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The Place of Inequality: Non-participation in the American Polity

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The recent history of political participation in the United States poses a particularly striking puzzle. Over the past several decades, the United States has stood out among wealthy capitalist democracies for its high and rising levels of economic inequality. Yet at the same time, the United States has continued to be distinguished by widespread political quiescence, far greater political engagement by the rich than the poor, and, until recently, the absence of even moderately redistributive policies. Students of capitalism and democracy, from Karl Marx to T.H. Marshall to Milton Friedman, have long suggested that rising inequalities would motivate the disadvantaged to exercise their political rights to seek economic redistribution. Yet this prediction seems to falter badly in the United States today.

2 Lawrence R. Jacobs and Theda Skocpol, eds., Inequality and American Democracy: What We Know and What We Need to Learn (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2003).

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Even in the 2008 election, despite an extensive mobilization effort by the campaign of Barack Obama and a financial crisis that appeared to threaten Depression-era economic conditions, turnout among the voting-eligible population was only moderately higher than in the 2004 election, and more than 60 percent of voters continued to come from families above the annual median household income of $50,000 (as was the case in 2004). Why? How can we explain the relative electoral quiescence of disadvantaged Americans in the face of sharply rising inequality, weakening social protections, and looming economic threats?

Given the centrality of political behavior as a subfield of modern political science, it is surprising how little analysis has been directed at this question. A great deal is known, of course, about how individual differences in socioeconomic status (SES) affect individual-level patterns of political participation. Yet it is impossible to draw conclusions from such studies about how rising inequality as an aggregate feature of American society matters for political engagement. Indeed, this blind spot has persisted even as the political consequences of economic inequality have emerged as a major focus of concern for students of American democracy.

We face, in short, an analytic conundrum. On the one hand, influential models of societal development predict that rising inequality at the aggregate level will stimulate political engagement among the disadvantaged, but these arguments pay little attention to the individual-level study of political behavior. On the other hand, individual-level models of political behavior predict that disparities in SES will make the disadvantaged less likely to engage in political participation, but these models largely neglect changing levels of economic inequality as aspects of broader societal development.

To adequately explain relative political quiescence in an era of rising inequality, we need an analysis that bridges this divide. In what follows, we advance this agenda by drawing individual differences and societal developments into a single account of structured political behavior. We begin by reviewing in greater depth the individual-level focus of political behavior research and its neglect of societal context and, more precisely, societal change. We then present evidence suggesting that this neglect of context distorts our understandings of political participation and leaves us poorly positioned to evaluate the electoral consequences of rising inequality. In the third section, we present a three-part account of how changes in political context, policy context, and community context help to explain why rising economic inequality in the United States has coincided with deepening class biases in political engagement.

Where Is the Context?

Differences among Individuals

Social scientists have analyzed a wide array of participatory behaviors in the American polity, ranging from activism in voluntary associations to protesting, letter writing, campaign activism, and, the most common form of all, voting. The primary focus of this research has been the analysis of individual decisions to participate, and the primary research tool has been the random-sample survey (directed variously at adults in the general population, those most likely to vote, or those exiting a voting location). Voting studies typically focus on identifying the types of individuals who vote and the factors that contribute to their voting decisions. They ask, for example, why individuals in some groups are more likely than others to turn out on Election Day. And they ask how votes cast for particular candidates can be traced to factors such as party identification, issue positions, and evaluations of candidate traits.

A clear and consistent finding emerges from this research: although formal political rights are widely distributed in the United States, these rights are exercised far more often by those with higher SES than by those with lower SES. Compared to wealthier citizens, lower income Americans tend to vote at lower rates and to participate less in a variety of other political behaviors, including writing letters to members of Congress and protesting (long considered the tool of the disadvantaged). Even in the 2008 presidential election, amid the Obama campaign’s large-scale efforts to mobilize lower income voters, those with higher SES turned out at significantly higher rates. According to the 2008 exit poll, Americans with earnings below the median household income (about $50,000) made up roughly 55 percent of the U.S. population but just 38 percent of voters; Americans with household incomes over $100,000 made up about 16 percent of the U.S. population but approximately 26 percent of voters in 2008.

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9 Kay Lehman Schlozman, Benjamin Page, Sidney Verba, and Morris Fiorina, “Inequalities of Political Voice” in Jacobs and Skocpol, eds., *Inequality and American Democracy*.
11 Ibid.
Efforts to explain why higher income earners participate more than individuals with lower incomes point to a variety of factors. Lower income individuals are less likely to have access to the skills and resources that facilitate political participation.\textsuperscript{12} They also have weaker ties to the civic organizations that recruit people into politics and, in the United States, have limited access to the trade unions that mobilize working-class voters in the European democracies.\textsuperscript{13} Citizens in the lower half of the income distribution are less likely to be targeted for political mobilization by strategic parties and candidates.\textsuperscript{14} They are also more likely to find that political contests are organized around issues that do not speak to their primary needs and interests.\textsuperscript{15} And of course, participation by low-income voters continues to be disproportionately constrained by institutional restrictions such as felony disenfranchisement laws,\textsuperscript{16} citizen-initiated registration,\textsuperscript{17} and workday rather than civic holiday voting arrangements.\textsuperscript{18}

To some observers, the greater tendency for individuals with higher SES to participate in politics has appeared to be an insignificant problem, or even a boon, for American democracy. Some evidence suggests, for example, that voters and nonvoters often share political attitudes, policy positions, and candidate preferences.\textsuperscript{19} In addition, a long line of political observers (including the Framers of the U.S. Constitution) and political scientists have argued that nonparticipation may be interpreted as a sign of contentment.\textsuperscript{20} Moreover, some scholars suggest that citizens with higher levels of income and education are likely to be more supportive of democratic rights and to make better quality evaluations of public issues and political choices.\textsuperscript{21}

