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Political Inequality in Rich Democracies

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Keywords

participation, representation, congruence, responsiveness, income inequality, trade unions

Abstract

In this review, we focus on political inequality in rich democracies. In the two main sections, we look at participation and representation, respectively. The former discusses whether rising income inequality and the weakening of trade unions have led to higher levels of inequality in participation. The latter looks at substantive and descriptive representation and asks how they might be linked. Research highlights that people with fewer individual resources participate much less than those with more resources, and collective organizations lose their ability to counter these trends. In terms of representation, the pattern is very similar. Not only are the opinions of decision-makers more congruent with those of the better off but policy choices also reflect their preferences more clearly. As the social distance between rulers and ruled increases, representative democracy gets more biased in favor of higher-status social groups.

INTRODUCTION

When we speak about political equality, we often think of equal rights of citizens, most notably the right to vote. Over time, these rights have been extended to include formerly excluded groups, and there is an ongoing debate about further extending basic political rights to underage citizens or to everyone residing in a country, independent of citizenship. Beyond legal status, horizontal political equality between citizens also concerns the question of how equally and effectively these rights are used: who participates in politics, who joins political groups, and whose voice is heard (Verba 2003). Less frequently, we think of equality in terms of vertical political equality, that is, the difference between decision-makers and citizens (Abizadeh 2021, p. 796). In representative democracies, those in office, by definition, have more power to influence political decisions than those who elected them. Yet, this kind of vertical political inequality between representatives and represented need not be problematic if decision-makers are “adequately constrained” (Ingham 2022, pp. 698–99). Ideally, democratic procedures, most notably free and fair elections, constrain the ability of those in positions of political power to neglect citizens’ demands and push them to act “in the interest of the represented, in a manner responsive to them” (Pitkin 1967, p. 209).

Since horizontal and vertical (in)equality are deeply interwoven, ensuring democratic equality and equal consideration is both complex and challenging (Beramendi et al. 2022). It demands that citizens—or different groups of citizens—have an equal effective opportunity to influence political decisions and are thus able to constrain the arbitrary political power of political representatives. Citizens must have enough resources to monitor governments, and there must be a vigilant and pluralist free press, a fair electoral system, a competitive party system, and impartial judicial review in place. In reality, however, these mechanisms of control and accountability do not work perfectly, or work more effectively for some groups than for others. Accordingly, Dahl (1989, p. 115) points out that realizing equal opportunities in democratic processes is so demanding a task that it “would require a people committed to it to institute measures well beyond those that even the most democratic states have hitherto brought about.”

At least two factors—relating to the horizontal and vertical dimensions of political equality—undermine equal consideration. First, voice is unequal. Most fundamentally, voter turnout in contemporary societies is skewed in favor of better-off groups. Age, income, education, and minority background influence electoral participation, and those with more resources at their disposal turn out to vote in higher numbers. The median voter is usually richer than the median citizen. Other forms of political participation—lobbying, demonstrations, contacting politicians, or joining parties—are even more unequally distributed than voting. Second, the “aristocratic” (Manin 1997, pp. 134–35) element of elections creates a social distance between representatives and represented, meaning that access to positions of political power is unequal. Those who decide are not a mirror image of citizens but instead come from more privileged segments of society: They are older, more often men than women, disproportionately university graduates and frequently come from higher-status social classes. This might make it harder for less privileged groups to adequately constrain representatives and to make them attentive and responsive to their preferences. Horizontal and vertical political inequality can reinforce each other: If some voices are louder than others, if access to positions of power is unequal, and if representatives listen more closely to some groups than others without being effectively punished, even formal equality might go along with a high degree of actual inequality. If patterns of participation and representation translate into unequal influence, the democratic promise of equality is put in danger (Lijphart 1997, Verba 2003).

However, while there always has been a tension between political equality and social inequality, the historical context is decisive for the actual (in)equality of representative democracies. In

most democracies, voting rights were given to men earlier than to women and to wealthier groups earlier than to the poor, and minority groups faced (and sometimes still are facing) many legal and extralegal obstacles to vote. While some of the barriers have been overcome, new forms of exclusion might be emerging. In fact, considering the political-economic changes of the past decades, there are reasons to believe that some forms of political inequality actually have increased. In particular, the gap between those with many resources and those with few seems to be higher today than in the past.

Mechanisms of social exclusion work both at the level of citizens and at the level of representatives. First, among citizens, we see an increase in social inequality. Individual resources such as income or wealth have not become more equally distributed but, on the contrary, have grown more unequal over time. While inequality between countries has been falling since the 1980s, inequality within countries has been rising (Alderson & Nielsen 2002, Brandolini & Smeeding 2008, Chancel & Piketty 2021). What is more, organizations that used to mobilize less resourceful citizens have become weaker. For example, in most rich democracies, trade unions have lost members and political clout over time (Hassel 2015). The shift toward tertiarization and more individualized forms of employment have made it more difficult for unions to organize workers—and, thus, to mobilize them to turn out to vote or engage with politics in other ways. As a result, there is a growing class gap in political participation. As sources of collective action become scarcer, individual resources become more important to voice political demands—and these resources are distributed unequally.

