

Self-Appointed Representatives on Facebook: The Case of the Belgian Citizen’s Platform for Refugee Support

LOUISE KNOPS¹

ELINE SEVERS

Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB), Belgium

Increasingly, representation is seen as an interplay of representative claims. In this article, we study the representative claims formulated by Belgium’s Citizen’s Platform for Refugee Support (CPRS) and examine how the CPRS justifies its right to speak on behalf of others. Our qualitative analysis centers on the content of the CPRS Facebook page and how its features and affordances shape the CPRS’s representative strategies. Our findings reveal that the CPRS’s claims produce an alternative conception of “we, the people.” To create this other generality, the CPRS taps into the registers of proximity, impartiality, and reflexivity proposed by Rosanvallon as alternative legitimization mechanisms. We find that the CPRS predominantly draws on its proximity to the people it represents to legitimize its authority and that this, in turn, lays the foundation for its claims of impartiality. Facebook here plays an ambivalent role as both facilitator and detractor.

Keywords: political representation, representative claims, self-appointed representatives, legitimization, Facebook, digital democracy, refugees

In 2014 and 2015, the refugee crisis was in full swing all over Europe, including in Belgium. By the end of summer 2015, hundreds of refugees were gathered in parks in Brussels, most notably in the Parc Maximilien, due to structural undercapacity in reception centers and asylum procedures.² Citizens improvised a camp in the Parc Maximilien to provide firsthand assistance and coordinate basic logistics for homeless refugees (including shelter, food, medical assistance, and leisure). To supervise these activities,

Louise Knops: louise.knops@vub.be

Eline Severs: eline.severs@vub.ac.be

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² In this article, we use the term *refugees* to refer to nonnationals who reside on Belgian territory and live in precarious conditions, irrespective of their legal status (e.g., asylum seeker or not) or reasons (political, economic, or other) for fleeing their home country.

the Citizen's Platform for Refugee Support (CPRS) was created. The CPRS gained notoriety for organizing, through social media, the private hosting of refugees by Belgian families. This hosting activity became central to the organization's identity as a humanitarian and, later, political actor. On July 21, 2018, the independent organization Democracy 2000 awarded the CPRS the Belgian Prize for Democracy for its commitment to solidarity.³

The CPRS is not only interesting from a perspective of citizen mobilization and civic engagement; it also provides relevant insights from a representation point of view. Over the years, the CPRS has increasingly taken up the role of spokesperson and has scrutinized the policies of Theo Francken, the Belgian state secretary for asylum policy and migration. In 2014, the Flemish nationalist party N-VA, of which Francken is a leading figure, overwhelmingly won the regional and federal elections. After giving a central place to the topics of Flemish identity and migration in his campaign, Francken announced tougher rules on immigration when he took office in 2015. Since then, his popularity has increased alongside mounting contestation for his adoption of controversial measures (e.g., the reopening of closed detention centers for refugee families) and his use of antagonizing language (e.g., the need to "clean" the Parc Maximilien of all its temporary inhabitants).

In many regards, Francken's popularity can be seen as evidence of growing popular support for harsher stances on immigration. The CPRS seeks to channel the voices of citizens who do not identify with this trend and who prefer a more humane approach to asylum and migration. It reclaims citizens' right to speak for themselves and, through contestation, prevents office holders from claiming to speak on behalf of the Belgian population in a definitive way.

This article examines the representative claims formulated by the CPRS. We analyze the people whom CPRS claims to represent and how the organization presents itself as a critical countervoice in the Belgian political landscape. We show how these counterclaims produce an alternative "we, the people" that challenges the legitimacy of elected officials. To be successful and insert reflexivity into public debates, the CPRS needs to demonstrate its own legitimacy as representative. Thus, it is important to understand how the CPRS defends its right to speak on behalf of others. Our qualitative analysis centers on the CPRS's Facebook page and draws on two theoretical models: (1) the representative claim (Saward, 2010; Severs, 2012) and (2) the legitimation mechanisms available to representatives who operate outside electoral institutions (Rosanvallon, 2011).

Our study contributes to two distinct, yet complementary, strands of literature. First, it speaks to the contemporary literature on political representation. Characterized by a so-called constructivist turn (Disch, 2011; Saward, 2010), this literature increasingly understands representation as a communicative current consisting of the formulation of claims to represent others and the reception of such claims by relevant audiences. This conception has extended scholarly attention beyond forms of representation structured by elections, generating questions about the legitimacy of self-appointed representative actors. Given our focus on the CPRS Facebook page (the group's main communication tool), our study also

³ The prize was originally launched in 1991 out of concerns for democracy following the rise of the extreme-right party Vlaams Belang (then, Vlaams Blok) in Belgium.

complements research on the use of social media by political representatives. Most research to date has focused on Facebook's potential to foster forms of participatory, deliberative, and "networking" democracy (Loader & Mercea, 2011; Zhang, Johnson, Seltzer, & Bichard, 2009), emphasizing low participation costs in the digital age (Benkler, 2006). Little attention has been given to the role of social media in enabling new kinds of political representation (Coleman, 2005).

The next section develops our theoretical framework and elaborates on both the claim-making model of political representation and the legitimation mechanisms available to nonelected representatives. After that, we detail our process for collecting and analyzing the data. We then present our main findings: an analysis of whom the CPRS claims to represent and how the organization justifies its right to do so, documenting how the group taps into registers of proximity, impartiality, and reflexivity. We conclude by specifying takeaway points and signaling areas for future research.