Against such arguments, scholars have identified at least four reasons to be concerned about systematic class biases in rates of political participation. First, it turns out that the preferences of participants and nonparticipants (as measured by surveys) do differ on important issues. For example, the less well off are more likely than the more affluent to prioritize and support government social welfare programs.\textsuperscript{22} Yet the "voice of the people" on social welfare issues tilts strongly toward the priorities of those with higher SES. Indeed, the extent of this bias is larger than many observers realize, because lower income individuals are disproportionately likely to skip survey questions or to answer "don't know," which produces systematic under-representation of their views.\textsuperscript{23} Second, there are good reasons to be skeptical about efforts to equate the existing opinions of nonparticipants with the preferences these individuals would hold if they became more active in politics. Participation is an educative activity,\textsuperscript{24} and as lower income citizens become engaged, they may encounter new information that leads them to change their preferences on issues related to redistributive programs and the taxes that pay for them.\textsuperscript{25} Indeed, mass mobilization efforts typically have an issue basis and expose the disaffected to new arguments and issue frames.\textsuperscript{26} Thus, existing survey evidence may seriously underestimate the degree of difference between currently active political voices and potentially activated political voices.

Third, patterns of electoral participation matter not only for the preferences they convey but also for the ways in which they make groups more or less visible as potential sources of costs and benefits for elected officials. The behaviors of elected officials often follow a logic of anticipated reactions.\textsuperscript{27} When participation rates vary strongly along class lines, government officials get clear signals about the groups they can safely ignore without facing a backlash and the groups they need to keep happy if they hope to be reelected. Fourth and arguably most important, there is growing evidence that on issues where the policy preferences of rich and poor diverge, government policy is substantially more responsive to the preferences of more-affluent individuals and groups.\textsuperscript{28} Indeed, Larry Bartels finds that the votes of U.S. senators are

\textsuperscript{12} Verba, Schlozman, and Brady, \textit{Voice and Equality}.


\textsuperscript{17} Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward, \textit{Why Americans Still Don't Vote: And Why Politicians Want It That Way} (Boston, MA: Beacon, 2000).


\textsuperscript{19} Wolfinger and Rosenstone, \textit{Who Votes}?


\textsuperscript{22} Verba, Schlozman, and Brady, \textit{Voice and Equality}.


\textsuperscript{26} Piven and Cloward, \textit{Why Americans Still Don't Vote}, chap. 11.


highly correlated with the preferences of higher income individuals but exhibit virtually no responsiveness to the preferences of the least well off.\textsuperscript{39}

Income-related biases in political visibility and responsiveness are compounded in the American polity by their close alignment with educational differences. Higher levels of education are associated with greater political and civic engagement, not just because they raise absolute levels of skills and knowledge, but also because of social sorting processes that shape the relative position individuals occupy within social and economic hierarchies.\textsuperscript{30} Educational credentials, particularly a college degree, function as gateways to advantaged social networks, occupational groups, and residential locations. Indeed, in recent decades, Americans have been sorting themselves into increasingly distinct and homogenous clusters of unequal social privilege and political influence, intensifying the social and political isolation and polarization of neighborhoods.\textsuperscript{31}

In short, while democracy is premised on an inclusive and egalitarian political order, studies of American democracy suggest a more troubling reality. Higher and lower income Americans often differ in what they prioritize and want from government; they participate at dramatically different rates as a result of a variety of intersecting factors; and as a result, the voices that government officials hear from and respond to are systematically biased in favor of those with higher levels of income, education, and other closely related attributes.

\textit{Rising Economic Inequality}

Given the strong connection between SES and political participation, one might expect rising economic inequality in the United States since the 1970s to further widen the class disparity in political participation. In an era in which rights have been extended to incorporate more Americans along racial, ethnic, and gender lines, disparities in income and wealth have risen sharply. Indeed, in recent decades, data from authoritative government and nongovernment sources (especially the U.S. Census Bureau, the U.S. Treasury Department, and Federal Reserve banks) document that income and wealth in American society have become concentrated at levels that are rare among affluent democracies.\textsuperscript{32} The economic gap has widened, not just between the rich and poor, but also between the affluent and the middle strata of white-collar and blue-collar workers. In a perfectly egalitarian society, each fifth of the population would receive 20 percent of a country's income. Today, the most affluent fifth of Americans receive about 48 percent of total family income, a sum that is approximately double the proportion received by each of the two quintiles immediately below them (approximately 22.9 percent and 15.3 percent, respectively) and more than fourfold greater than the bottom two quintiles, which each received less than 10 percent of total family income.\textsuperscript{33}

Although the rich have always enjoyed more income, their share has increased dramatically over the past three decades. Figure 1 shows that between 1947 and 1973, in the era of "the great compression" in American incomes, the growth of real family income among those in the top fifth was slower than in any of the other four quintiles. Between 1973 and 2000, the rate of income growth in this group was by far the fastest (increasing by 66.9 percent compared to 36.5 percent for the fourth quintile, which enjoyed the second fastest growth rate).\textsuperscript{34} Indeed, income inequality grows steeper the farther one moves up the ladder. Within the top 20 percent of income earners, rates of gain were far faster for the richest 5 percent than for the next 15 percent, and rates of gain for the top 1 percent exceeded those of all other groups by large margins.\textsuperscript{35} Finally, the economic retrenchment after 2000 was less than 1 percent for the affluent, whereas those with the lowest incomes experienced a decline of 7.8 percent.

Rising economic disparities are even greater with regard to wealth. Research by the Federal Reserve Board in 2004 on the distribution of household income and net worth (i.e., total family assets minus liabilities such as mortgages and other forms of debt) found that the top 1 percent of households drew 16.9 percent of all income but wielded control over more than double this proportion of the country's wealth (34.3 percent). By contrast, the super-majority of the country—the "bottom" 90 percent of households—earned the majority of household income (57.5 percent) but controlled only 28.7 percent of the country's wealth.\textsuperscript{36}

Although inequality has grown in other post-industrial democracies—in Europe, Canada, and elsewhere—inequalities of wealth and income are larger and have risen faster in the United States. Figure 2 shows income trends for families in the United States, France, and Britain. The most striking feature is the parity that holds for much of the twentieth century but then abruptly


\textsuperscript{30} Nie, Li, and Stehlik-Barry, \textit{Education and Democratic Citizenship in America}.

