**Call for Papers: Special Issue of the Journal of Political Sociology** https://journalofpoliticalsociology.org/

# What is democratic about participation? Representing society in opened-up knowledge production

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There are politics involved in doing knowledge production in one way or another. Knowledge production involves experimentation – be it in thought and text, in laboratories, in silico or in vivo. And experimentation transforms and shapes collective realities, it does not only mirror them (Hacking, 1983; Latour, 1983; Seguin & Lord, 2023). For to not leave such *political* decisions about collective ordering to scientific experts alone, but instead involve society or the people being affected, the participatory opening-up of academic-disciplinary knowledge production has actively been pursued since about the 1970s. This opening-up by means of public participation is often associated with the democratization of knowledge production. In that sense the governance of science is a matter of political sociology. It opens a new field for studying the problematization and shaping of collective orders beyond the institutions of state and the medium of law-making.

This special issue raises the question, *in what way the opening-up of science, technology and innovation for societal participation can actually bring about a democratization of knowledge production.* What *kinds of democracy* are relevant here, can they be captured partly or fully by ready-made models of liberal-representative, deliberative, direct, participatory, or radical democracy? Or are there new forms of democratic practices emerging beyond what can be captured by existing theories of democracy? Or does opening-up indeed come along with forms of governance that cannot easily be called democratic, such as corporatism or feudalism, or consumerism or public relations based mediocracy or even expertocracy in a new guise (Voß, 2019)?

A key to answering such questions is a closer look at the practices by which “society” (or the public, or the citizens, or the people, or any specific social group) is being represented in opened-up knowledge production processes. For concrete cases, we may attend to participatory, transdisciplinary and transformative research, to innovation platforms and clusters, to user-oriented design and citizen science, to living labs and real-world experiments, to university councils and extended review boards, or to priority-setting and programming in research funding.

By doing so, questions such as the following arise: Who speaks and acts on behalf of society or some particular social group? How are representative claims co-produced or at least tested with those whom they comprise? How are conflicting perspectives of different social groups related with each other? How are political representations of social groups related with the epistemic representational work of research and knowledge production on objective realities?

A particular challenge for studying emerging forms of political representation and democracy in participatory forms of knowledge production is given by acknowledging that representation is always *performative*: never just mirroring what is already there, but always contributing to constitute and bring the represented into existence (du Gay, 2010; Voß, 2016). What then is the quality of representation?

An understanding of performative representation is, for example, a key insight of Science and Technology Studies (STS) from reconstructing practices of epistemic representation and

showing that they do not mirror but create the theoretically ordered objective realities they describe (through methodized observation, laboratory set-ups, decontextualized reporting, technological control) (Knorr Cetina, 1981; Latour, 1987; Pickering, 1992, 1994; Callon, 2007).

A similar understanding has been articulated in Political Science with the so called "constructivist turn" in studies of political representation. Here it is collective subjectivities that are represented: social groups with shared identities, wills, values, concerns, interests, agency (Bourdieu, 1985; Saward, 2006; Butler, 2015; Disch et al., 2019; Voß & Schölzel, 2024).

Acknowledging performativity means that practices of political representation cannot be evaluated for how neutrally and accurately they mirror the will of the people, but instead have to be evaluated for how well they construct a will of the people (Latour, 2003; Laurent, 2011; Disch, 2015). Also here, democracy means self-governance. The question thus is: Do those represented have agency in articulating their own representations? And furthermore: Are they involved in constructing, or at least affirming or rejecting "representative claims" that are made on behalf of their collective will (Hayat, 2019)? But this is not enough. Since any specific mode of representing the people entails a partial and selective reduction of the complex actuality of social willing, performatively representing the people only through one single mode will inevitably be "biased" (Gomart & Hajer, 2003). Evaluation therefore has to include wider "ecologies of participation" and assess them with regard to the diversity and complementarity of different modes of representation (Chilvers et al., 2018; Chilvers & Kearnes, 2020).

With regard to our topic of democracy in participatory knowledge production, this comes down to the question, how claims about the views of "society" (or any particular social group) with regard to the orientation of research and experimentation are *articulated in interaction* with those who constitute that society. Are the people granted agency in articulating their own collective subjectivity in relation with potential lines of technoscientific world-making – or does somebody else define it for them, mobilizing legitimacy and authority by referring to it, but not providing for self-governance by any kind of procedure involving the people themselves in articulating representative claims on their own behalf?

**We invite proposal for papers that address the participation of society in opened-up knowledge production with regard to the question of how democratic actual practices of political representation are, and in which specific way.**

Papers can contain conceptual and methodological discussions with regard to the issues outlined and/or empirical accounts of such practices in concrete cases. All papers should address the dimensions of *participation, knowledge production, representation, performativity*, as well as an interpretations of the resulting *democratic quality*.

Timeline and procedure:

- Please submit abstracts of about one page to all editors by 28 February 2026.
- We notify about acceptance of proposals by 31 March 2026.
- Full papers of max. 40,000 characters (including references and blanks) are due until 31 August 2026.
- All participants agree to double-blind cross-reviewing of up to two other manuscripts assigned to them by the editors

- Short review reports are due by 30 November 2026.
- Review results are communicated by 31 December 2026.
- Revisions are due until 28 February 2027.
- The special issue is planned to be published within the first half of 2027.

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