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## **What do descriptive representatives describe? Minority representative claims and the limits of Shape-shifting**

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### **Abstract**

In contemporary debates on diversity, minorities are characterised mostly in terms of their cultural difference from the majority. Scholars have tended to focus on the role of minority representatives as advocates of their group interests in legislative assemblies. This article examines how minority representatives reach out to a mixed electorate, comprising voters of both minority and non-minority backgrounds, in election campaigns. Bringing together two hitherto distinct strands of the recent representative turn in political theory, theories of descriptive representation and constructivist theories of representation, for an inductive inquiry into minority representative claims in a majoritarian context, I argue the following. First, the influential contrast between the politics of presence and the politics of ideas underestimates the multi-dimensional and dynamic nature of minority identities, as well as the respects in which minority representation is conditioned and constrained by the politics of ideas associated with party competition. Second, while Saward's notion of shape-shifting representation is a promising for illuminating the multiple positionalities of minority representatives and the dynamic character of descriptive representation, its current formulation does not offer adequate criteria for operationalizing shape-shifting and evaluating its democratic character. Third, ethnographic approaches have an important role to play in countering the tendency in normative debates for the reification of minority identities, and the idealization of the democratic role of political parties. These arguments are established through a comparative

case study of the representative claims of BJP MPs of Dalit (Scheduled Caste) and Muslim backgrounds during the 2014 Indian national election campaign.

## **Introduction**

While the recent representative turn in political theory has substantially advanced our understanding of the work involved in representation (eg. Urbinati 2006; Saward 2010, 2014), there is a growing gap between normative theories of representation, which offer ever more elaborate accounts of what democratic representation ideally requires, and empirical theories that focus on how politicians actually seek votes in existing democracies. Stepping into the breach, this article engages critically with two normative approaches to political representation: group representation or the politics of presence (Phillips 1995, Mansbridge 1999, Williams 1998) and constructivist theories of political representation (Laclau 2005; Urbinati 2006; Saward 2010). While theorists of group representation have focussed on how descriptive representation can advance substantive representation and social justice, they have tended to assume that what descriptive representatives describe are concerns that derive primarily from their ascriptive identities. And whereas constructivist theories have emphasized that identities are not socially given but constituted through processes of political representation, these have tended to assume a universal political subject, with little attention to how a minority position affects the work of representation. The question of what descriptive representatives describe thus remains under-analysed in contemporary theories of representation. Both advocates of group representation and constructivist theorists have, for different reasons, neglected election campaigns as a site for the articulation of identity-based interests.

Focussing on Michael Saward's influential concept of shape-shifting representation (2014), I argue that this potentially offers a way out of problems of essentialism and identity ascription that beset theories of minority representation, but has remained limited in scope.

Proposing an inductive inquiry to test theories of representation, I focus on claim-making by minority representatives in India during the 2014 election campaign that led to majoritarian nationalist consolidation under the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). This article asks: how did minority representatives seek to establish representativeness with a mixed electorate during the election campaign? To establish their representative credentials, *which* identities and interests did minority MPs select and project onto their constituents during campaigning? How did these *change* depending on audiences? How did representative claims differ across representatives of *different* minority backgrounds, Muslim and Dalit? And finally, how did voters respond to the claims of representatives during electioneering? While a study of voting behaviour is outside the scope of this inquiry, election campaigns offer a brief window into the reception of representative claims by voters, a dimension relatively neglected by theorists of representation.

In this article, I advance three related claims. First, I argue that dominant characterisations of minority claims in terms of *cultural difference* underestimate the multi-dimensional and dynamic nature of minority identities. Minority representative claims in Indian electoral campaigns drew upon the repertoires of a range of identities shared in common with the majority, such as those of region and party. In some cases, these included majoritarian religious identities. Second, while advancing our understanding of representation in several respects, Saward's (2014) notion of shape-shifting in its current form does not offer sufficient resources for evaluating its extent, or democratic character. In our study, minority representative claims shifted not just across a range of subject-positions, but were also *simultaneously*, shape-shifting and shape-accordant or confined, depending upon the dimension of identity in question (eg religious, caste, party), and the standpoint of evaluation (eg. representative or constituency). The significance of *multiple perspectives* of evaluation for shape-shifting remains neglected in Saward's account. Third, in terms of methodology, I show that ethnographic approaches have an important role to play in countering the tendency in

normative theories of representation to reify ethnic identities and idealize the role representative institutions. In particular, whereas normative theorists have tended to idealize the democratic role of political parties and mechanisms of representation more generally (eg White and Ypi 201, Urbinati 2006: 4-6), my findings suggest that their role in *limiting deliberation* and the autonomy of representatives needs greater attention.

My discussion is organised into five sections. The first section argues for collaboration between two distinct strands of the representative turn in political theory that have hitherto tended to speak past each other, theories of descriptive representation and of representative claims. The second section provides a brief background on the Indian general election campaigns of 2014, the candidates, constituencies, and methods deployed in the study. The third and fourth sections offer a comparative analysis of the representative claims of BJP MPs of Dalit and Muslim backgrounds, to mixed audiences, and minority voters respectively. The concluding section discusses some general implications of the comparative case-study for wider debates on minorities, shape-shifting representation, and the role of ethnography in advancing democratic theory.

### **Descriptive representation and representative claims: Two theoretical approaches**

How do minority representatives seek to establish representativeness with a mixed electorate, comprising voters from *both* minority and non-minority backgrounds in contexts of majoritarian nationalism? How do they negotiate the gap between representatives and those that they represent that is inherent in the very concept of representation (Pitkin 1972: 8-9)? This question, surprisingly neglected in the empirical scholarship on representation, implicates minority representation on the one hand, and the work of representation on the other. Both have come to be extensively reappraised by contemporary theorists of representation in ways that go beyond Pitkin's classic study.

In Pitkin's influential account, identity representation is discussed as part of descriptive representation, which

depends on the representative's characteristics, on what he *is*, or is *like*, on *being* something rather than *doing* something. The representative does not act for others; he "stands for" them, by virtue of a correspondence or connection between them, a resemblance or reflection...(1972:60, emphasis added).

