THE REPRESENTATIVE CLAIM
The Representative Claim

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OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
For my parents, Rhyllis and Jim Saward
# Contents

**List of Figures and Box** viii  
**Acknowledgments** ix  

**Introduction** 1  
1. Remainders and opportunities: recent theories of political representation 8  
2. Mapping the representative claim 35  
3. Variations and resources 57  
4. The elected and the unelected 82  
5. Debates and interventions 111  
6. Representation, legitimacy, and democracy 138  

**Notes** 169  
**Bibliography** 189  
**Index** 201
List of Figures

2.1 Representation and binary distinctions ........................................ 41
2.2 Constituency and audience ......................................................... 50
2.3 Four conceptions of audience–constituency links .......................... 50
3.1 Directions of representative claims .............................................. 63
3.2 Nested representative claims ..................................................... 64
6.1 Nested domains of representation .............................................. 142

Box

2.1 The general form of the representative claim .................................. 36
Acknowledgments

In preparing this book I have benefited hugely from opportunities to present and exchange ideas with a great many colleagues. Formal and informal discussions in a variety of settings have prompted me to revise or try to clarify my thinking, and in that regard I would like to offer my sincere thanks to Rebecca Abers, Henrik Bang, David Beetham, Ingrid van Biezen, Geoffrey Brennan, Ian Budge, Dario Castiglione, Karen Celis, Sarah Childs, John Clarke, Drude Dalherup, Andy Dobson, John Dryzek, Torben Bech Dyrberg, Robyn Eckersley, Bob Goodin, Yasmin Gunaratnam, Richard Katz, John Keane, Margaret Keck, Vivien Lowndes, Georg Lutz, Tony McGrew, Fiona Mackay, Jane Mansbridge, Michelle Micheletti, Mike Mills, Laura Montanaro, Janet Newman, Raia Prokhovnik, Andrew Rehfeld, Jennifer Rubenstein, Marian Sawyer, Philippe Schmitter, Graham Smith, Judith Squires, Sophie Stoffel, John Street, Grahame Thompson, Lasse Thomassen, Jacob Torfing, John Uhr, Nadia Urbinati, Mark Warren and Albert Weale. Three anonymous referees for Oxford University Press offered exceptionally helpful and detailed comments on an earlier version of the manuscript, and I would like to thank them for their investment of time and effort.

There is widespread renewed interest in political representation, and I am grateful to organisers and participants in workshops and conferences in the UK and elsewhere for the chance to present my ideas. Spending three months as Visiting Fellow in Social and Political Theory at the Australian National University in 2005 gave me a welcome opportunity to explore early versions of these ideas, for which I owe thanks to Bob Goodin in particular. I would also like to single out others for particular opportunities provided to me: John Keane, Sonia Alonso and Wolfgang Merkel from WZB Berlin and Westminster University for the Berlin and Lisbon workshops on The Future of Representative Democracy; Laura Montanaro and fellow participants in the APSA Boston (2008) workshop Bono and Beyond; Stephen Macedo, Nadia Urbinati and Mark Warren for the workshop Beyond Elections at Princeton University (2008); Margaret Keck, Leonardo Avritzer and Rebecca Abers for Rethinking Representation:
A North-South Dialogue at the Bellagio Study and Conference Center (2008); Karen Celis and Sarah Childs for the ECPR workshop on The Substantive Representation of Women in Helsinki (2007); and Kris Deschouwer and colleagues from the Vrije Universiteit Brussel for the opportunity to explore research implications of the representative claim perspective. I am grateful to the Open University, not least for its enlightened approach to research leave, and for the high levels of support and debate with colleagues in the OU’s Department of Politics and International Studies and the wider Faculty of Social Sciences. Particular thanks go to Fran Ford and Marilyn Denman in the POLIS office for all their support. I am grateful to Dominic Byatt for his thoughtful approach to the book at Oxford University Press, to Louise Sprake and Lizzy Suffling at OUP for helpful guidance through the production process, and to James Button for his effective proofreading. Sarah Driver’s support and encouragement has been a source of strength throughout the project. All of that adds up to more help than I deserve, so let me be clear in saying that any remaining faults fall at my door.

