INCLUSIVE DEMOCRACIES?

CONCEPTUALISING AND MEASURING THE DESCRIPTIVE AND SUBSTANTIVE POLITICAL REPRESENTATION OF UNDER-REPRESENTED GROUPS IN DEMOCRATIC PARLIAMENTS (INCLUSIVEPARL)

To what extent is democratic representation biased? Is there a link between the "visible" presence of elected representatives from marginalised and minority groups and the way and extent to which the interests and issues that these groups care about are included in the political and policy agenda? Does this link vary across European countries and over time? The project InclusiveParl addresses these questions through an examination of the link between the visible descriptive political representation of sevel under-represented groups (women, youth, working classes, ethnic and migrant minorities, religious minorities, people with disabilities and LGBTI+) and their substantive political representation in four national parliaments (France, Italy, Spain and the United Kingdom). The project articulates the study of political representation around the visibility of self-designation statements or of their social characteristics as the basis of any legitimate claim to descriptively represent any social category or group. Substantive representation is studied through the analysis of the written questions submitted by legislators to the Executive, as well as through the selection of a number of law projects that particularly affect the interests of the studied under-represented groups.

Evaluation of democracy & discriminations research groups

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Objectives

The quality of democratic representation partly relies on the opportunity to elect and be elected also of a wide range of minority and marginalised groups. Amidst a crisis of representative institutions, this project proposes a comprehensive theoretical and empirical approach to the phenomenon of political under-representation in order to properly understand the dynamics that lead to representation gaps that affect multiple and diverse social groups, as well as their intersections.

Research approach

Although most of the scholarship on descriptive political representation revolves around the notion of "presence", we propose that the "visibility" of group identity and belonging is a necessary (but insufficient) condition to legitimately claim to descriptively represent a social group or category. For example, an elected representative may belong to a religious denomination, or have a minority gender identity or sexual orientation without these being visible in the public arena. In such cases, the invisibility of their identities and belongings prevents them from descriptively representing such groups, despite their presence. We consider "visibility" as the result of various intersecting mechanisms: the material characteristics of the elected official (what is *present*), the agency of the official (what is *presented*), and voter perceptions (what is *perceived*).

Methodology

We measure descriptive political representation gaps of marginalised groups through the creation of large databases using detailed and comprehensive coding protocols that operationalise our approach to visibility. The various complexities in apprehending visible descriptive representation require a balanced approach: self-designation does not always match what is materially visible or voters perceptions.