Beyond Elections: Self-Appointed Representatives

Over the last decade, the literature on political representation has expanded its focus on electoral democracy to also consider forms of "self-appointed representation"—that is, where citizens act as representatives themselves. Primarily located in civil society, self-appointed representation gives expression to citizens' dissatisfaction with their elected representatives (Montanaro 2012, p. 1096). Scholars generally view this kind of representation as citizens' attempt to overcome the limitations of electoral representation—for example, the fact that citizens' interests are represented only when they coincide with those of electoral constituents.

This trend is part of a broader paradigmatic shift in the literature. Whereas traditionally, political representation was conceived as the result of elections and measured by normative criteria (such as responsiveness), scholars increasingly understand representation as originating in a representative claim—that is, a claim "to represent or to know what represents the interests of something or somebody, or to embody the needs of a group of people" (Saward 2010, p. 38).⁴ This conception highlights both the relational character of representation and the contestable character of representative claims. As Saward (2006) remarks, "The representative claim can never be fully redeemed, always contains ambiguities and instabilities. As such, 'representation' can be said from this perspective not to exist; what exists are claims and their receptions" (p. 306).

The contestable character of representative claims means that citizens may dispute electoral claims by taking up the role of representatives themselves and acting as a countervoice. Self-appointed representatives may challenge the needs and interests claimed on behalf of "the people" and advance an alternative conception by representing the needs and interests of others. They aim to uncover the false homogeneity (of the people) assumed by electoral representation, which primarily seeks to aggregate citizens' preferences (expressed as votes) into a general will. Self-appointed representation highlights the

⁴ The decoupling of normative expectations from descriptive understandings of representation coincided with a shift from dyadic to systemic accounts of representation; from the principal-agent relationship inherited from Hanna Pitkin (1967) to a circular, dialogical conception.

multiplicity of judgments among the citizenry and, by doing so, prevents any single actor from claiming full authority to speak on behalf of the people (Disch, 2011; Rosanvallon, 2008). For these reasons, the presence of self-appointed representatives is often treated as evidence of democratic vitality (Urbinati, 2006) and is believed to help keep electoral democracy in check.

However, to act as a legitimate challenger (one perceived as formulating relevant or credible counterclaims), self-appointed representatives need to justify their right to speak on behalf of others (Severs, 2012, p. 171). Scholars have identified alternative means one can invoke to solicit recognition and approval from relevant audiences (whether audiences spoken for or audiences one seeks to influence). Saward (2010, p. 104), for instance, posits the "authorization-based" claims of elected representatives against the "authenticity-based" claims of self-appointed representatives, emphasizing the adoption of a stylistic register that is closer to citizens' own ways of debating politics. While authenticity may help correct existing flaws of representative politics (e.g., its remoteness from citizens' realities), it is not exclusive to self-appointed representation (consider "populist" politicians). Similarly, electoral authorization does not prevent citizens from requesting justification for the claims advanced by their representatives in between electoral moments. Stated differently, the relevance of using authorization versus authenticity to characterize the differences between electoral and self-appointed representation should not be exaggerated.

What sets electoral representatives apart from other representatives is not authorization per se but rather their ability to rely on elections as a democratic mechanism for constituting "the people." Underpinned by the principle of universal suffrage, elections allow citizens to cast their preferences and manifest themselves, through majority rule, as a cohesive and clearly delineated "we." The claims of elected representatives benefit from this clarity. According to Rosanvallon (2011), elected representatives' right to speak on behalf of the people has "always implicitly been founded on the idea of the general will and thus of the people as an incarnation of society as a whole" (p. 114). The challenge for self-appointed representatives, then, consists not only in offering an alternative to the social generality produced by electoral representation but also in demonstrating their aptitude for correctly assembling or interpreting what "the people" is about (Severs, Celis, & Meier, 2015).

Rosanvallon (2011) identifies three sources of legitimacy that hold their ground against the electoral mechanism of creating generality. The first way of realizing an alternative generality consists in a detachment from particularities, invoking impartiality as one's source of legitimacy. Rosanvallon (2011, p. 117) argues that the credibility of such claims depends on two variables that imply a certain distance or personal detachment from the subject represented: the factual independence of the claim maker (i.e., being detached from the authorities of surveillance and regulation associated with the state) and the claim maker's behavior. Rosanvallon's interpretation of what it means to act impartially is, however, not without critique. Conceptualizations of impartiality as personal detachment have been found to reflect historical power struggles that typically undervalue the lived experiences and judgments of historically disadvantaged groups (e.g., Harding, 2008). Hence, the question of how representatives invoke and attribute meaning to impartiality should be the subject of empirical investigation.

The second way of generating an alternative "we" consists in multiplying the expressions of sovereignty, thus showcasing the "shortcomings of a system which assumes the electoral majority to be the

will of the whole social body" (Rosanvallon, 2011, p. 117). Invoking reflexivity as one's source of legitimacy therefore resonates with the description of self-appointed representatives as challengers and counterdemocratic voices within a representative system. A key empirical question here is whether reflexivity should also be applied to the claim maker—that is, whether the latter should remain critical about her or his own authority in a bid to be considered legitimate.

The third way of generating alternative generalities consists in a "descent in generality," attributing closer attention to the particularities of different lived experiences. Proximity, or one's knowledge of people's lived experiences, features as the source of legitimacy. The credibility of these claims depends, again, on showcasing the flaws of an electorally produced people, demonstrating that this conception is skewed toward particular groups in society while leaving others underrepresented.