Index

accountability 12, 27, 31, 91–2, 165
aesthetic representation, see representation, aesthetic
Africa 82, 148
Ahern, B. 67
Alcoff, L. 16, 78
Amnesty International 27
Anderson, B. 51
Andeweg, R. B. 105
animals, representation of see nonhuman animals
Ankersmit, F. R. 68, 79, 107
anticipatory representation 20–1, 92
Antigone 65
associative democracy 143
audience (in representative claim) 18, 25, 27–8, 36, 48–56, 66–7, 76, 112–13, 119
Austin, J. 11
Australia 67, 119, 161
authenticity 103–4, 117
authorization 12, 103–4, 160
Bachrach, P. 152
Bagchi, A. 106, 166
Bang, H. P. 108
Baratz, M. 152
Barker, R. 61
Barnett, C. 78
Barthes, R. 40
Bartolini, S. 131
Bauman, Z. 16, 42
Becker, H. S. 78
Beetham, D. 87, 99
Bergman, T. 105
van Biezen, I. 127, 129, 131
Bingham Powell, G. 44
bioregional paradigm 114
Bohman, J. 165
Bono 61, 82, 99, 148–50
Botswana 96
Bourdieu, P. 51–2
British Medical Association 62
Budge, I. 165
Burke, E. 10, 70, 85, 93
Burma/Myanmar 156
Capitol Building, Washington, D.C. 91
Cavell, S. 11
Celis, K. 120, 124–6
Chabal, P. 57, 75, 103, 147
China 156
Chraibi, D. 62
citizen representative 165–7
citizenship, political 101, 125, 165–7, 185
citizens’ initiative 165
citizens’ jury 164–5
citizen standpoint 147
civil service 97
claim, representative see representative claim
Clinton, B. 67
codes, cultural see representation, cultural
Cohen, J. 78
Coleman, S. 55
Index

Combs-Schilling, M. E. 96
complex representation 164–5
collection, modes of 104–6
consent 89–90, 97
critical actors and critical claimants 124–6
Dahl, R. A. 84, 146, 155, 164
Dalai Lama 96, 102
Daloz, J-P. 57, 75, 103, 147
Darfur 101
definitional fallacy 31
De Gaulle, C. 91
delegate representation, see roles, representative
deliberative democracy 3, 83, 113, 165–7, 180, 186–7
deliberative poll 100
democracy 1, 85, 96, 154–68
and representation 12, 139–40, 160–8
democratic representation 25, 141–3, 164–5
democratic delegation 104
democratic institutions, design of 164–5
Derrida, J. 15, 70, 79–80, 136
descriptive representation 12, 72, 99–100
difference, politics of 28
direct democracy 160–2
discursive representation 185–6
dissent 108–9
Dobson, A. 31, 112–20
dog whistle politics 46, 58, 90
Downs, A. 90
Dryzek, J. S. 108, 114–20
Dyrberg, T. B. 108
Eastern Europe 108
Eckersley, R. E. 113–20
Eckstein, H. 105
elective representation 24, 65, 73–4, 82–110, 143, 152 see also non-elective representation
electoral systems 87–9
Emerson, R. W. 188
environmental defenders’ office 115
equality, political 86–7
Eulau, H. 44, 71
European Union 84

fascist theory of representation 13, 63
Fenno, R. F. 51–2, 67–8, 132
fictional entities, and representation 121
Fieschi, C. 136
Fishkin, J. S. 90, 100, 164–5
Frank, B. 22
Franklin River 119
future generations, representation of 112–20
Geldof, B. 74, 99
Ghana 96
Goffman, E. 67–8, 70, 132
Goodin, R. E. 30, 58, 90, 100, 113–20
Grant 27
Greenpeace 27
green political theory 112–20
Guinier, L. 44
Gutmann, A. 159
gyroscopic representation 21–2, 92
Index