Pitkin holds that 'the descriptive view has no room...for leadership, initiative, or creative action. The representative is not to give new opinions to his constituents, but to reflect those they already have' (1972:89, 90). While Pitkin does recognize the relational and contextual nature of identities in representation, noting for instance that not all characteristics can be described, 'so it is always a question of *which* characteristics are politically relevant for reproduction' which varies with 'time and place' (1972: 87), she did not theorize this further (Disch 2015).

Pitkin's account of descriptive representation has come to be challenged from two distinct standpoints in recent debates. First, whereas Pitkin had been dismissive of descriptive representation, theorists of minority representation have argued how in certain contexts, descriptive representation can advance the substantive representation of the interests of historically disadvantaged groups (Phillips 1995: 25, Mansbridge 1999:635-36), or otherwise advance values of democratic justice, even when substantive representation does not occur (Phillips 1995: 39, 40). A second direction of challenge has come from constructivist scholarship on representation, which has criticised Pitkin's assumption that the represented have 'a clear.... stable set of interests' that representatives simply mirror or reflect (Saward 2010: 10). Following on the work of social theorists (eg. Bourdieu 1991), political theorists such as Ernesto Laclau, Nadia Urbinati and Michael Saward among others have highlighted that the identities and interests to be represented are not socially given or pre-political but rather

constituted through processes of representation (Laclau 2005: 158; Urbinati 2006: 24; Saward 2010: 14). As Laclau puts it, the ‘represented depends on the representative for the constitution of his or her own identity’ (2005: 158).

Whereas these two theoretical approaches to representation have tended to proceed separately, I argue that bringing these together can enhance the efficacy of each. A focus on the political constitution of identities can help to mitigate some enduring challenges that confront advocates of minority representation, notably those of *essentialism* and *external ascription*. Identity representation is haunted by the charge of essentialism, the claim that a descriptive group shares common interests based on ‘a single or essential trait’ that can ‘transcend the interests that divide them’ (Mansbridge 1999: 637). Theorists of group representation have sought to counter essentialism in several ways, recognizing the challenge posed by intra-group diversity for instance (Phillips 1995, Williams 1998). Minority representatives represent their group’s interests not by virtue of how they look or shared phenotypical characteristics, but rather shared social *experiences* of exclusion (Mansbridge 1999:629). Nonetheless, an advocacy of increased presence of members of marginalized groups raises issues of *which* perspectives define the group and *how* group interests come to be constituted, questions which have received only cursory attention in theories of minority representation. A related problem is that of identity ascription, the imposition of identities from the outside, which obscures the agency of individuals in defining their group membership and perpetuates misrecognition through the reinforcement of dominant stereotypes. Again, theorists of group representation do recognize ‘the agency of individuals to define the meaning of their social and biological traits’ (Williams 1998:6). Nevertheless, with relatively little attention devoted to how group identities are inhabited by their members, normative theorists have inadvertently tended to reinforce socially given identity frames (see also Urbinati 2006: 49).

The constructivist turn in representation, although rarely focussing on minorities, has highlighted the role of representation and the agency of representatives in the constitution of political identities. Michael Saward's influential notion of the representative claim exemplifies how constructivist approaches bring into relief the often invisible work of representation. Like Laclau (2005:161), Saward rejects Pitkin's contrast between symbolic and substantive representation, arguing instead that 'the active making of symbols or images of what it is to be represented' is vital to a 'substantive acting for' (Saward 2010: 15-16). Furthermore, whereas for Pitkin, 'the maker of representations...is present, but is not seen as significant', Saward seeks to liberate 'the politician as artist, as a maker of representations...' (2010: 13, 16). Instead of emphasizing certain representative roles or styles as theorists have tended to do (eg principal- agent, delegate- trustee in Pitkin 1972), Saward argues that representatives should be seen fundamentally as *shape-shifters*, engaged in 'innovative blurring and hybridizing of roles in and through practice' (Saward 2014: 725). Involving 'repositioning the persona and the nature of...claims to audiences or constituencies' (2014: 730), shape-shifting for Saward is not a negative trait, a moral weakness as popular dismissals of politicians double-speak suggest, but a creative practice that is central to the work of representation. While Saward's emphasis on movement across multiple positionalities marks an important advance over the traditional focus on representative roles, he does not consider how representatives position themselves in relation to multiple socio-political *identities*.

Nevertheless, I contend that Saward's notion of shape-shifting representatives potentially offers a way out of the problems of essentialism and identity ascription that confront theories of minority representation. Its emphasis on the situational and relational character of representation can illuminate the *dynamics* of descriptive representation, challenging common depictions of minority identities as singular and fixed. Furthermore, Saward's focus on the agency of representatives can illuminate how minority representatives *choose* to define their

social identities, highlighting insider perspectives over external attributions of identity. Saward himself portrays descriptive likeness as akin to a single subject-position (2014: 727). However, his critique of the category of role that theorists of representation have focussed on, as obscuring ‘agent choice and capacity’ (2014: 729), opens up for examination the multiple roles that minority representatives inhabit. Finally, importantly for an inquiry into minority representation, Saward’s typology of shape- accordant and shape-confined forms recognizes that there may be *inequalities* in the structural positions of representatives, that a representative could inhabit a role from a position of weakness, or of strength.

I suggest, furthermore, that for constructivist theories of representation, a minority position offers an important vantage point for re-evaluating the work of representation in *general* that has been their primary focus. *Prima facie*, candidates of minority background would be expected to encounter obstacles with regard to identification with the majority population, and thereby need to undertake additional work to establish representativeness relative to candidates from majority communities. The work of minority representation has been explicated primarily in terms of the representation of minority perspectives and identities. Anne Phillips, Jane Mansbridge, Melissa Williams among others have elaborated the ways in which minority representation can advance the substantive and symbolic representation of minorities and why it matters from democratic standpoints (eg Phillips 1995: 25, 39, 40; Mansbridge 1999: 642-644). However, the role of minority representatives in navigating *between* majority and minority interests, and *across* different identity dimensions, remains underexplored. This can potentially advance our understanding of shape-shifting, as well as the role of negotiation, mediation and translation in the work of representation. Emerging studies of representative claims have begun to recognize the significance of minority representatives as a link between majority and minority groups (eg. Severs and de Jong 2018), in ways that parallel the role of the colonial cultural broker, for instance. While the concept of brokerage is



potentially promising for understanding minority representation, how it works in contexts of representative democracy, where minority representatives seek popular validation from multiple constituencies, remains to be elaborated.

