

Political Inequality and the Democratic Process¹

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Abstract

The foundation of democracy is the equal participation of its citizens in the political process. Equal voice is a prerequisite of equal democratic influence. This chapter argues that two trends are increasing the social status biases in political voice across most established democracies—and discusses the implications of this trend. The general decrease in voting turnout is occurring disproportionately among the less-educated and lower social classes. At the same time, increased participation in direct or contentious forms of political action is disproportionately occurring among upper social status groups. Both forces are widening the social status gap in political participation, which diminishes the representation of the unheard citizens, distorts policy outcomes, and feeds political alienation. The essay closes by discussing ways that democracies can address this topic.

Keyword: political participation, inequality, social status, voting turnout, protest, campaign activity, democratic reform

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The democratic ideal is based on citizens expressing their preferences through the political process and having a meaningful influence on the government.¹ Elections have traditionally been the main conduit for citizen input. However, a negative indicator of the health of democracy is the broad decline in voter turnout in most affluent democracies. Each decade, fewer and fewer voters are showing up at the polls on Election Day.

Thus, it is a positive development when more people have access to new means of democratic participation (Smith 2009; Cain et al. 2003). Citizens are using increasingly diverse methods beyond voting to influence their government. These new forms of participation greatly expand the potential for citizens to influence public policy and further democratic progress. However, the irony is that because these activities require greater resources, skills, and cognitive demands from participants, they may further widen the participation gap between higher status individuals and those with fewer resources. Compounding this trend, the decline in turnout is typically greater among lower-status citizens, which exaggerates the participation gap.

This chapter shows that the changing pattern of citizen participation is widening the participation gap between the politically rich and the politically poor in contemporary democracies. Even if there is a de jure equality in political opportunity, a de facto inequality in actual participation may widen differences in the voice of different social and ideological groups. If this is the case, an increasing participation gap may erode the foundations of democracy that are based on the equality of the citizenry in their ability to influence political outcomes. The reality of democratic voice is falling short of the ideal.

After briefly defining the theoretical and political importance of equality to democratic participation, this essay focuses on the inequality of political voice as a function of social status characteristics. These are not the only factors to consider in explaining citizen participation; they

were chosen because prior research highlights the importance of social status to political activity. The essay then describes the levels of participation inequality across a set of contemporary democracies. The first area is voting in elections, both across nations and across time. The essay then compares inequality for other forms of political action. Finally, we discuss the implications for contemporary democracies and their citizens.

The Equality Principle

Robert Dahl (1996, 639) stated the classic argument for why equality is essential for meaningful democracy:

“in making collective decisions, the . . . interests of each person should be given equal consideration. Insuring that the interests of each are given equal consideration, in turn, requires that every adult member of an association be entitled to participate in making binding and collective decisions affecting that person’s good or interest. This principle, in turn, requires political equality, which can only be achieved in a democratic system.”

This principle is widely endorsed by nearly all modern democratic theorists.²

Involving all the public in politics also strengthens the democratic process. Jeffersonian logic argues that political participation produces better citizens. People who participate typically become more informed about political issues. This is why analysts often describe elections as a national civics lesson when the public hears and discusses current policies affecting their lives. Other research suggests that people increase their understanding of the complexity of the democratic process, with both positive and negative consequences (Parry and Moyser 1992, ch. 12; Fillieule in this collection).

Electoral politics has historically moved toward decreasing inequality. First came the gradual expansion of the voting franchise to a wider share of the male population. In addition, systems of double voting for some groups (like university graduates in Britain or weighted voting in 19th Century Germany) were abolished. Women gained the franchise in the early 1900s in most democracies. Today, electoral systems are structured on the principle of equal access to the vote. Proportional representation systems are most effective in ensuring equality if the electoral districts are relatively large. The bias is potentially greater in majoritarian electoral systems that elect a single official from a district, especially if districts vary in their population. The principle of “one person, one vote” is now the accepted standard.