Hall, S. 75, 77, 123
Harrison, N. 62
Hinchliffe, S. 115
Hirschman, A. O. 143
Hirst, P. 143
Hobbes, T. 10, 91
Holden, B. 31
House of Chiefs 96
House of Commons 81
House of Lords 105
Howard, M. 46
Hobbes, T. 10, 91
Holden, B. 31
House of Chiefs 96
House of Commons 81
House of Lords 105
Howard, M. 46
Hudson, A. 27, 98

identity 77–8
independence of claimants 106–9, 125
INGOs 27
interests 44–5, 74, 97–9, 113–14, 129–30, 148
interpretation 153–4, 183–4
Iranian Guardian Council 96
Iraq 2, 99
Italy 161
judgment, political 30, 145–51, 154–60, 164
Kadeer, R. 156
Karps, P. D. 44, 71
Keating, P. 67
Keohane, R. 27
King, M. L. 28, 99
Klee, P. 51, 174
Kosovo 101
Kymlicka, W. 164
Laslett, P. 165
Latour, B. 51, 79
legitimacy, democratic 84, 143–60
legitimacy, political 26, 61, 96
Libya 27
Lijphart, A. 129
Luskin, R. 90, 100, 164
McKay, F. 125
Madison, J. 10
Mair, P. 127, 129, 131–2
Majone, G. 84, 106
Make Poverty History 82
maker of representations 13, 16, 45–8, 53, 117–20
Manin, B. 55, 74, 100
Mansbridge, J. 19–24, 26, 31, 44, 62, 89, 91–2, 99, 122, 163, 165
March, J. G. 98, 106
Marin, L. 47–48
Marx, K. 37
Menzies, R. 67
metaphor, use in theory 11–12, 68, 118–20, 181–2
Mexico 100
Micheletti, M. 101, 108
Mill, J. S. 118–19
Miller, A. 67, 69
Mills, W. J. 122
misrepresentation 91–2, 180
monarchy 96
Montanaro, L. 160
Morocco 62, 96
Muller, W. 105
Muscovici, S. 43
nation-state and representation 26–7, 94
nature 112–20
Netherlands, the networks 105–6
New Zealand 161
Nigeria 156
nonelective representation 24, 65, 82–110 see also elective representation range of 93–4
nonhuman animals, representation of 112–20
normative political theory 24, 32, 42, 118, 146–7, 184–5
No Sweat movement 108
Nozick, R. 97, 162
Obama, B. 93
object (in representative claim) 36, 46–8, 74, 112–13, 116–17
Ogoni 156
Olsen, J. P. 98, 106
open society 154–6, 165–7
ordinary language philosophy 11
Osipovic, D. 69–70
Parkinson, J. 99
parties, political, and representation 126–37, 161
popular mode 129–30
reflexive mode 133–5
statal mode 131–3
performance, see representative claim perspectives, social 28
Phillips, A. 30–1, 40, 44, 88, 122–5, 165
Putkin, H. F. 10–19, 26–7, 32, 47, 75, 85, 123, 139–40, 163, 168
Plotke, D. 162–3
Poland 51
political representation, see representation, political
polity 122
polyarchy 84, 155, 180
portraits, see representation, aesthetic
poverty, 157–8
Prendergast, C. 79
principal-agent model 20, 72, 104–5, 163 see also roles, representative
promissory representation 19–20, 92, 165
provisionality of judgment 153–4, 159–60
Przeworski, A. 74
quotas for women 121
Rancière, J. 55, 80
random selection 100, 164–5
Rawls, J. 97, 117, 147, 169–70
Reagan, R. 67, 69
referendum 161, 165
referent (in representative claim) 36, 51, 74, 79, 112–13
Rehfled, A. 25–8, 32, 55–6
Rehg, W. 165
Rembrandt 74
representation as presence and event 39–43
representation, aesthetic 13–14, 51–2, 68, 73–5, 92, 116, 132
representation, cultural 75–7
representation, political across society 141–3
active and passive conceptions 12–13
binary distinctions 41
as constitutive 14, 17, 20, 28–9
debates over 111–37
as fact and process 26
as first-best option 162–3
history of idea 4–6
limits of existing theories 9
negative aspects 52
nested 91
patterns of 94
staging and setting of 176
Index

