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**Contesting Unequal Group Representation.
Can Deliberative Participatory Fora Cure
Representation Gaps in the Legislature?**

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Photo: David Ausserhofer

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ABSTRACT

The French and German national parliaments are dominated by highly educated and elderly (mostly) male politicians. There are growing calls for a more balanced political representation. This paper seeks to inform this debate by conceptualising and measuring representation gaps in France and Germany and assessing the potential of deliberative-participatory fora to ameliorate underrepresentation. It suggests three criteria these fora must fulfil to potentially balance underrepresentation (descriptive representation in composition, deliberative quality and coupling with politics) and explores them in four recent cases of deliberative participatory fora. We show that significant representation gaps exist for all groups studied. They have been narrowing for women and people of immigrant origin and remain most pronounced for class. Regarding institutional features, our cases fare relatively well in terms of balanced composition and deliberative quality, but the potential to balance representation gaps is seriously limited by a lack of coupling with the political system.

1 INTRODUCTION¹

Inequality of representation has been identified as a major challenge to democracies following a “liberal script” founded on universal values such as freedom and equality. The development of both political parties and national parliaments towards “diploma democracy” (Bovens/Wille 2017) characterised by highly educated, elderly white men, has raised fears that the interests of other groups

in society, e.g. women, people of immigrant origin, disabled, young or people with less formal education, do not play a role in politics – not only on the national, but also on the supranational level. The increasing Euroscepticism is a case in point. Alongside the various crises that the European Union (EU) has faced since the turn of the millennium, Eurosceptic candidates and parties have continuously gained votes. Contesting European integration is part of an ongoing polarisation process within the European Parliament (EP). However, this contestation differs strongly across policy areas (Börzel et al. 2022, Hartlapp/Börzel 2022) and even divides political groups (Kantola/Lombardi 2020). For example, while Eurosceptic parties often use anti-gender rhetoric, Ahrens et al. (2021) demonstrate how all political groups in the EP are divided on gender equality and LGBTQI rights. They argue that the different nationalities of Members of the EP are a causal factor behind the contestations within political groups. Yet, they leave out the question of how representative political groups are regarding characteristics such as gender, age, or ethnic background. This omission is remarkable given the large country-specific and comparative scholarship that has demonstrated how inequalities in representation matter for policy debates and outputs (most recently Burgoon et al. 2022). Many EU Member States have taken measures to address these representational inequalities, for example, by introducing electoral quotas. More recently, participatory and deliberative forms of decision-making, such as citizen

¹ We thank Antonia Fidler and Luis Krings for excellent research assistance, an anonymous SCRIPTS Reviewer and the audience at the DVPW Convention 2021, in particular Armin Schäfer for helpful comments.

assemblies, complement parliamentary processes. Even the EU recently experimented with this deliberative body formed from randomly selected European citizens at the *Conference of the Future of Europe*. This paper aims to comparatively assess representation gaps in the two largest European member states, France and Germany, and the deliberative citizen assemblies' potential to balance these existing inequalities in representation. With our approach, we hope to open the debate towards social and political inequalities as drivers of contestations and possible remedies in the form of deliberative citizen assemblies.

Existing research has contributed to understanding the causes and consequences of unequal representation. Arguably, from both perspectives, the gender representation gap has been studied most widely (e.g. Murray 2016; Elsässer/Schäfer 2018), but other social groups come into view, such as ethnic minorities (Bloemraad 2013; Geese 2022) or younger age groups (Stockemer/Sundström 2018; Freire et al. 2022). Analyses tend to focus on single groups; methodologically a national perspective prevails. This narrow focus limits insights on broader trends of narrowing or widening representation gaps as well as potential trade-offs between groups. Moreover, scholarly attention has focused mostly on capturing and explaining the unequal political representation with its implications for democracy. The logical next step is to turn to the institutional responses towards these challenges, as they will be crucial for the impact current developments will have on how Western democracies work in the future. Where institutional responses to face representation gaps are studied, this mostly concerns parity legislation and quotas (Krook 2010), that is, changes addressing the electoral process. We build on these insights and ask for institutional innovations that aim to balance representation gaps, looking at extra-parliamentary fora. Much hope is placed on deliberative participatory fora, i.e. fora "in which citizens participate in making collective decisions

through deliberation" (Elstub 2018: 187). What features are necessary to ensure that these new types of citizen involvement have the potential to balance existing inequalities in representation? How are they implemented in practice?

We argue that to address these questions, it is necessary to first identify the representation gaps for multiple groups. We focus on legislators as central institutions of democracies and decisive actors for policy making. Secondly, we assess institutional features of deliberative participatory fora to understand their potential to balance existing deficits. We compare representation gaps and institutional responses between France and Germany. Our choice of the two countries is motivated by the similarities in group representation deficiencies and respective efforts to address these via deliberative participatory fora. At the same time, the two countries have different electoral systems and cultural framings of representation, which matter for the political representation of social groups. These distinctions enable us to generalise conclusions to countries with varying politico-institutional features.

The following section develops our theoretical approach to political representation and deliberative democracy. We present a measure for representation gaps, justify the selection of groups and countries to be assessed, and explore three institutional criteria that have to be fulfilled for deliberative participatory fora to tackle underrepresentation by opening new channels of participation. Next, we illustrate these gaps for women, ethnic minorities, the working class and younger age groups in France and Germany based on primary and secondary sources. Finally, we empirically explore the potential of deliberative participatory fora in four recent cases: the *Grand Débat National* and the *Convention Citoyenne Pour le Climat* in France and the *Bürgererrat Deutschlands Rolle in der Welt* and the *Bürgererrat Klima* in Germany. We conclude with a critical assessment of

the relationship between parliamentary and extra-parliamentary forms of representation.

2 POLITICAL REPRESENTATION AND DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY – THEORETICAL FRAME AND EMPIRICAL APPROACH

2.1 GROUP-SPECIFIC POLITICAL (UNDER) REPRESENTATION

The study of political representation has received great attention in theoretical and empirical research on democracy. The main question is whether and how citizen preferences are represented in policymaking by actors who speak and act on behalf of citizens. For a long time, the view of political parties channelling alternative policy visions based on their constituents' interests prevailed (Rohrschneider/Thomassen 2020). Scholars also explore more direct links between citizen preferences and elected political representatives. These studies typically focus on socio-demographic characteristics and actions on the part of the representatives. One of the most cited conceptualisations identifies formalistic, descriptive, substantive, and symbolic forms of representation (Pitkin 1967). While formalistic representation refers to the institutional arrangements of how representatives obtain office and how constituents may hold them accountable (e.g. by voting them out of office), symbolic representation concerns the meaning a representative has for the constituents. Descriptive representation is the extent to which representatives are similar to the represented in terms of socio-demographic characteristics, interests, and experiences. Lastly, substantive representation refers to the actions of representatives on behalf of the represented, i.e. to what extent representatives advance constituent preferences in policymaking. Pitkin's work has been highly influential, especially in debates on whether marginalised groups in society need representatives from their groups (Dovi 2018).