Another rationale for political equality is that the public and the polity benefit if the whole population is involved in political decisions. People articulate the needs that governments should address. If this input is lacking or distorted, then the decisions of the government may be suboptimal (Bartels 2008; Hacker and Pierson 2011). If societal needs go unaddressed, problems may fester and generate larger distortions in government administration and policymaking. For example, if policymakers do not hear of the true costs of deindustrialization, the costs will mount. If they do not hear of the true costs of inequality in social and economic opportunity, society will suffer. Policy-making that considers the full social and political consequences would be more democratic, and presumably more successful in the long run.

A democracy that is ineffective in ensuring equal voice may also generate discontent in the populace, which can erode the social contract that democracy is based upon. Research suggests that participation and democratic rights are strongly related (Welzel 2014). Freedom of the press is higher in nations with more political protest, and protest is higher in nations with greater press freedom. Even more striking, other research demonstrates that the quality of

democratic governance is positively related to the level of citizen participation and the equality of participation by social status (Dalton 2017). One of democracy's strengths is in ensuring the basic human right to have a voice in the decisions affecting one's life.

These considerations lead us to examine the levels of political inequality in various forms of political participation across a set of contemporary democracies.

Social Status and Participation

It is implausible that full equality in political voice will ever be achieved. Yet, this is an inquiry into the inevitable inequality of participation. Some forms of inequality may be more or less randomly spread throughout the population, without great bias in how social strata, religious groups, regional populations, or other subgroups are represented. For instance, personal interests vary. Some people are disinterested in sports or popular culture; other people distance themselves from politics because of their personal preferences. If non-participation is a relatively random personal choice, then the consequences might still be consistent with the principle of equal opportunity.

The opportunity to participate does not ensure that everyone can exercise this opportunity, however. And the principle of "one person-one vote" does not ensure that everyone votes. Even when voting is compulsory, some people still decide not to vote. Moreover, the formal principle of equal participation does not apply to other forms of political action: contacting one's representative, attending a political meeting, participating in protest activities, or posting political comments on social media. Thus, as political participation expands into new forms of activity, the potential for inequality of voice and influence increases. This is especially the case when various forms of action make greater financial, time, or social capital than

showing up on Election Day to cast a ballot. The expansion of participation may, therefore, increase the inequality of political influence.

Of central concern is when inequality stems from factors that limit a person's potential to participate and are often beyond the individual's control. The most direct example of this follows from the civic voluntarism model of Verba and his colleagues (Evans in this collection; Verba, Nie, and Kim. 1978; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; Schlozman, Verba and Brady 2012). Their studies and other research almost universally find that higher social status (e.g., education, higher status occupations, and income) represents essential *skills and resources* that enable people to participate in politics. For example, having the leisure time to read the news, and the skills to follow media discourse helps foster political engagement.

Social status also reflects a set of *cognitive abilities* that facilitate activity. Education and high-status occupations often encourage (or select on) the ability to process complex information such as sorting through the policy choices at election time. Effective lobbying activity also requires substantial skills and sophistication.

Norman Nie, Jane Junn, and Kenneth Stehlik-Barry (1996) showed that social status further encourages a set of *citizenship norms* that encourage participation, what they call "enlightened citizenship". Higher SES individuals are more likely to feel efficacious about their potential political influence. Other research indicates that educational experiences can influence a person's understanding of the political world and affect the formation of citizenship norms (Welzel 2014; Dalton 2021). Higher status individuals are more likely to have a broader view of their role as democratic citizens, which can expand the boundaries of political action. Nie and his colleagues (1996, pp 5-6) stated that higher social status can "encourage understanding of and adherence to [the] norms and principles of democracy."

The ‘standard model’ of political participation thus maintains that social status is a strong predictor of who exercises political voice. Higher-status individuals, especially the better educated, are more likely to have the time, the money, the access to political information, and the ability to become politically involved. The implication of the standard model, however, is to predict that a systematic subset of the population will have a lesser political voice—which erodes the basis of democratic voice and representation. This is the central topic of this essay.

Governments’ are less likely to consider the silent groups that may need government protection or assistance the most, while the politically engaged garner even more government benefits. Such inequalities might be constrained or countered in elections where there is a formal limit on activity. Labor unions may mobilize working-class voters in support of leftist parties, or civil society groups may mobilize marginalized population groups. But the mobilization of participation is different for other types of political activity. The cognitive and financial demands of participation in non-electoral activity may thus accentuate social status bias compared to voting turnout.