Clearly, the extent to which self-appointed representatives can rely on these legitimation mechanisms also depends on the media channels they have at their disposal. To create an alternative "we," they need, first and foremost, means to reach out to relevant audiences and convey their claims. Here we turn to the literature on digital activism and its role in encouraging both political participation and new forms of representation. Research in this field has demonstrated that social networking sites hold a strong self-representative function by allowing citizens to organize around shared goals or grievances and develop "collective selves" (Bakardjieva, 2015; Gerbaudo, 2017; Gerbaudo & Treré, 2015). In this context, digital platforms have been described as "mediation opportunities for collective subjects" and "the tools through which a social movement becomes self-conscious" (Cammaerts, 2015, p. 98, in Bakardjieva, 2015, p. 984). Hence, social networking technology may be seen as facilitating the process through which self-appointed representatives stand for an alternative "we" and strike a compromise "between the logic of participation and the logic of representation which long appeared irreconcilable" (Gerbaudo, 2017, p. 27).

Scholars have also described social networking sites as "actors in their own right, who intervene in the meaning-making process of social actors" (Milan, 2015, p. 888). Accordingly, research has been directed to both the use of digital platforms and the role of these platforms in processes of identity building. The particular features of a given platform (e.g., the friends, follow, like, and share of Facebook) and the actions they enable (the affordances) not only facilitate collective and connective action (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012) but also shape the ways in which these actions take place (Ben-David & Metamoros-Fernández, 2016). The architecture of Facebook, for example, promotes a sense of connectivity that allows users to endorse a cause and identify with others (Lee, Hansen, & Lee, 2016). Close attention should therefore be paid to both the claims conveyed through digital platforms and the way a given platform shapes the content of these claims.

Data and Method

The CPRS relies heavily on a Facebook page for both its internal organization and its outward communication. The content of this public Facebook page has, therefore, been our primary source of data. In addition, we conducted an in-depth interview with a CPRS spokesperson (on May 25, 2018) and carried out online observations (from November 2017 to July 2018).

Data

Created on September 2, 2015, the CPRS Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/bxlrefugees>) counted 48,506 followers at the end of our analysis (September 20, 2018). The CPRS also set up Facebook groups to coordinate specific activities, such as the hosting of refugees by individual Belgian families (*plateforme hébergement*) and the organization of political advocacy (*plaidoyer*). For ethical and analytical reasons, we focused on the public page rather than the closed groups, which display a more private character and target a more restricted audience. This choice also enabled us to analyze the CPRS claims intended for a wider—and more public—audience.

For our data collection, we used the qualitative software package NVivo and its add-on functionality Ncapture to retrieve the Facebook content. The period covered by the data ranged from September 2, 2015, to February 6, 2018. Because the extraction of data took place before the change in Facebook's Application Programming Interface security parameters, our data set (12,358 text items) contained all the posts and comments and the commenters' user names. For reasons of confidentiality and data management, we discarded user names and comments and retained only the original posts in our data set (868 posts, date and time of publication, and number of likes). Published by the page administrator (who is also a CPRS spokesperson), these posts were predominantly written in French and Dutch, and on rarer occasions, in English. All posts quoted here have been translated into English for this analysis. At times, the posts displayed all three linguistic versions (French, Dutch, and English)—for example, in the case of official press releases. An Arabic version was also occasionally added—for example, for invitations to public events. By disregarding the comments, our study cannot report on how the CPRS's claims are received or contested by relevant audiences (the CPRS's members, the general public in Belgium and beyond, and policy makers). Our online observations, however, suggest that the comments mainly express followers' support and are not used as a critical device for holding the CPRS to account.

The data testify to the dual function of the CPRS: as relief provider and political countervoice. Examples of both roles were found throughout the data. Some posts reflect the CPRS's grassroots activism and display the range of humanitarian activities undertaken: the provision of tents, sleeping bags, clothes, food, legal and medical assistance and the organization of leisure activities. Other posts reflect the CPRS's role as countervoice: calls for mobilization, press releases containing policy objectives, critiques of policy makers, and stances in ongoing debates. Often, posts combine organization and contention in interwoven messages. Finally, posts of a more personal nature were also found in the data in portraits of individual refugees and anonymized testimonies of Belgian citizens hosting refugees at home. Originally published on one of the CPRS's closed Facebook groups, these testimonies were, after seeking approval of the original authors, anonymized and reposted on the public page by its administrator.

The amount of politically laden posts grew between 2015 and 2018 along with the increasing public visibility of the CPRS in traditional media. In 2017, the police in Brussels started carrying out group arrests of refugees. These highly mediatized actions triggered public debate and controversy. Between November and December 2017 and following the exposure of the #notinmyname and #inmyname campaigns (see below), the number of Facebook followers on the CPRS hosting group jumped from 13,000 to 23,000 (online observations November 2017–January 2018).

Method of Analysis

Our analysis draws from Saward's (2010) definition of representative claims as described earlier and the insight that claims invariably entail a double claim: one about relevant characteristics of the represented and one about claimants' representational qualities or right to speak on behalf of the represented (Saward, 2006, p. 303). Severs (2012, pp. 173–174) argues that claims therefore convey meaning about: (1) who is affected (the subject dimension); (2) what is perceived to be at stake (the interest dimension), and (3) the representative authority of the claimant (the claimant dimension). Severs' dimensions are relevant to our study because they make it possible to integrate an analysis of the CPRS legitimization mechanism (based on Rosanvallon, 2011) with a study of who and what are being represented. Our content analysis treated the CPRS posts as the raw data or coding units ($N = 868$) and the three constitutive dimensions as the units of analysis (see Table 1). A post can contain claims related to multiple dimensions.