The concept of political representation has been further developed to account for broader and multiple forms of the relationship between the representatives and the represented, pointing, in particular, to the context-dependency of interests and the way representatives create and frame claims put forward by the represented (importantly Mansbridge 2003; Saward 2010). Recently, these more constructivist conceptions of representation have found their way into quantitative social research on the quality of representation (Wolkenstein/Wratil 2021), yet they fall short of providing a picture of the diversity of parliaments.

However, the burgeoning literature on inequalities in representation still makes a case for analysing to what extent legislators mirror groups in society – even without showing that their inclusion, *in fact*, makes a difference to policy outcomes. Despite critics of the term “descriptive representation” as being too passive, the concept uniquely enables the exploration of which groups in society are marginalised in political decision-making. Legislators are not robots who act on what their constituents expect from them. Rather, their social background likely makes a difference. As Anne Phillips put it, “the knowledges they draw on from their social experiences become relevant to their political decisions” (Phillips 2020: 179). For example, legislators from the upper classes vote differently than their working-class colleagues even when they belong to the same left-wing party (O'Grady 2019) or demonstrate they understand working-class interests (Carnes 2013). In other words, the presence of marginalised groups in parliaments more likely leads to a transformation of policies in favour of these groups (e.g. Wängnerud 2009; Elsässer/Schäfer 2018).

Research shows that when marginalised groups feel that established collective actors, such as political parties, no longer pursue their interests, they worry much more about the descriptive representation of their group (Urbinati 2012).

Also, groups who feel that their external efficacy is low might even refrain from political participation. Lower political participation of social groups is associated with a lower likelihood that their interests matter in decision-making processes because legislators arguably pursue policy outcomes that will reward them with votes (Elsässer/Schäfer 2022). In addition, descriptive representation matters as representatives act as role models in politics and society (Bühlmann/Schädel 2012).

So far, research on (the causes and consequences of) underrepresentation has largely focused on women and increasingly on people of immigrant origin. Researching a plurality of groups is demanding conceptually due to difficulties of defining in and out interests (e.g. Kroeber 2018) and empirically due to a lack of comparable data when it comes to such factors as sexual orientation or religious beliefs in society and among representatives. Theoretically, the choice by which underrepresented groups are researched is justified with a focus on (a) historically excluded and oppressed groups (prominently Phillips 1995: 174-175; Mansbridge 1999) and (b) a proven lack of responsiveness to group interests, for example, of the working class (Elsässer/Schäfer 2022) and younger age groups (Stockemer/Sundström 2018; see also Phillips 2020).²

In sum, it is broadly accepted that gaps in descriptive representation may pose a threat to democracy and that reaching more socially and demographically balanced parliaments is desirable (Mansbridge 1999). As explained for the case of people of immigrant origin by Bloemraad and Schönwälder (2013: 565), “Even if immigrants’ interests may be represented by politicians who are not of immigrant origin, the lack of diversity in

Europe’s legislatures sends a message of exclusion and signals a democratic deficit within domestic politics”.

2.2 HOW DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY MAY COMPENSATE FOR DESCRIPTIVE UNDERREPRESENTATION

Given the intricacies of representative democracy, proponents of deliberative democracy suggest that innovative fora for policy deliberation may supplement the institutions of representative democracy. The concept of deliberative democracy connotes debates on political issues of equal and mutually respectful people who then decide on the policies based on the discussions (Habermas 1997; Bächtiger et al. 2018). It thus involves talking and making choices based on these discussions. Deliberative democracy speaks to both citizens and political representatives. Deliberation helps “the citizens to understand better the issues, their own interests, and the interests and perceptions of others; forge agreement where possible; and, in the instances in which agreement is not possible, both structure and clarify the questions behind the conflict” (Bächtiger et al. 2018: 2). Deliberative democracy’s goal and requirement are to give reasons and justifications for policy decisions. It is, however, unclear to what extent those who deliberate (and make choices) represent – stand for, speak for, act for – those who do not deliberate (Brown 2020). Scholarship that connects deliberative democracy and representation theories has thus warned against socially exclusive deliberative fora (Williams 1998). Rather, more diverse social perspectives should be represented in any deliberation and, ideally, by group members themselves. By doing so, some argue that deliberative participatory fora can function as “a cure for the current disenchantment with representative democracy” (Trüdinger/Bächtiger 2022: 241) and stress the potential of innovation outside the political arena to “counteract failures of representative democratic institutions” (Kuyper/

2 Elsässer and Schäfer (2022) ground their argument in the theoretical distinction of symbolic and substantive representation. The working class might not suffer from a historical image of being “ill-fit to participate” or “unable to rule” that could be remedied by better symbolic representation but rather from an empirically more recent lack of responsiveness to their substantial interests.

Wolkenstein 2019: 656). Scholarship highlights the link between their instalment and the governments' interest in healing electoral democracy and in demonstrating responsiveness to the demand of people (Macq/Jacquet 2021), while there are also more sceptical arguments (e.g. Lafont 2017; Font et al. 2018; different contributions in Bächtiger et al. 2018) – empirically the jury is still out. Using the words of Vermeule (2012: 338), “the next task is to bring these ideas down to the level of institutional design”.

2.3 CRITERIA TO ASSESS DELIBERATIVE PARTICIPATORY FORA'S POTENTIAL TO BALANCE REPRESENTATION GAPS

How should deliberative participatory fora be designed to balance representation gaps? Criteria lists have already been established based on best practices and expert input (Chwalisz 2020; Curato et al. 2021). We draw on these lists, focusing on criteria that directly inform our research questions on the potential to balance existing inequalities in representation and their implementation.³ Further, selecting our three criteria follows the theoretical case for political representation and deliberative democracy (see above). Consequently, the first criterion is grounded in reasoning on descriptive representation and calls for the composition of these fora to mirror society in terms of gender, class, ethnic minorities, and age. The second criterion builds on the idea that deliberative democracy of good quality must render underrepresented perspectives visible, integrate expertise, allow for learning, and come to widely accepted conclusions. The third criterion takes issue with the central premise of this paper. We are interested in institutional innovations complementing existing democratic systems – thus,

we have to assess their place in these systems. Fora must be coupled to the existing political institutions by a clear mandate and follow-up procedures that can foster responsiveness of decision-making in the political system.

How should the deliberative participatory forum be composed? Accepting the theoretical case for descriptive representation, the representative composition of deliberative participatory fora becomes a necessary condition to balance representation gaps in parliaments. Historically, sortition (civic lottery) assured that every member of a community had an equal chance of being selected, as in Ancient Athens or the Doge of Venice. To overcome a purely random sample and to assure that the demographic composition of the sample matches that of the population, today sortition uses stratified sampling. Typically, strata of gender, age, migration, educational attainment, or territorial distribution are considered. Such selection processes are still biased by drawing in the more interested and available individuals in society but since they refer to existing group-specific inequalities in political representation (see 2.1), they come closer to a mirror image of society. Balanced participation can be further enhanced through coverage of expenses, compensation of income loss as well as for child and elderly care (Mansbridge 1999: 653), or through oversampling certain demographic characteristics (e.g. Chwalisz 2020: 118). Size of the forum is also a matter as larger settings are typically better at representing different group interests and bringing in multiple experiences (Curato et al. 2021).

