

The Poor Representation of the Poor

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In any democracy, voting rights are distributed more equally than income or wealth. In principle, the poor could team up with the middle class and use this leverage to “soak the rich” (Shapiro 2002) through higher taxes and more redistribution. The “median voter theorem” would suggest that this happens whenever the median voter has an income below the mean income in a society. Unfortunately for the theory, this is not what we observe. First, due to unequal participation, the median voter’s income considerably exceeds the median income of all citizens. Second, in more unequal societies the demand for redistribution is lower than in more egalitarian ones and income inequality has increased in most established democracies (OECD 2008; OECD 2011). In this note I argue that the main reason for this development is that *economic and political inequality reinforce each other*. Despite formal equality, not only political participation but also political decisions are biased in favor of the better-off. As a consequence, the poor turn away from established parties – and thus exacerbate the existing skew.

Income inequality and voter turnout

The rise in economic inequality that has taken place in many rich democracies over the past two to three decades has renewed interest in the question of how economic inequality affects political equality. While some expected higher participation rates in more unequal countries because the stakes are higher for both the poor and the rich, most studies find the opposite. In economically more unequal countries, citizens participate less, on average, and the “participation gap” is more pronounced. In unequal societies, the poor conclude that politics does little to improve their lives and, hence, is not a game worth playing (Solt 2008). “Don’t play if you can’t win” is the phrase Goodin and Dryzek (1980: 292) coined for the rational non-participation of the least well-off (see also Offe 2013; Pateman 1971).

The law of increasing disproportion

Inequality in office belittles inequalities in political participation. In liberal democracies, relatively few citizens become members of parties. Of those who do, a minority actively participates. From within this small group, the candidates for office are selected. Since running for office demands not only skills but also resources, such as money and time, those finally elected are an even more exclusive group, which becomes more so if we look at party leaders or office holders. Already in the 1970s, Putnam (1976: 33) called this the “law of increasing disproportion”: the more important an office is, the more selective is the choice of candidates. Since then, elite homogeneity has become even more pronounced (Best 2007). Bovens and Wille (2017) document for western European countries that their parliaments today are almost exclusively filled with university graduates. And Carnes (2013) shows that the social composition of the US Congress influences not only its agenda-setting but also the kind of decisions taken.

Unequal responsiveness and welfare state reform

Do unequal participation and unequal descriptive representation matter? In recent years, empirical studies of political responsiveness have focused on the question of *whose* preferences political representatives take into account. Several studies on the American case document selective responsiveness on the part of political decision-makers in favor of the better-off. In the most encompassing study so far, Gilens (2005; 2012) uses more than 1,800 survey questions on policy preferences, covering a wide array of policies, and compares the opinions of different income groups with political decisions made within four years after the questions were asked. He finds that political decisions reflect poor citizens' opinions only if these coincide with the preferences of the rich. Low- and even middle-income groups seem to have no influence once their preferences diverge from those of top income groups. Other studies corroborate these findings (Bartels 2008; Flavin 2012). In a comparable study of the German case, we find a very similar pattern of biased decisions: political decisions match the preferences of high income groups well, while the poor get their way only if they happen to agree with them (Elsässer/Hense/Schäfer 2018). The more widely preferences differ, the stronger the bias against the poor.

Unequal responsiveness leads to political decisions that increase economic inequality because richer citizens support free markets more strongly than the poor. Elsässer (2018: chapter 7) analyzes 27 major social policy and labor market reforms in Germany. In not a single instance did a reform take place that the poor favored but the rich opposed. In contrast, in 14 cases the opposite holds true. Ten times, both groups were in favor of a reform and three times both groups objected. As Elsässer shows, this means that spending on "passive" social policy has been cut, means-testing and sanctions have increased, whereas social investment policies have been expanded. There is less financial support for poorer citizens, while middle-class families benefit from policies that facilitate dual-career partnerships. The "social investment state" promotes greater horizontal equality at the price of greater vertical inequality.

Unequal representation and the populist revolt

In general, better-off groups are not only more strongly in favor of free markets but also support more libertarian cultural values, whereas poor citizens (in Europe) still strongly support the welfare state and redistribution and are more guarded (though not opposed) to cultural liberalism. Most party systems do not reflect the distribution of citizens' preferences well and unequal responsiveness makes pro-market and libertarian decisions more likely. Citizens perceive these biases. Accordingly, citizens with lower incomes have a lower sense of internal and external efficacy. And those who think that politicians are unresponsive to ordinary citizens and who see themselves as powerless have a far greater probability of voting for right-wing populist parties. Hence, the poor representation of the poor is a breeding ground for populism.

Populists rally against established parties and the elite; and they claim to represent the true interests of the people. They are successful because the deck of democracy is indeed stacked in favor of the better-off and political decisions are largely unresponsive to everyone else. Hence, populist parties point at a real democratic deficit, which is the reason why they cannot be lightheartedly dismissed (Berman 2017). The populist answer is nonetheless dangerous because its anti-pluralism is undemocratic. If we want to fight populism, we will have to take

seriously those who – correctly – feel sidelined, while defending the norm that one can reasonably disagree about politics.

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