Second, on the level of political representatives, we observe a narrowing of recruitment patterns concerning the class background of legislators, which increases vertical political inequality. Almost everywhere, assemblies are populated with university graduates who often have very streamlined political careers (Bovens & Wille 2017). In contrast, working-class citizens—in a very broad sense—are virtually absent. An increasing number of studies argue that these shifts are not inconsequential for political debate, for what policies are pushed to the agenda and for what kinds of decisions are made (for a thorough discussion, see Carnes & Lupu 2023). Of course, parliaments have never been a mirror image of society, but today, unequal descriptive representation goes along with increasing social homogeneity. In short, those who make their voices heard and those who listen and decide all come from more privileged quarters of society. Taken together, these broad shifts can reinforce each other and increase political inequality.

This review proceeds as follows. In the second section, we look at horizontal political inequality in political participation with a particular focus on the question whether, and if so why, it has grown. The two main strands of literature we concentrate on pinpoint income inequality and the declining power of trade unions to mobilize less-well-off groups. In the third section, we move on to vertical inequality and review the literature on unequal representation. In general, legislators' opinions are more congruent with those of better-off groups. It can be hard to detect whether this congruence translates into voting behavior in parliaments. However, studies of policy responsiveness, which focus on decisions and outcomes, indicate that what parliaments decide is more closely aligned with the policy preferences of high-income groups and higher-status social classes. The fourth section outlines blind spots of existing research and questions for future research.

Before we proceed, a word of caution. This review is limited in two ways. First, we mainly focus on rich European and Anglo-Saxon democracies rather than democracies worldwide. This parochialism is due to our area of expertise but limits the scope of the arguments presented. Second, we mainly focus on socioeconomic factors that correspond with political inequality. Of course, many other factors influence political participation and representation, but covering too many aspects is beyond the scope of a single review article. However, we do come back to the interplay of different forms of inequality in the concluding section.

HORIZONTAL POLITICAL INEQUALITY IN PARTICIPATION

In this section, we look at unequal voice and why it might have become more unequal over time. We focus on two factors: income inequality and collective mobilization (see also Schlozman et al. 2014, ch. 3). Rising income inequality means that individual resources that facilitate participation are distributed more unequally. This becomes more important as organizations of collective mobilization become weaker. For example, fewer workers are members of trade unions today than in the past, and this decline has been linked to falling levels of voter turnout. Taken together, these two trends help to explain why neither rising average incomes nor educational expansion has equalized political participation.

Empirical studies that investigate the relationship between individual resources and political participation find that respondents with higher incomes or higher levels of education participate more. On average, citizens in rich democracies have become more highly educated and incomes have grown. Taken together, these two observations suggest that levels of participation should increase and that all social groups should participate more today than in the past. Yet, this does not seem to be true. In many places, political participation has not only not increased but instead decreased and grown more unequal over the last decades. Rather than just looking at absolute resources available at the individual level, we must consider the distribution of resources and its relationship with political mobilization to resolve this paradox of participation.

Income Inequality and Political Equality

All established democracies are market economies. And while one may argue that both are rooted in individual freedom, capitalism and democracy follow different logics. Markets foster social inequality as they reward those skills and talents that are in short supply, whereas democracy insists on the fundamental equality of citizens. Champions of free markets have always feared that those who are less successful in economic competition might use their power at the voting booth to undermine market mechanisms. Indeed, the unequal distribution of income and wealth—or, more generally, intergroup inequality (Acemoglu & Robinson 2006, p. 36) could be a powerful motivator for the poor to engage with politics (Burden & Wichowsky 2014) and to use political power to “soak the rich” (Shapiro 2002). Yet, the opposite might also be true: Higher levels of social inequality increase political inequality as the poor lose hope that participating in elections improves their situation. Rather than being mobilized, those with fewer resources might conclude that “politics is simply not a game worth playing” (Solt 2008, p. 58). The first perspective draws on conflict theory (Brady 2004) and the second on relative power theory (Goodin & Dryzek 1980).

Given these different theoretical expectations, several studies have examined the effect of income inequality on voter turnout and political participation. A first set of studies looks at the impact of income inequality on aggregate turnout. Lister (2007) analyzes turnout in 15 rich democracies for 1963–1993 and finds a negative impact of income inequality on turnout. However, Arzheimer (2008) criticizes the statistical model and is unable to confirm the findings using the same data. However, broadening the data base and applying the methods Arzheimer suggests, Schäfer (2013) finds a negative effect of income inequality on aggregate voter turnout. In contrast, analyzing elections in Western and non-Western countries, Stockemer & Scruggs (2012) ascertain that the Gini index has no significant impact on voter turnout. However, they include a time variable that might be correlated with the rise of income inequality and thus limit the effect of the latter. With a focus on 61 presidential elections between 1990 and 2010, Stockemer & Parent (2014) also do not find a significant effect of inequality on voter turnout in these elections. Other than compulsory voting, none of the variables has an impact on voter turnout. Hence, at the aggregate level, results have been mixed, not least because the geographical scope differs between

studies, and there might be moderating variables that affect the impact of income inequality on political equality (see below).