Of course, other forms of political equality exist in contemporary democracies. Gender is another potentially important factor in producing the inequality of political voice (Burns, Schlozman, and Verba 2001; Kittilson and Bernal 2021). Traditional social norms and lower levels of social-economic status historically restricted women’s political participation in many nations. But this is changing. Since the 1980s, the proportion of women in the United States that have cast their ballot in Presidential elections is higher than the proportion of men out of the eligible adult population (Leighley and Nagler 2014). The gender gap in Europe has also narrowed over time (Norris and Inglehart 2003; Gallego 2008; Smets and van Ham 2013;). Gender is an important factor, but social status divisions are much wider.³

A participation gap can also exist across racial/ethnic groups in many contemporary democracies (Just and Anderson 2012, 2014; Leighley, Abraján, Markarian 2021). For example, if Hispanics participate less in American politics, or Afro-Caribbeans are less active in Britain, this may reflect their modest resource/skill endowments. Immigrant workers typically have lower political skills and resources—and political influence—in their new home. A generation or two ago, most societies were less diverse than they are today. Population migrations and changing rules about citizenship are increasing diversity in most contemporary democracies. However, most established democracies still have small minority populations, especially with established citizenship to vote in elections. The composition of ethnic/racial minorities also varies widely across nations, making cross-national comparisons more difficult. Even though this is beyond the scope of this chapter, racial/ethnic divisions are also likely linked at least in part to differences in social status.

Inequalities in Participation

Electoral research has closely studied the social status inequalities in voting turnout (Blais 2000; Wattenberg 2009; Leighley and Nagler 2014; Gallego 2014). Voting is the most common of political activities and makes relatively modest time and resource demands on the citizen. At the same time, voting determines the composition of legislatures and representation in the government. It is the cornerstone of the democratic process. If some groups systematically do not vote, this creates a representation deficit and may erode the foundations of democratic politics. Thus, turnout provides a benchmark for other aspects of political participation

Inequalities in involvement also inevitably extend to other forms of political participation. When cities hold public hearings, there is a bias in which people are prepared to argue their case before local officials. When a campaign approaches, the more affluent are more likely to make

contributions to their preferred candidates because they have the resources to make donations. The more affluent and educated citizen is also more likely to write their representative and participate in online political forums. And surprising to some observers, these same individuals are also more likely to protest and use other contentious forms of political action. The resource-rich are more likely to make their voices heard through many methods, the political poor may go unheard.

Moreover, inequalities for these other types of participation are likely greater than for voting in elections (Schlozman, Verba, and Brady 2012). Voting is exceptional because of its one person-one vote rules. No one limits the number of letters a citizen can write to their representative, the number of meetings they can attend, or how often they can post political themes on social media. In addition, many of these non-electoral forms of action require greater skills and resources than showing up to vote on Election Day. Working on a campaign, organizing a petition, or writing letters makes more time and resource demands on the individual, which increases stratification.

The impact of various skills and resources also can vary across different forms of political action (Marien, Hooghe and Quintelier 2010; Dalton 2017). Disposable income might be more important for political contributions, than for protesting. Educational skills might be more important for contacting and organizing activities than for attending a rally. Or, a trend away from time-based activities (such as working in a campaign) toward money-based activities (such as campaign contributions) may affect who participates in electoral politics. In summary, if the patterns of political participation are changing over time, this may affect the size of the participation gap.

Evidence from the 2014 International Social Survey Program (ISSP) can illustrate the patterns of social inequality in political activities.⁴ The ISSP survey asks about five types of participation: voter turnout, contributing money to a political or social cause, contacting a public official or the press, contentious/protest activities, or participating in an internet forum on politics.

Several social status traits can influence participation rates. Previous research points to the potency of educational effects in shaping political activity. The better educated feel more efficacious, have skills and resources that facilitate participation, the income to contribute to campaigns, and are socially connected in ways that encourage political activity (Smets and Ham 2013; Bovens and Wille 2010; Verba 2003). Income is especially relevant when financial resources or the leisure time they provide enhance a citizen's abilities to participate. Those in professional occupations also have the benefits of resources and skills to participate. A subjective measure of social status can summarize a person's class status.