### **Representative practices and election campaigns: A note on method**

So far, I have argued that bringing together two distinct strands of the representative turn is mutually beneficial, enabling a better understanding of the dynamics of descriptive representation as well as the constructive work of representation. I now want to take the argument further, and suggest that an *inductive* inquiry into representative practices notably election campaigns can yield important insights for theories of representation. While critical of the normative orientation of Pitkin and other theorists for ruling out ‘much what is accepted as counting for representation’ (2010: 9), Saward himself offers little sustained engagement with representative practices, beyond a few instances of exemplary individuals. The democratic legitimacy of representative claims, he contends, depends on their acceptance by the relevant constituency. Yet, the notion of the constituency and its acceptance of representative claims remain under-specified in his account, with constituencies appearing largely as unified, univocal entities in the legitimation of claims. As any sustained engagement with representative practices demonstrates, however, constituencies are multi-layered, and multi-vocal in their responses to claims. The complexity of evaluating legitimation increases in the case of minority representatives who are frequently called upon to represent the interests of groups who did not elect them (eg. women, Blacks, Muslims), as well as geographical districts that elected them.

An inductive approach focussing on collective practices of representation can also help tackle the problem of essentialism faced by theories of minority representation. As scholarship on gender has shown, an examination of the collective practices of social movements and

policy debates (Celis et al 2014) can help to highlight multiple perspectives among women, challenging the implausible views of women as a homogeneous group. In the case of minorities, however, the focus has often tended to be on exceptional individuals (eg Obama), leaving intact dominant understandings of minority groups.

In contrast to contemporary theories of representation, I contend that election campaigns are potentially an important site for the evaluation of representative claims. Constructivist theorists such as Saward have sought to move away from elections and formal representative institutions, towards non-elected forms of representation such as the media, NGOs, social activists. Theorists of group representation have also tended to focus on the composition of legislative assemblies and the role of the representative as a legislator, with little attention to how representatives get into legislatures in the first place. In both cases, the focus has been on representatives speaking for, or *on behalf of* a group, with relatively little attention to how representatives speak *to* their constituents (for the latter, see the classic Fenno 1978). Election campaigns allow us to examine how representatives describe their identities to their constituents, and to observe, in an abbreviated form, the reactions of different sections of constituents to representative claims, dimensions that remain neglected in Saward's account. A national election campaign offers a much larger stage than legislative debate for the public scrutiny of representative claims, open in theory at least to all citizens, in which these are evaluated by different audiences from a range of standpoints.

A further reason that theorists of representation have tended to move away from elections and other formal representative institutions is the recent experience of Western democracies of low voter turnouts and widespread apathy. However, in electoral democracies in Asia and Africa, notably India, elections remain popular, despite widespread distrust of politicians. Representation is of course a systemic process that is not limited to formal elected institutions; furthermore, elective processes may limit the 'style and scope of representation

that emanates from them' (Saward 2010: 24). However, it is also the case that like other political institutions, elections embody values of formal equality in ways that the institutions of the market and the civil society that are structured by deep inequalities, do not offer. As such, I argue that elections are an important discursive site for an evaluation of representative claims.

In terms of method, given the paucity of existing research on the question, a case study approach was chosen (Gerring 2004) based on field-research, shadowing the election campaigns of two sitting members of Parliament (MPs) of minority backgrounds from the BJP. Candidates from different minority backgrounds were selected, Dalit and Muslim, marginalized by virtue of their caste and religion respectively in contemporary India. As Muslims and Dalits are dispersed minorities, and separate communal electorates were abolished at constitution-making (see Bajpai 2011 for details), Muslim and Dalit representatives are elected by a majority of non-Muslim and non-Dalit voters, which was the case in our sample as well. It might be argued that while ostensibly descriptive representatives, our cases are not technically so in the strict sense of the term, as minority representatives in India are not elected by voters of their community alone. However, as studies in several contexts have shown, representatives of minority background face 'implicit and explicit expectations' from their political party, media organisations, and the general public to speak as group representatives (Celis and Wauters 2010: 388), and often perform that role, irrespective of the electoral mechanism linking them to their social group.

As is common with ethnographic studies, the sample was small, and the selection of cases was not intended as representative, or comprehensive, but rather as illustrative and exploratory. Ethnographic approaches have several well-known limitations, including what Herzog and Zacka (2017) term 'perspectival absorption, bias and particularism'. To mitigate the problems of identification with respondents and resultant bias, multiple voices and

positions in the field were accessed. Field-work included semi-structured interviews not just with the MPs and their chief aides, but also the main opponent candidates from other parties, as well as different sub-groups of voters during election meetings and voting.<sup>1</sup> Approximately 50% of the sample of voters interviewed were of minority backgrounds, with the remainder drawn from diverse socio-economic strata. In addition, multi-sited participant observation was undertaken, including attending and observing election rallies and walk-about, recording the speeches of the main candidates in different neighbourhoods. Finally, I followed the interactions of representatives with different audiences and voters in a range of settings. A research design of multiple interviews and observations across a range of sites and very different cases allowed for a measure of abstraction and generalization. This study forms part of a larger research project involving approximately 70 Indian MPs conducted between 2013-16 focussing on the work of representation through the prism of minority representation in a majoritarian polity.

### **Election campaigns 2014: Context and cases**

The 2014 Indian elections unexpectedly handed a comfortable majority to the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) (51% seat share in the Lower House, based on 31% of the popular vote). The BJP's campaign was populist and personality-centred, starring Narendra Modi as the icon of a youthful population's aspirations to jobs and upward mobility (Jaffrelot 2015). Through a centralized, expensive, and technologically innovative election campaign using social media platforms such as holograms, Whatsapp, Twitter, and Facebook, Modi was projected as the strong-man who would tackle India's myriad problems of development (*vikasipurush*) and bring roads, electricity and water to all.

