RESEARCH ARTICLE

The substantive representation of social groups: towards a new comparative research agenda

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This article maps the field of substantive representation of social groups and carves out a new research agenda. Examining a database of 313 publications, we identify patterns in what is studied in the field and how it is studied. Our findings suggest that while scholarship on the substantive representation of social groups has expanded over the years, many studies still predominantly (1) analyse the representation of women in (2) the governmental sphere, while adopting a focus on (3) a single country, (4) a single group and (5) a single axis. Comparative work across countries and groups is more scarce. We therefore argue in favour of a comparative research agenda that prioritises more cross-country and cross-group research on the substantive representation of social groups using pluralistic research methods. This direction offers distinct advantages for answering new research questions, exploring diversity in how the substantive representation of social groups takes place, identifying broader patterns across different contexts and groups, and formulating new explanations on the occurrence and quality of the substantive representation of social groups.

Key words substantive representation • political representation of social groups • comparative research

Key messages
• Research on the substantive representation of social groups often maintains a focus on a single country, a single group and a single axis.
• Comparative research on the substantive representation of social groups is critical for the further development of the field.
• Cross-country and cross-group comparative research contributes to a more integrated study of the substantive representation of social groups.
• Methodological pluralism is key to this comparative approach

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Introduction

Since Hanna Pitkin’s (1967) influential work in *The Concept of Representation*, all four types of representation – formal, descriptive, symbolic and substantive – have attracted scholarly attention. Many publications deal with the factors that shape the formalistic and descriptive representation of women and other disadvantaged social groups in politics (Evans and Reher, 2020; Paxton et al., 2020), and scientific thought has also moved a lot on the concepts of symbolic and substantive representation (Celis et al., 2008; Lombardo and Meier, 2014). Of these latter two forms, substantive representation continues to capture scholars’ attention most. A count of the peer-reviewed publications on the substantive representation of social groups (SRSG) reveals that their number has increased significantly over the past 15 years (see Figure 1 in the following).

With the growth of the field also came an increased diversification of scholarship on SRSG. A key question within the field has traditionally been whether and how SRSG relates to, and benefits from, the descriptive representation of social groups (Phillips, 1995; Mansbridge, 1999). Together, existing studies paint a complex picture: while, in various cases, SRSG is better when descriptive representatives are in place (Sobolewska, McKee and Campbell, 2018), the mere presence of descriptive representatives does not guarantee the representation of group interests (Childs and Lovenduski, 2013). The idea that an increase in group size would be sufficient to generate political impact has particularly come under scrutiny (Dahlerup, 1988; Childs and Krook, 2009).

To better understand how SRSG occurs, scholarship has therefore expressed the need to separate substantive representation from descriptive representation, both theoretically and empirically, and to study ‘what is going on’ in substantive representation (Celis et al., 2008; Childs and Lovenduski, 2013). The body of works that proliferated as a result presents the empirical richness of (mostly) single-country studies. Dahlerup’s (1988) and Childs and Krook’s (2009) appeal to focus not on critical mass, but instead on critical acts and critical actors, in research on women’s substantive representation produced work that focuses on individual agents promoting women-friendly change (Celis and Erzeel, 2015; Gwiazda, 2019; Rashkova, 2020). Other studies consider the role of ‘institutional’ bodies, including social movements and legislative equality bodies, in the advancement of group interests in and beyond parliaments (Weldon, 2002; Sawer, 2012; Saalfeld and Bischof, 2013).

By expanding its initial focus – from studying presence in parliament to understanding the various actors, venues and claims involved in SRSG – recent scholarship has significantly improved our understanding of what it means to substantively represent social groups. Yet, the expansion of scholarship in different directions also brings new challenges for how to align and, in a way, consolidate the arguments of this growing scholarship. Being able to foster continued mutual learning within the field (and beyond) begs asking how SRSG is studied and whether a common understanding of, and approach to, SRSG has occurred. Current work, however, does not provide answers to these questions. To fill this gap, this research agenda-setting article offers a systematic overview of extant research in the field of SRSG since the 1990s. We aim to survey the subfield of the study of SRSG to understand where scholarship is now and what is still missing, and to provide a way forward. To do that, we study political science publications on SRSG included in Web of Science and published between 1995 and 2021, and use the data to answer two key questions:
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- What is studied in research on SRSG? We analyse the social groups studied, the venues of representation, the country/region focus and the conceptualisation of substantive representation.
- How is SRSG studied? This includes the specific methods used, the unit of analysis, the case design and the link with other forms of representation.

Based on our analysis of the extant scholarship on SRSG, as well as how its research subjects, methods and conclusions speak to each other, we carve out a new research agenda that strives for more cross-country and cross-group comparative research on SRSG using pluralistic research methods. We argue that such a comparative framework allows for a systematic study of the ‘what’ and the ‘how’ of SRSG across contexts and groups, which is critical at this point in the development of the field. This comparative direction offers distinct advantages for: answering new research questions; exploring diversity in how SRSG takes place; identifying broader patterns across different contexts, settings and groups; and offering new explanations on the occurrence and quality of SRSG.