What are favourable conditions for a high-quality deliberative process in the forum? Habermas' (1997) seminal theory on “epistemic democracy” claims that more inclusive deliberative processes are conjectured to make better decisions. The quality of deliberation is considered to be better the more “informed, impartial, mutually respectful, and open to counter-arguments participants

³ We leave out criteria regarding the purpose and features of the wider setting, such as transparency of the website or conversation with the wider public. They are normatively important but have little potential to directly address unbalanced participation. Also, depending on the detailedness of the lists, several criteria inform one theoretical argument.

are” (Lafont 2017: 86). From this perspective, the diversity of participants is not sufficient alone. Institutions must also make sure that diverse views are present in deliberations and heard equally. Institutional features can support deliberation to reach these qualities. Participants should be provided with broad and diverse information and expertise (ideally on demand to avoid agendas being simply taken over). It is important that information is accessible and empowers those representatives who might have entered the deliberative participatory forum with less information (Curato et al. 2021). Skilled facilitation in the form of professional and content-neutral moderation is also important to ensure that all interests are heard rather than reproducing existing imbalances in a group (Landwehr 2014). Here, a mix of formats (broad plenary discussion and small groups with greater privacy) is beneficial as it is more likely to give every participant an opportunity to engage and exchange (Chwalisz 2020: 118).

Furthermore, plenty of time is needed to maximise participation and iterative exchange over weeks or even months (Gherghina et al. 2021). Theoretically, the nature of deliberation resulting an open exchange at eye level makes it difficult to deduce expectations on a generally valid “ideal” duration. Yet, it is argued that when the process is stretched out too long, problems related to attrition or socialisation of the group negatively affecting equality of contributions might emerge (Curato et al. 2021). Therefore, we propose that individual sessions follow within weeks rather than months. As for all complex processes, evaluation is important to secure good practices throughout the process.

What ensures the coupling of the deliberative participatory forum with politics? Deliberative participatory institutions differ in the tasks they have. Some hold a clear mandate to formulate policy recommendations, while others are more loosely connected to the political system, for instance,

where their function is to bring to the fore citizens’ latent opinions. We argue that the idea of balancing unequal representation in parliaments requires deliberative participatory fora recommendations to hold a certain degree of bindingness on the political system. Recently, van Dijk and Lefevere (2022: 135) have shown that disregarding citizen recommendations emerging from these fora can “lead to more dissatisfaction than not asking for its advice” (see also Goldberg/Bächtiger 2022). Institutional features can help render this coupling more likely (Setälä 2017: 853ff.). On the demand side, a clear and delimited task, as well as a mandate by political officials, such as a parliamentary committee, Ministry, or President, is beneficial. In addition, the more different issues participants must grapple with, the more likely an early saturation point, which might make participants leave and eventually lead to lower deliberative quality (Smith/Setälä 2018). Ultimately, a two-directional or even multidirectional coupling is warranted, where a forum is linked to various relevant actors and institutions to interact and exchange. Citizens would be “given the opportunity to question members and hold them to account” (Hendriks 2016: 56). On the output side, the citizen report or recommendations should have a clear purpose and target actor (e.g. parliament or government), and subsequent steps should be explicit (e.g. hearing in parliament or referral to other bodies) (Goodin/Dryzek 2006; Font et al. 2018). Otherwise, fora recommendations might run the risk of going astray.

Analytically these three criteria are distinct. Yet, we can consider balanced composition as a basic institutional feature deliberative participatory fora have to fulfil to have the potential to balance existing representation gaps. But even where this criterion is fulfilled, it is no cure for representation gaps where the quality of deliberation is low or where established political institutions can easily ignore output.

3 APPROACHING POLITICAL REPRESENTATION AND DELIBERATIVE PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY EMPIRICALLY

Empirically we focus on France and Germany as two big European countries experiencing substantial political inequalities. Representation gaps as phenomena of interest have been identified in both countries and will be specified empirically in this paper. In both countries, we observe new dynamics of collective mobilisation (e.g. Yellow Vests, PEGIDA) that evoke calls for a more balanced political representation of different social groups as well as substantively interesting institutional responses to these calls (Grossman 2019; Trüdinger/Bächtiger 2022). In recent years, nationwide deliberative participatory fora have been established in both countries to debate issues of public administration, economy and fiscal policy, and democratic quality more generally, and the issue of climate change in particular. Besides the similarities, France and Germany were also chosen because their electoral systems and cultural framings of representation work in ways that render persistent inequalities in political representation possible yet differ in important aspects. This case selection increases the possibility of generalising findings to countries with similar politico-institutional features.

How the design of electoral institutions may shape the chances of candidates from different social groups has been shown in numerous studies (for an overview, see Paxton et al. 2010). In France, the 577 members of the Assemblée Nationale are elected in a two-round majoritarian system. The lack of proportionality is a central challenge for balanced representation along with the practice of accumulating mandates (*cumul des mandats*). In 2000, after long political struggles, France introduced a legislative gender quota, the so-called parity law. Germany's mixed-member electoral system combines elements of proportional and plurality systems. Typically, candidates

from minority groups have higher chances of receiving a promising list position than running in a "winnable" district. Instead of legislative quotas, many parties apply party internal – formal and informal – quotas to their party list composition. These apply mainly to gender, age, and region (Reiser 2014).

The French state is crafted around the notion of "universal" or "republican". This idea means the state "refuses to recognize citizens by category, including sex and race, insisting on equality de jure even in the face of de facto inequalities" (Murray 2016: 587). Consequently, the Assemblée Nationale represents the nation in its totality rather than its individual members. Data collection on race and immigrant origin is banned from the French census (Murray 2016: 587). These thoughts contrast with the idea of descriptive representation at large. In Germany, the individual member of the Bundestag is committed to pursuing the goals of his or her party (and to his or her conscience). In that sense, party affiliation may be more important for representatives than group affiliation. However, when a group has a higher descriptive representation, it may also be able to influence the definition of party goals (Kroeber 2021).

3.1 MEASUREMENT OF REPRESENTATION GAPS

First, we assess the descriptive representation of different social groups known to suffer from underrepresentation more generally: women, ethnic minorities, working-class people, and younger citizens. A "representation gap" occurs when the share of legislators from a social group is lower than the group's share in the general population. We follow Bloemraad (2013: 657f) and operationalise representation gaps with a Representation Index (RI) by "dividing the percentage of minority representatives in a particular elected body by the percentage of people from that same

minority group among the general population. A figure of 0 indicates an absolute lack of representation, while 1 indicates perfect ‘mirror’ representation: there is parity in the minority group’s proportion in the population and their proportion in the elected body. Numbers below 1 indicate under-representation; those above 1 signal more representation in office than we would expect based on demographic data alone”. The lower the RI of a social group, the more necessary compensation becomes via other political channels, in our case, the balanced composition of deliberative participatory fora.

Next, we define and conceptualise the groups affected by underrepresentation. Acknowledging that gender is a socially constructed category, we define women as persons assigned female at birth or as persons who define themselves as women. However, official population statistics may not always account for the latter, while the legislators’ gender identity may be adapted. For example, in the current Bundestag, two German legislators identify (and count) as women while they are assigned male at birth in the official population statistics.