But how did Modi as an icon of development translate on the ground, in the campaigns of BJP candidates from minority backgrounds? The candidates, constituencies, and nature of

the contest were very different in the two cases, although both candidates belonged to the same party, and to communities that were similar in numerical proportions (Dalits and Muslims were each estimated to be just less than a third of the voting population of the respective constituencies). Dr Kirit Solanki was standing for re-election from Ahmedabad (West), a constituency reserved for Scheduled Castes in the western Indian state of Gujarat, where he had won in 2009.<sup>2</sup> Dr Solanki was a highly educated and well-to-do surgeon with a successful private practice. He did not have a large following of his own and was not a well-known political figure in national or regional politics. Shahnawaz Husain, by contrast, the BJP's only elected Muslim MP, was a nationally recognized party spokesman who appeared regularly on television news programmes. He was seeking re-election from Bhagalpur in Bihar in northern (east) India, a constituency that he had represented in Indian parliament since 2006. First elected to the Lok Sabha in 1999, he had held several ministerial posts in the BJP-led government between 1999-2004.

The two constituencies were very different in terms of their pattern of party competition, intensity of the campaign, and electoral outcomes. Ahmedabad (West) is a recently demarcated constituency in Gujarat, reserved since 2009 for Scheduled Caste candidates. By contrast, Bhagalpur, one of the oldest districts in the north-eastern state of Bihar is a general seat. In Ahmedabad, the contest was primarily two-way, between the BJP and the Congress, whereas Bhagalpur saw a four-way contest between the BJP and regional parties. Bhagalpur was a marginal constituency for the BJP, whereas Ahmedabad was a safe seat. Consequently, Bhagalpur saw several high-octane election rallies with several BJP leaders in attendance, including Modi himself. By contrast, the campaign in Ahmedabad was more low-key (*thandi*), bringing in no high-profile national leaders of note. In terms of electoral outcomes, in Ahmedabad, Dr Kirit Solanki won by a margin of over 320000, doubling his margin of victory from the previous election. In Bhagalpur, Shahnawaz Hussain lost,

unexpectedly and narrowly by a margin of less than 10,000 votes. In Ahmedabad, the turnout was 62.64; in Bhagalpur, it was 57.88%.

### **Presence through Ideas: Minority representative claims and the limits of inclusion**

In scholarly and popular debates, minority representatives tend to be viewed primarily through the lens of their ethnic identities, with a minority position usually defined in terms of *cultural difference* from the majority. However, the first feature of note in minority representative claims during the 2014 election campaign was that these emphasized *similarity* between majority and minority identities and interests. The cultural resources marshalled by the candidates were drawn less from their ethnic identities, than from the ideologies and programmes of their political party.

A typical speech of the Ahmedabad (West) during his election walkabouts (*jansamparak* rounds) went as follows:

Friends, I am the candidate of Bharatiya Janata Party and a soldier of Gujarat Chief Minister Narendrabhai Modi. If you press the lotus button in front of my name, I will get your blessings (*aashirwad*), win with a large majority, and the son of Gujarat, chief minister Narendra Modi will become India's Prime Minister (author translation from Gujarati).

Persuasion in representative claims centrally involves rhetoric, which serves to link together 'differently situated and differently disposed actors' (Dryzek 2010: 325). As the speech suggests, in order to make himself known to voters, and to establish his credentials as a representative, the MP standing from a Dalit quota, identified in the first instance with the party, its symbol on the ballot paper (lotus), and with the Gujarat Chief Minister and icon of the 2014 campaign, Narendra Modi. The candidate's relationship to Modi was portrayed as that of a disciplined party-worker and a loyal subordinate to his commander, rather than of

shared kinship or another form of personalistic relationship characteristic of patronage relations prominent in the scholarship on South Asia. The language made subtle allusions to party ideology - the term 'soldier' referred not just to the cadre-based character of the BJP, but also its close association with the RSS and its quasi-militaristic notion of Hindu nationalism (Jaffrelot 2011). In Gujarat, there was an appeal to regional cultural pride - by casting their vote in favour of the candidate, voters would be electing one of their own, a son of the soil, as India's Prime Minister. In the different mixed-population neighbourhoods of the city that Dr Solanki visited with BJP workers as part of the official campaign, the speech remained largely the same. A range of representational possibilities *beyond* the individual candidate were offered in appeals to an electorate that it was implicitly acknowledged, might be unfamiliar with, and perhaps unlikely to vote for the candidate on his own.

Silences shape rhetoric as well as speech, and what was not said was also significant. In public speeches to mixed audiences, there were no references to the candidate's past record as an MP, either in terms of raising issues relating to his constituents in Parliament, or bringing public works to the area, although the MP had a record much above the average in both areas. Nor were there attempts to outline and debate any concrete policies by the candidate or party workers during their walkabouts - for instance, what development (*vikas*) for all, the BJP's main campaign slogan in the 2014 election meant, was not elaborated. The campaign leaflets carried photos of Narendra Modi and the candidate and the price rise of daily commodities under the previous Congress administration. In the Ahmedabad campaign, representative claims tended to be plebiscitary rather than deliberative (Chambers 2009) in character.

Representative claims involve not just what the candidates say, but also what the campaign looks and sounds like to audiences. In Gujarat, the visual and aural language of the Dalit MP's election rallies closely resembled those of Hindu religious processions, and could merge easily with these in the public eye. The walkabouts were led by party workers on

scooters sporting saffron scarves and head-bands, heralded by drummers. The candidate usually wore Hindu religious markers, and made brief visits to temples in the neighbourhoods where he was campaigning, avoiding mosques and churches. Speeches in rallies across the city, often conducted in the backdrop of the Hindu nationalist figuration of the nation as a mother Goddess with images superimposed on maps of undivided India, commenced and concluded with slogans of ‘glory to Mother India’ (*Bharat Mata ki Jai*), with the audience exhorted to participate in the appeal to Hindu practices of goddess worship. By contrast, in the images and ceremonies of the campaign, there was nothing that could resonate with voters from Muslim, Christian and other non-Hindu backgrounds, a silencing which was echoed in the relative absence of any campaigning by the party in neighbourhoods where Muslims and Christians predominated. When the candidate’s convoy passed through streets where Muslims lived, its passage was tense and relatively subdued, with no speeches or cheering. As such, the ‘verbal and visual images’ (Saward 2010: 492) of the constituency that was described in the representative claims of a Dalit minority candidate denoted an assertive, undifferentiated Hindu community.

