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What are representative claims and why should we care about them?

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Representative claims offer ways for members of parliament (MPs) to profile themselves as representatives of certain groups and geographical entities, and to give interpretations of what people think. In this research note, Maija Mattila presents examples of representative claims from a case study of Finnish MPs' speeches. She argues that paying attention to representative claims opens avenues for better understanding politics.

The study of political representation is in the heart of political science. Traditionally, it has been asked whom elected politicians (truly) represent. This question has usually been posed in a national context. Geographical constituency, particular interest groups, political party, and the whole nation have been alternatives for representative foci.

Recently, the study of democratic representation has taken a new direction. Instead of researching whom or what representatives *really* represent, researchers have been interested in whom or what they *claim* to represent. These **representative claims** are claims about who should be understood as a representative of whom and, importantly, how the represented should be understood.

In this research note I present examples of representative claims by using Finnish MPs' speeches in the so-called Talvivaara mine issue as a case study. What representative claims were made? How can and should representative claims be interpreted? What do they have to do with politics overall and why should we care about them? As my findings show, representative claims offer ways to talk politically, yet in a seemingly neutral manner. Without understanding the essentially political connotations of representative claims, we fail to understand the very nature of politics. It is not simply that 'we' as people become represented by

representatives, but representatives also participate in defining 'us'. This defining happens in relation to representatives' political goals and background ideologies.

I studied the representative claims made by Finnish MPs in six question hour plenary debates concerning Talvivaara between 2012 and 2015. The Talvivaara is an example of a regionally important issue. The mine is situated in Kainuu province in eastern Finland. During the study period, the mine acquired national media publicity due to the extent of its environmental and financial problems, and for the involvement of the state of Finland as an investor. It went bankrupt in 2014 and was bought by the state in 2015.

During the weekly question hours MPs have the opportunity to ask questions, and challenge, the government. The representative claims during the debates can be distinguished using three different categories. In the first category were claims about groups of people that were allegedly affected by the mine. Here is an example of the category:

Tourism entrepreneurs** have for decades advertised Finland as the land of thousands of lakes. ... And if we think about the Talvivaara area and the water bodies nearby, there are a lot of **residences and summer cottages**, the values of which are going to sink due to this catastrophe. I hence ask a responsible minister: has it been considered how **these

citizens and entrepreneurs are compensated for the fact that their possessions have lost a big share of their value?

– Pirkko Ruohonen-Lerner (the Finns)

MPs referred to tourism entrepreneurs, to shore-owners, to mine workers, to investors, and to people that were worried about the environment. Many MPs referred to these groups simultaneously, but with varying emphasis; the problem was conceptualized either as that of the environment, of workers, or of entrepreneurs. In other words, the issue was conceptualized through these groups of people. In making these claims, the MPs made choices of which groups of people to represent and how. Hence this category of claims was about profiling the MPs as representatives of certain groups.

The second category included claims that referred to localities, regions, and the whole country. The following passage exemplifies this point:

This is of course a terrible day for Kainuu, and in the worst case the ramifications of the bankruptcy for the whole province are really dismal.

– Timo V. Korhonen (Centre Party)

The referred localities were in the constituencies that had elected the MPs, and MPs most often made allusions to localities and regions they themselves came from. This was the case even if the locality or region had nothing directly to do with Talvivaara. Nonetheless, in some speeches the Talvivaara issue was represented as a national issue, and the national interest was interpreted from the standpoint of the given MP's overall views and political goals. In this regard, the MPs represented themselves as interpreters of the localities, regions, and the national interest.

The third category was about telling what people in general thought or what they were like:

A strong, diligent and resilient people inhabits Kainuu. For all the people living in Kainuu I want to thank the members of the cabinet, ministers, for this encouraging hour that we have had the chance to listen to, to listen to what the government has planned for people in Kainuu in this very severe situation in front of which we now stand.

– Pentti Kettunen (the Finns)

These claims worked as a way for the MPs to speak on behalf of citizens to the executive. Consequently, MPs making the claims took their assumed role as *the* representatives of the people.

All of the claims in these three categories included interpretations about the situation of Talvivaara, of people's interests as well as interests of certain localities, regions, and the country. They were about telling what people thought, how they were like, and what was good for them. What the interpretation was, depended of the given MP's political aims and background ideologies. Overall, the representative claims offered a seemingly neutral way to communicate political aims and ideologies. At the same time, MPs acted out their expected roles as *the* representatives of the people.



The representative claims offered MPs a seemingly neutral way to communicate political aims and ideologies



Speaking with representative claims, then, is *essentially a way of speaking politically*. In making the claims the MPs did not simply reflect something that was 'out there' waiting to be represented, but how the represented was understood only emerged as a result of the MPs' speeches. What this signifies is that we need to reform the way we understand representation. So far, representation in political science and in everyday language has

often meant representativeness, a one-to-one relationship between representatives and the represented. What I suggest here, is to understand that our ideas and opinions of what we are and how we best would be represented in decision-making does not form in a vacuum. By understanding representation

in this way opens avenues for better understanding politics. Constituencies do not exist detached from the political arena. By paying attention to representative claims, both researchers and attentive citizens can make sense of the nature of politics.

This note represents the views of the author and not those of PADEMIA.



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