



Political Representation

Introduction to Political Theory
Department of Political Economy
King's College London



I. Direct Democracy vs. Representative Democracy

II. Representation: Trustee vs. Delegate

III. Pitkin on the Perplexities of Representation

IV. Descriptive Representation

Direct Democracy

Instrumental vs Intrinsic Debate: Voting is exercising power because you are voting on a *law* backed with coercion

But how many laws have *you* actually voted on directly?

Direct Democracy

In most democracies, we vote for
representatives, not laws

Does representation dilute democracy or
enhance it?

What principles should guide our
representatives?

Athenian Democracy



Democratic Athens c. 508-323 BCE

Direct Democracy

Citizenship = direct participation in political decision-making through acclamation of laws

The assembly = venue of participation

No idea of representation

Representative Democracy



At its peak, Athens had ~30,000 (male) citizens

How should democracy be realized in large-scale, modern states?



Representative Democracy

Sources of Representative Democracy

1. *Medieval*: Society as distinct groups (estates) that can be *represented*
2. *Elitist*: Representation *balances* democracy with *aristocratic principles of distinction and rule by the best*
2. *Revolutionary*: All government must be accountable to people *even in large states*

Representative Democracy

Is representation a concession to the size and scale of modern democracies, and so a necessary departure from the ideal of pure democracy?

Or does representation enhance the quality of democracy through the activities of the representatives?

Trustee vs. Delegate

To answer these questions, we need some account of the *appropriate activity of representatives*

The Classic Debate: Trustee vs. Delegate

Trustee vs. Delegate

Trustee

The job of representatives is to *exercise their own judgment to pursue the interests of their constituency and the community as a whole*

Trustee vs. Delegate

In an election, you elect an *individual* whose judgment you *trust*

Thus, your representative should independently employ that judgment in addressing particular issues

Trustee vs. Delegate

“Certainly, gentlemen, it ought to be the happiness and glory of a representative to live in the strictest union, the closest correspondence, and the most unreserved communication with his constituents.... But his unbiassed opinion, his mature judgment, his enlightened conscience, he ought not to sacrifice to you, to any man, or to any set of men living. Your representative owes you, not his industry only, but his judgment; and he betrays, instead of serving you, if he sacrifices it to your opinion.”

Edmund Burke, *Speech to the Electors of Bristol*

Trustee vs. Delegate

Once elected, a representative is not just responsible to their particular constituency.

They must exercise their independent judgment because they are meant to represent the interests of the *political community as a whole*.

Trustee vs. Delegate

“Parliament is not a congress of ambassadors from different and hostile interests; which interests each must maintain, as an agent and advocate, against other agents and advocates; but parliament is a deliberative assembly of one nation, with one interest, that of the whole; where, not local purposes, not local prejudices, ought to guide, but the general good, resulting from the general reason of the whole.”

Edmund Burke, *Speech to the Electors of Bristol*

Trustee vs. Delegate

Delegate Model

Typically, individuals vote for *policies* and a *platform*, and not just an individual

Representatives are meant to help implement those *policies*

Trustee vs. Delegate

Delegate Model

Given that their authority comes from democratic procedures, their job is to *translate the wishes of the public into laws and policies*

Trustee vs. Delegate

Some Problem with Trustees

Who defines interests of the community?

What is the point of *local constituencies*
and elections?

Trustee vs. Delegate

Some Problems with Delegates

If they are bound by *party discipline*, does that mean they are beholden to a small segment of society?

Can “mandates” cover *every specific issue that could arise*?

Perplexities of Representation

Representation is, most fundamentally, the act of making something absent present

So it involves both mirroring (delegation) but also *re*-presentation (trustee)

Perplexities of Representation

Pure Mandate – Not an act of representation, as you are not making something absent present

Pure Trusteeship – Not an act of representation, as no connection between what is being represented and representative (Burke admits this point)

Perplexities of Representation

Pitkin's Argument

Our attitude towards representation
fundamentally hangs on how we
understand the relationship between
individuals and interests

Perplexities of Representation

Duality of Interests

“in your interest”

vs.

“interested in”

Perplexities of Representation

The activity of representation is about representing your *interests* and so it will reflect both those meanings of interests

When we argue about representation, then, we are (also) arguing about how we *should* understand the relationship between people's interests and their judgment of their interests

Perplexities of Representation

“The concept of interest, then, profoundly embodies the duality of our thinking about who is to say what is good for people. At one extreme are unattached interests, where there are no relevant wishes to consult; at the other extreme what a person finds interesting, which is surely up to him. And in between is a wide range in which interest *means* what a person has in fact, objectively at stake; yet we also feel that he must eventually have some say in defining what that is.”



Descriptive Representation

Trustee: Representation is anti-democratic and that's good

Delegation: Representation is anti-democratic and that's bad

Descriptive: Representation *enhances* democratic



Descriptive Representation

Descriptive Representation

Representatives should match, in some way, the identity or demographic characteristics of the represented

Should blacks represent blacks and women represent women?