Table 1. The Constitutive Dimensions of a Representative Claim.

Claimant dimension (1,320 claims)	Construction of the claimant's right to speak on behalf of the represented		
	Impartiality (357 claims)	Reflexivity (211 claims)	Proximity (752 claims)
	References to CPRS's independent position (neutrality, equity, impartiality, fairness); questioning others' impartiality, praising its own reading of the truth; references to "objective" benchmarks	References to the CPRS's role as challenger in the broader context; evidence of how it keeps itself in check; signaling others' lack of reflexivity	References to the CPRS's personal relations with and knowledge of the needs of the represented or the diversity of their lived experiences; critiques on the remoteness of electoral representation
Subject dimension (830 claims)	Construction of the represented, their relevant characteristics, and their relations to other groups in society		
	Citizens (434 claims)	Refugees (396 claims)	
	References to "we," the population, "us," descriptions of citizens who do not identify with the electoral majority	References to nonnationals who reside in Belgium and live in precarious conditions, regardless of their legal status or reasons for fleeing their home country	
Interest dimension (192 claims)	Construction of the needs and interests of the represented		
	Denouncing unjust or disadvantageous situations; formulating proposals to improve unjust or disadvantageous situations		

The subject dimension is operationalized as claims that attribute an identity to the people who are represented and define their relevant characteristics and relations to other societal groups. Our analysis centers on two groups: citizens and refugees, the two central subjectivities constituted through the CPRS's claim-making activities. The interest dimension is operationalized as constructions of the needs and interests of the represented and identifies them as claims that (1) denounce unjust or disadvantageous situations and (2) formulate a proposal to improve such situations (Celis, 2008). The claimant dimension is operationalized as claims that justify the CPRS's right to speak on behalf of the represented, based on Rosanvallon's (2011) three sources of legitimacy: impartiality, reflexivity, and proximity. We include both endorsements of the CPRS's representational qualities and critiques on other representatives' qualities, which we consider instrumental in promoting one's representative authority.

The analysis was aided by our knowledge of Belgian politics and an in-depth interview with a CPRS spokesperson. The interview clarified how the CPRS's Facebook page is managed and provided valuable insights into the CPRS's role as humanitarian actor and countervoice. Finally, our analysis considers how the Facebook page itself, its features and affordances, affects the CPRS representative strategy.

Representing Others: Constructing Subjects and Needs

Before elaborating on how the CPRS justifies its right to speak for others, it is crucial to first address whom it represents—that is, how it constructs its subjects of representation. The most clearly defined subjects are two groups of people perceived as being in need: citizens and refugees. This distinction—even if evanescent (see below)—is evidenced empirically by the presence of different types of needs in the data. On the one hand, the CPRS claims to speak on behalf of people who enjoy citizenship status in Belgium. Regardless of their nationality, their relations vis-à-vis the Belgian state and the ensuing (social, political, and cultural) rights they enjoy are characterized by a form of codification, stability, and predictability. This group of citizens displays mainly political and emotional needs. On the other hand, the CPRS gives a voice to refugees, whose lack of citizenship status on Belgian soil leads to precarity and generates needs of an entirely different kind: survival and hospitality. The CPRS constructs both subjects by revealing their characteristics and relations to other groups in society (the subject dimension) and by constructing their needs and interests through denunciations of unfairness and alternative proposals (the interest dimension).

Despite its original mission as relief provider for refugees, the CPRS speaks first and foremost for citizens: from the active CPRS volunteer to the Facebook follower and, more broadly, anyone who identifies with the actions and values proposed by the platform. This was expressed by the CPRS spokesperson in our interview and confirmed by the data, where we found a total of 434 claims describing these citizens' characteristics. As a subject of representation, they are constructed as a group of indignant citizens "who do not accept to see anyone abandoned by society"; those who aspire to "live in a society which responds to people's most pressing needs, be it humanitarian, administrative, or medical" (interview with CPRS spokesperson). What ties this group together are intertwined political and emotional needs. These citizens need an outlet for the solidarity and humanity that their elected representatives are not providing. They do not feel represented by the state secretary and could be considered part of an alternative "we" that the electoral system does not account for. In the provision of relief and refugee support, they respond to this representational need themselves.

It all started with distributing soup, then we threw carpets on the floor and put up a tent, then another one; then clothes arrived. Moments were shared; smiles were exchanged. A collective will emerged and led to the creation of the "Citizen Platform." . . . Volunteers and an entire population were mobilized to create decent conditions to welcome refugees and respond to their most urgent needs. (September 30, 2015)⁵

The best illustration of the interplay between citizens' political and emotional needs is the hosting activity proposed by the platform whereby individual citizens or families open their homes to refugees. In the testimonies of CPRS hosts, titled *Témoignage*—a portmanteau of *témoignage* (story) and *ange* (angel)—we discover that these citizens, through providing solidarity, meet a range of emotional needs. In helping others, they have found "the essence of life," "a bit of themselves," "beauty," and "a sense of humanity." Politically, these acts of solidarity reveal their conception of citizenship and express what the CPRS stands for—a more humane migration policy. Hosts' descriptions include the following: "Tonight, two young Sudanese are staying with me; hearing them laugh is one of the most beautiful things I have experienced in life. . . . Tonight, I rediscover myself, through them. Tonight, I am a citizen" (October 22, 2017); "My ambition was to . . . reconcile these people with humanity, to create a bond and reinject some meaning in words like 'solidarity' or humanity" (September 24, 2017); "Anything but the park! In one word: humanity, sharing, collaboration, gratifying, enriching, solidarity" (October 20, 2017).