In what follows, we first discuss our research design and data. Next, we present the results of our analysis. In the final two sections, we reflect on the challenges that we see ahead of us and move into the development of a new comparative research agenda that focuses on cross-country and cross-group comparisons in the study of SRSG.

Research design, data and methods

To study how research on SRSG has developed as a field of study, we conduct a systematic analysis of the literature published on the topic between 1995 and 2021. The results are based on a content analysis of the titles, abstracts, introductions and methods sections of publications included in a data set that we extracted from the Web of Science database.

To identify the publications, we selected studies included in the Web of Science Core Collection, which offers bibliographical access to a comprehensive collection of peer-reviewed articles, book chapters and proceedings papers. We conducted an advanced search of the publications, focusing on SRSG (date: 19 April 2022). First, we searched for the phrase ‘substantive representation’ in the title (TI) or in the abstract (AB) or in the author keywords (AK). This generated 342 initial results. In addition, we searched for terms that are often used as synonyms for substantive representation in some subfields, more precisely, ‘congruence’, ‘policy responsiveness’, ‘political responsiveness’, ‘government responsiveness’ and ‘interest representation’. Since the number of publications obtained was very high (N = 21,398) and many publications were not in the field of political science, we added a search category of ‘political science’. This led us to an initial selection of 1,005 unique publications.

Second, we conducted a scan of the titles and abstracts of these 1,005 publications to assess whether their content dealt with the ‘substantive representation’ of ‘social groups’. Publications that did not have a substantial focus on ‘substantive representation’ (for example, publications that focused solely on descriptive representation in research design and analysis, and only mentioned that their findings had consequences for substantive representation) were removed from the data set. Equally, studies without a specific focus on ‘social groups’ (for example, publications focusing on substantive
representation in general terms) were not selected for further analysis. We use the term ‘social groups’ in the tradition of ‘social group representation’ (Phillips, 1995; Williams, 1998). Hence, we focus on traditionally disadvantaged social groups whose voices and interests risk being overlooked in representative processes or outcomes as a result of historical and structural processes of exclusion and marginalisation (Williams, 1998), based on ‘ascriptive’ characteristics, such as sex/gender, age, ethnicity, race, religion, sexuality, social class and (dis)ability (Reskin, 2003).

After this second selection, 692 publications were removed from the data set, predominantly general studies on substantive representation that did not focus on social groups. The final data set contains 313 publications published between 1995 and 2021 (Erzeel and Rashkova, 2022). The end year is 2021, and we included studies that were published on or before 31 December 2021. The start year of 1995 was not a priori determined, but rather corresponds with the first publication in Web of Science on SRSG. One important caveat, however, is that by relying on Web of Science data and on the use of keywords/titles/abstracts to select studies, we were unable to identify studies that might thematically link to SRSG but do not explicitly mention the term ‘substantive representation’ or any of the related terms. This is arguably less of a problem for recent studies (as the use of the concept ‘substantive representation’ has become widespread) than for early scholarship (for example, Kanter, 1977; Dahlerup, 1988). Given that these are pioneering studies that have served as a source of inspiration for many future studies, their exclusion from our data set is a shortcoming that we are aware of.

Another caveat is that by relying on the Web of Science collection, our data set primarily includes journal articles published in English. Although Web of Science also includes book chapters, proceedings papers and editorial materials, journal articles make up most publications. The data set contains 308 journal articles, four book chapters and one conference proceeding. The focus on journal articles allows us to meet our ambition to scan the largest breath of the subfield, and although the approach is in line with systematic reviews in other subfields of political science (Smets and van Ham, 2013), we acknowledge that other types of publications (for example, books and conference papers) can add to the amount of comparative work on the subject. A related limitation is that nearly all studies in our data set are publications in English. We were able to include publications in a non-English language that provided an English title and abstract, but the number of publications that offer this option is low (N = 3, of which one is in German, one is in Turkish and one is in Serbian).

A final caveat is that the data set only includes published work. Our choice to study published work aligns with the goals of a literature review to give an overview of the most important studies in the field, and we consider their recognition by peers as one measurement of this importance. Moreover, the Web of Science collection includes a wide variety of journals that are relevant to the study of social group representation, combining both generalist and specialist journals (such as Parliamentary Affairs, Politics & Gender, Journal of Women, Politics and Policy, Women’s Studies International Forum, Ethnic and Racial Studies, Politics, Groups and Identities and so on). The 308 journal articles analysed for this study were published in 111 different journals. The journals with at least five articles on the topic are listed in Table 1. The greater presence in some journals is partially linked to the publication of special issues, for instance, in Parliamentary Affairs and Politics & Gender. The inclusion of a large variety of journals
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strengthens our belief that our selection does not systematically ignore studies from a specific subfield, though we recognise that a publication bias still hinders the inclusion of studies dealing with marginalised research topics and methods (Teele and Thelen, 2017; Medie and Kang, 2018).