Research on the representation of ethnic minorities typically uses one of three distinct concepts and corresponding measures: First, foreign population – defined as individuals with non-national citizenship living in a country – is used as a proxy in administrative statistics. Yet, when it comes to elections, in many countries, foreigners do not have active or passive voting rights. Moreover, a passport – at least when we think of European Union citizens living in another EU member state – does not capture shared discriminatory experiences and can thus not bring into presence the information, perception, and insights valuable for democracy (Phillips 1995). Therefore, the validity of this measure is limited. Second, the concept of immigrant-origin population is used. It is defined as all individuals whom themselves and whose

parents (at least one) did not acquire national citizenship by birth (e.g. the German Mikrozensus). As a consequence, indigenous and linguistic minorities, such as in the French overseas departments (Caribbean, Indian, and South Pacific Ocean), are not captured. However, these minorities are theoretically relevant for descriptive representation as a mirror of society. A third concept – visible minority – arguably allows for a better consideration of racial discrimination (Jenichen 2020). Visible minorities are typically assessed on the basis of a) patronym (first name, surname), b) photo, c) place of birth (and place of birth of ancestors) (Kesslassy 2017: 21). The drawback is that the notion of a visible minority is typically not used in representative surveys or administrative data. In addition, a comparison is limited by the context specificity of the measure. Therefore, to measure representation gaps for ethnic minorities, we rely on the concept of immigrant-origin population, for which data is available in Germany and France.

Political representatives are increasingly unlikely to have a working-class background (Bovens/Wille 2017). For the working class – just as for women and immigrants – the lack of time, networks, and money means they have fewer central resources to (successfully) seek office (Carnes 2018). Class is a widely used notion in social science research and is typically measured by occupation or the level of educational attainment or skills, and sometimes, by income level (Oesch 2006). Due to the great differences in educational systems in France and Germany and the resulting problems of comparability, we focus on occupation as the indicator for class and measure the share of workers as wage earners.⁴

⁴ We are aware that today many workers in the service sector and self-employed workers share characteristics of the working class but had to exclude them due to a lack of available comparative data.

Finally, access to political decision-making positions is shaped by age restrictions. Typically, the right to run in elections is granted to individuals at least 18 years old. However, legislatures are dominated by the middle-aged (40-60). Relatively better representation of younger age groups in some countries has been causally linked to the surge of parties in which they are overrepresented (Stockemer/Sundström 2018; Freire et al. 2022). We thus take the share of those aged between 18 and 30 to assess the representation gap of younger citizens.

3.2 OPERATIONALISATION OF THE CRITERIA USED TO ASSESS THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE FORA TO BALANCE REPRESENTATION GAPS

Section 2.3 sets out the three minimum criteria for the institutional design of fora to balance representation gaps. We operationalise the first criterion, “composition”, via the number of participants, the process of selection, and – analogous to the selection of groups in parliaments – the representativeness of the forum in terms of gender, age, occupational status/education,⁵ and ethnic minority. The second criterion, “deliberative quality”, is assessed by the duration and the process of the forum. Given the absence of strong theoretical priors on “ideal” duration, we operationalise duration from an empirical average score based on the duration of face-to-face, hybrid, or online meetings (3.2 days) as well as the time elapsed from the first meeting to the last meeting (4.2 weeks) in the OECD Database on Representative Deliberative Processes and Institutions (OECD n.d.). The third criterion, “coupling with politics”, is operationalised as the mandate, the number of recommendations adopted, and their impact.

⁵ Information on occupational status is not (always) provided for the deliberative participatory fora, but participant educational attainment is reported.

4 REPRESENTATION GAPS IN FRANCE AND GERMANY

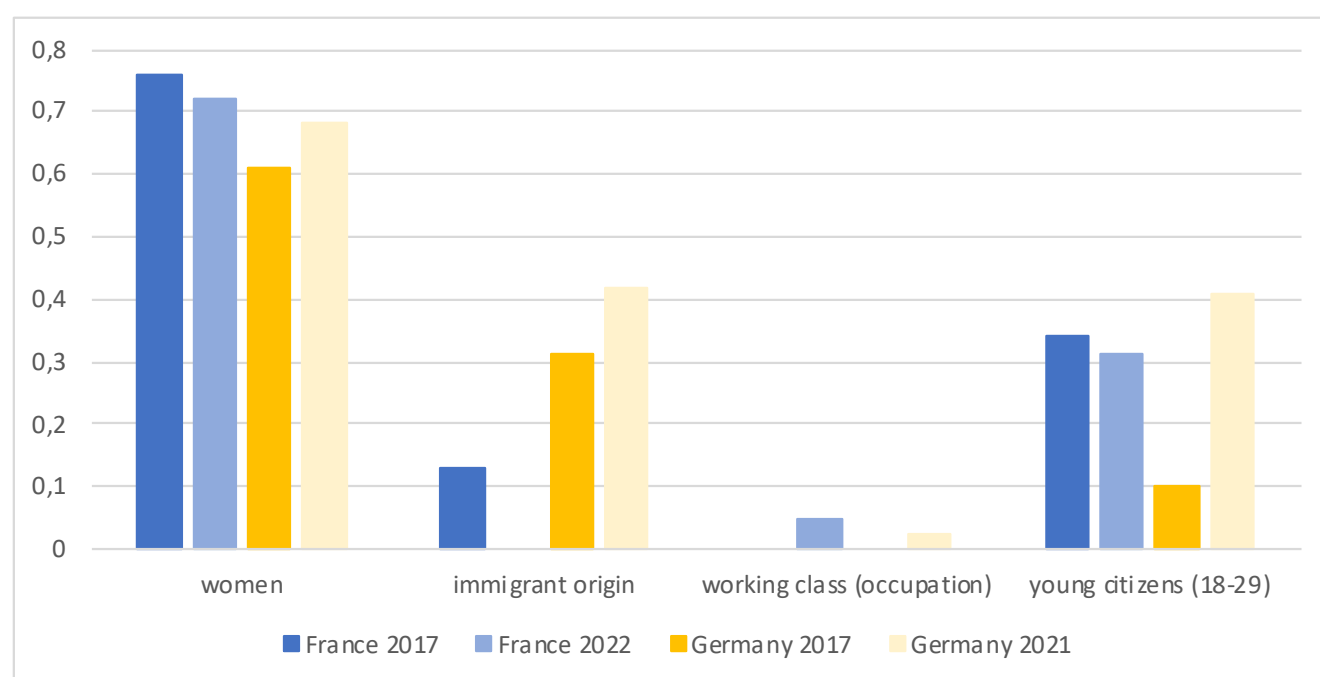
This section offers a comparative description of the various representation gaps that exist in the French and German parliaments. Figure 1 shows Representation Indices for each of the selected groups. If not reported otherwise, we use public administration data to assess the share of a social group in the population as well as election data on representatives in the French and German parliament.⁶ We cover two points in time, 2017 and 2022 for France and 2017 and 2021 for Germany.