<Place Figure 1 about here>

Figure 1 displays the relationship between these social status traits and participation patterns for all of the 28 ISSP democracies combined (national patterns are described below). The simple correlations (r) in the first panel shows that people with more education, higher incomes, professional/ managerial occupations, or with higher subjective social class tend to vote more often than their counterparts. Each of these social status measures reflects the skills, resources, and abilities that enhance citizens' abilities to follow the complexity of elections and make their voices heard. And even though their influence overlaps, the combination of social status traits is an even more predictor of turning out to vote.⁵

Perhaps even more striking, the correlations between social status measures and voter turnout are generally smaller than for other activities. Despite the extensive attention given to the inequalities in voting, *this is one of the most equal forms of political activity*. Because they make more demands on participants and are unconstrained, contributing money and political contacting show higher levels of inequality for each of the four social status measures (Teorell, Sun, and Tobiasen 2007; Vráblíková 2017; Dalton 2017; Cf. Stolle and Hooghe 2011). Thus as more educated, higher income, and middle-class citizens increasingly turn to these activities, the overall inequality of political voice has grown.

The patterns for protest activity demonstrate this widening participation gap.⁶ The popular lore is that protest is the domain of marginalized groups who do not have access to politics by conventional means. To an extent that is true. In broader terms, however, protest activities have become a conventional method of participation by a wider share of contemporary publics. Students and young people protest, as always, but they are joined by environmentalists, senior citizens, parents of school-aged children, doctors, truck drivers, farmers, and a wide range of other groups. Protest has become the extension of conventional participation by other means. Moreover, to engage in protest, to organize a petition, or buy products for political or ethical reasons requires skills and resources beyond checking a ballot (Quaranta 2016). Consequently, the correlation between education and protest is nearly three times larger than the correlation with voter turnout.

There has been much speculation and contrasting evidence on how online participation will affect the inequality of participation. As the internet developed, researchers debated whether online activism would accentuate or lessen the social status participation gap (Schlozman, Verba and Brady 2012: ch. 16; Anduiza, Jensen, and Jorba 2012). On the one hand, by decentralizing

and dispersing the channels for political expression, this might engage more people in political discourse especially those who did not participate in traditional channels. On the other hand, access to the internet varies by social status, and even today the skills and resources represented by SES are valuable in navigating the web, following political discussions, and contributing online. Thus early studies of various online political activity concluded that the same SES biases could be observed as for other political activities (Cantijoch, Cutts, and Gibson 2016).

The ISSP asked a simple question about participation in any online political forum. Online participation is more complex and diversified. Yet, this item shows a significant social status gap, albeit smaller than for other non-electoral forms of participation. One might expect that maintaining a political blog, joining online campaigns, and other such activities would display wider stronger social stratification than voting (Scholzman, Verba and Brady 2012).

Inequalities over Time

A single survey provides a snapshot of participation patterns in contemporary democracies, but a further question is whether inequality is growing over time. Politics is becoming more complex, and seemingly follows the Alice in Wonderland example of citizens having to run just to stay in place. The relatively tranquil politics of the 1950s and early 1960s now contrasts with political debates on a wider set of policy issues, confronting a more and more complex international economic system, and new international conflicts.

Inevitably, people with higher levels of social skills and resources are more likely to vote, and their turnout has persisted over time. In the United States, for example, the Census Bureau's Current Population Surveys show that the overall decline in turnout over the past several decades (Figure 2).⁷ However, the rate of decline is markedly higher among less-educated citizens. For

instance, people with less a primary school education had a more than 2.5 percent decline in turnout per four-year electoral cycle. By comparison, turnout dropped by only 1.0 percent per election cycle among people with a bachelor's degree or more. Consequently, the education gap increases between these two extreme groups; a 28.5 percent gap in turnout in 1964 increases to 43.0 percent by 2012. Analyses of the American National Election Studies show similar trends over time.