as substantive acting for 12–13

taxonomies and typologies 4, 19, 33, 72 see also roles, representative

ubiquity of 79–81, 163

representational art 14

representative claim

acceptance of 151–3

authenticity and 78–9

basic form 36–8

contestation of 53–4

as constitutive 44–5, 49–54, 73–8

democratic legitimacy and 143–60
dual effect 47–8

elective 87–9

elements of 43–56

factors in success of 73

illustrated 37–8, 111–37, 157–8

judgment of 154–60

lines of variation 57–66

formal-informal 62

implicit-explicit 60

internal-external 61–2

particular-general 59–60

singular-multiple 58

unidirectional-multidirectional 62–4

nested 64–5

nonelective 95–110

deep roots 95–8

expertise 98

wider interests and new voices 98–102

partiality 78–9

performance and 66–70

reception of 102–9, 147, 156

resources for 70–6

silencing effects 52, 55

statal 83–4

study of 183–4

resources for representation 11

roles, representative 11, 33, 42–3, 70–3, 83, 163

Roy, A. 74, 139

Rubenstein, J. 27, 99

Saro-Wiwa, K. 156

Sartori, G. 135

Sawer, M. 22

Schaffer, F. 103

Schmitt, C. 78, 107

Schmitter, P. 133, 136

Schnattseider, E. E. 127, 136

Schumpeter, J. S. 90, 129, 146, 166

Schwartz, N. 32, 53

Scott, J. 156

Seitz, B. 52

self-representation 101–2, 165

Simons, J. 119

Smith, G. 164

Spivak, G. 77–78

Squires, J. 120–3

stakeholder representation 84, 100–1

standpoint theory 147

Stokes, S. 74

Street, J. 66, 108

Strom, K. 105

Stoffel, S. 124–5

subject (in representative claim) 36, 46–8, 112–13

substantive representation 72, 85, 120–6

surrogate representation 22–3, 98–9

Suu Kyi, Aung San 156

Swidler, A. 75

Switzerland 161

symbolic representation 12–16, 18, 72, 91

systemic representation 20, 163–4
Index

206

Thatcher, M. 88
Thomassen, J. 105
Thompson, D. 27, 31, 159
Tibet 102
Tormey, S. 100
trustee representation, see roles, representative

Uhr, J. 67
Uighur 156
Union of Concerned Scientists 98
United Kingdom 46, 81, 87–8, 97, 105
United Nations 26–7, 84, 99, 101
United States 19, 22, 61, 92, 97, 99, 161
unrepresentable, the 80
Urbinati, N. 29–30, 162–3

Vargas Llosa, M. 176–7

virtual representation 181
voting 86 see also elective representation

Walesa, L. 51
Walzer, M. 164
Weldon, S. L. 126
Williams, M. 31, 88
Wittgenstein, L. 170–1
women, representation of 120–6
World Summit on Sustainable Development 84, 100

Young, I. M. 28–9, 31–2, 40, 44, 89–90, 109

Zapatista army 100
van Zoonen 67
Introduction

This book introduces a new way of looking at political representation, in the guise of the representative claim. Representative claims are unstable and highly variable. They encompass and implicate many different groups and individuals; they show us that representation is dynamic, shifting and elusive, and crucial to the very constitution of politics. Representative claims operate across borders and even across species; they denote shifting power relationships rather than fixed institutions; and they can work democratically and undemocratically. We need to look closely at how, and by whom, they are made, received, and judged.