\textsuperscript{31} Bill Bishop and Robert G. Cushing, \textit{The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America Is Tearing Us Apart} (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 2008).

\textsuperscript{32} Sheldon Danziger and Peter Gottschalk, \textit{Uneven Tides: Rising Inequality in America} (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1993); Osberg, Smeeding, and Schwabish, "Income Distribution and Public Social Expenditure."

\textsuperscript{33} Unless otherwise noted, the next three paragraphs are based on Lawrence Mishel, Jared Bernstein, and Sylvia Allegretto, \textit{The State of Working America 2006/2007}, An Economic Policy Institute Book (Ithaca, NY: ILR Press, an imprint of Cornell University Press, 2007), Table 1.9, Figure 1.1, and Table 5.1.

\textsuperscript{34} Figure 1 from: Mishel, Bernstein, and Allegretto, \textit{The State of Working America 2006/2007}.


\textsuperscript{36} Table 5.1 from: Mishel, Bernstein, and Allegretto, \textit{The State of Working America 2006/2007}. 
changes in the mid-1970s, when the United States becomes far more unequal. By 2006, the share of income enjoyed by the top one-tenth of 1 percent of families was two to four times greater in the United States compared to situations in Britain and France.

There are, of course, significant debates over why economic inequality has risen and why it has risen faster in the United States than in other wealthy democracies. A wide range of demographic, technological, and political factors have surely played important roles. What is clear, however, is that the inequalities generated by markets in the United States are not out of line with those generated by markets in the European democracies. Rather, the rich have pulled away from the rest to a greater degree in the United States because of the absence of institutional labor market arrangements and tax and transfer policies that have tempered market-generated inequalities in Europe.

The Elusive Political Effects of Rising Economic Inequality

If household SES is strongly related to individual political participation, and if economic inequality has been spiraling upward in recent years, it stands to reason that political participation in the United States has become more unequal as a result of rising disparities in household income. Or maybe not. Researchers

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26 Osberg, Smeeding, and Schwabish, “Income Distribution and Public Social Expenditure.”
have produced precious little evidence that such a direct effect exists and, in fact, there are good reasons to question the idea that changes in the U.S. income distribution, by themselves, account for the expanding class bias of U.S. electoral participation. To start with, rising income inequality in the United States has been driven primarily by changes at the high end of the income distribution, with relatively minor changes in the relationship between middle- and lower income Americans.39 By contrast, the growing class bias in voting has been driven primarily by changes at the lower end of the income distribution, as participation rates have fallen more quickly for lower income citizens than for other Americans.40 This empirical mismatch seems hard to square with the idea that wealthy individuals are simply converting their higher incomes into higher rates of electoral participation. Indeed, the logic of such an argument is suspect in its own right: if higher income people already possessed the resources needed to vote at high rates, there is little reason to expect that additional increments of income have done much to raise their participation rates further.

Indeed, the American Political Science Association’s Task Force on Inequality and American Democracy found from its review of class bias in political participation that the evidence was inconclusive: “We know little about the connections between changing economic inequality and changes in political behavior.”41 Some research finds “almost no” change in the class bias in voter turnout between 1964 and 1988 in presidential elections42 and in midterm elections between 1958 and 1994.43 Other studies find a positive relationship between voter turnout and levels of income inequality over time and across nations.44

Thus, a critical question remains open to debate: How, if at all, have recent increases in economic inequality affected patterns of political engagement? To what extent, and in what ways, have the political behaviors of individual citizens been reshaped by aggregate-level changes in the economic context? These questions take on particular poignancy in light of the fact that Barack Obama’s determined mobilization efforts failed to produce a significant increase in the proportion of voters from families earning below median income.

40 Freeman, “What, Me Vote?”,
41 Jacobs and Skocpol, Inequality and American Democracy, 661.

To address them, we need to move beyond conventional individual-level research on political behavior. Studies of individual voters are likely to produce misguided answers because they focus narrowly on what higher and lower SES individuals possess (traits, resources, etc.) while ignoring deeper changes in the ways higher and lower SES individuals are positioned in relation to political processes, government policies, and one another. To understand how rising economic inequality has affected political behavior in the United States, we integrate both individual and contextual factors into a common frame of analysis, examining more closely the interplay of changes in individual characteristics (such as income) and changes in the social, political, and policy contexts that individuals occupy. Just as important features of public opinion tend to be misunderstood when researchers focus on individuals and fail to place aggregate patterns in political context,45 the linkages between economic inequality and political participation tend to remain obscure when analysts focus solely on individual characteristics, or only on broad societal changes.

In what follows, we present evidence that the interaction of micro- and macro-level factors has played a central role in the changing class bias of the American electorate. We then outline a series of explanations to make sense of this interplay. Rising income inequality in the United States has coincided with a growing class bias in voter turnout because it has been accompanied by—and has contributed to—significant changes in the social, political, and policy contexts that influence the behaviors of individual citizens.

**Political Participation in Contexts of Inequality**

To illustrate the interplay of individual characteristics and contexts, and to provide a starting point for the explanatory analysis that follows, it is helpful to consider a simple descriptive analysis of how the relationship between income and electoral participation has changed in recent decades. To construct this analysis, we combined individual-level survey data from the American National Election Studies (ANES) and aggregate-level data on county income patterns from the U.S. Census. By merging these data sources, it is possible to describe how voting patterns in the United States were related to family and county income levels in the 1970s, when income inequality was just starting to rise, and in the 1990s, when it had become quite pronounced.46

46 County-level income categories are based on the 1970 and 1990 decennial censuses, with counties placed in one of three categories based on their position in the distribution of median county incomes: 1 = quintiles 1 and 2; 2 = quintiles 3, and 3 = quintiles 4 and 5. The 1970s analysis includes ANES respondents from the 1970, 1972, 1974, 1976, and 1978 studies. Likewise, the 1990s analysis includes ANES respondents from the 1990, 1992, 1994, 1996, and 1998 studies. Respondents are divided into three categories of family income based on tertiles. The dependent variable is a dichotomy indicating whether the respondent voted in the national elections (1) or did not (0).
Table 1 presents a simple logistic regression analysis of voter turnout. The dependent variable is a dichotomous measure of turning out to vote (as measured by ANES) regressed on three independent variables: family income (which is measured in tertiles and drawn from the ANES), the median family income of the county (three clusters of quintiles—one and 2, 3, 4, and 5—drawn from the U.S. census), and a term capturing the interaction of these two items.

