

Translation to English by the PRD team of an article on our research that was featured in an article in Ynet, a popular Israeli news and general content website. The article appeared in the Hebrew-language "Private Researchers" section, initiated by the Israel Young Academy, in which researchers describe why they chose their areas of study. For access to the Hebrew-language article, click [here](#) for the YNET website and [here](#) for a pdf of the article.



What is Effective Political Participation?

On a traveling childhood, digital citizenship, and political representation

Prof. Jennifer Oser | May 15, 2026

When I was 12 years old, we moved in the U.S. from Connecticut to South Carolina. This was seemingly just one more routine move for an American Navy family, but for me, it was an important turning point. Connecticut is generally considered to have one of the best education systems in the U.S., whereas South Carolina tends to be at the bottom of national rankings. The sharp encounter with two such different systems caused me, at an early age, to begin to ask questions about politics, inequality, and the way in which policy decisions influence people's daily lives.



Photography credit: Dani Machlis

I grew up in a family that was active in Conservative (Masorti) Judaism. My father served in the U.S. Navy, not as a rabbi, but as a Captain of fast-attack nuclear submarines, and my mother worked as a nurse. Through my father's Navy service, we moved multiple times – I have three siblings, and each of us was born in a different U.S. state. This travelling childhood exposed me from a young age to regional differences, and inspired in me a deep curiosity to know how societies are organized, and whose voice is heard in different contexts.

My path to the academy was not straightforward. I began my BA at Harvard in physics, with an ambition to be a medical doctor – but during my college experience, I was shocked by homelessness in Boston as a social problem that I had not been previously exposed to. I volunteered in a student-run homeless shelter, and this became the main focus of my activities in the first year of my BA. Motivated by a curiosity to learn more about how we could allow homelessness to be acceptable on the streets of Boston, I shifted my academic learning to focus on social studies, an interdisciplinary social science major. In this period I began working as a research assistant and coordinator in a project about civic engagement in America which was led by Prof. Theda Skocpol, and included graduate students throughout the social sciences. After this, I worked full time as a community organizer in the U.S. and in Israel. This work taught me how big the gap can be between our desire to make a difference, and our capacity to do so in practice.

Between the end of my BA studies at Harvard and the beginning of my MA in public policy at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, seven years passed. My return to academic studies was motivated by the practical recommendation of colleagues in the Israeli nonprofit world as a way to earn a bit more in my monthly salary. In these studies, as a new immigrant to Israel, my love of research was renewed from a cross-national comparative perspective. I also discovered that in Israel, compared to the U.S., it is more common for academics to combine academic careers and family life. I decided to continue to PhD research with the intention of returning to political activism after completing my studies.

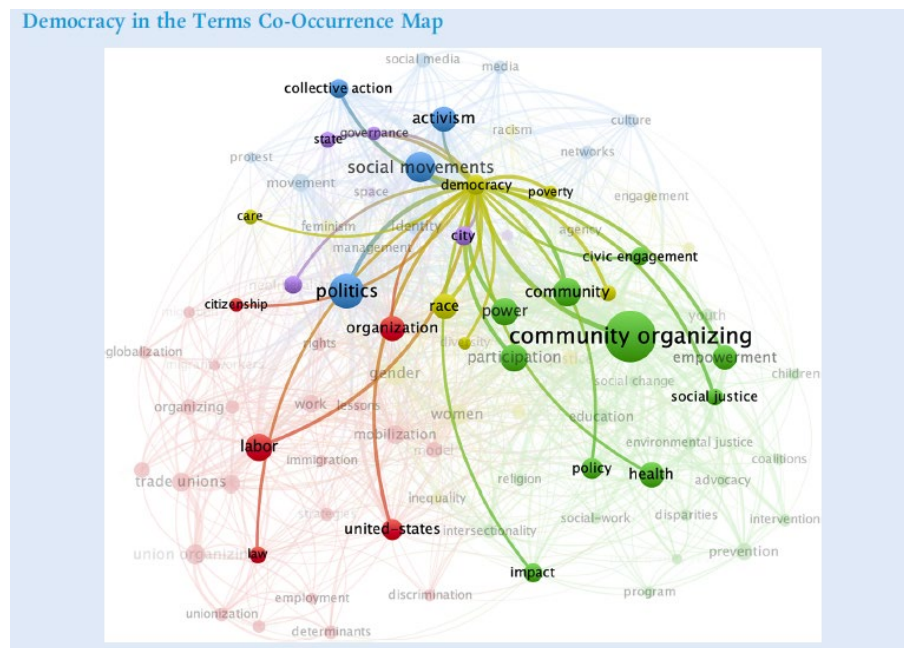
The academy eventually “pulled” me onto a new path. Today, I am a Full Professor in the Politics and Government Department at Ben-Gurion University in Israel. When I began my position in the department, I was told more than once that I was unusual (the term often used in Hebrew is “a strange chicken”) as a religious woman in my field of research. For me, these encounters are a reminder that also in academia, as in politics, representation cannot be taken as a given.

My research focuses on the connections between public opinion, political participation, and representation. I research who is involved in political activities, in what ways, and whether this political participation translates into representation. In recent years, we have witnessed a clear phenomenon of ongoing decline or stagnation in levels of voting, along with a sharp increase in political participation beyond voting, including digital activism.

But the central question remains open: Are people's voices really heard by decision-makers? In my research project on “Participation and Representation in the Digital Age,” which is supported by a grant from the European Union's European Research Council (ERC), I investigate these processes from a global, cross-national comparative perspective, with particular focus on the U.S., Europe, and Israel. This research assesses who participates politically, what is their socio-economic background, and what are the factors that enable – or block – the translation of political participation into political influence.

Winning this ERC grant, which totals 1.5 million Euro for five years, is an important accomplishment as an Israeli scholar in this field of study – and also a meaningful challenge. Managing a large budget and an international team has required creative thinking, especially because I launched the project in May 2023, at the end of COVID, and a few months before October 7th. I recruited an exceptionally talented and diverse team of researchers for the project – some working remotely, including from Sweden, Germany, Italy, Spain, France, the U.S., as well as Israel.

Our first team meeting was scheduled for October 10, 2023. I debated with team members about whether to still meet – especially the Israelis – and we ultimately decided to hold the meeting as planned. This first team meeting was remarkable for its atmosphere of mutual support, and set a precedent for our ongoing collaborative work.



An example of research that includes meaningful substantive insights about democracy is published in a new collaborative article in which we ask “Are the Politically Active Better Represented?”. Our analysis of political participation and democratic representation provides a clear empirical answer of “Yes” to this question for the first time, on the basis of our analysis of data in 40 countries, between 1996-2016 (link to the article <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-025-10101-y>).

Beyond data and statistical models, my research is motivated by a normative question: How can we build democracies in which many citizens feel that there is a reason to actively participate in them, and that their voices are actually influential. In my experience, researching different types of political participation is a necessary step toward a more equal and representative democracy.

Additional relevant links:

Webinar page of the project which includes access to live webinars and past videos with leading international researchers on topics of participation and representation. <https://www.prd-erc.eu/events>

Website home page of the project, including information on the team, publications, and project news: <https://www.prd-erc.eu/>

Publication that includes a literature map of research on democracy, published in the academic journal ranked #1 in political science: Han, Baggetta & Oser (2024) <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-041322-043040>

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