Descriptive Representation

Mansbridge's Defense

Descriptive representation *within the context of electoral institutions* ('selective' form)

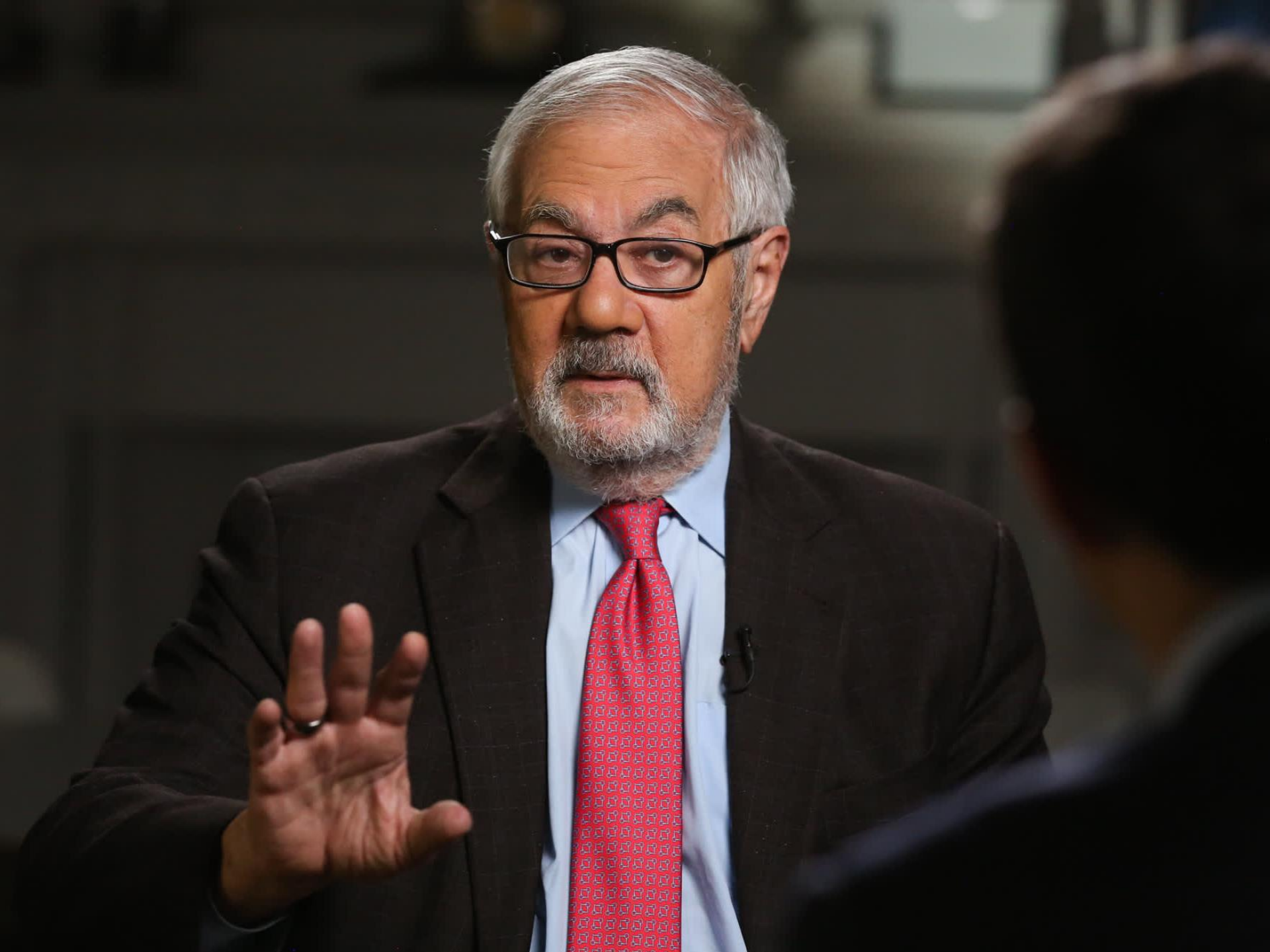
Against “pure” mirroring descriptive representation, such as through random selection



Descriptive Representation

Descriptive representation is *particularly useful where there is a history of exclusion and discrimination*

Descriptive representatives can become “surrogate” representatives for members of group in other districts, thereby *enhancing democratic inclusion*





Descriptive Representation

Descriptive representation is *particularly useful where there are ‘uncrystallized’ interests from marginalized groups*

Descriptive representatives can help *clarify and advance* those interests



Descriptive Representation

Descriptive representation is *particularly useful where there is a history of mistrust and low legitimacy*

Descriptive representatives can help *build trust and legitimacy of democratic institutions*

Descriptive Representation

Critiques of Descriptive Representation

Divisive

In some cases, yes, but can also build
“bridging” trust among historically
marginal groups that raises belief in
cooperation

The background of the slide features a dense crowd of stylized human figures. Each figure is a simple silhouette filled with a different color, including shades of blue, orange, red, green, yellow, and purple. The figures are drawn with a textured, sketchy style, giving the impression of a large, diverse group of people. The overall color palette is vibrant and varied.

Descriptive Representation

Competency

“No one would argue that morons should represent morons.”

Only applies to “pure” mirroring representation

Descriptive Representation

Essentialism

Descriptive representatives are asked to speak on behalf of a group, thereby making that group appear more homogenous

More descriptive representation often undermines essentialism



Descriptive Representation

Elitist

Descriptive representation can encourage the most well-off/privileged of marginalized groups to speak for that group as a whole