Unsurprisingly, refugees feature as the second subject of representation (396 claims). The platform spokesperson stated during the interview that refugees did not seek to be represented; therefore, the CPRS does not explicitly claim to speak on their behalf. Here, the claim-making takes place on a more implicit level. By understanding the interests of the represented and embodying the needs of a group of people (Saward, 2010), the CPRS effectively constructs refugees as a distinct subject of representation. As a group, refugees are constructed as people in need, which is the characteristic most prominently put forward by the CPRS. The bulk of the data reveals the extent of these needs: from the immediate (e.g., posts calling for donations of food, medication, clothes, and sanitation products) to the less tangible (e.g., calls to provide entertainment).

As individuals, the refugees are constructed as vulnerable humans who have gone through tremendous experiences and trauma in fleeing war-devastated areas, poverty, and repression. This construction comes through strikingly in the hashtag #portrayoftheday, which retraces the journey of individual refugees from their home country to Brussels. Each portrait published under this hashtag opens with this sentence: "They have been living in improvised shelters, in the Parc Maximilien, in the heart of Brussels; many call them 'refugees.' These refugees have faces, feelings, projects; they are humans, just like you and me." In these portraits, we learn that they are called Tareq (Afghanistan), Mohamed (Syria), Haider (Iraq), Asma (Palestine), and Sarah (Ethiopia), and they were teachers, carpenters, doctors, and so on.⁶ The sharing feature of Facebook plays a key role in unmasking the diversity of realities lived by refugees, thereby challenging the dominant and impersonal discourse of waves of refugees or migrant invasion.

⁵ The citation dates refer to when the statements were published on the CPRS Facebook page.

⁶ These first names and countries of origin were published on the CPRS public Facebook page.

According to the CPRS, the relationship between refugees and the rest of society should be entirely egalitarian. Referencing the organization's activities in support of all homeless people, whether refugees or not, the CPRS spokesperson stated, "There is no difference between a hungry person and a hungry person." The relationship between the indignant citizens of the CPRS and other groups—in particular, elected representatives—is contentious and existential. The CPRS's *raison d'être* is linked to the state's perceived inaction, or inadequate action, to support refugees. Interestingly, this relationship is not a competitive one; the CPRS does not aspire to replace the state representatives. Rather, by giving a voice to the contestation, the CPRS wants the state to provide sufficient support to refugees and for CPRS volunteers to go back to their lives as ordinary citizens (interview with CPRS spokesperson).

We would rather see #Begov [the Belgian government] take the necessary measures to ensure decent living conditions for people arriving here; but for the moment we/you are the only ones making sure refugees are not sleeping in the mud in the Parc. (October 21, 2017)

The dynamics behind these relationships are exposed in claims denouncing unjust or disadvantageous situations and formulating proposals to improve the situations (coded under the interest dimension). United by an overall sense of unfairness, these denunciations reveal the shared political needs and interests of all subjects of representation. In particular, the messages express the unfairness of existing policies toward refugees—people like you and me who are sleeping in the parks or dying in the Mediterranean Sea: "We don't tolerate people sleeping in the parks or stations, we don't tolerate new arrests . . . ; we don't tolerate imprisonments in closed centers; we don't tolerate this violence by the state" (September 14, 2017). In turn, these messages echo a broader sense of injustice felt by those who do not identify with the policies produced by the electoral system in the name of the Belgian people.

Here, the hashtags #notinmyname and #inmyname are particularly revealing. These hashtags have been explicitly used by platform members and others⁷ to express dissatisfaction and reclaim the right to be represented. On November 6, 2017, the #notinmyname campaign gave citizens the opportunity to denounce the current migration and asylum policy carried out by the Belgian government and, in particular, the unfair treatment reserved to refugees when they arrive in Brussels: insufficient infrastructure, discrimination, and sometimes brutality (in particular group arrests). One month later, on December 6, 2017, a second campaign was launched: #inmyname allowed citizens (from the CPRS and beyond) to call for the policy they would want to see enacted. In this light, other hashtags shared on the CPRS Facebook page may be seen as encapsulating political needs and interests, either as denunciations or ideals to strive for: #safepassage and #refugeeswelcome were used to demand the creation of safe and legal migration channels; #europeanblackdays denounced European migration policies; and #justicemigratoire called for migration justice.

In short, the CPRS speaks for a double constituency: CPRS members and others perceived as in need. Solidarity lies at the heart of this duality; by responding to the immediate needs of refugees, the CPRS members also respond to their own need to provide solidarity and feel human. In our interview, the CPRS spokesperson mentioned that he is often thanked by volunteers "who realize that their small contribution to the greater good

⁷ The #notinmyname and #inmyname campaigns brought together a collective of actors including the CPRS.

has been more beneficial to them than to others.” This sentiment indicates that the CPRS members can be both constructed as subjects of representation (when their own political and emotional needs are concerned) and as representatives (when they respond to the needs of others). The line between representative and represented seems to shift, quite fluidly, according to the types of claims put forward in one same case of representation. Here, the Facebook page features and affordances—in particular, the connectivity—play a key role in fostering fluidity between who speaks for and who is spoken about; the Facebook page is used to display information about the needs of both CPRS members (e.g., the hosting testimonies) and refugees (e.g., #portrayoftheday), sometimes within the same post. Reflecting on processes of collective identity formation, Kavada (2015, p. 878) explains that the features and affordances of Facebook may also blur the boundaries between the inside and the outside of a movement by allowing anyone—from the curious observer to the dedicated activist—to like and comment on a page.