The graph shows that none of the groups under study reaches full descriptive representation (RI is below 1 for all groups). Differences between groups seem more pronounced than differences between the two countries. In both France and Germany, the share of women living in the country is about 51%. In France, women representatives in the Assemblée Nationale accounted for 39% (2017) and 37% (2022) in the last elections. Germany had a lower share at 31% (2017) and 34.9% (2022). In both countries, the gender gap is persistent. In Germany, the RI was 0.61 in 2017 and 0.69 in 2021. In France, the RI was 0.76 in 2017 and 0.72 in 2022.

In 2015, 13.4 million people of *immigrant origin* lived in France (excluding Mayotte), which is 20.1% of the population. Yet, the share of representatives is only 2.8% (Geese 2022: 7). This results in an RI of 0.14 for the 2017 election. No data are available for 2022. In Germany, according to the Mikrozensus, the percentage of the immigrant-origin German population was 26% in 2019. The Mediendienst Integration provides information on politicians of immigrant origin. The data

⁶ For France, data is collected from the homepages of the National Statistical Office INSEE (Insee n.d.) and Assemblée Nationale (<https://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/dyn/vos-deputes>, last accessed 16.6.2023). For Germany, we consulted the Federal Statistical Office Statistisches Bundesamt, notably the Mikrozensus (Statistisches Bundesamt 2022) and Bundestag (Deutscher Bundestag 2014).

Figure 1: Representation Indices in France and Germany



Note: A value of 1 indicates perfect representation, while a value below/above 1 indicates under/overrepresentation of groups (Bloemraad 2013). The RI for the working class is 0 in 2017 for both France and Germany. Data for 2022 was not available at the time of this study for immigrant-origin in France. See tables A1 and A2 in Appendix.

shows that 83 of the 735 members of parliament (11.3%) in 2021 are of immigrant origin (Spitz et al. 2021). Thus, while every fourth individual in Germany is of immigrant origin, this is only true for every ninth MP. On this basis, we calculate an RI of 0.31 (2017) and 0.42 (2021) for people of immigrant origin.

Much like other European parliaments, the French Assemblée Nationale and the German Bundestag are parliaments of academics (Sineau und Tiberj 2007: 175f; Kintz und Cordes 2019) – *workers* are hardly represented. In 2017, 5'585'000 workers, which is 20.7% of employees in France, were blue-collar workers. Yet, not a single representative belonged to this social group in 2017. The newly elected Assemblée Nationale counts six working-class deputies. Consequently, we calculate RIs of 0 (2017) and 0.05 (2022). In Germany, 13.1% of the economically active population were workers in 2020. The occupational structure in the German Bundestag is remarkably different

– no worker was represented in the 2020 legislature, while two MPs of the 2021 legislature were workers (Kintz und Cordes 2019; Pyschny und Kintz 2022). Accordingly, the RI of the working class was 0 in 2017 and 0.02 in 2021.

Turning to *young citizens*, underrepresentation is strong and differs between France and Germany. In the Assemblée Nationale elected in 2017, more than half of the seats (58%) are occupied by MPs between 40 and 59 years of age. Seniors aged 60 and over account for almost a quarter (23.6%). This representation is very different from the age structure of the French population, in which the groups 40-59, as well as those older than 60, each make up 26% of the population, while those aged 18-29 make up 14% of the population. The age gap is particularly pronounced for the youngest. There are only 27 members under 30 (4.7% of members), resulting in an RI of 0.34 in 2017 and even lower in 2022, 0.31. The marked incumbency logic of the French electoral system might provide an

explanation. The situation is different in Germany. In 2020, 54% of the German population was older than 50 years, and 16% was between 18 and 29 years old. Yet, the share of the Bundestag members who are older than 50 years decreased to 46% in 2021, while 6.5% are younger than 30 years old (48 individuals). Compared to 2017, the share of young representatives has increased remarkably from 1.6%. Yet, it is still much lower than the share of the German population aged between 18 and 30, resulting in a RI of 0.1 (2017) and 0.4 (2021).

Comparing the two countries, the following findings are particularly noteworthy. First, in spite of great political awareness and several measures (e.g. legislative and party gender quotas), the gender gap still exists. Second, in both countries, the class gap is the most remarkable. We find that the trend might be changing in recent years, yet parliamentarians in France and Germany are still overwhelmingly academics and much more than those they represent. Third, the ethnic minority gap is somewhat smaller in Germany than in France. This finding, however, must be interpreted with caution, as it is strongly influenced by the measure of immigrant origin we use. Finally, even though, on average, the German parliamentarians are younger than the population, the age representation gap seems to matter more in Germany than in France.

5 CLOSING THE GAPS – BUT HOW?

Government responses to representation gaps take place within existing political institutions. Prominent examples are electoral reforms (Krook 2010; Rohrschneider/Thomassen 2020) as well as innovations outside established political institutions. These often take the form of deliberative participatory democracy (Bächtiger et al. 2018). The first experiments were made in the 1970s, developed over time, and became more widely visible with deliberative participatory fora on

electoral reforms held in the Netherlands and Canada in the mid-2000s and on the constitution in Ireland and Iceland in the early 2010s. The OECD (2021) Database of Representative Deliberative Processes and Institutions (1979-2021) displays 599 such initiatives, 19 in France and 64 in Germany. We acknowledge that a strong causal argument would require a more detailed analysis of government motivation and other drivers for installing these deliberative participatory fora. Yet, we are confident that the claims made by government actors and secondary analysis support the causal connection we imply.

In France, deliberative participatory fora figure prominently in the debate on the quality of democracy. In the run-up to the 2017 presidential election, several candidates called for these democratic innovations (Benoît Hamon/ Socialist Party, Emmanuel Macron/ *En Marche*, and Jean-Luc Mélenchon/ *France Insoumise*). They proposed different institutional designs such as an annual audit of the President or citizens drawn by lot in the senate. They pledged that resulting proposals should become policies. The proposal for “a great permanent debate” was revived in the run-up to the 2022 presidential election campaign – promising to render citizen participation and deliberation a permanent feature of the French political system (Gatinois 2022). The German government is also considering instruments which aim to ensure more comprehensive inclusion and better representation of the people. The Coalition Treaty of 2021 between the Social Democratic Party, the Greens, and the Liberals calls for commissioning Citizen Councils to work on specific issues to ensure equal participation and that the parliament considers the results.

To allow for comparative assessment, we will focus our analysis on cases at the national level. For France, we investigate the *Grand Débat National* (Great National Debate, GDN) and the *Convention Citoyenne Pour le Climat* (Citizen Assembly

for Climate, CCPC), the two most prominent deliberative participatory fora that have been widely covered in the grey literature, which allows us to assess our question whether these innovations facilitate closing the representation gap. In Germany, we investigate the *Bürgererrat Deutschlands Rolle in der Welt* (Germany's role in the World, DRW), arguably the most prominent national citizen assembly. In addition, we examine the *Bürgererrat Klima* (Citizen Council Climate, BK) that thematically matches the CCPC. Assuming that deliberative participatory fora have the potential to balance political inequality, we ask how they should be designed institutionally.

In the following sections, we give a short overview of the context in which the four deliberate participatory fora were set up before we discuss institutional design features along the three criteria.