Table 1 presents some striking results. In the 1970s, during the waning days of "the great compression" of American income distribution, the probability of voting was higher among individuals with higher family incomes (b = .419 at p < .01 level of significance). What is notable, however, is that the income level of one's county of residence had statistically significant effect on voting participation during this period. In addition, the income level of one's county did not alter the relationship between family income and voting participation in any significant way. In other words, county economic context had no measurable direct or indirect effect on individual participation: the disparity in political voice across higher and lower income communities could be traced with some accuracy to the simple fact that higher and lower income individuals differed in their rates of participation.

By the 1990s, however, after two decades of sharply rising economic inequality, county economic context emerges as a factor that dramatically deepens the class biases in American electoral politics. As during the 1970s, family income has a large effect on voting participation; the coefficient for this variable increases in Table 1 from .419 to .719 (p < .01 level of significance). There is, however, an important new development: the variables for the median family income in the county of residence and its interaction with family income move from statistical insignificance in the 1970s to statistical significance in the 1990s. These results indicate that, by the last decade of the twentieth century, the effects of family income are compounded by the independent effects of county-level income differences and by a significant interaction in which family income effects are enhanced by differences in county income levels.

Figure 3, which summarizes the predicted probabilities generated by the models in Table 1, presents two key findings. The first important change is that voting declined for all families between the 1970s and the 1990s. Indeed, the point estimates for all nine groups defined by family and county income levels are lower in the 1990s than in the 1970s. Compared to their levels in the 1970s, the predicted probability of voting in the 1990s falls below 0.6 for low-income families, below 0.7 for middle-income families, and below 0.8 for higher income families. The second striking change concerns the emergence of a powerful multiplier effect associated with individual and community economic standing. In the 1970s (left panel), we observe three parallel lines. Higher family incomes are associated with higher probabilities of voting, but this pattern is unaffected by context (namely, county income levels), as indicated by the relatively flat slope of each line. By the 1990s, however, a sharp change is evident: the probability of participation drops for every group, but it does so at a much sharper rate for residents of middle- and, especially, low-income counties. Individuals at all family income levels had far larger declines in participation if they lived in lower income counties. The greatest impact of economically depressed context is borne by lower income families: the declines in voting among residents of lower income counties were significantly larger for individuals in low-income families than for individuals in medium- or high-income families. Although poor Americans living in low-income communities were worst hit, the compounding effects of family and community also hit middle America by the 1990s. The political impact of economic inequality extended beyond the poor into middle-income families and communities.

By the 1990s, a political logic of compounding economic advantages and disadvantages had taken hold. The series of parallel flat lines that we find for the 1970s is replaced by an interaction of individual characteristics and county contexts that intensifies class bias. Among the most economically advantaged (upper right of each panel), the predicted probability of voting declined only 5 percent between the 1970s and 1990s. Among the most economically disadvantaged (bottom left of each panel), the predicted probability of voting fell by 27 percent during this period.

This empirical analysis challenges leading accounts of inequality and democratic participation on two fronts. First, the analysis confirms that participation...
The critical analytical challenge for students of American democracy and
decision-making is to develop a framework for explaining this change. It is to this
task that we now turn.

**Structured Political Behavior**

In politics as in many aspects of life, the interplay of context and individual
choice is a two-way street. On the one hand, social, political, and policy con-
texts define the parameters within which individuals make decisions. Individ-
uals who live in affluent, well-networked communities and who are the
beneficiaries of supportive government policies, for example, will have readily
available opportunities to engage in a wide range of political activities, from
writing checks to campaigning to organizing personal visits and letter-writing
efforts directed at senior government officials. On the other hand, individuals’
characteristics—their resources, skills, attitudes, and calculations—define their
abilities to access political contexts, assess political venues, identify political
opportunities, and develop effective strategies to capitalize on them. U.S. polit-
ical history is shot through with examples of low- to middle-income Americans
who made more of their political context than one might have predicted based
on an individual-level analysis.50

The challenge, then, is to understand the ongoing interplay of individuals and
contexts over time, focusing on how the terms of this interplay change in
politically consequential ways. In the sections that follow, we offer an account
of *structured political behavior* that focuses on the interaction of contexts and
individuals. Specifically, we focus on changes in three core aspects of American
society and politics.

**Changes in Policy Context**

The period of expanding class bias in political participation, from the 1970s to
the 1990s, was defined by dramatic changes in the public policies that shape
Americans’ life conditions and position them in the political process. Public
policies are often thought of as political outcomes. Pluralist accounts, for in-
stance, treat the resources and activities of organized interest groups as causal
forces in the policymaking process. Functionalist accounts focus on social and
economic environments, highlighting the imperatives they create for policy re-
responses. In these and other traditions, policies lie at the tail end of political
processes and seem to play little role in the operation of democracy.

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50 Frances Fox Piven, “Institutions and Agents in the Politics of Welfare Cutbacks,” in Soss, Hacker
and Mettler, eds., *Remaking America*, 141–156; Theda Skocpol, *Diminished Democracy: From Mem-
bership to Management in American Civic Life* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2003); Paul
Pierson and Theda Skocpol, eds., *The Transformation of American Politics: Activist Government and

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104–145.
Over the past two decades, however, scholars have increasingly shown how government policies construct political environments for individuals and groups by structuring incentives, resources, and interpretative frames of reference. Today, a growing literature suggests that policy designs can play a key role in shaping patterns of status, belief, and action in the citizenry.

