

Paper-11 Module-8

Defining Political Representation

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Description of the Module

Subject Name	Women's Studies
Paper Name	Women, Governance and Politics
Module Name	Defining Political Representation.
Module Id	Paper-11 Module-8
Pre-requisites	The Reader is expected to have a basic understanding of the concept of state, government, elections and democracy
Objectives	To make the Reader understand the notion of political representation, its key components, theories, types of representation, significance of representation and women's political representation
Keywords	Representation, democracy, elections, electoral system

Defining political representation

Introduction

Political representation is not easy to define as different scholars have tried to define it in different ways. There is a general and specific understanding of political representation. In a general sense representation means that when a group of people or individuals represents and acts on behalf of a group which is so large that all its members cannot directly participate in its deliberations, then this is the general understanding of representation. In the specific sense, political representation “is the process through which attitudes, preferences, viewpoints and desires of the entire citizenry or a part of them are, with expressed approval, shaped into government action on their behalf by a smaller number among them, with binding effect upon those represented.”¹ According to German social theorist, Robert Von Mohl, representation, “is the process through which the influence which the entire citizenry or a part of them have upon government action, is with their expressed approval, exercised on their behalf by a small number among them, with binding effects upon those represented”.² Hanna Pitkin provides, perhaps, one of the most straightforward definitions: to represent is simply to “make present again.”³ On this definition, political representation is the activity of making citizens' voices, opinions, and perspectives “present” in the public policy-making processes. Political representation occurs when political actors speak, advocate, symbolize, and act on behalf of others in the political arena. In short, political representation is a kind of political assistance⁴. But there are many controversial aspects related to representation, for example what should be the objective principles to judge political representatives? Different models of representation provide different criteria for evaluating representatives. Further, there are several questions which arise: (i) what should be the autonomy of the representatives and those represented, (ii) how representatives can be made accountable to the represented, (iii) how much representatives be given freedom to act as per their discretion, (iv) under what conditions representatives can defy the opinion of the people represented etc.? Pitkin offers one of the most comprehensive discussions of the concept of political representation, pointing out its contradictory character in her *The Concept of Representation*.⁵ Pitkin maintains that in order to understand the concept of political representation, one must consider the different ways in which the term is used. Each of these different uses of the term provides a different view of the concept. Pitkin compares the concept of representation to “a rather complicated, convoluted, three-dimensional structure in the middle of a dark enclosure.” Political theorists provide “flash-bulb photographs of the structure taken from different angles”. From this perspective, Pitkin identifies at least four different views of representation: formalistic representation, descriptive representation, symbolic representation, and substantive representation⁶. Brief explanations of these different types are given below⁷:

Formalistic representation

This refers to the institutional arrangements that precede and initiate representation. Formal representation has two dimensions: authorization and accountability. Authorization is the means by which a representative obtains his or her standing, status, position or office. Accountability is the ability of constituents to *punish* their representative for failing to act in accordance with their wishes (e.g., voting an elected official out of office) or the *responsiveness* of the representative to the constituents.

Symbolic representation

This refers to the ways that a representative “stands for” the represented — that is, the meaning that a representative has for those being represented.

Descriptive representation

This means the extent to which a representative resembles those being represented.

Substantive representation

This refers to the activity of representatives—that is, the actions taken on the behalf of, in the interest of, as an agent of, and as a substitute for the represented.

In recent years, there have been changes in the traditional understanding of political representation with changing national and international scenario. At the international level, with the rise of transnational actors and non-governmental associations, the influence of formal representatives has reduced in policy formulations at the national and international level. Similarly, interest groups and social bodies are also playing important role in deciding the contours of policies along with the formal representatives.

Further there have been recommendations by scholars to rethink the traditional understanding of political representation as principal-agent relationship⁸. For example, Melissa Williams recommends understanding representation as “mediation”. In particular Williams identifies three dimensions of political life that representatives must “mediate”: the dynamics of legislative decision-making, the nature of legislator-constituent relations, and the basis for aggregating citizens into representable constituencies. Nadia Urbinati argues for understanding representation as “advocacy”. For Urbinati, the point of representation should not be the aggregation of interests but the preservation of disagreements necessary for preserving liberty. Urbinati identifies two main features of advocacy: 1. The representative’s passionate link to the elector’s cause and 2. The representative’s relative autonomy of judgement⁹. Hence, it is clear from above discussions that the issue of political representation is complex and it’s any single definition of is it elusive. There are myriad ways in which representation can be understood. In addition, the criteria for evaluating representatives and the principles that should define representative-represented relationships are varied.