<Place Figure 2 about here>

The same pattern has been found in several other West European democracies (Birch, Gottfried, and Lodge 2014; Armington and Schädel 2015; Dassonneville and Hooghe 2017).⁸ Another study of voter turnout in seven established democracies found that the education gap widened in most nations between 1975 and 2014 (Dalton 2017). Thus, the politically rich have become even more disproportionately influential in determining election outcomes in most established democracies and thus likely the policies enacted by democratic governments.

Meanwhile the less educated, the poor, and members of the working class are turning away from elections and losing their voice. There is disturbing evidence that increases in income inequality are at least partially fueling this widening participation gap (Schäfer and Schwander 2019; Birch, Gottfried and Lodge 2014; Solt 2010). Moreover, such a policy cycle might further erode participation of lower status individuals who conclude the political system is unconcerned with their needs (Solt 2008). This would suggest a self-reinforcing process of lower turnout generating less attention to the non-voters, which further lowers turnout.

The same question can be asked about non-electoral activities that have increased in frequency over time. It is difficult to track the inequality of non-electoral participation because there are few long-term series asking about these activities and the nature of non-electoral

participation changes over time. Researchers often have to mix different items or have a relatively short time span. Some studies find little evidence of increasing inequality (Stolle and Hooghe 2011). More recent cross-national research comparing participation in the 1970s to the 2014 ISSP found increasing inequality for attending a meeting, contacting, signing a petition, or attending a demonstration; more detailed and comparable time series from the United States displayed the same pattern (Dalton 2017, ch. 9). Supporting this position, Mark Bovens and Anchrit Wille (2010; 2017) have provocatively argued that the Netherlands, and other democracies, are moving toward a “diploma democracy” in which the better educated are expanding their political involvement at the same time the less educated are virtually absent from electoral politics.

In summary, two different participation trends are increasing the social inequality of citizens’ political activity. On the one hand, decreasing levels of voter turnout are leaving behind the less-educated, lower-income and working-class public who now vote less often. On the other hand, citizen involvement in other non-electoral forms of participation has been expanded and this is increasingly the domain of the better-education, affluent, and middle-class public. The sum total of both trends is that political voice is becoming more and more unequal in most contemporary democracies.

Cross-national Patterns of Inequality

Behind the broad patterns for all the ISSP nations combined, inequality in participation can also vary across nations. Inequality is especially likely for voter turnout because of the influence of electoral systems and rules (Teorell et al. 2007; Gallego 2014). Table 1 presents the correlation between education and turnout for each of the 28 ISSP nations that asked the turnout question.

Two results stand out in these comparisons. First, there is a significant inequality of turnout between education groups in most nations. The average correlation ($r=.12$) is substantively a meaningful voting gap, and all but 4 nations show a positive relationship. Inequality is virtually endemic to democratic electoral politics.

<Place Table 1 about here >

Second, this evidence shows that educational inequality in voter turnout level varies substantially across nations. The United States displays the highest level of inequality ($r=.33$), which is equivalent to a 52 percent turnout rate gap between those with primary versus post-secondary education! It is as if each less-educated voter was competing with two more-educated voters in deciding the election. The contrast to the U.S. example is the nations with mandatory voting that restricts inequality (such as Australia and Belgium) and several Scandinavian and other nations

Several factors explain the excessive inequality levels in the United States: a restrictive voter registration system, majoritarian elections, complex ballots, workday voting, and problems in electoral administration. Similar institutional factors in other nations would also raise the hurdles to vote and thus make voter skills and resources more closely tied to who votes and who does not. In addition, high level of social and income inequality in resources, as in the United States, also affects the social status inequality of voter turnout (Anderson and Beramendi 2014; Pontusson, and Rueda 2010). Denmark, Finland, Iceland, and Norway are good examples of nations that have relatively low inequality of turnout, linked to the mobilization of the working class by unions and social democratic parties and low social inequality in the skills and resources of their citizens. Other research demonstrates that the declining share of unionized workers is

linked to the overall decline in turnout in Western democracies (Gray and Caul 2000), which is concentrated among working-class and less-educated voters (see Figure 2).