Figure 1 gives an overview of the distribution of the 313 publications over time. The number of studies on SRSG was low in the ‘early’ years but has increased since then. Until 2006, less than ten studies were published per year. This increases gradually (but fluctuates too) over the next decade. The highest number of publications on the topic is found in 2019 and 2021, with 30 and 39 studies published per year, respectively.

Figure 1: Number of publications on SR (1995-2021)

Table 1: Journals with the highest number of articles on SRSG (1995–2021)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Journal name</th>
<th>Number of articles</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Politics &amp; Gender</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parliamentary Affairs</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journal of Women, Politics and Policy (previously: Women &amp; Politics)</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Research Quarterly</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Science Quarterly</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women’s Studies International Forum</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Journal of Political Science</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Studies</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journal of Politics</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comparative Political Studies</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legislative Studies Quarterly</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>European Journal of Political Research</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government &amp; Opposition</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy Studies Journal</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politics, Groups and Identities</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West European Politics</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Not shown in Figure 1 is that patterns of authorship are also gendered. More than half of the studies in the data set (54.6 per cent) have women-only authors, 25.2 per cent have male-only authors and 20 per cent have mixed-sex co-authors. Hence, female authors have established a stronger overall foothold in this strand of research than have male scholars, though this also varies according to sub-strands. Most studies on the substantive representation of women/gender (72.2 per cent) are (co-)authored by female authors only, which is not surprising given the higher involvement of female scholars in gender and politics research. Only 10.2 per cent of the studies on women/gender are written by men only, and 17.6 per cent have mixed-sex co-authors. However, male(-only) authors are more prolific in scholarship on other groups, and especially so on ethnic/race groups. Around 50.7 per cent of the studies on ethnic/race groups are written by men-only authors, compared to 26.8 per cent by women-only authors and 22.5 per cent by mixed-sex co-authors. The latter arguably reflect wider publication patterns found more generally across major political science journals. Teele and Thelen (2017: 438), for instance, studied gendered patterns of authorship across ten prominent political science journals and found that 65.1 per cent of the articles were authored by men-only authors, 19.5 per cent by women-only authors and 17.1 per cent by mixed-sex collaborations.

For each publication in our data set, we coded the title, abstracts, introductions and methods sections to obtain a systematic overview of (1) what is studied in research on SRSG and (2) how it is studied. With regard to the question of 'what', we coded the following for each publication:

- The social group(s) under study, using seven predefined categories ('gender', 'ethnicity/race', 'age', 'social class', 'sexuality' and 'other' category for groups not included in the previous five categories and a 'multiple' category for studies of multiple groups). We also coded the specific term used by the authors themselves. Additionally, we coded whether an intersectional perspective was applied, that is, whether attention was paid to within-group differences and inequalities, and/or to how different social categories interact (McCall, 2005).
- The venues of representation. We coded whether the study focused on the 'governmental sphere' (for example, parliament, cabinet, administration), the 'quasi-governmental sphere' (for example, parties), the 'non-governmental sphere' (for example, non-governmental organisations [NGOs], civil society, media, ordinary citizens) or multiple spheres.
- The country/region focus adopted in the publication (not the authors’ institutional affiliation or country of origin).
- The conceptualisation of substantive representation as either a process or an outcome, or as both.

For the coding of substantive representation as a process or an outcome, we follow Franceschet and Piscopo’s (2008) initial distinction but broaden the definition to include other social groups and non-parliamentary activities:

- Substantive representation as a process includes: (1) parliamentary actions like bill (co-)sponsorship, raising concerns during parliamentary debates or networking with colleagues on behalf of a group; (2) politicians establishing connections with constituents from, or the civil society organisations of, said groups;
(3) representatives raising the issues and concerns of social groups in non-parliamentary venues, such as political parties, civil society, media or public debates; (4) groups from outside parliament seeking to establish connections with parliamentarians and/or parties; and (5) the discussion/action of groups outside parliament trying to encourage policy change.

- **Substantive representation as (policy) outcomes** includes studies on: (1) changes in political practice and how politics is done; (2) voting on legislation in parliament; (3) government or executive actions related to policy adoption, development and execution; (4) administrative action related to policy implementation; and (5) examination of content/effect/compliance with policy in and outside parliament.

Next, to examine ‘how’ SRSG is studied, we coded the following for each paper:

- The specific methods used, that is, whether studies used ‘quantitative’, ‘qualitative’ or ‘mixed’ methods. In addition, we also coded the exact terms used by the authors (for example, ‘survey research’, ‘in-depth interviews’, ‘content analysis’ and so on) to have a more concrete coding. When the studies did not use empirical data (for example, in review articles or theoretical contributions), this was also coded.