In relation to his political party, the Ahmedabad MP’s recourse to the language and symbols of Hindu nationalism can be seen as an instance of what Saward (2014) terms a *shape-accordant* pattern of representation, from a position of weakness. Within the context of a powerful leader-centered party aggressively propagating Hindu nationalism, representatives had few opportunities to shape-shift other than to position themselves as delegates of the party its leadership, and its primary constituency, the Hindu community. Seen from the perspective of his *minority* constituency, however, the MP was seeking to shape-shift, positioning his persona as a representative not so much of Dalits for whom reservations were instituted, as of the Hindu community as a whole.<sup>3</sup>



While an examination of voter responses is outside the scope of this paper, based on the limited evidence of the reactions observed during the election campaign, the candidate's claims appeared to resonate with audiences. Asked what brought them to an election rally, some female senior citizens replied 'we have come for Mother' (Interviews, 25.4.14), indicating the resonance of the party's symbol of India as mother goddess (*Bharat Mata*) with folk religious practices of Goddess worship. Most BJP party workers campaigning for the candidate in Ahmedabad interviewed said that while personally opposed to Dalit quotas, they were working to bring a good candidate, and above all else, their party and Modi to power in Delhi.

While the discursive and symbolic register of Hindu nationalism enabled a Dalit representative reach out to his upper and middle caste Hindu constituents mostly opposed to the Dalit quota that he represented,<sup>4</sup> for a Muslim candidate, the task was harder, given the ideology's anti-Muslim thrust. How did the BJP's sole Muslim MP seek to reach out to a mixed electorate? Shahnawaz Husain's speeches in Bhagalpur spoke to the BJP's 2014 slogan of development for all and in keeping with the party's position, rejected secularism as special treatment of religious minorities. Emphasizing the material interests that Muslims voters had in common with non-Muslims, he stated in a television interview: 'Their [Muslim] children also want jobs, they also want a share in the fruits of development, and equality' (ABP news, 13.4.14). His village pit stop speeches frequently invoked the value of non-discrimination on the basis of religious identity, denoting in his case, an absence of special attention to Muslim interests: 'when I work I take everyone with me – whether they are Hindu or Muslim I have made no discrimination (*bhed-bhav*).'

In positioning his Muslim constituency's interests, and his own persona as a representative, as no different from that of non-minority voters in his territorial constituency, Shahnawaz' claims appear shape confined in relation to the party in the terms of Saward's

typology, complying with the BJP's hostility to the expression of Muslim identity and interests. At the same time, in describing his Muslim constituency as similar to the majority in terms of its aspirations, Shahnawaz was also attempting to *shape-shift* within the constraints of his position, challenging dominant stereotypes of the Muslim community as distinct from the mainstream.

As in Ahmedabad, the reactions of audiences in Bhagalpur to the representative's claims confirm that it was the party, its leadership and ideology that were crucial in sustaining claims of representativeness of a minority candidate with non-minority audiences. At a television talk show, the presenter struggled to be heard amidst chants of 'Modi, Modi'. She asked the audience what their MP had done to deserve the people's vote again, and the response from a female constituent was typical:

...if [we] want Modi in the Centre [screams from audience], then [we will] have to make Shahnawaz win...and give lotus flower [BJP symbol] as a gift to that centre ... (*Aaj Tak* news, 9.4. 14).

In many ways, the centrality of the party is only to be expected in a national election campaign in which the party programme and ideology predominate. Minority representatives contesting a territorial constituency on a party ticket primarily represent its programme and ideology as Phillips (1995) notes, even when they choose to speak for their ethnic group or gender. For minority representation, the overriding significance of the party however meant that inclusion was *limited*, on the one hand, offering minority presence without recognition of difference, and *asymmetric* on the other, with different opportunities for Dalit and Muslim representatives in the BJP. For a Dalit representative, it was possible to describe their cultural identity in the terms offered by Hindu nationalism, which allowed for a limited form of recognition to a historically denigrated group, as members of the Hindu community of equal standing to the higher castes. For a Muslim representative, however, inclusion was not possible

within the party's Hindu nationalist ideology, instead was sought to be achieved through the party slogan of development for all, which offered a thinner form of identification. In both cases, the candidates' minority group membership did not figure in their claims to mixed audiences. While the appeal to the party ideology and programme enabled minority representatives reach out to non-minority voters, and mitigated some identity-related status issues, it also limited the terms of minority inclusion.

### **The multiple dimensions of presence and the limits of shape-shifting**

Against my argument so far, it could be contended that while the centrality of the party is likely to obtain when minority representatives seek to reach a *mixed* electorate, when speaking to voters from ethnic backgrounds similar to their own, a more direct relationship obtains, by virtue of a shared social identity. Jane Mansbridge has argued for instance that if representatives and voters belong to the same subordinate group, this can help to forge 'bonds of trust' with voters based 'on the shared experience of subordination', helping to overcome the inattention and distrust that act as 'barriers to communication between dominant and subordinate groups' (1999: 642).

If, however, my finding regarding the mediating role of the party in the relationship between representatives and voters holds, minority representatives belonging to a majoritarian party would instead expect to encounter *distrust* from members of their communities, given that their party, the BJP, has historically had little support among Dalit and Muslim voters (Jaffrelot 2015). This was indeed observed in our cases, as BJP Dalit and Muslim representatives, anticipating suspicion from their Dalit and Muslim constituents, deployed a range of creative discursive strategies seeking to overcome the trust deficit. Two strategies can be discerned in representative claims. The first involved *reframing* the party's relationship with minority voters, which involved countering the BJP's negative image among minorities as well

as recasting minority perspectives to better align with their party. The second involved *circumventing* the party, emphasizing the MP's minority group membership and the work undertaken in minority neighbourhoods.