Studies that focus on the subnational level, in contrast, frequently confirm a negative effect of inequality on turnout. Mahler (2002) analyzes 184 regions in 11 countries for the late 1980s and early 1990s. Although inequality has a negative impact on turnout, it fails to reach conventional levels of statistical significance. Focusing on the United States, studies investigate turnout variations across states. Boix (2003, pp. 127–28) looks at turnout rates in US states for the 1920 presidential election and interacts the percentage of farming population with a measure of wage inequality. Jointly, these two variables have a significant negative impact on voter participation. In unequal rural states, fewer citizens vote. Looking at more recent elections, Galbraith & Hale (2008) find in cross-sectional analyses a negative but not always significant effect of inequality on turnout in US states. Their supplementary analyses of changes taking place between 1980 and 2004 reveal a significant negative effect of inequality on turnout. Rising income disparities, they conclude, depress turnout (for Italian regions, see Scervini & Segatti 2012). Interestingly, Szewczyk & Crowder-Meyer (2022) report for the United States that higher levels of inequality at the local level lead to higher levels of political participation (measured more broadly than just voter turnout). However, the reason is that the rich tend to participate more, whereas local inequality does not affect participation of the poor to the same degree.

Finally, a growing number of studies adopt a multilevel perspective and examine the interaction between micro- and macro-level factors to assess the relationship between income inequality and political participation. Solt (2008, 2010) runs a series of multilevel models for a set of 23 countries as well as the US states and finds that higher levels of income inequality lead to lower and more unequal electoral participation as the poor become more likely to abstain. Anderson & Beramendi (2008) employ an instrumental variable approach and, based on a sample of 18 OECD countries, conclude that income inequality increases inequalities in turnout (see also Horn 2011, Houle 2018, Jensen & Jespersen 2017, Schäfer & Schwander 2019). In contrast, Gallego (2015, ch. 6) analyzes 85 elections in 36 democracies from roughly the late 1990s through 2007. She finds a negative effect of gross income inequality on voter turnout (though not always statistically significant) but no evidence that higher net inequality leads to more unequal turnout.

Besides different time periods and geographical scopes, results are context sensitive. Important variables such as partisan competition seem to moderate the relationship between inequality and turnout. But very few studies have taken these moderating factors into account so far. Whether or not citizens vote depends not only on the costs of participation, as the classical rational choice model suggests, but also on the costs of abstention, Aytac & Stokes (2019) insist. All else being equal, the costs of abstention rise if the stakes are higher because the programmatic differences between parties are large and if the election is likely to be close. In other words, if it is uncertain who will win and if the results matter a great deal, more people will turn out to vote. This is in line with some recent findings in the literature. For example, Wichowsky (2012) finds that intensified competition of parties in US states reduces turnout inequalities. In particular, efforts of the Democratic Party to mobilize voters dampen participatory inequality. Aytac & Stokes (2019, ch. 3) provide experimental and observational evidence that close and salient elections boost voter turnout.

Without using the exact same terminology, several studies have also argued that the costs of abstention moderate the effect of income inequality on voter turnout. For example, analyzing turnout in US states, Macdonald (2021b) shows that the saliency of elections conditions the effect of inequality on turnout: If the saliency is low, income inequality has a stronger negative impact on voter turnout. In line with these findings, Polacko et al. (2021) and Polacko (2022) demonstrate that programmatic differences between parties—what they call policy polarization—lower the

negative impact of income inequality not only on turnout but also on turnout inequality. However, the efforts of parties to mobilize low-income voters might themselves be a function of earlier turnout rates. Pontusson & Rueda (2010) argue that center-left parties react less strongly in terms of programmatic appeals to income inequality if turnout is low and skewed, which, in turn, could lower turnout further and depress poor citizens' political participation.

In sum, the dispute between conflict theory and relative power theory has not been settled as there is conflicting evidence. However, framing the debate in these terms may not be appropriate because recent studies suggest that it may be the interplay of income inequality, electoral salience, and political mobilization that explains under what circumstances inequality boosts or dampens participation. After all, Brady et al. (1995, p. 271) famously stated that people do not participate in politics "because they can't, because they don't want to, or because nobody asked." Higher salience, policy polarization, and mobilization efforts could mitigate the negative effect of unequal resources, as more people want to participate and more people are being asked to vote.