Justifying One’s Authority: Alternative Sources of Legitimacy

The 1,320 claims coded under the claimant dimension represent the largest category found in the data; this finding alone confirms the relevance of investigating self-legitimation processes when citizens act as representatives. Our analysis reveals that the CPRS predominantly taps into the register of proximity to legitimize its representative authority; the CPRS’s everyday activism strengthens its claims to know the represented. As described below, this proximity-based justification also lays the foundation for the CPRS’s claims of impartiality.

Proximity: The Integrity of Doing and Knowing

The proximity between the CPRS and the people it represents (752 claims) is documented by the panoply of activities in refugee support and political contestation and through symbols of its close-knit community. These activities not only demonstrate the physical closeness to the represented but also serve to render the CPRS’s understanding of the situation more credible. By relentlessly responding to others’ needs and continuously being where action is required, the CPRS develops an indisputable knowledge of what Rosanvallon (2011, p. 117) calls “everyone’s problems”; the “expertise claims” that Saward (2010) refers to; and what we call an integrity of doing and knowing.

In other words, the CPRS can legitimately claim that it knows the needs of others, because it is constantly in the field responding to these needs: from securing shelter for refugees late at night to marching in streets under the banner #refugeeswelcome. This “practice what you preach” kind of integrity is precisely what elected representatives are often criticized for lacking. This resonates with the concepts of “do-ocracy” and “act-ocracy,” which emphasize action as an alternative legitimation mechanism outside elections (Dulong de Rosnay, 2014). As one CPRS member said: “If Theo Francken doesn’t help the situation, we will.”

The CPRS reinforces its claims of proximity by pointing to a likeness among all the people it represents—their shared humanity. As humans, we are close to one another; we share the same needs (e.g., compassion and solidarity), and we share the same fears. One Facebook post states: “They flee the same threats that we undergo #weareunited” (November 19, 2015). At times, proximity becomes a

complete assimilation between them (refugees) and us (citizens). This is best illustrated by the use of the pronoun *yus*, a combination of *you* and *us* (translated from the French *vnous*, from *vous* and *nous*). There is no difference between *yus* nor between you (reading this post) and us (platform members). Following this logic, it comes as no surprise that the #portrayoftheday published by the CPRS is used to describe not only the individual stories of refugees but also the experiences of volunteers, who are called "Humans of Maximilian" (after the park where activities started). Similarly, the TémoignAnge (the hosting testimonies discussed above) display the closeness between refugees and their hosts (who share moments of humanity and conviviality) but also among the hosts (who share common lived experiences). In the same way that the line between representatives and the represented blurs, the lines between the various subjects of representation evaporate as well.

Clearly, the post, share, and like features of Facebook enable a connectivity that is conducive to the kind of proximity and closeness discussed here. First, on the integrity of knowing and doing, Facebook provides the CPRS with the means to develop an organization akin to an ant colony to respond to the various needs of many people.⁸ Like thousands of ants tending to their respective tasks, the platform members organize, coordinate, delegate, and communicate via the Facebook page and its related subgroups. The logistics of the hosting activity rely exclusively on the Facebook group created to this end. People offer rides, a bed, and clothes; others ask for help, share their feelings, and warn the rest of the group of imminent police actions against refugees.

The need for solidarity, as explained by the CPRS spokesperson, is met quickly thanks to the connectivity and social feedback offered by Facebook. When calls for donations are launched, they quickly materialize; last-minute marches and protests are rapidly organized and mobilize thousands of people all over the country. The Facebook page is instrumental in giving visibility to the CPRS's political actions and responding to the need for contestation. Finally, by symbolizing the close-knit character of its community, the hashtags, symbols, and logos serve the CPRS in its demonstration of proximity. Reflecting more broadly on the representative function of hashtags, they symbolically stand for "new forms of collective identity . . . in a digital era" (Gerbaudo 2015, p. 917), or what we call here an alternative we. In this vein, the extensive use of the heart icon (♥) on Facebook (also one of the platform's main logos) can be seen as representing the shared humanity and emotions that tie the CPRS community together: "Soon they got to know not only the refugees but also each other. A family was being born" (January 25, 2017).

Impartiality: Being on the Right Side of a (Hi)story

Closely linked to demonstrations of proximity, the CPRS engages in self-legitimation through claims of impartiality (357 claims): first, by pitching its claims as more accurate and fair depictions of reality and, concomitantly, of people's needs and interests; and second, by challenging the impartiality of elected representatives, most notably Theo Francken.

The CPRS seeks to present itself as the holder of the truth by backing up its claims with neutral and objective references: historical comparisons, legal arguments, and support of its actions by independent actors

⁸ The analogy to an ant colony was used by the CPRS spokesperson during our interview.

(e.g., international humanitarian actors). This idea is most strikingly revealed through a historical parallel between the contemporary context and the World War II era. One of the accompanying texts of the #notinmyname campaign was an explicit comparison of citizens hiding Jews decades ago and citizens hosting refugees today, describing the group arrests of refugees in the parks as *razzias*.⁹ The question here is not whether the comparison holds; the point is that the comparison conveys the impression that the CPRS is on the right side of history. Several illustrations were found in the data: "A razzia is a historical concept, something brutal and violent; something belonging to the past" (October 19, 2017). "History will remember those who stayed silent; we will not be part of them!" (December 20, 2016). "[These arrests] can be described as razzias; they are as massive as they are violent and aim at deporting people . . . depriving them of their liberty and sending them to closed centers" (September 19, 2017).

