

Tentative Title of Dissertation:

“Public Opinion and the Construction of Populist Representation in American Politics”

Abstract:

Modern democracies around the world use the concept of representation as the fundamental normative basis from which ideals of democratic legitimacy and virtuous forms of governance originate. The study of representation has typically focused on its mechanisms. Yet, the connection between representation and democracy is not intrinsic. This realization is exemplified by the current trends in normative literature on representation, which have taken a "constructivist turn," where representation is a process of creation and framing around social identities and issues. With additional support from empirical work suggesting political representation is largely an elite-driven process, the need for new conceptualization of representation becomes obvious.

This dissertation seeks to bring the empirical literature concerning how representation actually works in the American public and the normative political theory literature regarding the new "constructivist turn" together for the first time. I will measure political representation in the terms of actual public expectations concerning what representation is and what it ought to be. This will provide a unique and empirical look into the actual expectations of Americans on the representative process. This will also be the first time a normative theory of representation is empirically tested. If public expectations are shaped by implausible assumptions of political representation, then the effects on democratic legitimacy are profound. Ultimately, the insights provided within this dissertation will provide greater understanding of political behavior and allow prescriptions for how representative institutions may be reformed in the name of democratic legitimacy.