Individual and Collective Resources

Political participation is not always unequal (Gallego 2015, pp. 31–33). If the rate of participation is high, political inequality is generally low. However, the threshold for near parity seems very high indeed. For example, in countries with enforced compulsory voting such as Belgium or Australia that reach 90% turnout rates, differences in electoral participation become negligible. Yet, participation rates are usually much lower not just in elections but also for other forms of political engagement. If turnout falls below 80%, participation tends to become unequal along class lines. As nonelectoral forms of engagement tend to be used at much lower rates, they usually are even more strongly skewed toward the better off (Kaase & Marsh 1979, p. 185; Rosenstone & Hansen 1993, pp. 238–39; Schlozman et al. 2014, p. 8; Verba et al. 1978, pp. 65–67). Thus, Tingsten's (1975, p. 230) "law of dispersion" still seems to hold today: Lower average rates of participation go along with higher participatory inequality. As turnout rates have been declining, political inequality has been rising (Dassonneville & Hooghe 2017; Persson 2013; Persson et al. 2013; Rosenstone & Hansen 1993, pp. 238–41).

Changing levels of turnout in part explain why studies at different points in time find different results. We can observe a hump-shaped pattern of turnout in many rich democracies: Voter turnout rates tended to be low in the first elections after World War II but increased from the late 1960s onward. At the end of the 1980s, however, electoral turnout started to decline again (Schäfer & Streeck 2013, p. 12). In fact, Topf (1995, p. 48), who insists that there is no "generalized educational effect for voting," shows that turnout differences were larger in the early 1990s than they were in the 1970s and 1980s. Today, as a recent meta-study of voter turnout finds, there is a clear link between education and, less unequivocally, income on electoral participation (Smets & van Ham 2013).

Recent studies also suggest that the participation gap between resource-poor and resource-rich groups has been widening. For example, analyzing different types of political participation across several rich democracies, Dalton (2017, p. 185) concludes that inequality has increased. In particular, the gap between those with higher and lower levels of education has widened. Armingeon & Schädel (2015) demonstrate that the participatory divide has grown over time because the social integration of lower-educated citizens and, as a consequence, their political participation have declined. As sources of collective mobilization become weaker, those with fewer individual resources participate less. This might be the case especially for the young. Schäfer et al. (2020) document that turnout differences are largest among younger citizens. Whereas those older than 60 participate in high numbers, not only is the level of participation lower among those younger than 30

but participation is also much more unequal. If this pattern is not just a life-cycle effect but rather a cohort effect, turnout inequalities might rise in the future. One explanation for rising disparities might be that collective resources are less readily available for younger citizens.

Citizens with fewer resources might depend on collective organizations to mobilize them. Membership in these organizations reduces the costs of participation because they provide information, political cues, and motivation for their members (Armingeon & Schädel 2015; Gallego 2015, pp. 116–17; Kim & Margalit 2017; Macdonald 2021a). Those with higher levels of resources are less in need of this kind of support than are those with lower levels (Rosenstone & Hansen 1993, p. 242; Verba et al. 1978, p. 14). In the past, trade unions stood out in mobilizing people with fewer resources. Accordingly, several studies link union membership to voter turnout. For example, Radcliff & Davis (2000) report for a set of 19 countries that higher levels of unionization go along with higher turnout rates even after controlling for other explanatory factors. This positive link means, in turn, that falling union membership hampers turnout. And, indeed, Gray & Caul (2000) and Pontusson (2013, p. 809) highlight that declining union density is correlated strongly with declining turnout rates across European democracies. Everything being equal, a 20% drop in union density leads to a 2.8% drop in voter turnout (Gray & Caul 2000, pp. 1109–10).

Union density can influence voter turnout indirectly and directly. A first indirect link exists because stronger unions reduce income inequality (Ahlquist 2017, Huber et al. 2019, Western & Rosenfeld 2011) and more egalitarian countries have a higher turnout rate (see above). A second indirect link works through parties. Historically, left-of-center parties and trade unions were close allies in many countries (Allern & Bale 2017). Trade unions mobilized their members to vote for these parties, and in turn, left parties provided policies that union members cherished. However, left-of-center parties' core constituents have changed over time (Gingrich & Häusermann 2015, Häusermann et al. 2021), and with programmatic shifts toward a more market-friendly agenda, the traditional alliance with trade unions has weakened (Baccaro & Howell 2011, Streeck 2009). Finally, unions might directly mobilize their members to participate in politics, for example, in campaigns to raise the minimum wage (Draut 2016, Levi 2003). Indeed, several studies maintain that union members participate more than nonmembers. Combining survey data with macrodata from US states, Leighley & Nagler (2007) demonstrate that both individual union membership and trade union density boost turnout, particularly for low-income groups. In line with these findings, Kerrissey & Schofer (2013) show for a variety of political activities that union members in the United States tend to be more active (see also Rosenfeld 2014, p. 171). Finally, Flavin & Radcliff (2011) analyze cross-national survey data for 32 countries and find a positive effect of individual union membership and union density on individual electoral participation.

With trade union membership in decline, an important source of mobilization is vanishing. As a result, participation might decline, too, in particular for less privileged groups, as these organizations mobilized them in the past (see Ahlquist 2017, pp. 422–24). This becomes even more likely because not only has union membership declined but the composition of trade-union membership has also changed. In many countries, union members now are concentrated in the public and export-oriented sectors. As a result, they often earn incomes above average (Pontusson 2013, pp. 815–16; Rosenfeld 2014, pp. 164–65). If these unions mobilize their members, it might not ameliorate but exacerbate political inequality (for example, see Gallego 2010, Kim 2016).