Regarding substantive representation, we collect the written questions submitted by legislators to the Executive, which are dozens of thousands in each country and legislature, as well as key legislative projects. Aided by the production of topic dictionaries that the research team create, we examine the extent to which the issues and interests of marginalised groups are represented in the legislative process.
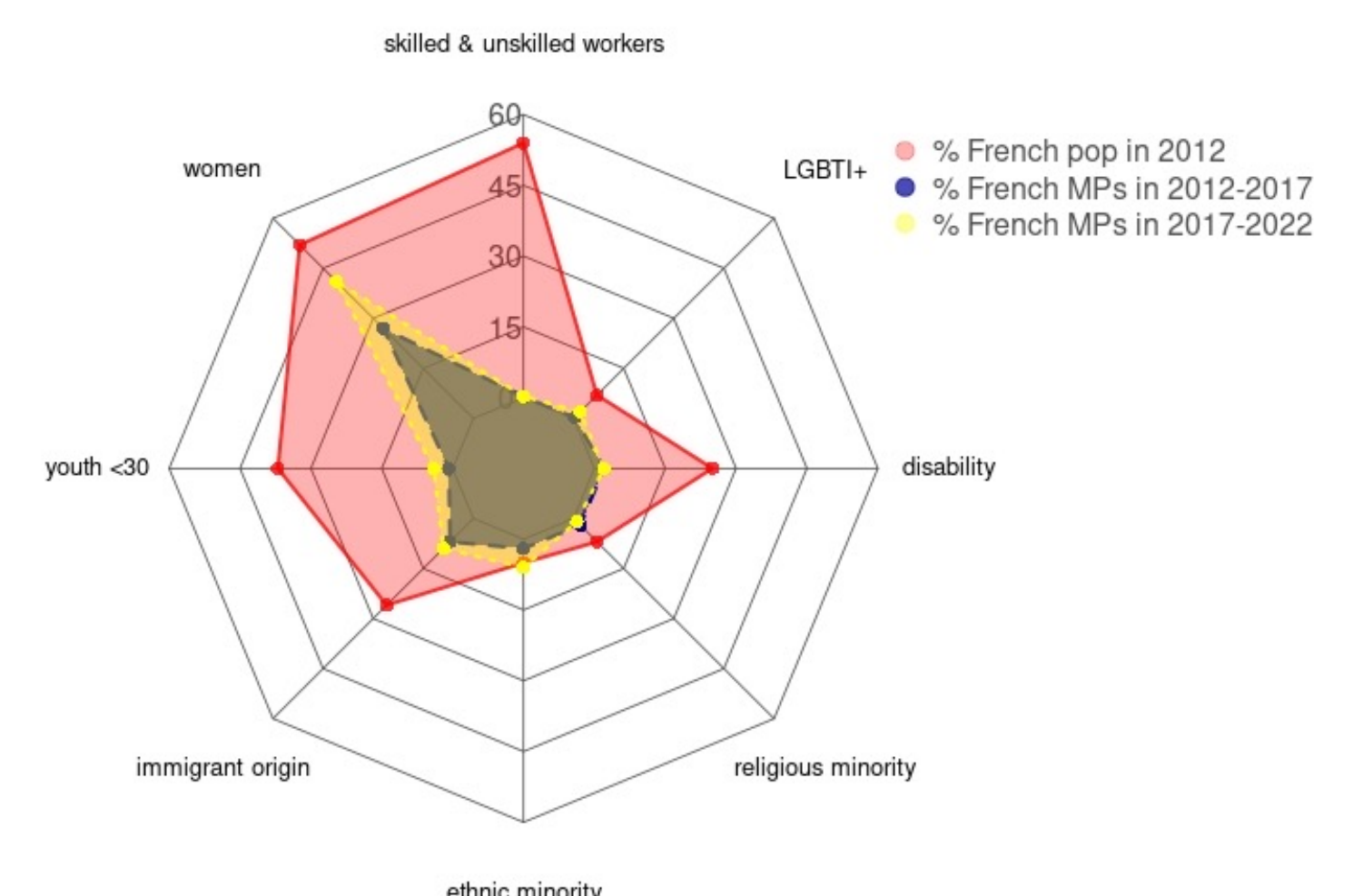
Finally, linking the biographical database and the legislative activities of individual legislators allows us to examine the complex relation between descriptive and substantive political representation.