Key Components of Political Representation

Political representation, in general exhibits the following four components¹⁰:

1. Some party that is representing (the representative, an organization, movement, state agency, etc.);
2. Some party that is being represented (the constituents, the clients, etc.);
3. Something that is being represented (opinions, perspectives, interests, discourses, etc.); and
4. A setting within which the activity of representation is taking place (the political context).

The above four components constitute the basic features of any type of political representation. The first component is the party representing, which can be not only an individual but also a group, organization, movement or even a state's agency. There are certain terms and conditions prescribed by the government for being elected as representative at local, state and national levels. Like there may be age bar on representatives for contesting elections and there can be some educational qualifications also prescribed for them. There are different ways for electing representatives and sometimes they are even nominated by the people. The second component is the people or the constituency being represented and there are various ways of representing people like through territorial division, functional or proportional representation. When each and every individual was the power of electing their representatives, it is known as a democratic form of representation. Earlier, representation was not democratic but elitist in nature as only few propertied and privileged class had the power to elect their representatives. The third component is the purpose of representation, that is what for representatives have been elected and what functions they are to perform on behalf of the constituency. It can be general welfare to the fulfillment of specific objectives or functions and also building policies for the citizens. There are different viewpoints on whether representatives should simply carry forward the interests of the people or exercise their discretion to decide what is beneficial for their constituency. The fourth component is the political setting in which representation takes place. There can be many different contexts like representation may take place in a democratic or a non-democratic set up. For certain politicized and disadvantaged communities, representation may be a big issue for carrying forward their interests and they may voice for representation amongst their own communities.

In spite of differences within all the four components of political representation, they are linked with each other as the properties of each one of them determine the nature and outcome of political representation.

Nature of Representation

There is no consensus on the nature of representation. There are multiple theories which are based on different ideological and political considerations. For example, according to A.R. Ball,

the theories of representation may be put into two categories-liberal-democratic and socialistic or collectivistic-and the implications of the term 'representation' differ in both¹¹. There are many principles guiding political representation and four models of nature of representation can be put forward¹²:

1. Trusteeship
2. Delegation
3. Mandate
4. Resemblance

Trustee Model

Trustee is one who is vested with responsibility to act on behalf of other's affairs. It is assumed that trustee is educated and more conscientious than the common people and can act on their behalf. It is assumed that common man has less understanding of politics and governance and trustees are those who have the capabilities to deliberate on behalf of the people. Some of the important proponents of the trustee model have been Edmund Burke and J.S. Mill. According to Burke, the essence of representation was to serve one's constituents by the exercise of 'mature judgement' and 'enlightened conscience'¹³. Similarly, Mill reiterated that although all individuals have a right to be represented, not all political opinions are of equal value. Mill proposed a system of plural voting in which four or five votes would be allocated to holders of learned diplomas or degrees, two or three to skilled or managerial workers, and a single vote to ordinary workers.¹⁴

Some of the criticisms of this model are: first, it promotes an elitist model of representation which is antagonistic to the notions of democracy and equality. Second, it is wrong to consider that people are incapable of deciding about their matters because if it is so, then they should also be considered incapable of choosing their representatives.

Delegation

In delegation, representatives are given the powers and instructions to work on behalf of others. They cannot act on their own and their powers and authority can be withdrawn any time depending upon the wish of the delegating authority. The people try to control the representatives by means such as referendum, recall and initiatives, regular elections and fixed terms in office. James Madison (1787–8) is one of the leading historical figures who articulated a delegate conception of representation. One of the advantages of delegate representation is that it comes very close to direct democracy though not same. Because the representatives totally represent the will of their constituency and have very less scope to exercise their own discretion. Disadvantages of this type of representation is that it gives very less leverage to the politicians to exercise their will and act as per their rational choice, that kills initiatives and creativity on the part of the politicians. It may lead to demagoguery as representatives may try to manipulate the will of the people which may not be rational and beneficial to their interest.