Four kinds of "feedback effects" (from policy to politics) merit attention in this regard. First, policies distribute resources to citizens that can facilitate political engagement. These resources matter for the political capacities that individuals possess in their own right and encounter in their social networks and communities. Second, policies position groups in relation to the major institutions of state, market, and civil society and in relation to one another. Depending on its design, a policy may facilitate the incorporation of a group on full or equal terms or place the group in a subordinate and marginal position vis-à-vis state officials and other important societal actors. Third, policies convey cues to groups about their status in the polity, the importance of their problems, and the ways that government is likely to respond to them. Through their public treatment of policy targets, policies suggest whether particular groups deserve dignity and privacy or require monitoring and discipline. Policy actions send messages about political possibilities and realities, and policy designs structure direct personal experiences of government in ways that teach important lessons about the wisdom and efficacy of exercising voice as a citizen. Fourth, policies may support and protect citizens in ways that are visible, traceable, and collective, or they may do so in ways that make it difficult for citizens to see the supportive hand of government at work and unlikely that they will recognize the interests they share with others. In this manner, policies may stimulate political organization, solidarity, and accountability, or they may foster atomized publics with little sense of what they have in common and at stake in politics and government.

A host of studies have found that policy designs can have a potent influence on citizens’ political attitudes and behaviors. Moreover, by treating distinct groups in different ways, policies can encourage significant disparities in political engagement. What is less clear is how policy changes since the 1970s have repositioned more- and less-affluent segments of American society and how this repositioning, in turn, may have increased class biases in political engagement.

The period between World War II and the early 1970s was marked by a sharp expansion of social protections in an era of diminished economic inequality and growing democratic incorporation. Far from coincidental, these developments were integrally related and mutually supportive. As social policies strengthened economic security and opportunity at mid-century, they also functioned as engines of civic and political incorporation for disadvantaged groups (though often with distinctive and exclusionary implications for racial minorities). The expanding welfare state supplied politically relevant resources to lower and middle-income Americans; it stimulated the growth of organizations that recruited people into politics; and it presented citizens with visible evidence of their collective stake in government outputs and political processes.

During this period, the value of Social Security benefits rose sharply, and coverage expanded to include new sectors of the workforce and new categories of beneficiaries, such as the disabled. In addition to lifting many Americans out of poverty, the growth of Social Security created incentives and opportunities for interest groups to form and work diligently to mobilize affected citizens into electoral and legislative processes. Benefits and coverage also expanded in unemployment insurance (UI) and in the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program. Likewise, protective labor policies expanded in ways that bolstered wages and facilitated the growth of union memberships.


Campbell, How Policies Make Citizens.

and mobilization efforts. The G.I. Bill created a major new benefit stream that raised the skills and education levels of low- and middle-income Americans and drew them into the mainstream of civic and political life.

These and related policies played a key role in reducing disparities of income and wealth in mid-century America. In the process, they elevated the collective political capacities of low- and middle-income Americans. As citizens in this group gained resources and skills as individuals, they also found themselves better positioned for recruitment into politics because political capacities were simultaneously growing in their social networks and communities. These dynamics, in turn, were bolstered by the growth of political organizations such as labor unions and the AARP a development that could be traced to government policies and that served to mobilize policy constituencies into politics.

The large social programs of this period drew diverse Americans together as collectives in expanding pools of shared risk and common interest. They also provided Americans with a visible symbol of how government made a positive difference in the lives they led as workers, family members, and community residents. Direct personal experiences with policies such as the G.I. Bill were "marked by fairness and ease of accessibility." Even the least powerful beneficiaries of the welfare state, poor women in the AFDC program, were eventually assimilated into a regime of rules and procedures designed to promote privacy and due process. As these changes occurred, confidence in government grew; citizens expressed stronger belief in the responsiveness of government and the efficacy of political action; and rates of participation in civic organizations and political activities reached "twentieth-century peaks." Since the 1970s, the policies of the U.S. welfare state have changed in complex and uneven ways. Expenditures on healthcare have risen dramatically, and protections for the disabled and elderly have expanded in coverage and strength. By contrast, social policies directed at non-elderly, non-disabled citizens in the lower half of the income distribution have changed in ways that have worked to reverse their civic and political incorporation. Beneﬁts in programs such as UI and AFDC have declined precipitously and now cover far fewer Americans. Veterans' beneﬁts became a pale shadow of the vigorous supports once offered by the G.I. Bill; the real value of the minimum wage declined; and Pell Grants offered weaker assistance for low-income individuals seeking to attend college.

At the same time, tax expenditures grew rapidly and came to play a far more prominent role in government efforts to achieve social goals. Tax expenditures differ from the major mid-century social programs in two ways that matter for political engagement. First, they provide beneﬁts to Americans on an individualized basis, often in ways that make it harder to trace beneﬁts to policies and to discern the centrality of government's supportive role. In this sense, growing tax expenditures signal the rise of a "hidden welfare state" guided by "subterranean" and highly technical political processes that engage the attention of very few non-elite Americans. A second key difference between the major mid-century social programs and today's rising tax expenditures is that the latter distribute beneﬁts disproportionately to middle- and higher income citizens. The earned income tax credit has become a major source of support for low-income working Americans. Spending on this program, however, is dwarfed by tax expenditures that go primarily to middle- and higher income Americans through policies such as mortgage interest deductions, real estate tax deductions, retirement savings deductions, and tax subsidies for employer-sponsored health insurance and pensions.

Thus, since the 1970s, the resources distributed by government social policies have become less progressive in distribution, less widely shared across class lines, and less visible as a reminder of the stake that lower and middle-income citizens have in politics. At the same time, other policy changes have altered the kinds of interactions that low-income Americans have with government. The social rights ethos of mid-century welfare provision has been superseded by a paternalistic approach that emphasizes the use of direction, supervision, and penalties for noncompliance to change welfare recipients' behaviors. Client experiences in the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program, for example, are focused on hierarchical authority relations

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50 Mettler and Milstein, "American Political Development from Citizens' Perspective."
with caseworkers who hold substantial discretion over the distribution of benefits, services, obligations, and punishments. Government is encountered as a directive and potentially punitive authority, and recipients have little control over the terms or content of their program activities. Experiences with such programs tend to increase citizens’ doubts about the responsiveness of government and the efficacy of exercising political voice.

