



Participation, Power, and Gender: New Perspectives on Democratic Citizenship

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This issue of *Power Asymmetries* is dedicated to political participation, examined through a gender perspective that questions its forms, limits, and transformations. In a context marked by rising inequalities and a crisis of representation—where the very concept of democracy is becoming increasingly blurred—participation remains central to understanding both the dynamics of democratic inclusion and the persistent mechanisms of exclusion within contemporary societies.

Adopting a gender lens means recognizing that participation is not a neutral terrain: opportunities for access, engagement, and the recognition of participatory practices are deeply shaped by power relations and asymmetries intersecting gender, class, and ethnicity. The contributions gathered in this issue explore these dynamics across diverse contexts and spheres of public life, highlighting both the structural barriers limiting full political citizenship and the innovative strategies through which frequently marginalized subjectivities redefine the very boundaries of participation.

This issue foregrounds unconventional forms of political engagement, social movements, and everyday practices of agency that challenge traditional conceptions of politics and expand the participatory repertoire. From this perspective, gender is not merely an analytical variable but a critical lens revealing the tensions between formal and substantive inclusion, and between representation and recognition.

In an era characterized by a deep crisis of representation and growing socio-economic inequalities, the concept of political participation requires a critical renegotiation that examines not only its forms, but also its limits and power asymmetries. This special issue explores par-

ticipation as a non-neutral terrain, where democratic inclusion confronts persistent mechanisms of exclusion that intersect gender, class, and ethnicity. The objective is to move beyond a purely formal view of citizenship in order to analyze the tensions defining effective access to the public sphere and political subjectification.

The issue opens with a reconstruction of the theoretical framework on participation, examining the link between inequalities and the construction of citizenship, through Luca Raffini and Sandro Busso's article, "Inequalities, participation, and the construction of democratic citizenship. A theoretical framework". This opening contribution analyzes how the erosion of social rights, driven by neoliberalism, has transformed welfare into an apparatus of control, creating symbolic and material barriers that prevent marginalized subjects from translating their needs into "political voice". In this context, participation itself emerges as a dimension of inequality, where the lack of economic and cultural capital leads to processes of disaffiliation or to new, and at times exclusionary, forms of direct social action. The article offers a critical examination of institutional public action, especially when institutions—institutions such as the European Union—construct a theory of social inclusion that produces contradictory results: "Not every form of inclusion, however, produces emancipation, just as not every participatory device genuinely redistributes power. [...], inclusion processes can generate what have been termed the "paradoxes of inclusion": forms of subordinate membership in which access to rights is accompanied by a reduction in autonomy, freedom of action and the very possibility of expressing political voice".

The second essay shifts the focus to the geographical and relational dimension of power in Fabio De Nardis and Angelo Galiano's article, "Territory, Conflict, and Political Subjectivation: Rethinking Power Asymmetries through the Case of Southern Apulia". Through the analysis of environmental conflicts and agricultural laborers' struggles in Southern Apulia, the authors propose a view of territory not as a mere administrative field, but as a field that generates political subjectification. Here, conflict becomes the arena in which power asymmetries become visible and contestable, challenging technocratic attempts to depoliticize dissent. Appropriately, the article reminds us that territory is a field in which to measure power asymmetries—an approach that remains valuable for redefining both conflict theory and empirical

analysis: "Territory has acquired renewed significance in sociological debate, increasingly connected to contemporary capitalism's transformations and shifting modes of power exercise. Yet this renewed interest remains shadowed by persistent theoretical confusion. Territory continues to be reduced either to an administrative scale within multi-level institutional arrangements or to a repository of collective identities. These readings capture real dimensions but obscure what matters most: territory's relational and conflictual character. They treat territory as a spatial support for dynamics originating elsewhere, as if it were a reified, pre-political given rather than the historical product of practices, institutions, and power relations".

The issue then examines the gender dimension as a key variable for understanding contemporary political behavior through Davide Angelucci and Ester Flumeri's article, "Gender, perceived discrimination, and support for the Left in Western Europe". A comparative analysis conducted across 15 Western European countries explores the so-called "modern gender gap," demonstrating that the increase in women's support for left-wing parties is not merely the result of structural changes, but is mediated by the subjective perception of discrimination. Gender identity thus becomes politically relevant when it translates into a conscious recognition of social disadvantage: "In particular, relatively little attention has been paid to the role of group identity and subjective perceptions in shaping the gender gap in voting. This paper addresses this gap by introducing a perspective centred on identity and perceived discrimination. In particular, in line with Social Identity Theory [...], we argue that the political consequences of socio-economic transformation are conditioned by processes of social recognition and group identification. More specifically, we posit that women are more likely to support left-wing parties when they interpret their experiences through the lens of group-based disadvantage—that is, when they perceive gender inequalities as reflecting a broader pattern of discrimination affecting women as a social category".

Mirroring this perspective, the issue examines conservative resistance and the cultural conflicts animating European democracies, through the article by Luca Carrieri, Nicolò Conti, and José Javier Olivás Osuna, titled "Radical Right Supporters and Opposition to LGBTQ Equality: Evidence from France, Italy, and Spain". This study on radical right constituencies in France, Italy, and Spain highlights how op-

position to LGBTQ+ equality and moral traditionalism constitute central pillars of contemporary political mobilization. These dynamics underscore a polarization that pits demands for recognition against forms of identity-based reaction. This article confirms the correlation between “traditionalism” and aversion to LGBTQ+ rights, while highlighting a transnational ideological dimension: “Moreover, the convergence of attitudes across different national contexts points to the existence of a broader ideological alignment among radical right supporters centred on the defence of traditional moral values and conventional family structures. This suggests that support for radical right parties cannot be explained solely in terms of protest voting or socioeconomic grievances, but must also be understood as reflecting a moral and cultural agenda that targets directly, among others, the LGBTQ community. Overall, our study highlights the central role of cultural and moral issues in shaping contemporary radical right politics and mobilization, as well as the resulting threat to advances in LGBTQ equality”.

Finally, the analysis shifts to the symbolic and communicative dimension of politics. An innovative contribution examines the perception of political leaders' “coolness” in Europe, revealing how the personalization and “celebrification” of politics operate within a gender framework. Donatella Campus and Giovanni Barbieri's article is titled “Is My Leader “Cool”? Differences in How Fans Perceive the Coolness of Female and Male Political Leaders”. The findings show the persistence of stereotypes that tend to objectify female figures and reward male leaders, suggesting that established gender hierarchies are reproduced even within the field of political aesthetics and lifestyles, and that female leaders tend to polarize the public to a greater extent: “the study first highlighted that individuals generally feel closer to male leaders than to female leaders. Male leaders also receive higher levels of appreciation in terms of coolness, and the scores they obtain do not differ substantially from one another. Furthermore, those who express appreciation for male leaders tend to recognise that details concerning their private lives are useful for gaining a better understanding and evaluation of their preferred political figure. Compared with those who feel close to female leaders, they also seek out information about such politicians more actively, whether through reading articles – including in gossip magazines – consulting autobiographies, or watching political programmes”. By contrast, the distribution of scores of

coolness attributed to female leaders appears to be particularly polarised, meaning that some receive high scores, others intermediate ones, and others still relatively low evaluations”.

Taken together, the collected contributions offer a critical lens for understanding how political participation can be reimagined, moving toward a more equitable democracy attentive to difference. By adopting an intersectional approach, this special issue aims to foster an interdisciplinary dialogue on the relationship between power, social justice, and gender.