The problem of distrust was most evident in relation to Muslim voters, given the anti-Muslim stance of the BJP and Modi. Shahnawaz Husain's pit stop speeches in Muslim areas sought to challenge the BJP's image as anti-Muslim, reminding Muslim voters that the party they distrusted, had re-nominated him, a minority candidate and given him an important position as party spokesman: 'what I say is accepted as the party view that you hear on TV (12.4.14). Shahnawaz also emphasized his role as an advocate (*vakil*) of Muslims within the BJP, and the advocacy (*vakalat*) that he did for the group, positioning himself as a trustee of Muslim interests within the party. As Urbinati has argued, claims to advocate on behalf of a group go beyond descriptive representation, for it is 'not people's identity as such that seeks for representation, but their ideas and claims as citizens who suffer, or are liable to suffer, injustice because of their identity (2000: 776). Establishing equivalence with other parties was another reframing strategy deployed to detoxify the party for Muslim voters, a familiar approach of candidates perceived as majoritarian. Shahnawaz Husain reminded voters of the many riots that took place under the rule of the Congress and other so-called secular rivals of the BJP; as such, the latter did not deserve to be distrusted more by Muslim voters.

Reframing the relationship between the representative and constituents involved attempts to recast influential views not just of the party but also of their community identity. Shahnawaz Husain sought to challenge influential perceptions, including self-perceptions of Muslims as essentially religious, as voting according to their religious identity. Emphasizing secular over religious concerns, he cautioned his Muslim constituents against their religious leaders' interference in politics:

...remember, the elections that happen are for roads, electricity, water, employment ...this vote is a worldly thing...it is not a matter of religion...don't go according to anyone's decree or *fatwa*...(12.4.14, translated from Urdu)

As this illustrates, even within a majoritarian, plebiscitary context of a national election campaign, representatives sometimes sought to transform existing preferences and prejudices instead of treating these as given, as we would expect (Chambers 2009: 339).

If one shape-shifting strategy used by minority representatives to overcome the distrust of their party among minority constituents was reframing dominant perceptions of their party and their community, a second approach was that of *circumvention*, emphasizing a direct relationship between the representative and their community. At a village stop, Shahnawaz attacked his political opponents for making Muslims fear the BJP:

... do not scare people of my community...this is a community that is God-fearing, it is not fearful of political leaders and political parties [clapping]...(12.4.14)

Rhetoric that was bonding in terms of religious characteristics (eg. Muslim symbols such as the *Hajj*) was deployed here to *bridge* (on the general distinction, see Dryzek 2010) the representative's differences from his co-religionists that stemmed from his party and caste-class identities (the representative belonged to an upper- caste Muslim community whereas audiences in this instance were predominantly lower caste, poor Muslims).

A novel way of seeking to establish a direct relationship between the candidate and his constituents was by describing this in the terms conventionally used for marital and filial relationships:

Today between you and me there is no one. We...have a direct relationship...You are maintaining the relationship (*rishta nibha rahe hain*)

[shouts of *zindabad*]...it was not easy for you to vote for a BJP man, the lotus—  
you did this difficult work...

The metaphor of a love relationship allowed the representative to simultaneously, evoke a direct, unmediated connection with voters, side-stepping the party's negative image among his Muslim constituents, to recognize that despite the fact that their relationship was sometimes difficult to maintain, his constituents had been fulfilling the duties of the relationship, under difficult circumstances, as many wives and husbands, parents and children do, and that they should continue to do so, in the form of voting for him in the election. The metaphor of a love relationship in this case evoked a bond between the representative and constituents that could encompass descriptive likeness but went beyond this, denoting attachment to a person desirable yet distinct from oneself.

Another discursive strategy commonly adopted by minority representatives to establish their credentials with their minority constituents involved reminders of the work that they had done for their community, usually the provision of collective goods in minority neighbourhoods such as roads, bridges, parks, libraries, senior citizen shelters. Again, such appeals suggest that minority representatives did not see descriptive likeness as sufficient for establishing trust with their minority constituents, given that their party, the BJP, was distrusted by large sections of their community. In Gujarat, in the door-to-door campaigning by family members in Dalit neighbourhoods in the final days of electioneering, it was such works that were highlighted. In Bhagalpur, Shahnawaz Husain asked Muslim voters to vote for him:

I have come here - not to ask [you to] give votes in the name of Islam, caste, religion, kinship – I have come to say even if I was not from the minority community...and solved your problems...would you give me a reward or not?  
[audience shouts back saying we would] ...

References to the work that the candidate had done for the community can be seen as appealing to the values of reciprocity of patron-client relationships - votes as the pay-back due to representatives for the goods rendered to constituents belonging to their community. The language used for mobilizing reciprocity was not, however, that of hierarchy or kinship relations characteristic of patronage, nor of a clientalistic exchange, but of equality and just deserts (*insaaf*), the honourable reward due to the representative for the services he had rendered to his constituents, the masters of his electoral fate.

Thus far I have suggested that representative claims were *shape shifting*, deploying creative discursive strategies of reframing and circumventing their party. The further question this raises is to what extent were such claims successful in altering *the overall pattern of representation*? While Saward's account offers little guidance here, if we take the indicator of voter responses as evidenced in the reactions of constituents to claims during election meetings, it would appear that representative claims had limited efficacy. Minority voters did appear to appreciate the inclusion of minority candidates by major parties, as reflected in the higher turnouts in meetings in minority neighbourhoods. However, in interviews and conversations later, minority voters seemed unconvinced that BJP representatives could represent Dalit and, more substantially, Muslim interests. In Ahmedabad, the passage of Dr Solanki's convoy through a Dalit neighbourhood was interrupted by angry youth demanding to know why their living conditions had seen little improvement under the BJP. In Bhagalpur, while Muslim voters turned out for Shahnawaz Husain's speeches and clapped on cue, in interviews afterwards, they seemed less convinced of the work he had done in his latest stint as MP, and more importantly whether his party could be trusted to protect their interests. In post-election interviews, Shahnawaz Husain's team reckoned that notwithstanding the work that he had done for his Muslim constituents, they would not vote for him, on account of their fear of the BJP. Whether this in fact transpired, with Muslims in Bhagalpur voting for the Hindu candidate

from the BJP's main rival, thereby contributing to Shahnawaz' narrow defeat in 2014, is hard to establish with the available data. What is clear is that notwithstanding the representatives' creative attempts to appeal directly to their minority constituents over the heads of their party, their party affiliation limited the shape-shifting work of representative claims, across the two very different cases.