Rising income inequality, combined with a shift of center-left parties to the right and waning union power, seems to counteract the positive effect of educational expansion on political participation. Rather than seeing a rise in political activity, we are witnessing stagnation or even decline, especially among the least well off. After reviewing the literature, it seems safe to assume that horizontal political equality has not improved much.

Open Questions: What Needs to Be Done?

Despite an impressive research effort, several questions still need to be addressed in future work. First, as most studies focus on rich democracies, it is less clear whether these patterns also hold in other world regions. Expanding the geographical scope of research is called for. Second, regarding income inequality, it is not quite clear whether the actual distribution or the perception of income inequality affects political (in)equality. People are not great at estimating inequality and often seem to misjudge their own position in the income distribution (see Gimpelson & Treisman 2018), but we do not understand fully how this influences their willingness to participate. Finally, new competitors, such as right-wing populist parties, might intensify polarization and possibly mobilize citizens who abstained from voting (or participating more generally) in the past—because they want either to support or to fight these parties (for example, see Han 2016, Leininger & Meijers 2020). As politics becomes more conflict prone, patterns of participation might change, too.

REPRESENTATION AND VERTICAL POLITICAL INEQUALITY

Pitkin (1967, p. 142), in her magisterial work on representation, does not subscribe to the view that substantive representation requires descriptive representation, even though she notes that “the representative’s characteristics are relevant only insofar as they affect what he does.” For her, representatives with different ideological orientations can represent different groups in society. “Acting in the interest of the represented” (Pitkin 1967, p. 209) does not depend on belonging to the group one speaks for. In contrast, advocates of the “politics of presence” (Phillips 1995) maintain that which policies representatives fight for is not entirely disconnected from who they are. Disadvantaged groups would benefit from a better numerical representation because, to give but one example, even the most benevolent male-only parliament might not be able to represent women adequately.

However, most champions of the politics of presence have rejected the idea that members of the working class, too, might need group representation (Mansbridge 1999; Phillips 1995, pp. 174–77; Williams 1998, p. 201). Phillips (1995, p. 173), for instance, argues that even though working-class citizens have always been marginalized in politics, “class itself has had an extraordinary presence.” Because the left-right divide used to shape party systems, she maintains, issues related to social class have not been silenced or blocked from the political agenda. Yet, as the alignment of class and votes has changed over time and working-class parties have steered toward the middle class, this argument has lost some of its force (for more details, see Elsässer & Schäfer 2022). In fact, recent studies point out that the numerical underrepresentation of the working class contributes to its substantial underrepresentation.

In this section, we look at recent studies that suggest that being present or absent in parliament also matters for different education groups or social classes. Parliamentarians from different class backgrounds, broadly understood, tend to differ in their political preferences, the policies they promote, and, sometimes, their voting behavior in the assembly (this section dovetails with Carnes & Lupu 2023). We start by looking at opinion congruence before we move on to policy responsiveness and, finally, to studies that link descriptive to substantive representation.

Unequal Substantive Representation: Whom Legislators Agree With

Since the early 2000s, a vivid research field has emerged that asks whether and to what extent less-privileged groups see their interests poorly represented in contemporary democracies (Giger et al. 2012). Scholars have tried to tackle this question by using different concepts and operationalizations of substantive representation. In addition, different measures of social stratification have been used to capture socioeconomic inequality, with the most common being income, education, and occupation-based measures of social class.

One important strand of this literature investigates the ideological proximity between legislators (or parties) and citizens, thus focusing on the ideological congruence between representatives and represented. While overlapping opinions or programmatic positions are not equal to an active representation of interests, congruence is often regarded as an important precondition for substantive representation (Miller & Stokes 1963). Focusing on differences across income groups, several authors document that politicians' or parties' positions are ideologically more closely aligned with those of richer citizens (Adams & Ezrow 2009, Bernauer et al. 2015, Lupu & Warner 2022, Persson 2021, Rosset 2013, Rosset & Stecker 2019, Schakel & Burgoon 2022, Schakel & Hakhverdian 2018).

In the most comprehensive study to date, covering a wide array of countries around the world, Lupu & Warner (2022) demonstrate that citizens with lower incomes are more distant to their legislators than are upper-income groups when placing themselves on a left-right scale. Concerning issue domains, they find a bias in favor of higher-income groups for economic questions, but greater ideological proximity between the poor and legislators on cultural issues such as same-sex marriage.

Using several survey items with a special focus on sociocultural questions, Schakel & Hakhverdian (2018) provide evidence that Dutch legislators' views are more congruent with those of affluent and higher-educated citizens than with the poor and those with low levels of formal education. In addition, they document that both income and education contribute independently to unequal congruence, which tends to increase over time. In line with these findings, Rosset & Stecker (2019) report for 16 European countries that government positions—taken from expert surveys—are more congruent with the views of better-off citizens. On questions of redistribution, the mismatch between low-income groups and governments is particularly pronounced, while the distance is greatest between citizens with lower levels of education and government with regard to European integration.