National conditions may also come into play for inequality in other forms of participation (V. The right column of Table 1 presents the correlation between education and an index combining the four non-electoral activities for each nation.⁹ The contrast between columns is striking. While education inequalities in voter turnout are troublesome, inequality in non-electoral activities shows a participation gap that is nearly three times larger. This gap exists both in countries with compulsory voting (Australia and Belgium) and in Scandinavian nations that have successfully moderated inequality in voting. Equally striking, the United States displays the highest level of educational inequality in participation for both voting and non-electoral activities. In contrast, Japan and South Africa stand out for their low inequality for both voting and non-electoral participation. Unconstrained by the rules that limit and equalize participation in voting, the resources and skills of the more educated (and higher income, middle-class occupations) citizens give them a disproportionate voice in the democratic process beyond elections.

The table also shows some variability across nations. Less research has examined the impact of various contextual factors on social status differences in non-electoral participation (Vráblíková 2017). Christensen (2011), for example, found that open institutional structures (strong parliamentary structures and decentralized governing) have less inequality across educational groups for membership in public interest groups, political consumerism, and protest. Weldon and Dalton (2014) found that consociational political systems had higher levels of social status inequality, but other factors such as federalism and income inequality did not affect inequality in participation. There is a substantial overlap in the ranking of nations on both voting

inequality and non-electoral inequality, which suggests that some general societal factor—whether institutional or cultural—are at play.¹⁰ Overall, however, institutional factors appear to have less impact on non-electoral participation because the usage of these activities is by definition less-institutionally structured.¹¹

Addressing the Inequality Problem

Arend Lijphart used his 1996 presidential address to the American Political Science Association to make both the political and normative arguments for political equality. He stated: “unequal participation spells unequal influence—a major dilemma for representative democracy.” (Lijphart 1997, 1; Skocpol 2003). I agree with Lijphart, but the situation has become more challenging over the subsequent two decades.

Two trends have increased the inequality of citizens’ voice (and influence) within contemporary democracies. In most nations, the decline in voter turnout has come disproportionately among the less-educated and the less-affluent. The reasons are complex, including their feeling that the political system is not attentive to their needs and their lower ability to be politically active. This reciprocal relationship depresses turnout further over time. The result is that elections—and the governments selected by elections—are increasingly biased toward upper-status voters.

The second trend involves the expansion of participation beyond voting. More people are more politically active in varied ways than was the case a generation or two ago—even allowing for the decrease in voting turnout. This marks a positive expansion of democracy because more voice means a larger role for the public in the political process. But these non-electoral forms of

action are even more disproportionately used by upper-status citizens who possess the skills, resources, and networks to be engaged in these more demanding forms of action.

These two trends exacerbate the inequalities in who participates and which voices policymakers now hear. If financiers on New York's Wall Street or London's Square Mile lobby for their interests, this is normal politics. If blue-collar workers in Ohio or the Ruhrgebiet are not involved, their policy views and needs go unheard. The same problem would exist if we reversed the roles of the two groups—although this is very unlikely. Environmental problems can lead to global climate change if unaddressed. Deindustrialization and growing income inequality can generate social and economic problems that are more easily solved by addressing the root problems. And to argue, as some scholars have, that the interests of those without university degrees can be well-represented by graduate-degree holders contradicts the literature on descriptive representation for gender and race/ethnicity. In the long-term, it is not beneficial for society and the democratic process if only some voices are heard, and these shape the policies of democratic governments.

Well-educated citizens taking advantage of new participation opportunities is a positive development for democracy. Many of their concerns address issues shared by the public at large, empowering the citizenry. They are being good citizens in expressing their interests. So the political process should not consider limiting their participation. However, if there is a wide gap in who participates, and the loud voice of some drowns out the weaker voices of others, this is not beneficial for those who are not heard or the polity overall.