This sense of truth and righteousness was confirmed in other instances where the CPRS explicitly tries to get the story right by correcting flawed information circulating about refugees: "This is not a refugee crisis, it's a crisis of humanity" (December 12, 2016); "No, Brussels is not being 'invaded' by migrants from 'the Jungle' in Calais . . . and to get the record straight, here are a few facts coming directly from the field where our volunteers have been present since mid-November" (January 25, 2017).

Crucially, this last quote evidences the spillover from the proximity-based legitimation discussed above to claims of impartiality. It states essentially that the CPRS' constant presence in the field makes their reading of the situation more accurate. The reality proposed by the CPRS as indisputable, impartial truth boils down to the fact that people are sleeping outdoors and that their needs should be responded to. Accordingly, the CPRS proposes a repertoire of action tinted with compassion and care (e.g., hosting refugees in homes) in opposition to the cold and efficient policy of the government (e.g., repatriations, reception centers, and *razzias*).

This brings us to the second strategy used by the CPRS in this context: challenging the impartiality of elected officials, both for their poor reading of reality and their "illegal" actions. As explained by the CPRS spokesperson in our interview: "Through our successive actions, we hope to push the political world to take its responsibilities and *see the reality for what it is*, and to stop ignoring democracy and the contestation" (emphasis added). The CPRS explicitly challenges the elected representatives' reading of the reality and, by referring to "a denial of democracy," contests the government's legitimacy as representative of "all the Belgian people." The data revealed a plethora of wrongs attributed to Francken and the Belgian government, including inertia, ignorance, brutality, and inhumanity. Importantly, these criticisms often culminate in accusations of illegality, invoking international treaties, universal values, fundamental rights, and sometimes merely "the law": "The right to asylum is a universal right and it is dangerous, in a democracy, to dissuade anyone . . . from exercising their rights" (May 10, 2016); "The prime minister made a reference to universal values in his speech yesterday; we are still waiting for public officials to rise up to these values" (November 20, 2015); "The state secretary, Theo Francken, is once again going beyond the boundaries of the law and of his function . . . The citizen platform joins the voice of other organizations who have called this behavior authoritarian and discriminatory" (November 27, 2015).

⁹ The term *razzia* refers to group arrests of Jews in World War II.

In January 2018, Francken came under fire for repatriating Sudanese refugees despite having been made aware of the risk of tortures they would face on their return. He was thereafter accused, by the CPRS and other political actors, of violating Article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights. In summary, the CPRS challenges the government's impartiality by continuously pointing to its allegedly illegal actions—in particular, its discriminatory treatment of refugees, whose rights, as humans, are being violated.

Finally, the CPRS attempts to bolster its own impartiality by claiming representativeness and ideological neutrality. While Francken does not represent all Belgian people (cf. #notinmyname), the CPRS claims to gather a representative sample of Belgian society with people from all walks of life. The CPRS spokesperson noted that members range in age from 17 to 77; include both women and men (about 65% women); and come from all regions of Belgium and from all socioeconomic categories, from single-parent to aristocratic families, from the jobless to the wealthy. The platform also claims to rally people around ideas rather than ideologies and to be completely independent from any political party; contrasting here with the ideological—and therefore partial—character of elected representatives. The spokesperson said: "We are too easily caricatured. Every day I receive applications for hosting migrants, none has a typical profile. . . . There are people from the left, the right, the center, laic or Catholic" (February 2, 2018). In this context, the features and affordances of the CPRS Facebook page play a key role in fostering and facilitating this heterogeneity by allowing anyone to like the page (Kavada, 2015).

Reflexivity: Contestation and Introspection

When it comes to reflexivity (211 claims), the CPRS makes two central claims. First, it showcases the limitations of the electoral system and infuses reflexivity into the public debate on migration. Second, the CPRS claims self-reflexivity by remaining critical about its own voice and organization.

Looking at the Belgian political system as a whole, the citizens of the CPRS perform this reflexive role when they argue that migration policies should not be implemented in their name. Despite Francken's landslide victory in the 2014 elections, he is not legitimate in the eyes of all Belgian citizens (cf. the #notinmyname campaign), and the mere existence of the platform is evidence of this resistance.

For some citizens, the CPRS may be a more legitimate representative (cf. the #inmyname campaign) and keeps elected representatives in check by critically reading back their representative claims. Concretely, this role as counterpower is enabled through some of the features of Facebook that allow the CPRS to quickly organize contestation actions in response to the fast-changing political environment. Here, the group feature has been important. The CPRS created a subgroup called Plaidoyer to professionalize the conduct of political activities at the local, regional, and federal levels (e.g., providing templates for letters to send to one's local representative or a road map for organizing an action). The following statement was posted on the public page when the Plaidoyer group was created:

Citizens must reclaim their place in the democratic debate. . . . The Platform is subordinated to no political party and will never let any party claim ownership over its actions. However, whether we like it or not, the political apparatus, at all levels, has considerable means of action which could serve the objectives of our platform. For this

reason, we propose to question and directly address the political world. (February 6, 2018)

This reflexive role performed by the platform has been lauded by other actors in the broader political system as the CPRS has received much recognition, most recently the European Citizen Prize (June 26, 2018) and the Belgian Prize for Democracy (July 21, 2018). Echoing the discussion above on impartiality, the CPRS was also invited to take part in the celebrations on the European Day of the Righteous, a symbolic event created to recognize those acting in support of human dignity and the victims of hate and persecution.