Extending this line of research, recent studies not only differentiate citizens regarding their socioeconomic positions and compare them to the (average) attitudes of legislators but also ask whether legislators from different social backgrounds differ in their preferences and priorities. They thus aim to test a crucial assumption made by proponents of descriptive representation, namely that underrepresented groups bring not only new and distinct perspectives but also different problem perceptions to the political process (Mansbridge 1999). Looking at countries in various world regions, the existing literature lends support to the argument that legislators with a working-class background bring more leftist economic attitudes to the political process, even when partisanship is controlled for (Carnes & Lupu 2015, Hemingway 2022, O'Grady 2019). For example, Carnes & Lupu (2015) highlight for 18 Latin American countries that parliamentarians with a working-class background prefer higher social spending and more government intervention in economic policy-making than their colleagues from other occupations. Similar patterns can be observed in Europe, where legislators from business occupations express less aversion to economic inequality and are less favorable to government intervention in the economy than former workers and service-based professionals (Hemingway 2022).

In sum, the literature on ideological congruence indicates that the views of those with fewer resources are systematically underrepresented in parliament and suggests that this is also due to the numerical underrepresentation of people with fewer resources. One shortcoming of this literature, however, is that it mostly relies on standardized surveys with only a small number of items asking for highly abstract policy preferences. This makes the results sensitive to the question wording and item selection and probably underestimates the differences in preferences for specific policies (Gilens 2009, Rosset & Stecker 2019). In addition, we cannot infer from these findings whether and to what extent preferences translate into legislators' behavior, which

ultimately defines whether policy-makers act for their constituents in the sense Pitkin (1967) defines substantive representation of interests. In parliamentary systems, party discipline might inhibit individual legislators from acting on their own preferences, thus strengthening the need for other measures to capture inequalities in substantive representation (Carnes & Lupu 2015).

Policy Responsiveness: Biased Decisions?

Addressing the link between citizens' preferences and legislative decisions, studies of policy responsiveness aim at capturing substantive representation more directly. While responsiveness studies have a long tradition in political science (Miller & Stokes 1963), they used to compare average public opinion to policy decision and thus did not differentiate between different segments of society and the (unequal) representation of their interests. In his pioneering study of unequal responsiveness in the United States, Gilens (2005, 2012) uses 1,779 survey items asking for the agreement/disagreement with specific policy proposals and relates the opinions of different income and education groups to the decisions taken up to four years after the survey question was asked. Covering three decades of policy-making and a wide range of policies, he shows that political decisions are more responsive toward high-income Americans, in particular when poor or middle-income citizens differ in their preferences from the rich (Gilens 2005, p. 789).

This pattern implies neither that the median voter never gets the kind of policies she wants nor that policies cannot be linked to public mood (Erikson 2015). In fact, preferences of medium- and high-income groups are highly correlated, and thus Soroka & Wlezien (2008) and Enns (2015) argue that the possibility for implementing policies that contradict the median voter's preferences is limited. Even if politics is more responsive to the rich, the middle might still get the policies it supports. Reanalyzing Gilens's (2005) original data set but with a focus on the 185 questions where majority support differs, Branham et al. (2017) report that the rich win 53% of the time and the middle 47%. Yet, this is only partially reassuring. First, as the authors note, given that the rich are a small group, they still seem to hold a disproportionately large sway on policy outcomes (Branham et al. 2017, p. 56). Second, Bowman (2020) insists that the exact definition of disagreement (preference gaps) and support (preference thresholds) has a strong impact on the results. Branham et al. (2017) only use those items where the majority of one group supports policy change while the majority of the other opposes it. These groups might still have very similar views if support is 51% in one group and 49% in the other. In contrast, Gilens (2005) uses opinion gaps (8 percentage points and more) to identify policy disagreement. In response to his critics, he introduces the distinction between popular (>75% support) and unpopular proposals (<25% support). Reanalyzing Gilens's data set and using 22 combinations of preference gaps and preference thresholds, Bowman (2020, pp. 1029–30) can show that in most scenarios, the affluent do have a stronger impact than the middle on policy change, especially when both groups disagree.

Using similar research designs as Gilens (2005), scholars have corroborated his findings on both the federal (Bartels 2008) and the state level (Flavin 2012) in the United States, as well as for a variety of European countries such as the Netherlands (Schakel 2021, Schakel & van der Pas 2021), Germany (Elsässer et al. 2021), Denmark (Elkjær 2020), Sweden (Persson 2021), Norway (Mathisen 2023), and Spain (Lupu & Tirado Castro 2022). Besides extending the geographical scope and documenting that unequal responsiveness exists in several rich democracies, some of these studies have focused on social groups beyond income, investigating representational inequality across educational groups (Schakel & van der Pas 2021) or occupation-based social classes (Elsässer et al. 2021). Taken together, most responsiveness studies find a prorrch bias in policy-making, in both economic and noneconomic policy domains (for recent meta-analysis, see Elkjær & Klitgaard 2021). Less clear, however, remains the evidence on whether there are systematic

differences across party families and whether inequality in responsiveness has increased over time (Mathisen et al. 2021).