### **Conclusions and discussion**

Whereas *who* represents is increasingly accepted as important, *what* they represent has remained under-analysed. This article has argued for bringing together two distinct strands of normative debates on group representation and representative claims, for an inductive inquiry into what descriptive representatives describe in election campaigns. In conclusion, I will highlight some wider implications of my findings of my comparative case study of Indian election campaigns for debates on shape-shifting representatives, descriptive representation and democratic theory.

My findings confirm several elements of Saward's theory of shape-shifting representation, while also illuminating some of its problems. Saward is right that shape-shifting representation is the norm rather than aberration- in our cases, minority representatives moved across multiple positionings constantly, adapting their persona to the audience they were addressing. With non-minority audiences, minority representatives often acted as *delegates* of their political party; with minority audiences, by contrast, they often claimed to be *trustees* of community interests. However, my findings also suggest that for guiding evaluations of shape-shifting and its democratic character, Saward's current formulation needs development in at least the following respects. First, there are multiple perspectives for evaluations of shape-shifting, as well as *multiple dimensions of presence* or descriptive likeness, neglected in Saward's account. Claims that were shape-shifting from the vantage point of the representative,



yielded to patterns of representation that appeared shape-confined when viewed from the standpoint of constituent responses. Furthermore, representative claims moved across *different dimensions* of descriptive likeness, with the *same* audience and at the same time, without as Saward suggests (2014: 731), opening themselves up to charges of inconsistency. Social identity is a dynamic site at the intersection of multiple networks rather than a single, monochromatic position. Second, as a model for the work of representation, the notion of shape-shifting appears to *overestimate the room for agent choice*, and underestimate the structural constraints on representative claims. In our cases, Dalit and Muslim representatives did deploy shape-shifting discursive strategies, seeking to reframe identities, notably community identity with non-minority voters and party identity with minority voters. However, whether the *overall* patterns of representation were shape-shifting is arguable, given the influence of available vocabularies and dominant understandings among their constituents. Third, Saward's *criteria for evaluation* for both the extent of shape-shifting and its democratic character, need specification. Thus, although his examples focus almost exclusively on claim-making, deeming a pattern of representation shape-shifting for Saward entails some engagement with the *reception* of representative claims, of their persuasiveness for audiences and constituents (2014: 732). Similarly, democratic legitimacy for Saward depends on the acceptance of representative claims by the relevant constituency. However, *what counts as persuasiveness or acceptance* by a constituency, remains unclear. Does majority or plurality assent suffice for instance, or are deliberative debate and reflection necessary? A deliberative ideal informs Saward's assessments of democratic legitimacy, as successful shape-shifting is not democratic when it obscures and blurs 'the basis upon which constituencies may accept or reject representative claims' (2014: 734). But how deliberative legitimacy is to be established with respect to his criteria of plurality, equal access, variability and reflexivity, also given that voter choices are re-shaped by representative claims, remains unclear.

My findings also challenge key assumptions of theories of descriptive representation. In arguments for group representation, the perspectives that descriptive representatives describe are assumed to be derived from their minority identities, typically characterized in terms of *difference* from the majority. By contrast, in our cases, minority representatives chose to define themselves overwhelmingly in terms of *similarity* with the majority, invoking party and regional identities that they shared in common with majority voters. There was little, if any articulation of cultural difference from the majority during electioneering. The focus on similarity rather than difference could be the result of multiple factors, including for instance, the requirements of winning electoral contests in a demographic context where minority representatives depend on the support of non-minority voters, pressures on minorities to conform to dominant norms, and/or a desire on the part of minority representatives to not to be pigeon-holed within the confines of a single ascribed identity. Whatever the reason, our findings suggest that representatives from minority backgrounds may have an incentive to use rhetoric that appeals to the sentiments and prejudices of the majority, to counter their *identity-deficit* as marginal or outsiders in a polity. Second, the assumption that shared group membership automatically makes for greater trust between representatives and their co-ethnics is not supported by this study. In the case of our representatives, identification and trust with their communities, nominally Dalit and Muslim, was not given but rather required identity-work across the barriers of class and sub-group that separated representatives from most of their co-ethnics. Most significantly, their party affiliation posed a barrier to the trust that is presumed to exist on account of a shared social identity between minority representatives and minority voters. Furthermore, attempts at reframing their party by representatives did not appear to overcome distrust of their party membership from their co-ethnics.

Whereas a minority position is often defined in singular terms, as inhabited by a marginalized group defined interchangeably by race (Blacks) or religion (Muslims) for

instance (see eg. Young 2000: 123, and for a contrast, Phillips 1995:4), my findings suggest that the constraints within which representatives made choices differed across different minority groups. Caste and religious minorities were differently disadvantaged by majoritarian Hindu nationalism. In the BJP's Hindu nationalist ideology, Dalits are incorporated through hegemonic inclusion within upper-caste norms, whereas Muslims are excluded as foreign invaders. A Dalit MP could choose not to self-identify as a Dalit during campaigning, whereas a Muslim MP did not have that choice, his religious identity hyper-visible in his name, even when he adopted no religious markers. Recent experience across the world suggests that majoritarian nationalisms can strategically include some marginalized groups (eg. women), to legitimate the exclusion of other minorities (eg Muslims), keeping existing power hierarchies intact. In India, Hindu nationalism's quest for the domination of Muslims has been advanced by its partial accommodation of some Dalit and tribal groups, as well as smaller religious minorities such as Parsis (see Buck 2018) and Jains.