The seven groups studied share a path of claims-making around better political representation but are, nevertheless, diverse in terms of their status, size and historical trajectory. Importantly, their visible characteristics are of very different natures: some are relatively easy to perceive (e.g. age), others are less so (e.g. LGBTI+). Several are legally protected against discrimination (e.g. ethnicity, disability, etc.). The comparative study spans a period of 15 years, and the selection of the four countries (France, Italy, Spain and the United Kingdom) took into account their migration histories, electoral systems and gender quotas.
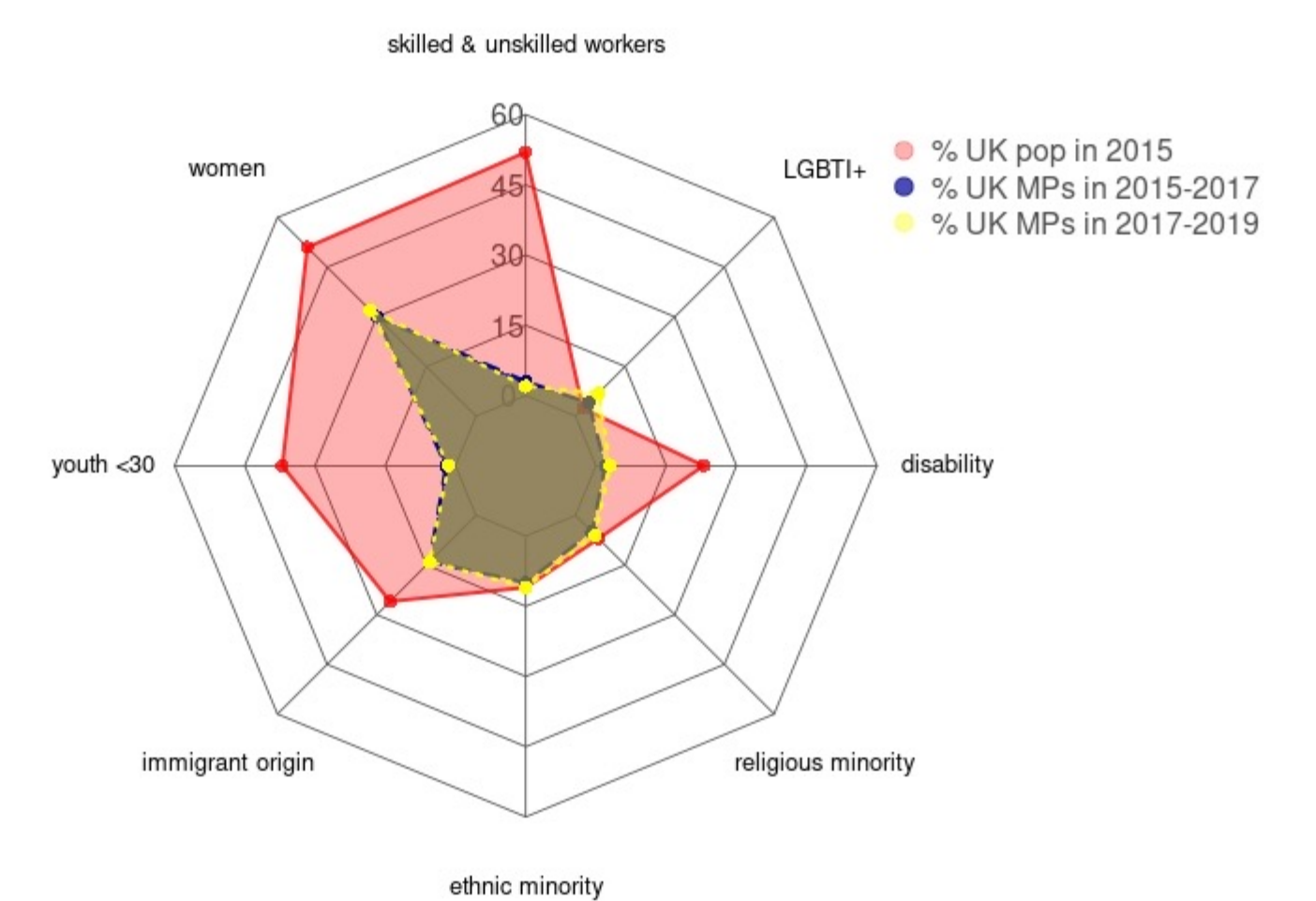
Initial findings

In this poster we restrict our presentation to the results of the analysis of the visible descriptive representation gap for the four countries and a selection of most recent legislative terms. As the first figure demonstrates, showing the gap in the visible presence of the various social categories studied in the French population and among the legislators of the French National Assembly (AN) of the latest two legislatures, the majority of the groups are under-represented in the AN when compared to their population weight. Nevertheless, the gap is particularly larger for the working classes, the youth and people with disabilities. Although we find an improvement in the visible representation of women and ethnic and migrant minorities, there is very little progress for the other social categories.