The rise of welfare paternalism has been accompanied by changes in criminal justice policy that have produced a stunning rise in incarceration rates. Between 1970 and 2000, the prison population in the United States increased six times over. The effects of this custodial turn have been felt most keenly in low-income communities, and especially in poor communities of color. By the age of 35, around 14 percent of white men without a high school degree can expect to have spent time in prison; the corresponding number for black men is 59 percent. It is hard to overstate the consequences of this custodial turn for civic and political marginality. In many states, a prior felony conviction strips individuals of their eligibility to receive social welfare benefits, pursue many types of jobs, and/or vote at election time. Relative to similar men who have not been incarcerated, men who have been to prison earn lower wages, experience more unemployment, and have lower odds of getting married or cohabiting with the mothers of their children.

Taken together, the policy changes described in this section have profound implications for political engagement in the United States. Evidence suggests that citizens who came of age at mid-century encountered policies that facilitated egalitarian political incorporation: experiences with means-tested and non-means-tested social programs were associated with voting rates indistinguishable from the population at large. By contrast, members of more recent generations exhibit significantly lower participation rates if they have experienced means-tested programs targeted at the poor and significantly higher participation rates if they have benefited from non-means-tested programs. Voting rates among the growing number of low-income Americans who have been incarcerated are extremely low. And a variety of studies suggest that people who experience paternalistic AFDC/TANF programs vote at rates significantly below those who share their social characteristics. Moreover, states with more paternalistic welfare policies also tend to be states with higher levels of class bias in voter participation.

These patterns stand in stark contrast to the mid-century pattern of policies that drew low- and middle-income Americans into civic and political life. Today, Social Security offers a distinctive reminder of the mutually supportive relationship between policy and political engagement in this earlier era. Social Security beneficiaries are significantly more likely than other Americans to be targeted for political mobilization by parties and candidates; their participation is facilitated by policy-focused political organizations; they are significantly more likely to vote at election time; and their participation represents a powerful barrier to policy changes that would withdraw government support. Thus, it is no surprise that the class biases in voting that have emerged in recent decades remain smallest among older Americans. For non-elderly Americans, however, policy changes since the 1970s have multiplied the political disparities associated with rising economic inequality. The affluent have been repositioned in ways that have deepened their social and political advantages, while Americans below the median income level have been demobilized by policies that are less generous and visible, more paternalistic and custodial, and less supportive of organized and efficacious program constituencies.

Changes in Political Context

The policy changes just described have occurred in the context of broader developments in the U.S. system of political representation and citizen engagement. The restructuring of elite politics and electoral competition since the 1970s created incentives for policymakers and candidates, along with political parties and interest groups, to become less responsive to majority public preferences that often stretched across class lines and to reduce their investments in mobilizing middle- and lower income voters into the political process. Instead, government officials responded to the intense preferences of more-particularistic and more-advantaged groups in the American polity. The failure of politicians to converge to the midpoint of public opinion and to mobilize the disengaged...
and reduce the class bias in participation may strike some observers as surprising given the competitiveness of the two major parties during recent presidential and congressional elections.90

Yet recent experience in the U.S. political system has not conformed to the predictions of the median voter theory. Over the past three decades, Americas' policy preferences and ideological orientations have remained relatively stable while the policy goals of candidates and public officials have moved toward the ideological poles.91 Concerns about rising inequality and financial vulnerability have grown in the American public, yet government officials have done relatively little to mitigate income disparities or protect families from new forms of social risk.92

In recent decades, government officials have exhibited weak and declining levels of responsiveness to median public preferences.93 Since the early 1980s, floor votes by members of Congress have exhibited only weak ties to the median preferences of voters in their congressional districts,94 and U.S. House members have become more attentive to the ideology of the national party than to the ideology of their constituents.95 Policy choices in government have closely tracked the preferences of higher income groups, business interests, and sectional interests, while displaying a far weaker relationship to median public preferences and virtually no discernible relationship to the preferences of low-income Americans.96


The biased patterns of government responsiveness matter for our story because they reflect deep structural changes in the U.S. political system and in the incentives confronted by political elites. Rational candidates and officeholders have become more likely to seek out and respond to activated and affluent groups and, at the same time, have increased their capacity to discount the views of middle- and lower income citizens without paying a political price.97

Since the 1970s, power and control have shifted decisively from party leaders to political action committees, interest groups, and, especially, higher SES activists who provide the primary base of support for candidates and officeholders in terms of financial contributions, volunteering, and votes necessary to win the party's nomination and then the general election.98 Surveys of national party conventions since 1976 indicate that the delegates who represent each party's most engaged activists embrace policy positions far outside the views of the general public or even of their fellow (but less-active) partisans. In recent decades, the distance between party activists and the general public has not only expanded, it has done so in an asymmetrical manner, with Republican activists moving considerably farther away from the center than Democratic activists.99 Thus, delegates at the Democratic conventions and caucuses became a bit more liberal, whereas delegates to the Republican conventions and caucuses became decidedly more conservative. In 2008, for example, the proportion of Democratic delegates that identified themselves as liberal was 43 percent compared to 26 percent of the general public that identified as liberal. The proportion of Republican delegates that identified themselves as conservative was 72 percent compared to 36 percent of the general public.100

Candidates and officeholders seeking to win party nominations and to lock in the support of party activists face intense pressure to take extreme positions that diverge from those of the opposing party and from centrist opinion.101 The results of these pressures were illustrated during the 2008 nomination battle.