Second, our data analysis reveals that the CPRS attempts to engage in self-reflexive behavior, all the way to its own internal organization. A good example in this context is the realization, by the platform founders themselves, that the horizontal structure established in the early days was leading to chaos. It therefore quickly moved from a grassroots modus operandi to a more structured organization that retained elements of horizontality. The CPRS organizational committee is currently composed of seven people (three men and four women). The gender balance sought in the CPRS organization can be interpreted as a way of applying the normative principles the group believes in and preventing a patriarchal expression of power (typically associated with elected representatives).

In the same vein, transparency—in both finances and communication—is also seen as a crucial component for the internal management of the platform. The Facebook page was instrumental in making widely visible the financial details about donations and key information about the CPRS's political positioning. Again, this may be interpreted as adopting, self-reflexively, a type of behavior that the organization demands from others: "Every week, a summary of our expenditure will be drawn up by the finance group finance of the platform to ensure total transparency" (September 19, 2015).

Finally, our interview revealed that the CPRS spokesperson—also the administrator of the public Facebook page—engages in self-reflexivity when it comes to the use of social media. The administrator deliberately attempts to post content that reflects the variety of messages and viewpoints shared among members of the platform while discarding content that is deemed too radical or stereotyped. He expressed concern over the potentially dangerous role of social media in promoting a sloganesque and self-centered style of politics.

This self-reflexivity is all the more important given Facebook's algorithmic anatomy, which encourages people to gather in echo chambers, filter bubbles, or public enclaves (Trenz, 2009). Indeed, for all the positive influence Facebook may have in community building through connectivity, it also entices people to find justification for a particular worldview, potentially undermining one's willingness to accept political compromises or pursue collectively defined goals (Vaidhyanathan, 2018). All the features and affordances of Facebook enhance this risk; the constant sharing of like-minded messages and the social feedback enabled by the like and follow buttons create persistent and accessible content that reinforces the idea of being on the right side of the story. In summary, while these features of Facebook may confer a sense of impartiality, they are likely to complicate the attainment of self-reflexivity. However, given our choice to exclude the comments from our analysis, we cannot draw definite

conclusions on the opportunities for self-reflexivity offered by Facebook in this particular context. More research would be needed with platform members themselves to further develop this finding.

Conclusion

Our analysis of the Citizen's Platform for Refugee Support confirms the relevance of studying instances of political representation that occur outside electoral institutions. First, the study reveals that even digital platforms and action groups that represent particular interests (e.g., those of refugees) need to present a conception of the general interest (e.g., those of the population at large). Our findings, furthermore, showcase that the CPRS speaks both for refugees and citizens in a fluid, unconstrained way. At times, the distinction between representatives and the represented and between the various subjects of representation becomes completely superfluous. By emphasizing a shared humanity and unveiling its diversity, the CPRS produces another conception of "the people," an alternative we, challenging the alleged cohesion and homogeneity produced by elections. By doing so, it pushes the boundaries of the demos currently serviced by electoral democracy and puts the role of citizens in a new light: not only are they at the receiving end of electoral claims, they can produce their own political representation when they feel let down by the available institutions.

Second, the study demonstrates that nonelected representatives, by necessity, invoke alternative means for self-legitimation (other than authorization or appointment; see Rosanvallon, 2011). Challenging the remoteness of electoral politics, the CPRS invokes its proximity to those represented as their main source of self-legitimation. Its integrity of knowing and doing also feed the organization's claims of impartiality: CPRS's relentless presence in the field allows it to claim to have a more credible, neutral understanding of the situation. Boiling the problem down to one of human suffering, the CPRS advances an alternative take on what is real or what should matter, thus challenging the position taken by the state secretary of migration. The CPRS reinforces this mode of self-legitimation by making historical references and offering the hindsight that classifications of types of humans were not only ill-conceived but also had devastating effects. Finally, the CPRS invokes reflexivity to legitimize its actions. It presents itself as a vehicle that, first and foremost, seeks to mobilize citizens' judgment and encourage them to take on a more active role in processes of representation.

Third, given our view of representation as a communicative current, the study shows that the medium conveying representative claims—in this case, Facebook—should not be overlooked. We provide tentative insights on how the features and affordances of the social networking site may facilitate, but also undermine, the CPRS's self-legitimation process. On the one hand, Facebook enables the CPRS to clearly showcase portraits of the people it represents and tend to the many needs of many people. It also acts as a genuine collective identity builder by offering accessible and visible symbols. However, Facebook's filter bubble effect may also encourage followers to believe they are on the right side of the story—which might, in turn, discourage the attainment of (self-)reflexivity. Future studies may gain further insights into the self-reflexivity of citizen-representatives by including users' comments in the analysis.

Our study is limited to understanding how nonelected actors represent and justify their right to speak on behalf of others. The findings do not inform us about how these actors are perceived by relevant

audiences (such as those represented or elected officials) and to what extent their representative claims receive the latter's approval or recognition. To assess under which conditions these other representatives contribute to the overall functioning of democracy, it is crucial to study both their relations with those they claim to represent and the effect their claims produce in the representative system. In this vein, it is relevant to devote further attention to forms of digital representation and the audiences they speak to, and in particular, their capacity to draw new or previously overlooked constituents into processes of representation.

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