- The unit of analysis. We make a distinction between ‘small-N’, ‘intermediate-N’ and ‘large-N’ studies. We use 12 cases as a cut-off point for ‘small-N’ studies ($N = 1–12$ cases), between 12–50 cases for ‘intermediate-N’ studies and more than 50 for ‘large-N’ studies (Berg-Schlosser et al, 2009).

- Comparison. We coded this in two steps. First, we coded whether the study was a single-case study or a comparative study. Following Gerring (2004: 342), we define a case study as ‘an intensive study of a single unit for the purpose of understanding a larger class of (similar) units. A unit connotes a spatially bounded phenomenon … observed at a single point in time or over some delimited period of time’. Building on this definition, we define a comparative study as a study of at least two units, where attention is paid to differences and similarities between these units (Caramani, 2017). The types of phenomena that can be compared are quite broad, including ‘spatially bounded phenomena’ (such as nations, revolutions, parties, elections, parliaments and political leaders) and ‘temporally bounded phenomena’ (such as legislative terms and time periods), which fits with the ‘substantive inclusiveness’ of comparative politics (Beckwith, 2010: 161). To make a further distinction between different types of comparisons, we also coded whether the publication included a cross-country, cross-group, cross-time or other comparison.

- **Link with other forms of representation in research design.** We coded whether authors study substantive representation in relation to other forms of representation (descriptive, symbolic and/or formalistic representation). The focus on research design is crucial in our coding of this variable: the link must be made in how the study is set up and/or how the research question is formulated. For example, studies testing the ‘critical mass’ or ‘politics of presence’ argument, as well as studies testing the impact of gender quotas, affirmative action or redistricting on substantive representation, were all coded as displaying links with other forms of representation. However, if other forms of representation are simply mentioned to introduce the topic or as an afterthought, we did not code this as a ‘link’ with another form.
**What is studied?**

The first indicator is which social groups are being studied. The data presented in Table 2 show that studies on SRSG thus far have largely focused on gender. This holds for almost 60 per cent of the studies, and they have particularly been framed to study the substantive representation of **women**. In addition, 22.7 per cent of the studies focus on ethnic, racial and immigrant minorities. Surprisingly, there are only a few studies dealing with the substantive representation of social class groups and lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer and intersex (LGBTQI) people (less than 6 per cent and 4 per cent, respectively). Studies focusing on age and health/disability inequalities are almost completely absent. While scholars are starting to look at various groups, only few (6.1 per cent) study two or more groups simultaneously. In this category, we find studies comparing SRSG based on gender and race/ethnicity, on race and social class, and others. There is also still relatively little attention paid to intersectionality: only 12 per cent of the studies include an intersectionality perspective.

These results tell us two things: first, gender scholars have been leading in carving out the larger part of the research on SRSG; and, second, there is not enough research on other social groups. The first finding is not surprising given the long tradition

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>N (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social group (N = 313)</td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>187 (59.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ethnicity/race</td>
<td>71 (22.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>2 (0.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Social class</td>
<td>17 (5.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sexuality</td>
<td>12 (3.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Health/disability</td>
<td>5 (1.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Multiple</td>
<td>19 (6.1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Region/country (N = 298)</td>
<td>Europe</td>
<td>111 (37.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Europe – East</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Europe – North</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Europe – South</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Europe – West</td>
<td>21</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>UK</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Asia and the Pacific</td>
<td>30 (101%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Latin America and the Caribbean</td>
<td>9 (3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Middle East</td>
<td>7 (2.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Turkey</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>North America</td>
<td>104 (34.9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sub-Saharan Africa</td>
<td>17 (5.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Across regions/worldwide</td>
<td>20 (6.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Venue (N = 298)</td>
<td>Governmental</td>
<td>212 (71.1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Quasi-governmental</td>
<td>31 (10.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Non-governmental</td>
<td>18 (6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Multiple</td>
<td>37 (12.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Substantive representation (N = 275)</td>
<td>Process</td>
<td>129 (46.9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Outcome</td>
<td>88 (32%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Both</td>
<td>58 (21.1%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
of work among gender and politics scholars studying the substantive representation of women. The second can be explained by the fact that scholarship on SRSG has been dominated by studies on the ‘largest’ (in demographic terms) unequally treated group in society – women; however, simultaneously, this trend is changing, with other social groups starting to be analysed. While it is noteworthy to state that about 40 per cent of the research on SRSG is not on women per se, it is important to stress that we need more, and more diverse and comparative, research on the substantive representation of various groups, at the very least, for showing the effects of unequal treatment and proposing potential counter strategies.

A second indicator considered the geographical focus of the studies. More than 70 per cent of the publications focus on Europe (in particular, Western Europe) and North America. Publications on the US and UK are especially numerous, with 99 and 45 studies, respectively. Overall, the studies in the data set cover 56 countries around the world. These trends show that while we are starting to know a little more about many corners of the world, scholarship on SRSG is still very much subject to data availability, which is more readily available in countries like the US and the UK. In the rest of the world, especially in many new democracies or countries of the Global South, scholars not only have to answer their intellectual queries, but also have to generate data that can help them reach an answer.