101 Aldrich, *Why Parties?*
when Senator John McCain abandoned his earlier and publicly popular approach to comprehensive immigration reform, which President George W. Bush shared, in the face of intense pressure from Republican Party activists. In addition to applying pressure to candidates, party activists work upstream to recruit candidates who will be inclined to support their policy goals. Indeed, many candidates are drawn to politics by their initial experience as activists and by their attraction to the more extreme policy positions of their fellow activists.

The rising power of party activists has created strong incentives for politicians to discount the preferences of broad public opinion. Its impact has contributed to historic levels of polarization within Congress as representatives have pursued policy positions increasingly distant from the positions of the other major party and the median American voter. As Figure 4 reveals, the distance between the parties at the end of the twentieth century was wider than at any point over the preceding 130 years.

At the same time that candidates and officeholders have had strong incentives to focus on the demands of polarized party activists, they have confronted weaker incentives to reach out to lower and middle-income Americans. Since the 1970s, both major parties have become highly reliant on wealthy donors to fund campaign efforts, and accordingly have become highly sensitive to the preference distributions of potential donors. As political competition has become more dependent on funding than on foot soldiers, candidates and parties have increasingly practiced a form of “rational prospecting” that focuses mobilization efforts on higher income Americans. As Andrea Campbell has recently documented, party mobilization efforts shifted significantly after the 1970s away from voters in the bottom third of the income distribution and toward higher income voters. The result of this shift has been that “party mobilization efforts reinforce rather than combat underlying patterns of political inequality.”

As the national party system has become more competitive in recent decades, it has also been subdivided in ways that undercut incentives to mobilize broad coalitions of support. Because each party has maintained firm control of particular states and regions, meaningful incentives to mobilize have often been restricted to just a handful of “battleground” jurisdictions. Redistricting changes have reinforced this effect by loading particular districts with ideologically homogeneous voters. Thus, even though the political parties are closely divided at the national level, they each ignore large parts of the country in which their rival enjoys a dominant position and, they reason, in which investing resources would probably be “wasted.” In sum, one of the ironies of American politics is that closely contested national elections coexist with parties that do little to activate a demobilized and biased electorate. The Obama campaign of 2008 offers an important counterpoint to this pattern because it invested more seriously in efforts to mobilize the excluded and less-advantaged. Yet if the Obama campaign presents a counterpoint, the persistence of a steep class bias in electoral turnout in 2008 underscores the strength of the intersecting structural forces highlighted by our analysis. It is particularly striking that even

- Ibid., 68.
with the Obama campaign's financial and electoral opportunities to make incursions into the South and parts of the Sunbelt, it ignored many states in the South and West just as the McCain campaign coded much of the West Coast and East Coast.

Beyond the party system, the political engagement of middle- and lower-income Americans has been further blunted by the decline of encompassing organizations that drew these publics into politics in the past. Organized labor—a decisive influence into the 1960s in pressing for policies that assisted middle- and lower-income Americans—saw its membership slip from over 30 percent to 12.1 percent of the overall workforce in just three decades. The unionization rate in the private sector was just 7.5 percent in 2007. Rates of union membership in the United States are among the lowest in economically developed democratic countries, leaving working-class Americans distinctively disadvantaged in the organizational processes that mobilize citizens into politics. Moreover, because of splits within organized labor and other developments, the AFL-CIO no longer serves as a dominating peak association.

At the same time, since the 1960s, we have witnessed the fading away of class-integrated mass membership organizations that historically incorporated working-class people and linked them to political processes. For much of American history, large federated voluntary associations helped to build cross-class coalitions in communities and to link citizens to government policymaking at the state and national levels. Over the past four decades, these civic associations have been replaced by narrower issue organizations that are more dependent on foundation funding and wealthy donors and are directed by professional managers. Such organizations have no mass memberships of their own to mobilize and do little to draw broader coalitions of middle- and lower-income citizens into electoral and legislative processes.

The cumulative effects of developments in the American system of political representation and citizen engagement during recent decades have been to erode the organizational underpinnings of mass political involvement. With working-class and cross-class organizations in decline, individual differences in political resources, skills, and networks—strongly correlated with SES—have become more decisive in shaping patterns of political engagement. This development has been reinforced by the growing need to focus on affluent donors and polarized party activists rather than broad coalitions of citizens. It has been strengthened further still by the growing incentives and capacities for electoral campaigns to target their mobilization efforts narrowly in higher SES communities where dollars are more plentiful and high turnout rates are more likely.

The cascading effects of advantage in the political process for the better off has contributed to the class bias in policy feedback discussed in the previous section. In particular, the bias in political representation has sent sharply divergent messages to elite and non-elite Americans about whether they can expect government to respond to their political efforts, which in turn shape differential evaluations by citizens of their efficacy and the likely payoff of investing their time and resources to attempt to influence government policy.

In short, three basic developments have converged to expand class biases in political participation as inequality has risen in recent decades. First, citizens have become increasingly likely to enter the political arena with unequal resources, skills, and expectations of responsiveness. Second, elite political actors, who respond to, inform, and mobilize citizens in the political arena, treat citizens quite differently based on their social and economic status, catering to the better off and ignoring or minimizing their attention to those who are disadvantaged. Third, these disparities have been exacerbated by dramatic shifts in government policy that have advantaged the political positioning, capacity, and rationality of citizens who are already better off. The point at which these forces come together and interact is inevitably the local community—a site of equally momentous change over the past three decades.

Changes in Community Context

Political participation is a fundamentally social act. Indeed, as many scholars have noted, it would be irrational and rare for citizens to vote if this behavior depended solely on self-interested calculations, given its relatively high costs and limited direct benefit. Political engagement emerges from an ecology of social relations that is, in significant respects, local in nature. An individual can become significantly more or less likely to participate in politics depending on the interactions she or he has in families, peer groups, neighborhoods, workplaces, religious organizations, and community groups.