Political ideas and practices are more closely intertwined than we often think. In part, the impetus behind the book comes from current and pressing problems of political life. The politics of representation in many countries and contexts is both changing fast and troubling – there is more than a little talk of a crisis of representation. This should provoke fresh thinking about what representation in politics is, and what it can be. But prevailing ideas about representation are looking tired and out-of-date; in key respects they are not up to the job. A number of political theorists have recognized this issue and have tackled it – I discuss their work throughout the book, and in Chapter 1 in particular – but the debate needs to be taken further.

The pressing problems and real-world changes that prompt this concern are varied:

• a decline in voting rates in most established democracies, and rising disaffection from mainstream representative politics;
• the decline of political parties and rising distrust of politicians;
• the increasing role, especially in international politics, of regulatory bodies and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) which are often seen as unrepresentative or unaccountable; and
renewed demands for better representation of marginalized groups such as women, cultural minorities, and even future generations and non-human nature.

That is not an exhaustive list, by any means. One can look at daily headlines and see the need for fresh thinking about representation. Who, several years after the US-led occupation, speaks or acts for the people of Iraq? Who claims to represent them, and how are those claims received? Is designing a parliamentary democracy enough to achieve representative democracy in Iraq? And what of global warming? Whose voices are most powerful in debates to address it? Among politicians, experts, corporate leaders, and green campaigners, who speaks for whom, and with what authority? Is it enough to be elected to be “representative,” or is there more to it?

Challenging our received ideas about political representation matters. Consider, for example, the widespread sense of remoteness of elected politicians in Western countries from “real issues” and citizen concerns. Conceiving of representation as a zero-sum game (either you are elected, and therefore a representative, or you are not) and as institutionally locked-in (elections alone confer representativeness) can readily lead to condemnation of representative government and politics. But this is both too rigid and politically too conservative a view of representation. Carefully revisiting the theory can – as I hope to show – open our eyes to new styles of representation, electoral and non-electoral, which might help varied actors to address the sense of remoteness and inadequacy.

Of course, representation is an institutional fact in the contemporary political world. But prior to that it is a multisided process of claim-making and the reception and judgment of claims. Conventional representative institutions, such as national parliaments, remain crucial to representative practice. But they do not exhaust its manifestations, or the ways in which (and the domains within which) it is politically important. Looking through the lens of the representative claim leads us to question a range of institutions and factors normally taken as settled. We come, for example, to see the field of the representable as constantly expanding and contracting, rather than as fixed or stable.

Political theory has a genuine role to play here; there is real scope for searching, problem-driven theory. In recent years, there has been some useful renewed attention paid to political representation by theorists. The
widespread acceptance of the analysis of Hanna Pitkin for more than thirty years after the publication of her book *The Concept of Representation* (1967) is a key reason behind the lack of critical attention prior to the late 1990s (in Anglo-American political theory at any rate). But as we shall see, Pitkin herself now challenges important aspects of the thinking behind her classic book, on the basis of the troubling real-world developments (not least the impact of big money on representative democracy). Arguably, there are other reasons for this renewed attention that are more internal to political theory as a discipline. For example, the dominant deliberative thread in democratic theory in recent years – which has emphasized the democratic role of talking rather than voting – has prompted concern with who gets to deliberate, where, and how, which is very much an issue of representation.

It is not that progress is undetectable. Consider arguments and institutions for enacting representation in territorial ways that are alternative to the nation-state (e.g., Held 1995) – or indeed non-territorial bases of representation, including ones which seek to have nonhuman interests represented within human polities (Eckersley 2004). Further, a good deal of recent empirical work illuminates issues of indigenous and minority representation, the representation of women, group representation, descriptive representation in deliberative forums, and the ambiguities of representatives’ roles (see, e.g., the essays in Sawyer and Zappala 2001; Laycock 2004; Sawyer 2000). But mainstream approaches to representation place undue limits on creative thinking about who, or what, may be represented politically, and how this might be done, in these and other fields. A fuller conception of representation, which stresses its dynamic and creative aspects as well as its narrowly institutional ones, and its potential for radical extension, can open up further ways for us to think about political inclusion – going an important step further, I would argue, than even provocative work such as Held’s or Eckersley’s has taken us so far.