The final two indicators look at the venue of representation – in which the representational body is studied – and the conceptualisation of representation, that is, whether it is a process or an outcome. The data show that most studies (71.1 per cent) focus on the government sphere, where SRSG is mostly studied in parliaments, though also in cabinets, ministries, bureaucracies and local governments. Second comes the quasi-government sphere, with studies studying political parties, which amount to a bit over 10 per cent of the publications. Lastly, 6 per cent of the studies are on the non-governmental sphere, including representation not only in NGOs, civil society and the media, but also on school boards, in universities or in peace agreements. These results suggest that governmental institutions, which are seen as having the primary power to decide and/or change the level of representation of a certain group, are drawing the largest attention of scholars. Connected to this finding is also the coding related to the conceptualisation of representation. The largest set of studies study SRSG either only in its process (almost 50 per cent) or only as an outcome (32 per cent). Only 21.1 per cent of the studies focus on SRSG as a process and outcome together, which makes sense given that a large majority of works study what is being done in parliaments and other governmental bodies. What is still missing here is a broader coverage of SRSG in the non-governmental sphere, which can be highly influential in the policymaking process in both old and new democracies.

How is it studied?

In our quest to map the field, we were also interested in the methods that have been used to study SRSG. Table 3 shows that the quantitative versus qualitative divide is roughly 51 per cent to 35 per cent, respectively. Whereas most studies using quantitative methods are based on studies of the US (50.3 per cent), Europe (21.7 per cent, particularly Western Europe and the UK) and cross-country comparisons, the qualitative studies, some of which also do cross-time and cross-unit comparisons, have greater variation in geographical focus and cover not only multiple European,
but also non-European and non-Western, countries. The share of US studies is much smaller here (6.4 per cent). This methodological trend is to be expected given the data (in)availability in some countries and given differences in disciplinary norms and the kinds of methods training provided in different countries. In addition, studies that use a mixed methodology and employ both statistical analysis and a qualitative method make up almost 8 per cent of our data set (with the majority [17 out of 24 studies] focusing on US or European data). In terms of research traditions and methodologies, we observe that studies on gender and substantive representation have a far more qualitative approach: 83.5 per cent of the qualitative studies focus on gender, while 43.5 per cent of the quantitative studies do. The opposite is true for ethnic/racial groups (which make up 8.3 per cent and 31.1 per cent of the qualitative and quantitative studies, respectively) and the other social groups (8.3 per cent of the qualitative studies and 25.5% of the quantitative studies).

We also coded whether studies have a comparative focus and whether they link their research designs to other representation forms. For the latter, the data show that about 63 per cent of the work on SRSG makes a clear link to other forms of representation, chiefly with descriptive representation. This reflects the predominance of critical mass approaches in the early years, but we also see a movement away from that, in that almost 34 per cent of the work focuses only on substantive representation. Given the focus on the link with descriptive representation, we also found that most studies use SRSG as a dependent variable; studies using SRSG as an independent variable are lacking.

Next, we find that a good number of studies use comparisons (69.4 per cent) but that the types of comparisons vary. What currently exists are studies that compare within a given country either across parliaments, across parties, across districts or across individuals (30.9 per cent). A substantial number of studies also compare over time (37.2 per cent), but these are mostly comparisons of two or three legislative terms—longitudinal research is lacking. Moreover, there is a paucity of cross-country (14 per cent) and cross-group (10.3 per cent) comparisons. If studies do compare across countries, these mostly contain comparisons in a smaller number of countries.

### Table 3: How is SRSG studied?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>N (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Method (N = 313)</td>
<td>Quantitative</td>
<td>161 (51.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Qualitative</td>
<td>109 (34.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>24 (7.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Theoretical piece</td>
<td>19 (6.1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Link with other forms of representation (N = 313)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>196 (62.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>106 (33.9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Unclear</td>
<td>11 (3.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case design (N = 301)</td>
<td>Single-case study</td>
<td>92 (30.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Comparative study&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>209 (69.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cross-country</td>
<td>41 (14%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cross-time</td>
<td>112 (37.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cross-group</td>
<td>31 (10.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>93 (30.9%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<sup>a</sup> The percentages of cross-country, cross-time and cross-group studies are counted on the total number of studies in this theme (N = 303). The column percentages do not add up to 100% because studies can combine different types of comparisons.
The substantive representation of social groups

for instance, with studies comparing four Scandinavian countries, three countries in South-East Africa or four ‘new democracies’. Comparisons across larger numbers of countries are less evident, though they do exist (for example, ten studies compare a set of countries worldwide, eight studies offer European comparisons and one study offers a comparison of Latin American countries). However, most studies on SRSG remain single-country case studies. Leading countries here, after the US and the UK, are Australia, Belgium, Canada, Germany, South Africa, Sweden and Turkey, all of which are represented by at least five studies in the data set. Studies that explain in a comparative manner, for example, the causes of SRSG in various countries or across groups are still very much missing. It is evident from the study of the data set that the groundwork of both theoretical and single case-oriented studies that dominated our sample is hugely important for the development of the field. Yet, cross-country and cross-group comparative studies, as well as longitudinal research, are scarce.