Thus, when advantaged or disadvantaged citizens become concentrated in particular locales, community contexts function as force multipliers in political life. The advantages that flow from individual resources and skills are compounded by the returns that accrue from living in a community where political information is plentiful and organizations engage local residents. Conversely, living in deeply disadvantaged neighborhoods both imposes harsh conditions and removes critical communities and networks in schools, religious organizations, and other bodies that might bolster skills and opportunity for enterprise individuals. Political parties and candidates acutely evaluate these changing community conditions and behave as rational prospectors. Rather than

108 Skocpol, Diminished Democracy.
109 Ibid.
As these sorts of neighborhood problems concatenate, levels of collective efficacy—beliefs in a shared capacity to achieve goals as well as beliefs in government responsiveness—decline markedly.¹¹⁰ This dynamic is strengthened further when poor neighborhoods are clustered together and add fuel to one another’s problems.¹²⁰ By contrast, areas of concentrated affluence appear to generate an opposite dynamic in which they “gain advantages simply by their proximity to other neighborhoods with high levels of collective efficacy.”¹²¹ Thus, privileged neighborhoods benefit from a confluence of individuals who possess resources, skills, and efficacious attitudes and from a confluence of well-functioning community organizations that range from high-powered schools to well-staffed libraries and religious organizations.

The result is that, as the most affluent become more segregated from other parts of American society, the social ecologies that provide the most basic backdrop for political life grow farther apart and more unequal as conditions for political engagement.

For all these reasons, the degree of class bias in American electoral politics hinges, in large part, on patterns of residential segregation in American society. As income inequality rose in the United States in the last decades of the twentieth century, so too did levels of residential segregation. Income-based segregation rose dramatically after 1970,¹²² with the strongest shifts toward residential isolation occurring among the poor and the most affluent.¹²³ In 1970, the average poor family in the United States lived in a census tract where 13.6 percent of residents were poor; by 1990 this number had risen to 27.9 percent.¹²⁴ The residential concentration of affluence grew even more sharply and by 2000, had become significantly stronger than the concentration of poverty. Douglas S. Massey and Mary J. Fischer report that “during the final three decades of the twentieth century, the poor increasingly came to inhabit poor neighborhoods and the affluent increasingly came to live in affluent neighborhoods.”¹²⁵

The spatial reorganization of communities along class lines during this period was not restricted to the relationship between income and residence. Resi-

¹¹¹ Ibid.
¹²⁴ Ibid., 21.
dential sorting also increased in relation to other politically relevant aspects of SES such as education and occupation. High- and low-skilled workers became increasingly likely to work in different firms and Americans became increasingly likely to select marital partners with earnings profiles similar to their own. In schools and workplaces and other local institutions, Americans of different classes became increasingly likely to move in separate social worlds. Moreover, as poor and working-class people became more isolated from the affluent, their communities bore the brunt of destabilizing shocks associated with deindustrialization, rising rates of job turnover, and the outsourcing of jobs that had once offered stable income streams across the life course.

Viewed from this perspective, the findings presented earlier in Table 1 and Figure 3 take on deeper meaning. As Americans have become more segregated by class, distinctive ecologies of political advantage and disadvantage have emerged in higher and lower income communities. When communities were more integrated along class lines, citizens with fewer political resources were more likely to benefit from their connections to the politically advantaged. As class-based segregation rose, however, it concentrated myriad political advantages for some and a host of political disadvantages for others. As middle- and particularly lower income Americans became more concentrated, their communities depressed their electoral participation in ways that stood in contrast to individuals living in more affluent areas.

**CONCLUSION**

In recent decades, a combination of changes in individual resources and social, political, and policy contexts has restructured political behavior in ways that reinforce and widen class-based disparities in political participation. The extent of these changes is likely to be systematically underestimated by analysts who concentrate on individuals and ignore the mobilizing and demobilizing effects that political, policy, and community contexts can exert.

In American politics today, rising inequality appears to coexist with political quiescence and a growing participatory tilt toward the economically advantaged. This pattern defies the expectations held by influential theorists who have carefully explored the relationship between democracy and capitalism. Rather than provoking a sharp increase in political engagement and demands for redistributive policies, rising economic inequality has weakened citizen engagement and fueled a shift toward government policies that favor the already advantaged.

The larger question is whether sustained and perhaps deepening inequality may foster more intense and unruly political participation. Observers ranging from Karl Marx to T.H. Marshall have argued that severe disparities in the living conditions and statuses of social classes predictably give rise to protest and rioting. A century of conservative politicians from Otto von Bismarck to Theodore Roosevelt sought to head off such disruptive responses by establishing political and social rights and by constructing institutional arenas for political participation in place of extra-constitutional activities. Since the 1970s, conservatives in American politics have largely abandoned this ameliorative approach. In an era of polarized politics and conservative ascendance, policymakers in the United States did far less than their counterparts in other wealthy democracies to combat dramatic redistributions of income, assets, and economic risks. They have overseen one of the sharpest increases in economic inequality experienced by an established democracy, and have done so with virtually none of the concerns about social disruption that animated earlier generations of conservatives.

Contemporary conservatives have exhibited a curious amnesia about the utility of social provision for maintaining social order. If the past is a guide, they may be due for a rude challenge as spiraling financial and economic crises intersect with diminished social protections and with inequalities of wealth not seen since the Gilded Age. In recent decades, the structural and contextual changes analyzed in this article have combined to foster political quiescence amidst rising economic inequalities. It would be a mistake, however, to view this quiescence as a settled matter and to ignore the potential for sharp and prolonged economic distress to generate significant demands and disruptions.

Barack Obama's election, and the campaign that produced it, may signal a new era of political engagement that invites and achieves broader citizen participation. If so, the form of this participation remains highly uncertain. To date, the steep class bias of American voter turnout remains intact, and mass political action continues to flow through conventional political channels. If economic distress rises sharply and government responsiveness does not increase to a commensurate degree, neither condition may hold. Insurgent popular movements may emerge, and we may become reacquainted with the disorganized and fleeting periods of political turbulence that have done so much to reshape American democracy and society in the past.

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22 Sampson, Morenoff, and Earls, "Beyond Social Capital."
26 Piven, "Institutions and Agents in the Politcs of Welfare Cutbacks."
27 Pierson and Skopol, eds., *The Transformation of American Politics."