

# **When did the Masses become Political?**

“Layers and Connections of the Political”  
International APH conference 2020-2021  
14-25 June 2021

Author: Anne Heyer  
Leiden University, The Netherlands

## Abstract

By the end of the nineteenth century, the concept of the masses had become an essential feature of a new legitimizing strategy for political participation: instead of the quality of political representatives, it was the quantity of the represented that legitimized power. Conceptual historians have suggested a more nuanced interpretation of what has long been described as a natural process of emancipation of politically excluded groups. Instead of taking the emergence of mass politics for granted, they study language not only as a description of society, but as an actual factor in the creation of democracy. This contribution quantitatively and qualitatively analyses the changing use of the term “mass” with the recently digitized Dutch newspaper archive Delpher. While at the beginning the term was used to describe large quantities of land and other unanimated entities, with time contemporaries increasingly talked about assemblies, demonstrations and protests. The paper will focus on the timing of this process in a national and transnational perspective. Can we identify key moments when contemporaries talked about the masses and can these be linked to specific events within the Netherlands and abroad? How did they effect the discussion about the subject, object and process of political participation?

## Author information

**Anne Heyer** is an Assistant Professor with a research interest in the ideas and practices of political participation in different European countries (1800-today) at the Institute for History at Leiden University (the Netherlands). She currently works on the changing perception and practices of mass politics in Germany, Netherlands, Britain and Spain. She currently also prepares a monograph “The Making of the Democratic Party”, based on her doctoral dissertation, about the emergence of modern party organizations as transnational and comparative history in the 1860s and 1870s in Germany, Netherlands and Britain. Her publications focus on political parties, participation, democracy and populism.

### Contact Information

[a.heyer@hum.leidenuniv.nl](mailto:a.heyer@hum.leidenuniv.nl)

**Monday, 21 June** - Session 9 - **9,00-10,30 CET (Webex)** - Panel – *“Political Participation” in Democracy History: A Contested and Ever-Changing Concept and Practice?*

When did the Masses become Political?

**Luiss**  
School of Government

Via di Villa Emiliani, 14  
00197 Roma  
T +39 06 85225052  
[sog@luiss.it](mailto:sog@luiss.it)