Towards a comparative research agenda

Based on the content analysis of a large body of work on SRSG, we can now synthesise several trends that can be observed in this line of scholarship, as well as identify opportunities that lie ahead. One main finding is that scholarship on SRSG adopts a wide focus on (1) various groups (in particular, minority racial/ethnic groups, socio-economic groups and LGBTQI groups) in (2) a variety of venues and in (3) a variety of countries, and uses (4) different methods and approaches (both small-N case studies and large-N designs). At the same time, it became clear that some elements gained more attention than others, with many studies (1) focusing (only) on women as a group and (2) being bound to the governmental sphere, while maintaining a focus on (3) a single country, (4) a single group and (5) a single axis. The main challenge that we see in extant scholarship is therefore the limited number of studies that offer comparisons between multiple groups and across countries and contexts. As noted earlier, a great deal of this can be explained by the lack of readily available data and by the need that existed in ‘settling the field’. Yet, now that the latter has been achieved, we identify the lack of cross-group and cross-country/setting comparative studies as a pressing need for future research.

A comparative approach that prioritises cross-country and cross-group comparisons has several advantages, the most important being that it allows us to tackle research questions that have previously remained unanswered. Such questions might include:

- How much attention do political parties devote to the grievances of women and minority ethnic groups in their election manifestos, and what explains differences in the attention paid to each group?
- How do differences in civil society dialogue in majoritarian and consensus democracies account for differences in policy outcomes for low-income citizens?
- How responsive are governments towards the demands of young people in Japan and South Korea? What accounts for differences between the two countries?
- How does the substantive representation of disabled people in Argentina compare to other countries? Why is the quality of SRSG higher in some countries compared to others?
• Under what conditions do gender and youth quotas foster the representation of the interests of women and young people, both individually and jointly?
• Why do critical actors succeed in changing the political agenda in some countries and fail in others?
• What is the effect of having critical actors in parliament on the inclusion of group-specific demands, net of the effect of a critical mass?
• What are the differences and similarities in the subjective experiences of substantive representation by citizens of marginalised groups?

Questions such as those formulated earlier – which aim to explore, explain, understand and theorise differences and similarities in the occurrence and quality of SRSG across groups and contexts – are not easily answered by single-country or single-group research. To give an example: existing single-case studies can offer detailed insights into the activities and motivations of critical actors, or the workings of parties, in one particular country but experience more difficulties in answering questions that aim to understand whether these findings are specific to the respective country or group, to what extent they are part of wider trends occurring across contexts, and whether such macro-political factors as voting systems, types of democracy and political cultures impact the activities of critical actors and parties. The reason is that the level and type of diversity and variation needed to answer these questions can only be provided by adding more countries or groups to the research design. We therefore believe that cross-country and cross-group comparisons help to fill three concrete and current gaps in research on SRSG, as they allow us to: explore diversity in how SRSG takes place; identify broader patterns across different contexts, settings and groups; and formulate new explanations for the occurrence and quality of SRSG (on this more broadly, see Ragin and Amoroso, 2011: 54).

First, cross-country and cross-group research allows us to explore diversity (Ragin and Amoroso, 2011: 54) and map variation in SRSG better. Given that many existing studies of SRSG focus on established democracies, in particular, the US and UK, adding more diverse countries to the mix within the same research design would allow scholars to gain a deeper knowledge and better understanding of SRSG in a variety of systems, including in majoritarian versus consensus democracies, in ‘old’ versus ‘new’ democracies, and in democracies, partial democracies and non-democracies. Furthermore, studying SRSG in different countries might be needed to study how SRSG is shaped by a variety of international and transnational processes that are not confined to the borders of one country, such as de-democratisation, transnational advocacy and changes in societal norms (see Chiva, 2021).

Second, cross-country and cross-group comparisons allow us to identify broad patterns (Ragin and Amoroso, 2011: 54) in when, how, why, by whom and for whom SRSG takes place (Childs and Lovenduski, 2013). Based on single cases, it is difficult to generalise, but adding more cases helps scholars to detect wider patterns and trends, and to see more clearly whether the relationship between two phenomena or variables is robust. A related benefit is that cross-country knowledge on the level and quality of SRSG might also help policymakers to identify points of reference and define clearer goals and benchmarks for SRSG in their respective countries.

