

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ARTICLE

## Descriptive Presentation: Invoking Identity as a Claim for Descriptive Representation

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Descriptive representation is commonly understood as the proportion of women or racial minorities in an institution. While useful, this approach is limited in its ability to capture intersectional identities, less visible characteristics, and the extent to which particular characteristics are more or less central to one's identity. Traditional approaches have raised concerns about essentialism—"the assumption that members of certain groups have an essential identity that all members of that group share" (Mansbridge 1999, 637). This assumption can lead to faulty logic—for example, that any woman can represent all women. Traditional approaches have also focused on visible characteristics, rather than shared experiences. These limitations affect not only who counts as a descriptive representative, but also our ability to assess which descriptive representatives will be most likely to contribute to substantive and symbolic representation.

### The Concept of Descriptive Presentation

We suggest that the concept of *descriptive presentation* can overcome these pitfalls and provide another approach for assessing descriptive representation. Descriptive presentation is a means of invoking one's identity, allowing representatives to describe or present themselves and who they represent. Descriptive presentation focuses on how representatives perform their identity, centering the actions and agency of representatives. It allows individuals to highlight the shared experiences that Mansbridge (1999) urges us to consider and make a representational claim signaling that they belong to a group (Piscopo 2011; Saward 2006). Descriptive presentation departs from traditional measures of descriptive representation in that it is active, not passive: representatives draw

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attention to particular identities. Descriptive presentation acknowledges that the salience of identities varies and representatives may present themselves differently across contexts. The concept of descriptive presentation can thus move us toward a richer understanding of descriptive representation, whereby shared experiences—and shared commitments—matter.

### Descriptive Presentation in Practice

Representatives can descriptively present themselves in numerous ways, including in speech, name, appearance, behavior, or environment.<sup>1</sup> Descriptive presentation not only involves the embodiment of certain traits, but also captures when representatives draw attention to their outward manifestations and shared experiences, demonstrating that they belong to particular groups. Representatives can perform descriptive presentation while campaigning, communicating with the public, engaging with colleagues, or carrying out other functions.

Representatives may descriptively present themselves by calling attention to their identity via their speech; for example, a legislator may use phrases like “as a woman” or “as a mother” (Hinojosa, Carle, and Woodall 2018; Piscopo 2011). A representative can also share information about their identity through their choice of language or linguistic features, communicating their identity (e.g., gay, Black, Texan) and affinity with their group (Dietrich, Hayes, and O’Brien 2019). Descriptive presentation can occur via the internet; for example, Black legislators use racially distinct hashtags on Twitter (Tillery 2021), and candidates choose to emphasize different identities on their websites (McDonald, Porter, and Treul 2020). Representative Ilhan Omar’s website opens with “Meet Ilhan: Somali. Black. Muslim. Woman. Refugee. Minnesotan.”<sup>2</sup> Descriptive presentation can also manifest in the stories representatives tell. Sarah Palin called herself a “hockey mom,” while Kyrsten Sinema frequently recounts her experience with homelessness.

Names and nicknames can be a form of descriptive presentation. Political candidates descriptively present themselves by using nicknames and professional titles on the ballot and in campaign materials (Boas 2014). For example, in the 2012 Brazilian municipal elections, over a dozen candidates ran as variations of “Barack Obama” (Darlington 2012).

Representatives can signal identity nonverbally as well. They can communicate membership in ethnic groups through their appearance, such as hairstyle (Lemi and Brown 2019) or dress, as when Patsy Mink donned a lei or Deb Haaland wore Indigenous dress at their inauguration ceremonies. They might wear religious garb, symbols, or colors representing their affiliations and beliefs. For example, New Zealand minister Nanaia Mahuta has a Māori facial tattoo. When accepting the vice presidential nomination, Kamala Harris wore a pearl necklace as a reference to her sorority (Davis-Marks 2021). Importantly, descriptive presentation is distinct from sheer physical appearance and clothing preferences. Dress or appearance matter only insofar as they are used as representative symbols or markers of identity. For instance, skin color may indicate identity, but is not in itself descriptive presentation; a candidate in

Mexico performs descriptive presentation when she calls herself *morena*, drawing attention to her skin color and ethnicity.

Descriptive presentation can also be conveyed through gestures, such as hand signals, culturally significant greetings, or other forms of collective group expression. In 2017, Australian senator Larissa Waters made headlines for breastfeeding while addressing parliament, spotlighting her identity as a working mother (Erickson 2017). More noxious examples include the Nazi salute and hand gestures associated with white supremacy.

Descriptive presentation can occur through presentations of oneself in particular surroundings and with objects. Announcing one's candidacy at a factory versus a swanky hotel might communicate connections to the working class. Likewise, the locations in which representatives choose to present themselves in speeches or visual media can signal geographic and group ties. In addition to locations, representatives can surround themselves with objects representing their identity and ideology. Elected officials are frequently pictured next to flags symbolizing their patriotism. Colorado representative Lauren Boebert surrounded herself with assault rifles during a virtual meeting in 2021, and in 2018, Florida representative Mike Hill posed with a Confederate monument in a campaign ad.