Addressing this participation gap poses a continuing challenge for democracies. A root cause of political inequality is the persistence of social inequality in contemporary societies, and to some extent, this will continue. Even the most equal democratic societies show an inequality

in political voice. At the same time, however, social inequality has grown over time, so that we are moving in the direction that widens the participation gap (Stiglitz 2013; Piketty 2014). Any efforts to address the large structural issues are likely to be long-term methods of reform. There are ways for democracies to encourage the equality principles they claim to support—but inequality of voice is a very difficult problem to solve.¹²

Political parties may be vehicles to articulate the needs of the working class and less educated, and mobilize these citizens to become politically active. This was traditionally the electoral base of leftist parties, but as many of these parties moved to the center to attract middle-class voters this lessened the voice of lower status citizens. Electoral politics is taking on the form that Bovens and Wille (2017) term a diploma democracy, with voters and elites now drawn disproportionately from the better-educated, even for parties that once spoke for and included members of the working class.

One consequence is that many democracies are seeing a rise in new right or left-populist parties that focus on the interests of the working class and underprivileged. Rightist populist parties have a base in France, Belgium, Italy, and several Scandinavian parties, while leftist populist parties have grown in Spain, Greece, and several other European states. In other nations, there are challenges from the right and left (such as the Linke and AfD in Germany, or the Socialist Party and Freedom Party in the Netherlands). Some analysts might critique this development because it strains the boundaries of democratic discourse at times. But it arose because of a deficiency in democratic representation by existing party systems that led voters to parties claiming to represent their interests (Evans and Tilley 2017; Dalton 2018).¹³ If the established parties eschew these new populist parties, they should try to address these voters' unaddressed policy interests.

For both electoral and non-electoral politics, one possible method of broadening participation is through social groups and intermediary organizations. However, the irony of the civic voluntarism model is that the vitality of intermediary organizations often reflects the skills and resources of their members (which also facilitate political participation). The flowering of a social movement society in the past several decades seems to disproportionately produce citizen groups that build upon a middle-class base and their interests. These are positive developments that address important social issues, but what is lagging are civil society activities for the interests of lower status citizens.

Community groups might become advocates for the lower status individuals, even if the individuals remain relatively passive. There are many positive examples of this in social justice groups, anti-poverty organizations, and similar groups. Yet, when placed in the larger context of interest groups politics, one might be wary of the potential for effective political influence. For example, Frank Baumgartner and his colleagues (2009, 255) noted the surfeit of such groups in their study of interest group lobbying in the US: “Equally conspicuous is the relative paucity of issues related to the poor and the economic security of working-class Americans.” The lack of effective interest group representation by lower-status citizens magnifies the inequality gap.

Another reform option is to lower the bar for political activity, especially for non-electoral forms of action that are more strongly dependent on social skills and resources. The government can take the lead in these efforts if they choose to represent all citizens (Goldsmith and Crawford 2014). Governments could make it easier to write local representatives or request public services; asking people to navigate webpages is no longer sufficient. The government should be more user-friendly in ways to enable those with limited political and internet skills and resources to be involved. However, politicians and bureaucrats do not always welcome more

public input.¹⁴ And the irony of easing access is that those with skills and resources will likely take advantage of these new opportunities.