A final advantage is that cross-country and cross-group research helps to formulate additional explanations of SRSG. Previous studies have emphasised the causal
The substantive representation of social groups: both the occurrence and the quality of SRSG are shaped by many different conditions, and no single condition leads to a single outcome (Waylen, 2008; Childs and Krook, 2009). Furthermore, many of the factors that presumably influence SRSG are of a macropolitical or macro-social nature, among others: the level of descriptive representation; the level of gender/sexual/ethnic equality in a country; the electoral and party system; the presence of left-wing parties in power; the political culture and mass beliefs; systems of interest groups; and welfare state regimes. Understanding the single and combined effects of these macro-level variables is not an easy feat in single-country studies. Some studies succeed in studying macro-level effects in the context of one single country, for instance, in multi-level countries where different government levels or different regions offer sufficient macro-level variation (see, for example, Mackay, 2010), but in many single-country cases, this is not possible. By carefully selecting cases in cross-country research, following a logic of difference and similarity, scholars can tease out which different macro-social conditions lead to SRSG, or which combination of conditions improves the quality thereof. Similarly, comparative research has merits for studying the impact of ‘rare events’ on SRSG, such as whether the election of a female head of government fosters the substantive representation of women. The number of relevant cases in one country is limited, which makes it difficult to draw broader conclusions; adding additional cases through cross-country comparison allows for (more) empirical generalisation.

Although we believe that cross-country and cross-group comparisons can push scholarship on SRSG forward, we also acknowledge that this comparative approach might pose its own challenges. One immediate challenge is that current scholarship has no uniform understanding of exactly what SRSG constitutes and how to measure it (see also Harder, 2021; Siow, 2021). Indeed, studies use various conceptualisations of SRSG and different behavioural indicators, and rely on non-uniform conceptions and measurements of group interests. This is fully acceptable in single-group or single-case analyses. Yet, the lack of a more integrated understanding complicates, rather than streamlines, attempts to move towards a comparative study of SRSG. Another challenge is that, inevitably, cross-country and cross-group comparisons risk being reductionist. Comparisons always imply a process of making abstractions of the complex social phenomenon under study. Comparing across countries means that the full complexity of SRSG cannot be studied, but rather one aspect or one dimension of it (Kroeber, 2018). Comparing across groups involves making categorisations that might obscure some of the drivers and heterogeneous experiences of social groups (McCall, 2005: 1783; Smooth, 2011; Murray, 2016). A final challenge relates to data availability or dealing with skewed data. In cross-national research, some countries will present a wealth of comparative data that are systematically stored and available online; in other countries, scholars will be hard-pressed to find any comparative data at all. We come back to some of these considerations in the final section, where we reflect on comparative research strategies to study SRSG.

Moving forward: what and how to compare in SRSG?

In line with comparativist thinking in political science more broadly, we contend that a comparative perspective shapes both what is studied in relation to SRSG (that is, the research subject) and how it is studied (that is, the method of analysis) (Caramani,
Regarding the 'what' of SRSG, Pitkin’s definition still offers a good starting point. In her words, substantive representation requires that the representative ‘acts in the interest of the represented, in a manner responsive to them’ (Pitkin, 1967: 209). Related to SRSG, substantive representation requires some sort of action by the representative that is enacted on behalf of specific social groups in connection with the wishes of that group. From a comparative perspective, a crucial question is what ‘acting on behalf of social groups’ means for different groups and across contexts.

In previous research, this ‘acting for’ takes many forms. Studies on the substantive representation of women and minority racial/ethnic groups – which together make up more than 80 per cent of our data set – have linked it to activities in the legislative process broadly defined, including the (co-)sponsorship of bills, voting for legislation, participation in parliamentary debates, raising parliamentary questions and motions, and offering constituency service. Other studies have studied party pledges or have alternatively focused on the development of public policy in the governmental sphere or on policy congruence. In cross-country research on SRSG, the validity and comparability of the behavioural indicator is crucial. Here, we can think of the use of single indicators, which might lose in complexity but gain in comparability and uniformity. Various studies in our data set consider parliamentary questions to be valid measures for studying MPs’ concerns for the policy problems and interests of social groups across systems and groups (for Black, Asian and minority-ethnic citizens, see Saalfeld and Bischof, 2013; for emigrants in four countries, see Ostergaard-Nielsen and Ciornei, 2019; for different minority groups in Singapore, see Tam, 2020; for lesbians, gays and bisexuals in the UK and Ireland, see Bönisch, 2021). Single-indicator comparisons are conceivable when offering a good contextualisation of what each indicator means in each country or for each group, but different indicators can also be combined in one study. A case in point is Kroeber’s (2018) study, in which she introduces three distinct measures for the representation of minority ethnic groups, namely, the introduction of new minority rights, policy congruence and membership in minority committees. We can also think of a composite index that brings together different behavioural or policy indicators in a systematic and consistent way, for instance, the Intergenerational Justice Index, which combines policies promoting intergenerational justice across welfare states (Vanhuysse, 2013; Caluwaerts and Vermassen, forthcoming). In a similar vein, and building on the extant studies of SRSG, Rashkova and Erzeel (2022) build a composite quantitative index for women’s substantive representation based on two dimensions and eight behavioural indicators, collected mostly from existing comparative data sets. Such a comparative measure also offers opportunities for benchmarking across countries, provided that it corrects for the relevance and importance of each activity, as well as the levels of support and commitment (Childs and Krook, 2009) that activities require in different contexts.