5.1 GRAND DÉBAT NATIONAL⁷

The *Grand Débat National* (GDN) is a direct response to the *Mouvement des Gilets Jaunes* (Yellow West Movement). The movement was formed against economic and fiscal injustice and called for more democracy in the political system. It mobilised many citizens who previously participated little in politics, had less education, and were economically less well off than average French people (Grossman 2019: 33). Facing a numerically strong and, in part, violent movement, the government gave in to some of the substantial demands and opened an alternative channel for people to participate in politics when they announced the GDN on 10 December 2018.

The GDN realised 19 regional and four thematic conferences on tax and fiscal policies, public administration and services, energy transition, and democracy and citizenship on different

weekends in March. For these deliberative participatory fora, a total of 1'404 citizens were selected in a two-stage process. First, 300'000 people were randomly selected. Mobile phone numbers were automatically generated and persons answering where asked to participate. The resulting fora were far from representative. Based on participant characteristics from 18 regional conferences, we calculated RIs close to 1 for women (0.9), young citizens (0.6), and the working class (0.2).⁸ Including the 19th regional conference, exclusively focused on young citizens, in the RI would further reduce the representation gap for this group. The representation gap remains the widest for the working class, with higher incomes and higher education strongly overrepresented. Overall, the deliberative participatory fora moved towards closing the existing representation gaps but stayed far from balancing them.

The GDN was equipped with important institutional features impacting deliberative quality. To animate and structure the debates, central organisers provided the participants and the local facilitators with background information and discussion points along the lines of the four themes. The participants and the facilitators had to respect the norms of deliberation, such as respectful interaction and attention to neutrality towards opinions. A feature critically affecting the quality of deliberation is the rush in which the GDN took place. Each deliberative participatory forum took place over one weekend, leaving little time for deliberation to unfold.

The link to politics is characterised by a mandate given by the President to discuss the four central themes. Given its strong visibility in the French media and its appearance as a response to the protests of the Yellow West Movement, it is not astonishing that the 146 recommendations adopted

⁷ Unless noted otherwise, information was drawn from the official site (Grand Débat National n.d.).

⁸ Calculated from data for 18 regional conferences. Overall, it can be regarded as a specific youth data for young citizens aged 18-34. For immigrant origin, no numbers are available.

by the CCPC were taken to the Assemblée Nationale and Sénat. President Macron announced reforms flowing from the GDN in a speech on 25 April 2019. Yet, to date, few concrete actions have been taken. They mostly concern projects complementing existing government priorities, such as a law strengthening local government (*Engagement et Proximité*), territorial decentralisation (*Loi „3DS”*) and rearrangements of services of general interests (*Maisons de services aux publics*), the reform of elite education (*ENA*), and the strengthening of participatory democracy which resulted in the CCPC (see below 5.2). Thus, while some “cherry picking” (Font et al. 2018) took place, most of the recommendations have so far had little practical impact (Keller 2019: 13).

5.2 CONVENTION CITOYENNE POUR LE CLIMAT⁹

A second innovative forum is the *Convention Citoyenne Pour le Climat*. The CCPC mandate is to define “structural measures to achieve, in a spirit of social justice, a reduction of greenhouse gas emissions by at least 40% by 2030 compared to 1990 levels”. The CCPC shows some similarities to the GDN: It was composed of 160 citizens drawn by lot. In the first stage, ca 225.000 randomly selected citizens were contacted by phone. From those who showed interest in participating, a representative panel was constructed, taking into account gender, age, education, socio-professional situation, and location. The number of participants varied slightly across the seven sessions, but without affecting our RIs (women (1.0), young citizens aged 18-34 (0.9) and the working class (0.5)) (Fourniau et al. 2020: 7f).¹⁰ Compared to the earlier experience with the GDN, the CCPC improved mirroring the French society substantially and closed representation gaps for women and young citizens.

Regarding the quality of deliberation, a central difference to the GDN is that the CCPC deliberations were accompanied by 52 scholars who presented insights from research and were available for questions. The CCPC met in seven sessions from October 2019 to June 2020 (including two virtual meetings due to the Covid-19 lockdown in France in spring 2020), allowing for the process to unfold over time. Deliberation took place in five thematic working groups (housing, work and production, transport, and consumption) and plenary sessions on cross-cutting issues, such as constitutional consequences and financing aspects. The work concluded with a final vote by majority on which propositions were to be presented.

Turning to coupling with politics, we note that, unlike the broad thematic outreach of the GDN, the CCPC held a mandate to define measures aiming to reduce greenhouse gas emissions (40% by 2030) while paying attention to social justice. In a press conference on 25 April 2019, President Macron announced that the emerging proposals should be put to a referendum “without filter” or a vote in parliament or be applied directly. In total, 149 recommendations were adopted, and an NGO called *Les 150 - L'association des Citoyens de la Convention Climat* was created to monitor follow-up. A broad reform bill has been announced to take up the 149 recommendations in autumn 2020. Parliament debated the legislative draft as well as the unusual high number of amendments (ca. 7000) in March 2021. Adoption, however, got stuck in political struggles aggravated by the Covid-19 pandemic and the incipient election campaign – further weakening the (selective) legislative answer to the CCPC.

⁹ Unless noted otherwise, information was drawn from the official site (Convention Citoyenne pour le Climat n.d.).

¹⁰ No data was available for citizens of immigrant origin.

5.3 DEUTSCHLANDS ROLLE IN DER WELT¹¹

In 2019, the civil society association “Mehr Demokratie” and the Schöpflin Foundation organised the first so-called “Citizens’ Council Democracy” headed by Bavaria’s former prime minister Günther Beckstein. This first Bürgerrat prompted another Bürgerrat in 2020 that dealt with *Deutschlands Rolle in der Welt*. The range of topics included sustainable development, economy and trade, peace and security, democracy and constitutional state, and the European Union.

The 160 participants were drawn by lot, but the three-stage selection process had to fulfil the criteria of territorial and socio-demographic diversity. First, the organisers asked 84 municipalities of different sizes from all German regions to provide address data drawn at random. Of those municipalities who responded positively (68), 4’365 individuals were invited to participate. The organisers then selected participants who were representative of the population in terms of age, education, size of municipality, origin, and gender. While group representation worked well in the gender and age categories (with RIs of 1 or higher), the group of low-educated persons was severely underrepresented: instead of having about 30% of the participants with no or a lower secondary school degree, only 10% of the Bürgerrat had a lower secondary degree, and only 0.6% (instead of 4%) had no school degree. In addition, 13.6% of the participants were of immigrant origin compared to 26% in the general population (RI: 0.5).

The institutional set up supported the quality of deliberation in the following respects. The participants met virtually in 10 meetings in January and February 2021 to work on recommendations. They were supported by professional moderators and experts from diverse backgrounds, e.g. in science,

media, and society. The experts’ role was to inform the participants on discussion topics.