These findings complicate, although they do not negate, the case for a politics of presence. If what descriptive representatives describe, and were seen to describe across very different cases, was primarily their party identity, then descriptive representation may not allow for the substantive representation of minority interests, or the extent to which this occurs is constrained by institutional norms, including party ideology. This is not to deny that the descriptive representation of marginalized groups is desirable for deepening democracy and advancing social justice. Blunt instruments to tackle the entrenched nature of group disadvantage can be better than none at all, even if these fail to do justice to the nuances of identity. It is, however, to suggest that the case for minority representation needs to go beyond the binary between the politics of presence and of ideas, and be attentive to the multiple forms in which minority perspectives are articulated *through*, and constrained by, the politics of ideas associated with party competition. More specifically, the presence or inclusion of minority

candidates does not necessarily result in voice, let alone influence, and may result in cooptation (see also Dovi 2002), even if creativity occurs in its interstices. It may be contended that this conclusion derives from the choice of cases, of minority representatives from the majoritarian BJP in mixed electorate constituencies. Descriptive representation may offer better substantive representation to minorities when linked to minority-centred parties and/or constituencies where minorities form a majority of the electorate. Nevertheless, the general point regarding the constraints on descriptive representation remains, and is borne out by institutional studies in other contexts which show that the inclusion of women and ethnic minorities in Parliament often results in an adaptation to dominant norms rather than the articulation of diversity (Celis and Wauters 2010: 387), from a range of motivations including re-election, reselection, career ambition among representatives. My study suggests that in election campaigns, there are strong incentives for minority MPs to comply with dominant norms that reflect the values of numerically preponderant groups which deny recognition to difference; furthermore, the party and its ideology may play a central role in conformity to dominant norms. This in turn poses a challenge to assumptions regarding the autonomy of representatives that motivate arguments for descriptive representation (Phillips 1995).

While the importance of political parties is increasingly recognized by normative theorists, my findings suggest that this remains inadequately addressed. In particular, theorists have tended to *underestimate, and/or mischaracterise*, the role of political parties in mediating the relationship between representatives and constituents. Notably, emerging democratic theory has emphasized the role of parties as agents of deliberation (eg. White and Ypi 2011, Ebeling 2016); however, my findings suggest that the space for deliberation may be very limited in representative practices, and the role of political parties may be less that of enabling, than of limiting deliberation. Deliberative theorists argue for partisan fora as ‘effective vehicles of civic education and empowerment’ (White and Ypi 2011: 387), however, our cases suggest

that these can serve equally as vehicles for ethnic education, mobilizing particularist and majoritarian rather than universalist and inclusive notions of the common good (see also van Biezen and Saward 2008:31). Against my contention regarding the deliberation-constraining role of parties, it can be argued that these findings stem from a focus on India, where party control over candidates is strong in relation to selection, voting in legislatures (an anti-defection law disqualifies representatives from voting against their party), policy formulation, and ideological direction. However, other studies suggest that India illustrates in an accentuated form, the ways in which parties limit the freedom and influence of representatives in Westminster style parliamentary systems (Bird 2015), constraining deliberation more generally (Bhatia 2018).

In terms of method, I have argued that road-testing normative theories through ethnographic inquiry is productive for identifying areas for the development of democratic theory. The preoccupation among normative theorists with advancing universal arguments at high levels of abstraction has meant that when empirical engagement is sought, it has been accompanied by reification and idealization of the real, thereby, paradoxically, further distancing political theories from the practices that they seek to improve. Statistical analyses of large-n data that focus on aggregate outcomes such as voting and numbers of minority representatives in legislatures, remain important for a reckoning of the inclusiveness of institutions, but also tend to reify and ascribe categories, viewing minority representatives through the lens of a single, given, identity. By contrast, ethnographic inquiry at the micro level that focusses on how minority representatives articulate and negotiate the meanings of identities better illuminates their multi-layered and dynamic character, as well as lacuna in normative theories of descriptive representation and representative claims. While scholars have recently highlighted how ethnography can advance normative theory (Herzog and Zacka 2017), my case here speaks to a broader role for political theory in political science that includes

interpretive and critical purposes as well as normative, that I defend elsewhere (Ackerly and Bajpai 2017). By providing a richer and fuller account of the contexts in which claims acquire meaning and resonance, as well as of how representatives and parties function and the range of roles that they perform, ethnographic studies can contribute to the construction of mid-level theory that is necessary if democratic theories are to be more than exercises in deliberative escapism and inform improvements in practice. Normative theorists need to learn from ethnographic approaches to engage substantively with the exclusionary effects of representative practices, and to specify the conditions under which representation may, and may not be, democratic. Representative claims offer a promising terrain to develop grounded political theory that addresses the real-world challenges that democratic representation confronts in our times.

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<sup>1</sup> During April-May 2014, I conducted approximately 200 interviews with the candidates, party workers and voters associated with the major parties with the help of two research assistants. The campaigns of incumbent representatives, and their principal rivals were trailed across multiple sites in different wards of Ahmedabad and Bhagalpur.



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<sup>2</sup> Under India's reservations system, 84 seats in the Lower House (*Lok Sabha*) are reserved for Scheduled Castes (Dalits) and 47 for Scheduled Tribes (Adivasis). In reserved constituencies, all candidates must belong to the designated group (Dalit or Adivasi), while the electorate is mixed. Scheduled Caste voters are not a majority in most reserved constituencies, unlike the more territorially concentrated Scheduled Tribes. During constitution-making, reserved seats for Muslims were abolished.

<sup>3</sup> Ideologically, Hindu nationalism seeks to unify all castes under a common religious identity and as such offers inclusion to lower castes in theory. Sociologically, while the core personnel and support base of the BJP have been overwhelmingly upper caste, in recent years it has expanded its reach among Dalits, other backward castes, and tribal groups. Modi's lower caste origins are advertised by the BJP as an example of its commitment to social mobility, and contrasted with dynastic politics of the Congress party, its main opponent.

<sup>4</sup> Although constraints of space prevent a fuller consideration of the evidence, the centrality of the party and its ideology was not limited to the BJP. The representative claims of the Dalit Congress candidate from Ahmedabad (West) for instance, invoked the party ideology of secularism in the sense of equal respect for minority religions, through practices such as visits to churches.