My aim is to offer a more fundamental reappraisal of the idea of political representation. Seeing representation as a dynamic process of claim-making, and not, for example, as a static fact of electoral politics, can help us to make sense of great changes in the daily politics of representation. Crucially, it can also help us to bring ideas of cultural and aesthetic representation into our thinking about political representation – where they belong.
My focus is quite relentlessly contemporary; this is not a book about the history of the idea of political representation. Good summaries of key parts of that history are available elsewhere (Pitkin 1967; Skinner 2005; Brito Vieira and Runciman 2008). The history is rich, to say the least, and varied historical currents inform the content of my argument. I make some brief and highly selective comments here to show how that is the case.

Political theories are partial and complex products of their times. Some, by virtue of prescient thinking, unusual insight, political influence, and compelling expression, resonate beyond their times and up to today (e.g., key works from Hobbes, Burke, Rousseau, and Paine). In her contemporary classic, Hanna Pitkin takes the insights of such writers as, together, providing us with a taxonomy of types of representation, no one complete in itself but each providing a vital piece in a “jigsaw.” My approach differs. I am interested less in locating a correct theory of representation, or in building a theory by close engagement with the work of great theorists from the past. My focus instead is on understanding what representation does, rather than what it is; to explore the effects of its invocation rather than its institutional embodiment; to stress its dynamic character rather than its correctly understood forms or types. Insofar as it can be achieved, I seek this understanding by deploying a perspective that is uncommon in other historical and contemporary works.

Of the varied currents from the history of thinking about representation that inform my efforts, perhaps the most evident is my attempt to knit tightly together in one framework aesthetic, cultural, electoral, and other political approaches. Representation and cognate terms, in Latin, French, and to a degree in English, historically referred to theatrical and symbolic representation before being adapted to use in more strictly political contexts. At the most general level, the history of representation and cognate terms has covered, over a wide sweep of history, varied ways in which one thing or person or body could be said to stand for another. That is the most abstract way to express the underlying meaning of representation, though the historical and theoretical variations on this formulation are so great that we must be cautious in reducing them to a general formula. Different currents have emerged from legal, artistic, religious, philosophical, and dramatic spheres. From Rome to early modern times, there are from these spheres complex, varied, and overlapping notions of
representation as symbolizing, resembling, portraying, standing for, acting for a collectivity, acting for individuals, authorized and non-authorized portraying or acting for, microcosmic representation, and so on. Although the Latin word *repraesentare* in ancient Rome meant something close to “to present,” the theatrical term “persona,” a character or guise adopted for the stage, is perhaps closer to modern political usage. Middle Age Christian thinking and practice developed other senses of representation: spiritual, as in Christ representing God, and corporate, as in the pope representing Christ to Christendom, for example. Here, an early sense of one person or body being able to “speak for,” as well as symbolize, another body of people emerged, though this was not initially a form that involved authorization by the represented of the representative. Notions of consent underpinning the authority of political representatives emerged in a more recognizably modern form around the time of the English Civil War, not least in Hobbes’s *Leviathan*.

Several of these currents make their way through later centuries, informing or morphing into new modes such as virtual, republican, democratic, trustee, delegate, and others. So, from a modern political perspective, and to generalize perhaps too much, the earliest meanings were connected more to theatrical representation and religious symbolism. Subsequent meanings moved toward more political senses of a king or a parliament portraying, and then standing or speaking for, an earthly constituency. The latter set of meanings moved from acting for a collectivity without actual authorization, to acting for smaller groups and individuals with authorization.