The envisaged features that couple the deliberative participatory fora with politics are comparably strong because the DRW was initiated by the Bundestag. Together with social actors and research institutes, MPs from all parties drafted guiding questions. These questions were checked in focus groups with randomly selected citizens and via a representative survey of the population. Finally, a workshop with political and societal representatives developed the final programme for the Bürgerrat. Besides the Bundestag’s interest regarding the substance, the Bürgerrat was also seen as an experiment to test whether such an instrument is suited for complementing classical legislative work (Deutscher Bundestag 2020). In March 2021, the President of the Bundestag received the final report. Up to the Federal election in September 2021, participants explained their recommendations in several workshops and talks at Federal Ministries or meetings in parliament. While parties expressed high interest and willingness to incorporate proposals into their manifestos, no concrete reactions to the results of the DRW have been observed to date.

5.4 BÜRGERRAT KLIMA¹²

The *Bürgerrat Klima* took place after the DRW had finished. Unlike its predecessor, it was not initiated by political actors in office but by civil society organisations, using the DRW as a blueprint. A scientific advisory board worked out thematic parameters, parliamentarians and civil society associations were asked to prioritise and identify topics and questions, and a survey was conducted to assess public opinion on the importance of the proposed themes.

11 Unless noted otherwise, information was drawn from the official site (Bürgerrat Deutschlands Rolle n.d.).

12 Unless noted otherwise, information was drawn from the official site (Bürgerrat Klima n.d.).

Regarding composition, the 160 participants were drawn by lot in a two-stage process: individuals older than 16 were randomly selected. Phone numbers were randomly generated and then dialled to see if persons answering were interested in participating. Those who showed interest were invited by mail to apply for participation. The final round of participants was then chosen based on characteristics such as age, gender, migration background, educational attainment, and municipality size. The BK featured RIs of 1 in three of the four categories. Only the working class was under-represented, with 18% of participants reported to have the lowest educational qualification (*Hauptschulabschluss*) compared to 29.6% in the general population (RI of 0.6) (Autorengruppe Bildungsberichterstattung 2021).

Turning to features supporting quality deliberations, the participants met in 12 virtual sessions between April and June 2021 to debate four fields of action (mobility, food, buildings and heating, and energy) related to the challenges of climate change and how Germany could reach the agreed temperature goal. Each session was opened with insights on the theme presented by researchers. Scholars were also available to check facts and answer questions from the participants during the sessions.

In addition, much importance was placed on a close relationship with politics before and after the meetings. The final report was delivered before the elections in September 2021. A survey showed that 80% of the population thinks that political actors should take the recommendations into account. As with the DRW, however, concrete action has not been observed to date, even though all parties showed great interest in the recommendations. Coalitional dynamics in government are likely to have a greater impact on the choice of policy proposals.

5.5 COMPARATIVE ASSESSMENT

Table 1 summarises the core features of the citizen assemblies investigated in France and Germany. These features are relevant for assessing the potential to balance the identified representation gaps regarding composition, high-quality deliberation, and a link to politics.

Regarding the participant selection, all four citizen assemblies used sortition and stratified sample selection. The French GDN, however, reproduced some of the existing representation gaps, notably for younger citizens, ethnic minorities, and the working class. This fact is particularly disappointing as its much bigger size could have allowed it to mirror different social groups more easily. In contrast, CCPC and both German Bürgerräte work with a stratified selection that shows greater potential to balance existing representation gaps. Unlike the Assemblée Nationale, working-class citizens are represented in the CCPC and age groups mirror French society. The German Bürgerrat DRW and the BK failed to represent society's share of workers, while the other groups we studied are well represented in the DRW. The share of people with immigrant origin was also lower in the BK than in the general German population.

The conditions for quality of deliberations differed regarding information, expert input, moderation, and time accorded. All fora provided information for participants, and deliberation was moderated by facilitators. Expert input from researchers who accompanied debates on demand was assured continuously for the CCPC, and research input was also provided in the DRW and BK.

Turning to duration, the GDN stands out with the shortest time span regarding meetings reserved for deliberation (1.5 days) as well as the elapsed time from the first to the last meeting, as there

Table 1: Deliberative participatory fora in Germany and France

Key Aspects of the German and French Citizen Assemblies	Grand Débat National (GDN)	Convention Citoyenne Pour le Climat (CCPC)	Bürgerrat Deutschlands Rolle in der Welt (DRW)	Bürgerrat Klima (BK)
Descriptively representative composition				
Number and selection	1404 in 21 assemblies of 19 to 125 participants (random selection of phone numbers & stratified sampling according to five criteria)	160 (sortition and stratified sampling selection according to six criteria)	169 (sortition and stratified sampling selection according to six criteria)	160 (sortition and stratified sampling selection according to six criteria)
Representation Index	women 0.9, young citizens 0.6, working class 0.2, immigrant origin n.a.	women 1, young citizens 0.9, working class 0.5, immigrant origin n.a.	women 1, young citizens 1, working class 0.6, immigrant origin 0.5	women 1, young citizens 1, working class 0.6, immigrant origin 1
Quality of Deliberation				
Duration	one meeting, 1.5 days in groups of 5-7 in March 2021	seven weekend meetings and one online meeting over nine months (October 3, 2019–June 21, 2020)	ten online meetings in groups of 6-8 over ten days (January 13 – February 20, 2021)	nine meetings in small groups, 3 plenary meetings over 12 days (April 26 – June 23, 2021)
Role of experts	input	input	may be consulted	input
Coupling to politics				
Number and impact of final recommendations	mandated by President 146 measures debated in parliament & by government, selective uptake in reforms	mandated by President 149 measures, promise to turn them into law monitoring of follow-up by NGO	mandated by parliament 5 policy guidelines and 32 recommendations, promise to deal with them in plenary and committees	mandated by civil society organisation 10 guiding principles, 83 recommendations

Source: compilation based on the above

was only one meeting per group. The CCPC marks the other end of the continuum with seven meetings, each lasting a weekend over a period of seven months. Yet, the number of meetings was about the same. All fora had mechanisms in place that aimed for high-quality deliberation. Yet, we need more detailed information on the implementation of these mechanisms to assess whether the voices of all groups represented found their way into aggregated outputs (Gherghina et al. 2021).

The features that couple the deliberative participatory fora to politics are more difficult to compare. First, on the input side, mandates differ substantially. Two fora, the BK and the CCPC, focused

on climate. The GDN and the DRW are more encompassing, covering a range of topics of societal and political relevance. While the French mandates were both given by the President, in Germany, only the DRW held a clear mandate from the Bundestag. Second, in the German political system, the output in the form of recommendations was directed at parliament – which, in the case of the DRW, was also important in setting up the forum in the first place. In the French political system, recommendations have been officially received by the President but were also debated in parliament. Yet, the take-up of recommendations is subject to pick and choose (Font et al. 2018), which is already visible, despite the fact

that some of our citizen assemblies finished their work only recently with input still under debate on ensuing legislative reforms.

In sum, the composition of the four studied deliberative-participatory fora clearly mirrors society better than the parliaments studied. The institutional features guaranteeing the quality of deliberation show some potential to balance the representation gap. But this potential is critically limited by the lack of an institutional mechanism for a link to politics.