The visible presence of French MPs compared to population by social categories
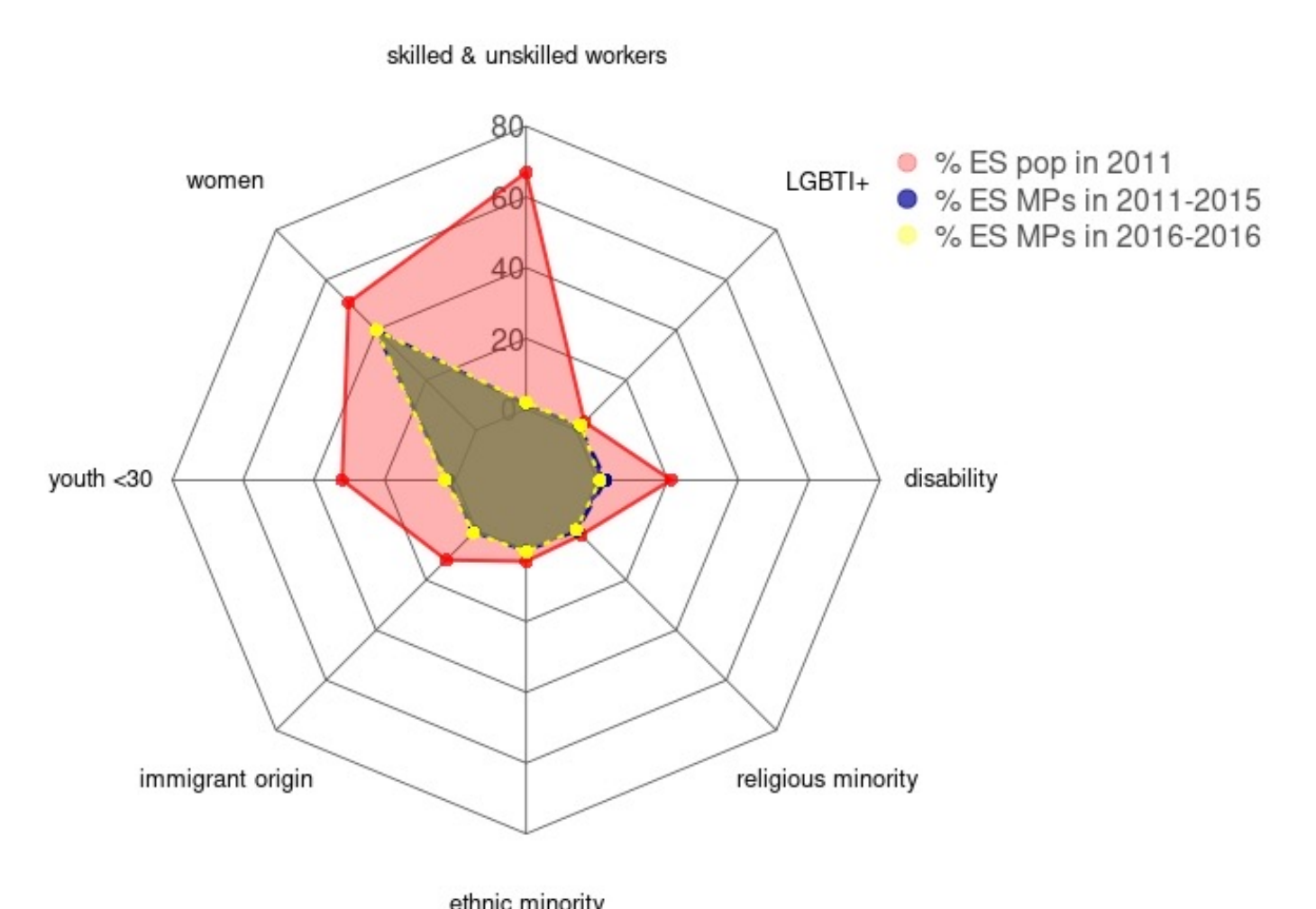
The results for the United Kingdom show a similar situation but with a smaller progression in women's representation and a better overall representation of migrant, ethnic and religious minorities, as well as LGBTI+ people.

The visible presence of British MPs compared to population by social categories

The Spanish and Italian cases, by contrast, have proportional electoral systems and their migration flows are more recent (especially, since the 1990s). In Spain, the visible descriptive representation of women and LGBTI+ people is more balanced than in France but the gap in the representation of migrant minorities, youth, disabled people and, especially, workers is larger and shows no to little progression. Instead, in Italy, the representation of migrant, ethnic and religious minorities is closer to their population share and improves over time, as does the presence of youth, women and workers, even if the gaps with their population share remain quite substantial.

The visible presence of Spanish MPs compared to population by social categories

The visible presence of Italian MPs compared to population by social categories