From a cross-group perspective, a question is whether existing indicators capture the substantive representation of different social groups equally well, or whether there are other acts that deserve more attention, such as acting in the non-governmental sphere or ‘acting with’ a certain group by participating in protest activities or online activism. The latter seem particularly relevant for groups whose interests are more likely to be advocated through non-institutionalised forms of political action or whose descriptive representation in parliament is very low, such as those of young people and lower-educated groups. Our data set features several interesting examples of acting in the non-governmental sphere that can serve as inspiration for future
research: Gwiazda (2019) studies protest activities as venues for feminist substantive representation in Central and Eastern Europe; Gervais and Wilson (2019) analyse substantive representation as expressed in the use of Twitter for Latino constituency outreach; Mendelberg, Karpowitz and Goedert (2014) examine the substantive representation of women in citizen deliberation; and Rocha and Wrinkle (2011) analyse SRSG on education policies across school boards.

If we turn to the question of ‘how’ to study SRSG, our call for more comparative work should be read as a call for methodological pluralism (Beckwith, 2010). We do not advise against the use of either deductive or inductive approaches, or against the use of either quantitative or qualitative research. On the contrary, different approaches and methods can be used to solve different parts of a research puzzle and to pursue the different research goals that we identified in the previous section, that is, exploring diversity, identifying broader patterns and formulating new explanations for SRSG.

Inductive approaches and small-N comparisons are arguably best suited for ‘exploring diversity’ in SRSG. If the goal is to add new country cases and to give priority to countries or regions that have received less attention so far, including new and transitioning democracies or smaller countries, the problem of large-N data (un)availability will be most acute. This is even more the case if we assume that SRSG will occur disproportionately more in extra-parliamentary and non-governmental settings when compared with older, established democracies (see, for example, Gwiazda, 2019). Small-N studies are probably more feasible in realising this ambition, though large-N studies remain an option (for example, Forman-Rabinovici and Sommer’s [2019] study on female representatives’ policy influence in partial democracies and non-democracies illustrates this clearly).

Studies aiming to ‘identify broader patterns’ in SRSG might also start from case studies, but to the extent that they aim for empirical generalisations, intermediate- or large-N research might offer a better option because of the need for variation (see earlier). Studies in our data set achieve this through cross-sectional analysis or hierarchical analysis in cross-country research (for example, on economic inequality and the representation of poor citizens in 24 democracies, see Rosset et al, 2013; on gendered mass–elite priority congruence in Sub-Saharan Africa, see Clayton et al, 2019).

Finally, in order to formulate new explanations, both deductive/large-N and inductive/small-N approaches are possible, each bringing distinct advantages. Deductive/large-N approaches may be used to arbitrate between competing theories and conduct additional hypothesis testing. A meta-analysis of the results of existing studies in different countries could, in a first stage, offer opportunities for studying the factors that are consistently linked to higher or lower levels of SRSG. Inductive/small-N approaches, on the other hand, are better able to advance new theories and hypotheses for SRSG. Although none of the studies in our data set uses this approach, qualitative comparative analysis (QCA) has the additional advantage that it sheds light on how combinations of conditions affect the outcome (Ragin and Amoroso, 2011), thereby acknowledging the causal complexity in SRSG (Waylen, 2008; Mackay, 2010). Moreover, the use of mixed-methods research, perhaps jointly conducted by quantitative and qualitative scholars, offers fruitful avenues for making causal inferences in cross-country and cross-group research. Experimental methods can also be seen as a complementary manner to present additional, but differently derived, evidence about causal validity.² Schwarz and Coppock (2022),
for example, analyse data gathered from candidate-choice experiments to find a generalised conclusion on the effect of gender on being chosen as a candidate. Similar research designs can also be applied to the study of SRSG. We could see value in understanding to what extent a particular policy shift is successfully accepted by citizens of marginalised groups based on who it is raised by (a single MP, member of the same marginalised group, a particular type of party or other). Such experiments are often less expensive than large-N surveys and can thus help transcend the ‘data-paucity barrier’ in some settings.

The previous offer several roads for further exploration, and many more arguably exist. Nevertheless, given the enormous effort that it costs to every single one of us as researchers, it should be clear that the comparative study of SRSG can only be achieved as a group effort. It is this effort that we plead towards and that we hope to inspire and achieve.

Notes
1 We thank one of the reviewers for this argument.
2 We thank one of the reviewers for the suggestion to consider the potential of this newly developing trend of studies for our subdiscipline and its questions.

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Conflict of interest
The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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