense that they do not take place in the artificial setting of the laboratory and can be fielded to large and representative samples. In this case, the experiment will be fielded to at least 1,000 respondents in each country, and quotas will be used to ensure that respondents are representative of the populations in Poland, Sweden, and the United Kingdom, and of the online population in India.

In fielding conjoint survey experiments to investigate the impact of candidate characteristics on public preferences for them, this approach builds on the work of Campbell and Cowley (Campbell and Cowley 2014), Carnes and Lupu (Carnes and Lupu 2016), and Vivyan et al. (Vivyan et al. 2020), and extends it in two directions. First, it tests the effects of signals about capital alongside traits that have been investigated previously, such as gender, occupation, and education. Second, it tests those effects in four contexts with distinct institutional arrangements and levels of inequality. Specifically:

- India is a quasi-federal parliamentary democracy that uses single member plurality voting to elect its lower legislative chamber (Lok Sabha) and single transferable voting amongst state legislatures to elect its upper legislative chamber (Rajya Sabha). The country experienced colonial rule by the United Kingdom prior to independence in 1949, and currently has moderate levels of income inequality and high levels of wealth inequality, both with their roots in a particular historical social hierarchy (the caste

system), by global standards.

- Poland is a unitary parliamentary, or semi-presidential, democracy that uses proportional representation to elect the lower legislative chamber (Sejm) and single member plurality voting to elect the upper legislative chamber (Senate). The country has experience of a non-democratic communist regime that sustained low levels of inequality, and the transition to a capitalist economy during the 1990s, and currently has low (but growing, (Bukowski and Novokmet 2019)) levels of both income and wealth inequality by global standards.
- Sweden is a unitary parliamentary democracy with a unicameral legislature (Riksdag) elected using a proportional representation system. The country has a long social democratic tradition (Pfeffer and Hällsten 2012), including a dominant social democratic party, and currently has low levels of income inequality and high levels of wealth inequality by global standards.
- The United Kingdom is a unitary parliamentary democracy, but with devolved administrations in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, and has a lower legislative chamber (House of Commons) elected by single member plurality voting and an appointed upper chamber. The country is a long established democracy with a political tradition that has been influenced by neoliberal policies (Grasso et al. 2019), and currently has low-to-moderate levels of income and wealth inequality by global standards.

The different contexts of the four countries in term of institutions, ideology, and inequality may shape how people respond to signals that candidates are in high or low status in- or out-groups (Benoit and Laver 2006; Dalton and Anderson 2010; Lübker 2004; Roex, Huijts, and Sieben 2019). Alternatively, as hypothesised, given that some collections of beliefs are associated in multiple contexts (Bertsou and Caramani 2020), it may be the case that such signals plug into beliefs and feelings about inequality between in- and out-groups in similar ways across contexts. Fielding the conjoint experiments in these four countries allows us to

test whether signals about candidates' economic, social, and cultural capital have similar or different effects in different contexts.

The following example will be the content of the conjoint survey experiment in the United Kingdom, and differs slightly in India, Poland, and Sweden. The survey instruments for all four countries are attached with this paper. Within the surveys fielded by YouGov, the following scenario will be presented to respondents two times, with candidate characteristics varying at random each time. Please imagine that the [Labour / Conservative*] Party has given people in your area a say over which candidate they should select to stand in the next general election. Two people who grew up in the area have put themselves forward and you must decide which one would do a better job of representing you:

- **Candidate 1.** [Name] is [a lawyer* / a teacher / an electrician / a call-centre worker] who [left school after gaining [her / his] A Levels / gained a university degree*] and then pursued [her / his] career, and currently earns [£25,000 / £50,000 / £100,000*] per year. [She / He] remains friends with some of the people who [she / he] grew up with, many of whom have gone on to work [in professions such as law and medicine / in occupations relating to IT and finance / in occupations such as plumbing and building / as staff in shops, cafes, and restaurants]. In [her / his] spare time [she / he] enjoys [going to the cinema / going to watch football / going to art galleries / going to the opera], and [she / he] is particularly interested in policy issues relating to [health / the economy / immigration and asylum / the environment]. [She / He] is [on the left / a moderate / on the right*] within the [Labour / Conservative*] Party.
- **Candidate 2.** [Name] is [a lawyer* / a teacher / an electrician / a call-centre worker] who [left school after gaining [her / his] A Levels / gained a university degree*] and then pursued [her / his] career, and currently earns [£25,000 / £50,000 / £100,000*] per year. [She / He] remains friends with some of the people who [she / he] grew up with, many of whom have gone on to work [in professions such as law and medicine