Mandate

Here the representative fights on behalf of a political party and he is chosen because of his party and its ideologies. Both the trustee and the delegate model have developed before the emergence of modern political parties and therefore view representatives as essentially independent actors. Mandate is a one of the most influential of the new theories of representation. It is based on the idea that, in winning an election, a party gains a popular mandate that authorizes it to carry out whatever policies or programs it outlined during the election campaign¹⁵. The doctrine of the mandate thus guarantees responsible party government, in that the party in power can only act within the mandate it has received. This is a 'policy mandate'.¹⁶ One of the drawbacks of mandate system is that political parties call the shots and representatives have very less leverage to rise beyond party politics. Secondly, the political parties try to manipulate the opinion of the people.

Resemblance

According to this model, representatives should resemble the group they represent. If the representative is from his own communities, then it will better represent the interests of that group. For example, it is believed that women can better represent women community, dalit representative is better capable of carrying forward the interests of dalit community. It is based on the assumption that in the government, there should be representatives from different sections of the society so that an inclusive government in the true sense of the term can be established. The benefits of this type of model is that it helps in providing representation to all segments of the society especially the minorities and socially disadvantaged groups. On the other hand, it promotes parochialism and narrowness in the society as representatives represent only small groups and it may lead to conflict of interests. Also it will be very difficult to develop consensus on policies amongst the representatives. Further, there is no guarantee that representatives from one community will always protect the interests of that group, for example, sometimes a Dalit representative may not be sensitive enough towards the welfare of his community.

Types of representation

Representation was practiced in some form or other since time immemorial. It was prevalent even in the ancient and medieval period but the nature of representation was different from the modern times. In the earlier times, representation was the privilege of the elite and the propertied class and they used to select representatives for the entire population. With the advent of democracy and extension of adult franchise to all segments of the population, now every individual has got the right to elect representatives. Many criteria have been developed for the basis of representation like territory, functions and gender to elect representatives and each one of them has its own merits and demerits. Some of them are described below¹⁷:

Territorial representation

As per the number of seats in the legislature, the entire territory is divided into electoral districts, which are termed as 'constituencies'. The constituencies may be single member or multi-member constituencies, in proportion to the number of people living in that area. One of the features of territorial representation is that each representative must represent roughly an

equal segment of the population. To ensure this, each constituency is divided in such a way that they have almost equal population. One of the basic assumptions of the territorial representation is that people within a constituency are similar and have like-minded interests and a representative which they will elect by the majority will better represent the population. This type of representation is universally adopted by countries across the world. But this model of representation has many disadvantages also, like, since the representatives are elected on the basis of majority, the minority do not get a chance to be represented and their interests get sidelined. Secondly, it gives importance to the proportion of population in representation and ignores other factors like functions, occupations in the society. Thirdly, it does not ensure that women who constitute half of the population gets adequately represented. Fourth, the division of constituencies on the basis of population may lead to 'gerrymandering' where the constituencies may be divided in such a way that it may increase the winning chances of some candidates. Fifth, since in modern democracy the fight between representatives is actually a fight between major political parties, in such a scenario smaller parties have very less chances of winning elections and sending their representatives. Some of the shortcomings of the territorial representation has been addressed with functional and proportional representation which is explained below.

Functional Representation

In contrast to territorial representation, where the representation is done on the basis of territory, in functional representation, the representation is done on the basis of occupations in the society. In modern society, there is tremendous functional and occupational specialization and any system of representation should represent the interests of these various occupational groups in the society. In the modern government, these different occupational groups should be represented by representatives belonging to them. It is believed that functional representatives can better represent the interests of different sections of the society. For this a census should be done to find out the different occupational patterns in the country and based on that representatives should be chosen. Like the teaching community would chose teachers, a business community will elect business representatives amongst themselves; workers will choose workers' representatives, etc. It is based upon the assumption that such a type of representation will help in choosing better and competent persons. Parliament is supposed to represent the general will of the people and territorial representation helps in choosing general representatives but it does not necessarily lead to representation of experts in the legislature. G.D.H. Cole is one of the most important proponents of functional representation. Though the idea of functional representation has many merits but it is having many disadvantages also. First, representation according to occupational interests creates narrow parochial groups in the parliament where there is always conflict of interests and it is very difficult to build consensus on any issue of national importance. Second, it is not congenial for the national integration as different occupational interests may work in opposite directions and pose challenge to the national interests. Third, it is very difficult to have census of different occupational groups and to have representatives representing all the interests.