Adopting a comparative approach, other scholars have used policy outcomes such as social spending or redistribution as their dependent variable and related those to standardized cross-national surveys (Donnelly & Lefkofridi 2014, Elkjær & Iversen 2020). For example, Elkjær & Iversen (2023) look at absolute and relative transfer rates for different income groups. They show that the income share of the middle has remained constant or even risen slightly in most countries (with the notable exception of the United States) and conclude that governments have been responsive to the interests of the majority. While this is an important reminder that substantial income redistribution is still taking place, it is not a counterargument to those who stress unequal responsiveness. Elkjær & Iversen (2023) deduct interests from the income position and do not prove that policy preferences diverge. However, most studies on policy responsiveness highlight that, in many instances, the preferences of different income groups are aligned—if they are not, though, the rich prevail. The median voter might coincidentally (Enns 2015) get what she wants because the highest-income groups support redistribution, too. For example, in the 2018 wave of the European Social Survey, even among the highest-income third, a majority agrees with the statement that “government should take measures to reduce differences in income levels” in 27 out of 29 countries. The rich are not generally opposed to ameliorating income inequality, especially since wealth differences are so much larger.

Biases in political decision-making also raise the question of whether the social background of the decision-makers themselves affects it. While such a link between descriptive and substantive representation has been empirically established for other social groups, most notably women (Hömann 2020, Volden et al. 2018, Wängnerud 2009), the empirical evidence on the influence of legislators’ class backgrounds is just beginning to emerge. Adopting different methodological approaches, existing studies confirm that the socioeconomic background of legislators influences not only their priorities and opinions but also their behavior in office (Alexadiou 2022, Barnes et al. 2021, Borwein 2021, Carnes 2012, Carnes & Lupu 2015, Grumbach 2015, Hayo & Neumeier 2012, O’Grady 2019).

For example, O’Grady (2019) compares legislators from working-class backgrounds to career politicians during two welfare state reform episodes in the United Kingdom. He uses speeches to position parliamentarians on the left-right axis. A number of points are worth noting. First, working-class legislators position themselves to the left of the median legislator within the Labor Party, while careerists position themselves to the right. Second, the former group sticks to its preferences even when the party leadership adopts a different position, whereas the latter group behaves more opportunistically. Third, when a career politician replaces the prototypical coal miner, this goes along with a rightward ideological shift. Taken together, O’Grady’s findings confirm that class background matters for the policy stances and behavior of legislators.

Using data from 18 parliamentary democracies, Alexadiou (2022) analyzes whether the class composition of cabinets affects welfare generosity. Even when she takes the partisan composition of cabinets into account, there remains a substantial effect of ministers’ class backgrounds. Higher numbers of working-class ministers and sociocultural professionals are associated with higher welfare generosity, whereas a higher number of liberal professionals is associated with welfare cuts. And cabinets with a higher share of sociocultural professionals are more responsive to the preferences of lower-income citizens. Again, who governs matters for the decisions governments make.

In sum, recent work highlights that the sociodemographic composition of parliaments and governments has an impact on the substantive representation of different social groups. As seats in assemblies today are filled almost exclusively with politicians with university degrees and from

high-status professions, the decisions they make are also more in line with the preferences of better-off citizens.

Open Questions: What Are the Mechanisms?

While the previous section hinted at unequal descriptive representation as one cause of unequal substantive representation, further mechanisms for these biases are plausible, too, but it remains an open question which ones are most relevant. Gilens (2005) highlights campaign finances as an explanatory factor of unequal responsiveness. To run for office, candidates in the United States depend heavily on donations, which creates pressure to act in the interest of large donors. Yet, this explanation does not fit equally well to European countries, where campaigns are financed publicly to a larger degree. Other factors seem less specific to individual countries. For example, lobbying seems to be a plausible mechanism that is present in all of these countries and might also shift policies toward the preferences of the better off (Boräng & Naurin 2022). Differences in political participation (not just voting), different levels of political knowledge, different priorities (Traber et al. 2022), and misperceptions of citizens' preferences (Pereira 2021, Sevenans et al. 2022) might also contribute to unequal responsiveness. Finally, long-term changes in party ideology and in the strength of corporatism could also make policy-makers less attentive to the preferences of citizens with fewer resources. Future research should help us to adjudicate between these different mechanisms.

Since most studies focus on the last two or three decades, it is another open question as to whether politics was more responsive to lower-class citizens in the past. In many rich democracies, voter turnout was higher and less unequal in the 1960s and 1970s, the labor movement and center-left parties were stronger, and economic growth rates were higher—these conditions might have been more conducive to politics catering to the preferences of poorer citizens. Yet, we do not know whether policy responsiveness was higher in the past, in part because we lack the appropriate data to answer this question.