### Advantages of the Approach

The concept of descriptive presentation alleviates many of the limitations produced by our quotidian use of the concept of descriptive representation. Descriptive presentation addresses concerns about essentialism and intersectionality by allowing representatives to present information about themselves. Two Latina representatives may differ in how they descriptively present themselves in their speech, use of nicknames, or places they campaign. These all contribute greater information about their identities, combating concerns about essentialism and permitting researchers to more fully appreciate and measure intersectional identities.

Descriptive presentation allows representatives to decide which of their own characteristics to emphasize or de-emphasize. Representatives can opt to highlight shared experiences and less visible identities, as may be the case for members of religious groups, migrants, or persons with disabilities. Importantly, descriptive presentation as an approach does not require the researcher to define who counts as a descriptive representative for a particular group—a practice that can be problematic for those susceptible to being misclassified using traditional approaches, like transgender or multiracial individuals.

Furthermore, descriptive representation is necessary, but not sufficient, for proper substantive representation (Celis and Childs 2020), especially in contexts of mistrust and uncrystallized interests (Mansbridge 1999). We argue that by considering descriptive presentation—a novel way of assessing descriptive representation in addition to simple headcounts—we strengthen the connections between descriptive and substantive representation. Descriptive presentation also allows the public to distinguish among possible representatives to identify

those who are most apt, or “preferable” descriptive representatives (Dovi 2002), and reject those whose experiences or interests are inconsistent with those of the group. Moreover, descriptive presentation builds on Mansbridge’s argument that descriptive representatives should be privileged over nondescriptive representatives who share concerns (Mansbridge 1999, 648). Descriptive representatives who engage in acts of descriptive presentation are preferable to not only nondescriptive representatives, but also to descriptive representatives who do not invoke their identity, as the former are more likely to contribute to substantive representation.

### Guidance for Future Research

The concept of descriptive presentation offers many avenues for future research. Descriptive presentation can be used to study a multitude of identities, including less visible or uncommon identities. Importantly, the concept of descriptive presentation reminds us that “there is activity in symbolic representation” (Lombardo and Meier 2019, 234; Rai 2017). Furthermore, this approach allows for several identities to be studied simultaneously, answering calls from intersectionality scholars for researchers to focus on the entirety of an individual (Crenshaw 1991). This approach can also shed light on why historically marginalized groups can remain disempowered after appearing to achieve descriptive representation numerically (Behl 2014)—that is, if only the most elite and loosely affiliated group members ascend to political offices (Dovi 2002).

Descriptive presentation can be studied using multiple research approaches. Quantitative and qualitative data can be derived from videos, audio clips, images, or text, allowing researchers to examine how representatives present themselves through various platforms and venues (Boas 2014; Hinojosa, Carle, and Woodall 2018; Tillery 2021). Interpretivist approaches can be useful for gleaning intentionality—both well-intentioned and nefarious—and defining what is and is not descriptive presentation. Why does a representative draw attention to their identity “as a mother” or “as an immigrant”? What are they trying to achieve or communicate? Who is the intended audience? Can we infer descriptive presentation from particular clothing choices? As an example, Melania Trump’s apparel frequently puzzled observers who struggled to decipher whether these garments were representative symbols or simply peculiar fashion statements.

Studies can also examine how various audiences react to instances of descriptive presentation, or “symbolic representation.” Are these presentations perceived to be authentic, strategic, disingenuous, or even fraudulent? (Rai 2017). Do they influence public attitudes or political engagement? Experiments and surveys can be useful for examining how in-group members react to different forms of descriptive presentation, such as appearance or statements of shared identity (Lemi and Brown 2019; Montoya et al. 2022). For example, Colin Powell was not seen as a true representative by many African Americans because of the way he descriptively presented himself (Mansbridge 1999, 645). Studies might focus on the electoral consequences of descriptive presentation. Including nicknames or occupations on ballots, for instance, can influence voters’ decisions (Boas 2014;

McDermott 2005). Studying media reactions or those of political adversaries can prove insightful. Opponents of Brazilian president Dilma Rousseff referred to her as *presidente*, instead of *presidenta*, to undermine her during impeachment proceedings (Krook and Restrepo Sanín 2020). Barack Obama's opponents were keen to emphasize his middle name, Hussein, when spreading conspiracy theories about his birthplace and religion.

Finally, future research might focus on how specific contexts shape when, where, why, and how representatives choose to descriptively present themselves and whether descriptive presentation in certain contexts allows for more powerful claims for substantive representation. The contexts that Mansbridge (1999) highlights provide a useful point of departure. Does invoking one's identity allow a representative to facilitate communication in contexts of mistrust, to demonstrate an ability to rule, or to enhance an institution's legitimacy? Does it lend them credibility when speaking about "uncrystallized" group interests?

## Notes

1. "Representatives" include individuals broadly viewed as representatives of a group; they need not be elected officials.
2. See <https://ilhanomar.com/about/> (accessed May 28, 2021).

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