6 DISCUSSION

Our article provides a conceptualisation and detailed description of representation gaps for women, people of immigrant origin, the working class and younger age groups in France and Germany. We compare two countries and four groups, which allows us to see that important representation gaps exist for all groups and that the gap is most pronounced for class. In addition, the representation gap for gender and people of immigrant origin seems to be narrowing over time. Regarding age in France, deputies are, on average, substantially older than the population – but also compared to Germany.

The comparison of the French and German cases further indicates that despite the fact that group-specific gaps are influenced by the interplay of electoral system features (e.g. women quotas) and cultural aspects (e.g. notions of citizenship), the countries show largely similar patterns across the different groups analysed. This finding leads us to expect that, at least among other Western European countries, the representation gap for women is likely smaller compared to the other groups studied, in particular, to class. Moreover, these differences in gaps and trends highlight that we should engage systematically with potential tradeoffs in the representation of

groups. Future research should concentrate on identifying the drivers of representation of individuals with intersecting categories of underrepresented groups. This focus requires research to engage in systematic data collection that helps to fill these knowledge gaps.

Deliberative participatory fora hold some potential to tackle underrepresentation by opening new channels of participation. This potential is critically influenced by the institutional design of these fora. We explore this potential empirically in four recent cases of deliberative participatory fora: (1) the *Grand Débat National*, probed as a deliberative answer to the Yellow Vest movement in France, (2) the *Convention Citoyenne Pour le Climat*, also in France, and (3) the German *Bürgerrat, Deutschlands Rolle in der Welt*, supporting policy-makers in decision-making processes, and (4) the *Bürgerrat Klima*, which followed from the DRW. Strikingly, country differences seem negligible. Rather, the comparison allows a clear assessment of what already works well and where more efforts are needed to benefit from the potential of balancing underrepresentation. Random stratified sampling assured largely descriptive representation in three of our four cases, yet, working-class people are still underrepresented despite this effort. This continued imbalance holds the potential danger of further discouraging them from politics as their interests not only are absent in parliamentary debates but they are not even heard in fora explicitly designed to give underrepresented groups a voice.

All fora are designed in a way that institutions support the quality of the deliberative process by offering information and expertise to participants as well as moderation by professional facilitators. However, other institutional features (e.g. allocating time for deliberation) could be improved to more fully exploit the potential for quality deliberations. Finally, while political support was important to the set-up of all four cases, our findings

clearly show that this does not mean governments want to share power with ordinary people. All cases elaborated a more or less precise political mandate, but we found no mechanisms to secure the uptake of the recommendations. We conclude that the biggest challenge for balancing representation gaps with deliberative participatory fora in the future is related to the institutional design of coupling fora with politics – even if a somewhat improved take-up of recommendations might still occur in the future. Recent research shows that a disregard of the fora's results due to a lack of or a loose coupling with politics can easily aggravate political dissatisfaction rather than curing current challenges to liberal democracy (van Dijk/Lefevre 2022). Differences between our cases further suggest that institutional approaches to address this challenge depend on the political system. Our cases in Germany show that in a parliamentary system, coupling could benefit from institutionalised links to parliament, e.g. via specific committees that include representatives from parliament and citizen fora – something other parliamentary systems have experienced positively (Landemore 2020). The French case, in turn, highlights the important role of the president. Here, institutional features to address the challenge should incentivise (e.g. by creating co-ownership) or force (e.g. veto power of the citizen forum in case of far-reaching changes to proposals) the president to follow the input of citizens. While we would not go so far as to argue that efforts are superfluous, we believe that a *stronger* government affirmation of uptake of the recommendations would signal much more the willingness to include underrepresented group voices and not leave some groups disaffected.

The dominant challenge of coupling is likely to matter for even more cases as it links to the inherent tension between features of representative political institutions and raises more fundamental questions on the balancing of underrepresentation within parliament through

extra-parliamentary channels. Direct participation (of some) sits uneasily with the logic of representative democracy more generally. While deputies are accountable to their voters and can be sanctioned in the next elections, no such “control” mechanisms exist for citizen fora. Processes within deliberative participatory fora are frequently less transparent to ordinary citizens than parliamentary debates and votes. Arguably, this lack of transparency and accountability in the decision-making chain negatively affects the legitimacy of a political system more generally. We might also generalise that a more balanced representation within political institutions should be given priority to achieve political equality. This alternative does not disregard the potential of participatory deliberative fora for contributing to the quality of democracy and the functioning of politics in other respects.

This research provides an important lesson for efforts to take advantage of citizen assemblies on the European level. The EP is characterised by representation gaps like those in national parliaments: For example, the RI is 0.78 for women, and for people of immigrant origin, the RI is estimated at 0.5 by the European Network against Racism. The very recent *Conference of the Future of Europe 2021-2022* was designed to give European citizens a chance to express their opinion on a range of issues which then fed into discussions of citizen panels – composed of citizens based on different characteristics with an overrepresentation of young people (Conference on the Future of Europe n.d.). Their recommendations were being debated at the Conference Plenary composed of representatives from all three European Union institutions, national parliaments, civil society, and the public. A final report was delivered to EU leadership. While the EP is eager to push for European Union reforms and EU Commission President von der Leyen promised to give citizen panels in the EU a legally binding framework, it remains to be seen whether citizen voices will be heard

in strongly contested policy areas. The European Citizens' Panel recommendations also state "if the resulting recommendations are not adopted by the EU institutions, this must be justified" (Bürgerrat 2022). This clause gives leeway to overrule citizen recommendations and might even aggravate polarisation and contestations if no further action is taken against inequalities in group representations in the European Parliament.

Therefore, Lafont (2017) argues that rather than giving citizen assemblies decision power, they should be a tool to challenge the majority opinion of the public, enhance the agenda-setting power of ordinary citizens, or anticipate what the public would want if it were more informed and deliberative. Thus, future research should discuss the benefits and costs of improving descriptive representation externally – ideally by comparing alternative external channels such as direct democracy (Trüdinger/Bächtiger 2022) and deliberative participatory fora.

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APPENDIX

Table A1: Calculation of Representation Indices (RI), France

	% population 2017 (a)	% population 2022 (b)	% deputies 2017 (c)	% deputies 2022 (d)	representa- tion index 2017 (=c/a)	representa- tion index 2022 (=b/d)
Women	51.6	51.6	39	37	0.76	0.72
People of immigrant origin	20.1	21.2	2.8	n.a.	0.14	n.a.
working class (occupation)	19.2	20.7	0	1	0	0.05
young citizens (18-29)	14	14	4.7	4.3	0.34	0.31

Source: homepages of the National Statistical Office INSEE (Insee n.d.) and Assemblée Nationale (<https://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/dyn/vos-deputes>, last accessed 16.6.2023)

Table A2: Calculation of Representation Indices (RI), Germany

	% population 2017 (a)	% population 2022 (b)	% deputies 2017 (c)	% deputies 2022 (d)	representa- tion index 2017 (=c/a)	representa- tion index 2022 (=b/d)
Women	51	51	31	35	0.61	0.68
People of immigrant origin	26	26.7	8	11.3	0.31	0.42
working class (occupation)	21.4	13.1	0	0.3	0	0.022
young citizens (18-29)	16	16	1.6	6.5	0.1	0.41

Source: Statistisches Bundesamt (2022) and Deutscher Bundestag (2014).

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