Finally, the implications of unequal representation are not well understood. Do citizens accurately perceive these patterns, and how does it affect their view on the way democracy works? Does the feeling of being poorly represented fuel negative views of parties and politicians and influence preferences for procedural reforms? To what extent are the rise of right-wing populist parties and higher abstention rates linked to unequal descriptive and substantive representation? These are just a few questions that follow from the insights generated by recent studies on representational inequality.

BLIND SPOTS AND FURTHER RESEARCH ON POLITICAL INEQUALITY

There is ample evidence that citizens with fewer resources participate less and that their preferences translate less often into policies. However, it is not quite clear which kinds of resources matter most. Often, empirical studies use concepts such as social class in a very broad sense and resort to income and education to operationalize it. Anyone without a college degree could then be a member of the working class. However, to understand how social inequality translates into political inequality, we would have to know whether it is income, education, or occupation that matters most for political involvement. It is not obvious, for example, why below-average incomes should go along with lower levels of political participation. People with the same income might have little in common otherwise. In contrast, occupational measures of social class can point to shared workplace experiences that may lead to a common view on politics—especially if we use more fine-grained concepts of social class that distinguish between different levels of training and

work logics (Oesch 2006). Education, too, might affect how people think about politics and how likely they are to participate. And while rising levels of education can have a positive effect on political activities, those who fall behind might be even more unlikely to participate. If educational attainment is seen as an individual achievement, leaving school early becomes a personal failure. The ideal of meritocracy—even if not quite lived up to—might frustrate those who do not make it and enlarge the gulf between those at the top, including political elites, and those at the bottom (Sandel 2020). In short, the exact mechanisms of how different kinds of social inequality translate into political inequality are not well understood.

What is more, many studies of political inequality look at only one measure of stratification at a time; most commonly, they use income, education, or class. And even though gender or ethnic minority status is often controlled for, we still do not have enough studies that combine these different forms of social inequality. This omission may conceal how increased equality along one dimension may be accompanied by new forms of inequality along another. For example, in many rich democracies, the number of female legislators has risen over the last three decades. While there are still remarkable differences between countries and between party families, the general trend has been upward. Yet, those women who make it into parliament usually come from more privileged social backgrounds. Just like men, they are overwhelmingly university graduates and much more likely to come from the ethnic majority than from minority groups. The better representation of middle-class women ameliorates one kind of inequality but does not reduce inequalities based on resource endowment.

To understand these dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, we have to study, among other things, recruitment patterns in parties. If people do not participate because “nobody asks” (Brady et al. 1995, p. 271), we have to study who is being asked (Carnes 2018). What kind of heuristics do those in charge of recruitment use when they look for suitable candidates? Why are some groups more willing than others to run for office, and which factors keep the less well off from trying? And how do party organization and electoral rules influence the prospects of success of different groups? We would like to know whether and how these factors differ across democracies. Finally, what are the repercussions of the growing professionalization of political careers and the resulting social homogeneity of legislators for the motivation of those with less resources to enter parties or, even more fundamentally, to turn out and vote (Heath 2018)? The dynamic interplay of horizontal and vertical political inequality still needs to be understood.

CONCLUSION

In a democracy, political equality must be striven for despite a plethora of differences among the citizens. In this review, we have stressed that people differ in their personal and collective resources. In the face of these differences, perfect political equality might not be attainable. However, if inequalities of resources create permanent political inequality, democracy’s promise of an equal opportunity to have one’s voice heard is broken. To map political inequality, we have distinguished its horizontal and vertical dimensions. The former relates to differences among citizens. These can be grounded in legal barriers to participating or to running for office and also in resource inequalities such as time, money, or access to networks that challenge equal effective participation. Vertical political inequality refers to the differences between citizens and legislators or, more generally, decision-makers. Again, this type of inequality consists of two elements. It means that those in office have more influence on political decisions than those who are not, and it also refers to how similar or different decision-makers and citizens are. This is not inherently problematic, but if mechanisms of accountability and control do not work properly, legitimate power might turn into arbitrary power. High degrees of horizontal inequality in combination with social closure at

the elite level mean that the opportunity to influence political decisions is distributed unequally. The interplay of both kinds of political inequality means that decision-makers are not “adequately constrained” (Ingham 2022)—which would prompt them to act in the interest of all—and that they have leeway to make biased decisions.

Over time, political inequality can become self-reinforcing. If citizens with fewer resources think that their representatives are oblivious to their needs and preferences, they might turn away from politics in resignation. This, in turn, might lead those who want to run for office or who hold office to focus ever more strongly on those who do vote, write letters, enter parties, or donate money. If they infer from those who are active and who are similar to themselves what the public wants, the message is distorted in favor of the better off (Pereira 2021, Sevenans et al. 2022). If political inequality breeds more political inequality, differences in political interest or knowledge between social groups might not be the cause but rather the consequence of existing biases. A new wave of elitist thinking about democracy uses this kind of evidence to argue in favor of more political exclusion (Brennan 2017, Caplan 2007). In light of the research reported in this review, we should rather ask how old and new forms of political inequality can be fought more effectively.

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