

# How women, migrants and workers are represented in the German Bundestag

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Members of the German Bundestag who belong to underrepresented groups are more active in the legislative process and, early on, typically tend to advocate more for the interests of their groups. However, a current study by the universities in Konstanz, Basel, Geneva and Stuttgart indicates that, after a few years, most of them do move on to other political fields. This is tied to the career-related incentives these

elected representatives face: At first, their careers in parliament benefit from their ability to speak for underrepresented groups. As their careers progress, however, they are required to demonstrate expertise in areas beyond the interests of these groups, the researchers conclude.

The study was led by Professor Christian Breunig, professor of comparative politics at the University of Konstanz and principal investigator in the Cluster of Excellence "The Politics of Inequality." It was completed in collaboration with three colleagues from the universities of Basel, Geneva and Stuttgart, and the results were published yesterday in the *British Journal of Political Science*.

"The German Bundestag embodies both democracy and politics in Germany like few other institutions," Christian Breunig finds.

"Nonetheless, the discussion of its composition arises time and again: Critics often cite its lack of certain groups who are disadvantaged in society: [young people](#), women, migrants and members with blue-collar backgrounds. At the same time, there is an overabundance of 'old white men,' lawyers and teachers. We wanted to know: to what extent do these approximately 700 people really represent the country's diverse society?" For a representative democracy like the Federal Republic of Germany, this issue cuts to the core of its identity. Breunig and his colleagues have now examined how exactly the representation of underrepresented groups works in the Bundestag.

How members of the Bundestag represent groups Even the concept of 'representation' itself is complicated: "A group can be represented in two different ways. When members who are from a specific group are elected to the Bundestag, we call that 'descriptive representation' of that group. "Substantive representation," on the other hand, is when members of the Bundestag actively represent the interests of a given group in the parliamentary process," Breunig explains.

Descriptively, the Bundestag only represents society to a certain degree, as evidenced by only about a third of its members being women. The same is true to a greater extent for other criteria like social class, age groups or migrant background. The researchers wanted to find out: Do members of the Bundestag who are from underrepresented groups also advocate for the interests of these groups? And how does their role in representing these interests change over time?

To answer these questions, the researchers analyzed the written questions (large and small inquiries) submitted in the Bundestag that were signed personally by the members. In contrast to voting behavior, the submission of written questions is less tied to a representative's party membership. At the same time, submitting written questions allows members of the Bundestag to bring content to the political agenda and to formally force the recipients to give an official answer. The researchers used this information to investigate which issues individual members are involved with. They analyzed a total of 40,000 personally signed written parliamentary questions (so-called "Große" and "Kleine Anfragen") submitted during a period of 15 years by a total of 1,277 members of the Bundestag in underrepresented groups.

## **Advantages and drawbacks of representing a group**

In their research, Breunig and his colleagues determined that the behavior of individual members changed substantially over time. "The typical development of political careers means that, early on, individual members can profit greatly from being seen as a representative of an underrepresented group," Breunig explains. It is difficult for such members not to be perceived in this way, anyway. The descriptive representation of underrepresented groups is also often the reason why an up-and-coming politician is able to play a role on the large political stage in the first place. Such members then have the opportunity to substantively represent their group and thereby establish their own

political profile.

On the whole, the study finds, members of underrepresented groups—e.g. who are young or female or have a migrant background—are often more actively involved in the parliamentary process. Over time, however, the strategy of simply representing the interests of a group is less advantageous for individual members.

"Reducing your work to simply representing the interests of women, migrants or young people will get you politically sidelined after a few years," says co-author Stefanie Bailer. "The interesting question is: who will continue to represent the issues important to underrepresented groups, and who will focus instead on topics offering greater power and broader political appeal—such as finance or international politics?"

The study shows that, on average, after one to two legislative periods (4-8 years), members' substantive representation of their respective groups wanes significantly. This is especially true for members with a migrant or blue-collar background and for young members (who grow older with time). However, female members often remain very active on equal opportunity issues even in later career stages.

The research of Breunig and his colleagues shows that a more diverse parliament leads to better representation of voter interests. At the same time, representation is a dynamic concept that is also influenced by individual career considerations and political strategies.

**More information:** Stefanie Bailer et al, The Diminishing Value of Representing the Disadvantaged: Between Group Representation and Individual Career Paths, *British Journal of Political Science* (2021). [DOI: 10.1017/S0007123420000642](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123420000642)

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