Proportional Representation

It stands on the principle that 'votes should be weighed, not counted'. It has three ingredients:

1. There should be a multi-member constituency,
2. A candidate should be elected not by

gaining an absolute or relative majority but by obtaining a quota of votes that is equivalent to the total number of votes cast and divided by number of seats to be filled, and 3. There should be a mathematically exact, as far as possible, representation of electorate in the legislature¹⁸.

Proportional representation is a system by which divisions in an electorate are reflected proportionately in the elected body. If 30% of the electorate support a particular political party, then roughly 30% of seats will be won by that party. The method of proportional representation is put into practice in two ways- single transferable vote system and list system¹⁹.

The single transferable vote system was first devised by Danish minister Carl Andrae, but it was presented in a refined form by Thomas Hare of England in 1859. So it is also known as the Hare system²⁰. According to this system, voters rank candidates in order of preference. To be elected, any candidate has to achieve a set number of votes. At the first stage, only the first preferences are counted and any candidate who has votes above the quota is elected. The surplus votes of the candidates that is which is above the quota are then distributed to the second preferences shown on the ballot papers. When no candidate has reached the quota, the bottom candidates are eliminated and his votes are transferred to the other candidates, according to the order of second preference marked on the ballot paper. This procedure continues until all the seats are filled up. The electoral quota is calculated by dividing the total number of valid votes by number of seats to be filled up plus 1 and then the figure of 1 is added to the quotient. The formula is given below²¹:

$$\frac{\text{Total Number of Valid Votes}}{\text{Total Number of Seats} + 1} = \text{Electoral Quota}$$

$$\text{Total Number of Seats} + 1$$

According to David Robertson, this is a method of election which seeks to ensure that minorities as well as majorities and pluralities are adequately represented in the legislature and which distributes seats or units of legislative representation in accordance with the proportion of votes recorded in the whole electoral division.²²

The second method of proportional representation is the list system, in which the vote is cast for a party's list of candidates though in most countries the elector can also express support for individual candidates on the list. Each party submits a list of candidates which is equal to the number of seats to be filled up or even less than that. For the purpose of counting, the electoral quota is calculated in the manner as given above. Depending upon the percentage of votes secured by the parties the seats are assigned to them accordingly.

The number of votes won by a party determines how many candidates are elected from that party's list. The order in which the candidates appear on the list (usually decided by the party itself) governs which people are elected to represent that party. For example, suppose a party wins 10 percent of the vote in an election to a 150 seat assembly. That party will be entitled to 15 MPs, who will be top 15 candidates on its list. So list voting is party voting. This method therefore weakens the link between the representative and a particular constituency²³. One of

the merits of proportional representation is that it gives representation to all sections of the people as far as possible. It also gives a sense of security to people belonging to minority groups or political parties. The demerit of this system is that it leads to a multi-party system in the country that may not be congenial for a stable government. It may also lead to increase in expenses and labor.

Minority Representation

Minority representation is one in which representation is given to minority on the grounds of religion, language, culture, race, etc. In democracy, the majority gets represented but there should also be measures to represent minorities as otherwise it will lead to iniquitous rule in the society. In a democratic government various measures are used for representation of minorities which are given below²⁴:

Limited Vote System

It requires that there should be at least three seats in a multi-member constituency and the voters be given votes less than the number of seats; they should also not be allowed to cast more than one vote for a candidate. In such a situation the position of the minorities is improved a little and they may have a chance of capturing one seat if they are fairly united and well organized.

Single Vote System

It prevails in a multi-member constituency with one vote of each voter. The candidates are elected on the basis of the majority of votes. The position of the minorities is much improved in this system in as much as they may cast their votes for their own candidate, while the votes of the persons in majority would be distributed among different candidates.

Proxy Vote System

Under it a voter may cast his vote for one candidate in a multi-member constituency. A minimum number of votes are fixed and a candidate securing that point is declared elected. It is also provided that those who vote for a candidate, who fails to be successful, may vote again for others so that the unfilled posts may be filled up. Obviously, this would require either a preferential ballot, or one which is most secret.

