

An Analytical Perspective on Participatory Inequality and Income Inequality

A paper for the Russell Sage Foundation Project
on the “Social Dimensions of Inequality”

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Introduction

At least since the *sans culottes*, literally “those without pants,” streamed through the streets of Paris in 1789 to overthrow the Ancien Regime, modern social theorists have been concerned with the relationship between income inequality and political participation. Connections between people’s economic resources and their political activities surely date back to antiquity, but the appearance, in the late eighteenth century, of democratic nations with novel forms of mass participation and the onslaught, in the nineteenth century, of the industrial revolution with its starkly unequal social classes, led to new speculations about how income inequality produces political activity. De Tocqueville worried that democratic participation would allow the lower classes to use their political power to level society, erasing all differences (including income inequality) and creating uninspired homogeneity. Marx predicted capitalism’s extreme income inequality would eventually generate working class consciousness that would lead to the revolution of the proletariat and communism. In both formulations, economic inequality would spawn political participation that would transform the society.

With the rapid rise in income inequality in the United States from 1979 to 1994, it is a good time to reevaluate this classic concern of social theorists. Modern social scientists have explored the relationship between income inequality and revolutionary activity across many countries (e.g., Hibbs, 1973; Gurr, 1970), and they have investigated the relationship between income and conventional activities such as voting, campaign work, and campaign contributions by individuals (Verba and Nie, 1972; Wolfinger and Rosenstone, 1980). Neither of these strains of research, however, adequately addresses the questions raised by the changes in the past thirty years in America. In a stable democratic society such as the United States, income inequality seems less likely to foster revolutionary activity than to erode the conventional activities of some groups and to stimulate the conventional activities of others, leading to changes in who gets what, when, and how. And the finding from cross-sectional surveys that political activity increases with higher income captures just part of the story. It says nothing about how over-time increases in income inequality affect political participation.

This paper offers an analytical perspective on income, income inequality, and participation, and it presents new empirical work that goes beyond existing research. The analytical perspective draws upon economics and political science to consider how income and income inequality might affect participation. The empirical research reveals the seemingly paradoxical result that from the 1970s through the 1990s, participatory inequality decreased for at least some forms of political participation as income inequality increased. The analytical perspective suggests various reasons why this might be so, and it provides avenues for future research. Although we append an extensive bibliography of articles that we have consulted, this paper does not provide an article-by-article review of this literature, partly because there are several other excellent literature reviews (Leighley, 1995; Schlozman, 2002; Verba, 2001; Freeman, 2002) but primarily because the greatest need is for an analytical perspective on this literature that considers the objectives of the Russell Sage Foundation’s project on the “Social Dimensions of Inequality.” Without such a perspective, the empirical findings are obtuse, recondite, and confusing.