/ in occupations relating to IT and finance / in occupations such as plumbing and building / as staff in shops, cafes, and restaurants]. In [her / his] spare time [she / he] enjoys [going to the cinema / going to watch football / going to art galleries / going to the opera], and [she / he] is particularly interested in policy issues relating to [health / the economy / immigration and asylum / the environment]. [She / He] is [on the left / a moderate / on the right*] within the [Labour / Conservative*] Party.

Question 1. On a scale from 1 to 7, where 1 indicates that the candidate is not at all like you and 7 indicates that the candidate is completely like you, how would you rate each of the two candidates?

Not at all				Completely		
like you				like you		
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

- [Name]

- [Name]

Question 2. On a scale from 1 to 7, where 1 indicates that the candidate is not at all competent and 7 indicates that the candidate is completely competent, how would you rate

each of the two candidates?

Not at all							Completely
competent							competent
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	

- [Name]

- [Name]

Question C3. And which of the above candidates would you be more likely to vote for?

- [Name]

- [Name]

Following the two pairs of candidates in the above format, respondents will see a third pair of candidates in with slightly different introductory text and concomitant minor changes to the candidate descriptions, but followed by the same three questions as above:

Please now imagine that you are voting in a general election. Two people who grew up in your area are standing and you must decide which one would do a better job of representing you:

- **Candidate 5.** The [Labour / Conservative*] Party candidate is [Name]. [She / He] is [a lawyer* / a teacher / an electrician / a call-centre worker] who [left school after gaining [her / his] A Levels / gained a university degree*] and then pursued [her / his] career, and currently earns [£25,000 / £50,000 / £100,000*] per year. [She / He] remains friends with some of the people who [she / he] grew up with, many of whom have gone on to work [in professions such as law and medicine / in occupations relating to IT and finance / in occupations such as plumbing and building / as staff in shops, cafes, and restaurants]. In [her / his] spare time [she / he] enjoys [going to the cinema / going to watch football / going to art galleries / going to the opera], and [she / he] is

particularly interested in policy issues relating to [health / the economy / immigration and asylum / the environment]. [She / He] is [on the left / a moderate / on the right*] within the [Labour / Conservative*] Party.

- **Candidate 6.** The [Labour / Conservative*] Party candidate is [Name]. [She / He] is [a lawyer* / a teacher / an electrician / a call-centre worker] who [left school after gaining [her / his] A Levels / gained a university degree*] and then pursued [her / his] career, and currently earns [£25,000 / £50,000 / £100,000*] per year. [She / He] remains friends with some of the people who [she / he] grew up with, many of whom have gone on to work [in professions such as law and medicine / in occupations relating to IT and finance / in occupations such as plumbing and building / as staff in shops, cafes, and restaurants]. In [her / his] spare time [she / he] enjoys [going to the cinema / going to watch football / going to art galleries / going to the opera], and [she / he] is particularly interested in policy issues relating to [health / the economy / immigration and asylum / the environment]. [She / He] is [on the left / a moderate / on the right*] within the [Labour / Conservative*] Party.

Finally, after seeing all three pairs of candidates, respondents will be asked the following question:

Question 4. Imagine that the people you know well are on different rungs of the ladder shown below. Those with the lowest status are on rung 0. Those with the highest status are on rung 10. In your opinion, which rung are you on?

- 10 Highest status
- 9
- 8
- 7

- 6
- 5
- 4
- 3
- 2
- 1
- 0 Lowest status
- 99 Don't know

With a sample of 1,000, the choice task repeated three times, a target effect size of 0.05, and the highest number of variable levels being four, the power of the experiment in each country is 0.86 (Lukac and Stefanelli 2020). This means that, with a sample of 1,000, an effect size of 0.05 relating to a four-category variable will be correctly identified 86% of the time.

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