Cumulative Vote System

Under this system a voter has as many votes as there are seats to be filled up and he is allowed to cast his votes either for different candidates or all votes for a single candidate. It is obvious that the persons in minority may cast all their votes in favour of a candidate of their community. It is also known as plumping vote system.

Weightage

It means that the persons in minority may be given some extra benefits. That is, they may be entitled for more votes than those given to persons in majority. For instance, in India in pre-independence days, the Muslims, the Sikhs and the Christians had one vote in the general constituency and one more vote for election in a separate constituency for the candidates of their own community.

Nominations/Reservations

There may be a system of nominations by the head of the state or reservation of seats for the candidates of a particular class in minority. In India, some seats are reserved for the persons of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, while two members of the Anglo-Indian community may be nominated by the President to the Lok Sabha and one member of this community may be nominated by the Governor to the State Legislative Assembly.

Why Representation is significant?

Representation is an important component of democracy and a necessary corollary of elections. Representation is significant in a democracy because representatives have status and authority derived from the people, have access to political power and privileges that make them powerful members of the society. Representatives have important decision-making powers and have considerable control over the resources and its distribution in the society. Therefore, it is understandable why people aspire to become political representatives and why it is important that right persons are chosen as representatives. It is ironical that since independence there has been rise in people having criminal and strong financial background contesting elections and becoming representatives of the people. Another unfortunate trend has been the continuous dominance of male members in the Parliament in comparison with female representatives across the world. Various factors like patriarchal mindset and criminalization of politics have deterred women from participation in politics. Invisibility of women in political sphere has led to unfair treatment of issues related to women. Another point is whether any representative can represent all segments of the society. In the context of women this is important because they constitute half of the population and have about 10-11% representation in parliament. Low representation of women has to be understood keeping in mind the lower and inferior standard of women in our society. Dominant male sections of the party control the process of elections by deciding who will contest elections and most often control the outcome through money and manipulative powers. It is a well-established fact that people with economic powers have often tried to control politics through the process of representation. The discrimination in representation is visible not only in the economic and gender field but in the social sphere also as some privileged castes have tried to dominate elections and representation for a long time.

The process of representation and the representatives are important because the latter act on behalf of people and is responsible of representing their interests and formulating policies in their favor. Further there is the question of the accountability of the representatives to the people that is invariably connected with the ways by which people can exercise control over their representatives. It is not simply majority representation that is important but each and every segments of the society should get a chance to be represented in the legislature. In this context, women's representation is significant question that is discussed below.

What is women's political representation?

Women's representation means the participation of women in the decision making process, exercising political power, political activism, rise of political consciousness, etc. They constitute half of the population but are not adequately represented in the Parliament. Till now women have a poor 11% representation in Lok Sabha and 10.6% in the Rajya Sabha, making India 108th among 188 countries covered in the annual analysis on statistics of women members of parliament (MPs) conducted by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU). Though women have participated in the Indian national movement to a large extent, after independence the representation of women in politics has been very low. Though the Constitution of India has enumerated various provisions for the removal of gender inequality in India. In spite of low representation of women in politics in general, women have held the posts of the President and Prime Minister in India, as well as chief ministers of various states. Indian voters have elected women to numerous state legislative assemblies and national parliament but their number has been low. To increase representation of women at the local level, the government passed the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Bills in 1993 that reserved 33% of seats for women at local government level. After the establishment of women's reservations at local level, political participation went from 4-5% to 25-40% among women, and gave millions of women the opportunity to serve as leaders in local government. In contrast to the local level, at the national level, since long women groups are struggling for the passage of Women's Reservation Bill or The Constitution (108th Amendment) Bill, which is a pending bill in India that proposes to amend the Constitution of India to reserve 33 per cent of all seats in the Lower house of Parliament of India, the Lok Sabha, and in all state legislative assemblies for women. The Upper House Rajya Sabha passed the bill on 9th March 2010. Till now, the Lok Sabha has not voted on the bill. If the Lok Sabha were to approve the bill, it would then have to be passed by half of India's state legislatures and signed by the President. Patriarchal mindset amongst the male members of political parties have led to various objections being raised by them on some pretext or other that have prevented the passage of this Bill till date. Whenever the Bill is passed, it will herald a new era for women's representation in politics, by not only changing the demography of our elected bodies but bringing new hopes for empowering women through power sharing.

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