Today, the term tends to be used in specialized ways. There is little overlap, for example, between discussions of political representation via election, artistic representation, and cultural representations. As I hope to demonstrate, we need to knit together these disparate threads that have too often been driven apart. To do so we require an analytical tool built from a perspective that differs substantially from received contemporary ideas of representation. The tool I fabricate and deploy will be one that elaborates the idea of the representative claim. It links five central elements of representation: the maker, the subject, the object, the referent, and the audience. These terms and their important interconnections will be explained in Chapters 2 and 3 in particular. This analytical tool is designed to incorporate symbolic, mimetic, corporate, individual, electoral, and
other currents in the history and present of the idea. I hope to show that it can help us to capture multiple particularities of political representation without sacrificing, for example, aesthetic dimensions of representative practice. As such, it offers a way to avoid “types” or “models” of representation that too artificially separate and oppose different, related threads in the study of political representation. It offers a way to look at political representation today in more than formal, parliamentary, and electoral terms; terms that settle it as a fact rather than a claim, and fail as a consequence to question sufficiently what sort of relationship it is, and what cultural factors make it feasible. The tool can help in these ways precisely by concentrating on representative claims, and their multiple dimensions.

The representative claim is defined, unpacked, illustrated, and defended in the pages that follow. Chapter 1 offers a focused critique of Pitkin’s classic account, and explores more recent innovations and their limits, in order to show what work remains to be done and why it matters. It establishes the need to focus more on what representation does; how claims pay a constitutive role; why interpretive depth is more important, in the first instance, than normative bite; how we need to downplay typologies and highlight dynamics (what is going on in representation); why non-electoral modes need to be taken seriously; and why national state representation should not be the overwhelming focus of studies of representation.

Chapter 2 defines and elaborates the multisided idea of the representative claim, setting out its attractions as an analytical tool. Framed by a broad account of representation as an event (especially a claim) rather than a given presence (or a fact), it sets out and discusses in some detail the five-part account of the elements of the representative claim. Representation has often been understood as three-sided: a subject stands for an object that is an account of a referent. The argument in the chapter shows that to understand multiple forms of political representation we need to add to this triangular conception the ideas of the maker and the audience (for claims). The account is designed both to capture the essence and to show the subtlety and reach of the representative claim approach. Chapter 3 continues that work, looking at the variety of dimensions of the representative claim, for example at singular and multiple claims, and internal and external claims. It also explores the crucial role of performance in
representative claim-making, and seeks to recast representative types or roles as resources that varied actors can use in the making of representative claims. This chapter further elaborates the aesthetic and cultural elements in any representative claim – and therefore that are present in any political manifestation of representation – and examines the notion of the ubiquity of representation (if representation is everywhere, perhaps it is nowhere in particular?).

Chapter 4 takes the framework elaborated thus far and homes in the controversial question of nonelective representation. The nature and limits of elective representative claims are used as a way to discuss several practical types and examples of nonelective representation. The chapter goes on to examine some of the main modes of reception of representative claims, setting up the discussion in the final chapter of the judgment of claims in terms of democratic legitimacy. The broader usefulness of the claim-based framework is addressed in Chapter 5, which takes up questions of the representation of women, future generations, and “nature,” and the representative role of political parties in the past and the future. Factors that are central to the idea of the representative claim, such as nonelective representation, the making of portrayals of the represented, and the multiple potential sites of representative practice are elaborated with respect to these three important cases. Here, and indeed across the book, there is a good deal of focus on specific institutions, practices, and places – this is political theory because it stays close to real politics, and not in spite of the fact. In the concluding Chapter 6, I review some key points and step back to consider what these new approaches and arguments might mean for democratic representation and “representative democracy.” I explore how we might judge the democratic character of representative claims, not by offering an independent theory of legitimacy but by exploring the conditions under which certain constituencies and audiences may make assessments of claims. The chapter further pinpoints how various points of received wisdom about representative democracy need to be revised, some of which might be considered surprising.
We hope you have enjoyed this short preview. The representative claim by Michael Saward can be purchased from Amazon here:

http://www.amazon.co.uk/Representative-Claim-Michael-Saward/dp/019579385

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