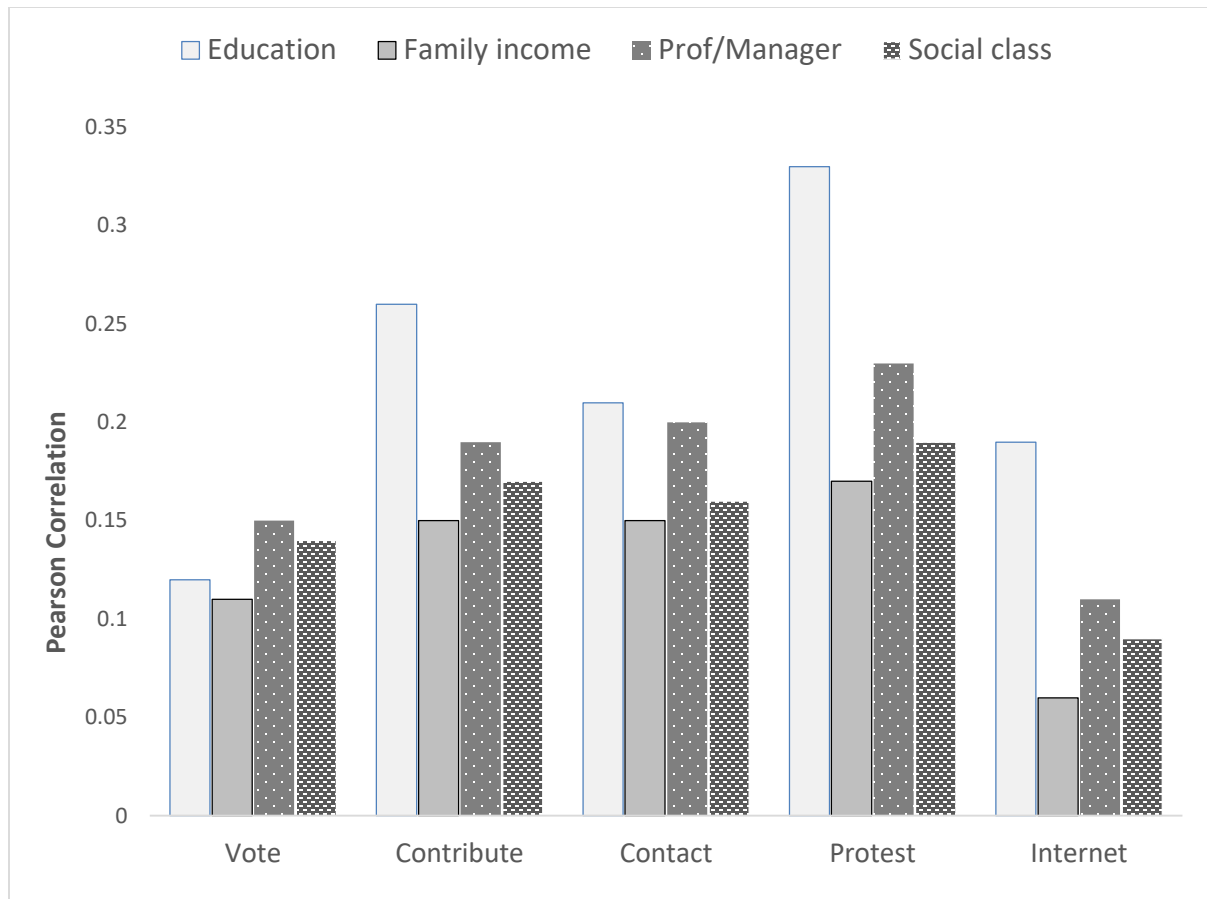
Perhaps there is a lesson in the literature on descriptive representation. Lower social status groups are another minority deserving of government attention. And the emphasis on intersectionality might include class background. Yet, most of the literature and policy efforts on descriptive representation focus on gender or race/ethnicity, and almost ignore social class (e.g., Phillips 2020). Indeed, typically the solution for the descriptive representation of minorities is to select the relatively affluent, better-educated members of these groups.

An intriguing reform is the development of citizen panels or citizen deliberations (Farrell and Stone 2020; Baiocco and Ganuza 2017; Nabatchi et al. 2012;). A growing number of cities and other governing bodies are empaneling small groups of citizens (mini-publics) to deliberate on issues ranging from setting budget priorities to local planning decisions. *If there is a conscious effort to recruit citizens that reflect the diversity of the community*, rather than accept volunteers with the inevitable SES bias in participants, this can produce more equal citizen input.

If policymakers discussed the views of the citizenry with a representative group of citizens, this would at least expose them to voices they might not otherwise hear. A local setting allows for face-to-face discussions over information and the proposals to the local government. Citizen panels are easily organized and recruited at the local level. And such a process might stimulate more activity among formally disaffected parts of society. Even here, however, there is the possibility that such deliberative bodies might turn out to be another forum for those with skills and resources. Jurg Steiner's review of deliberative bodies concluded: "What is really troubling is that there is a systematic bias in the sense that middle-aged men with higher levels of education tend to speak up the most. The empirical world is far away from the Habermasian

normative ideal of equal and unconstrained participation.” (Steiner 2012, 49). Still, I am intrigued by the potential of deliberative bodies to include new voices and significantly expand the democratic process.

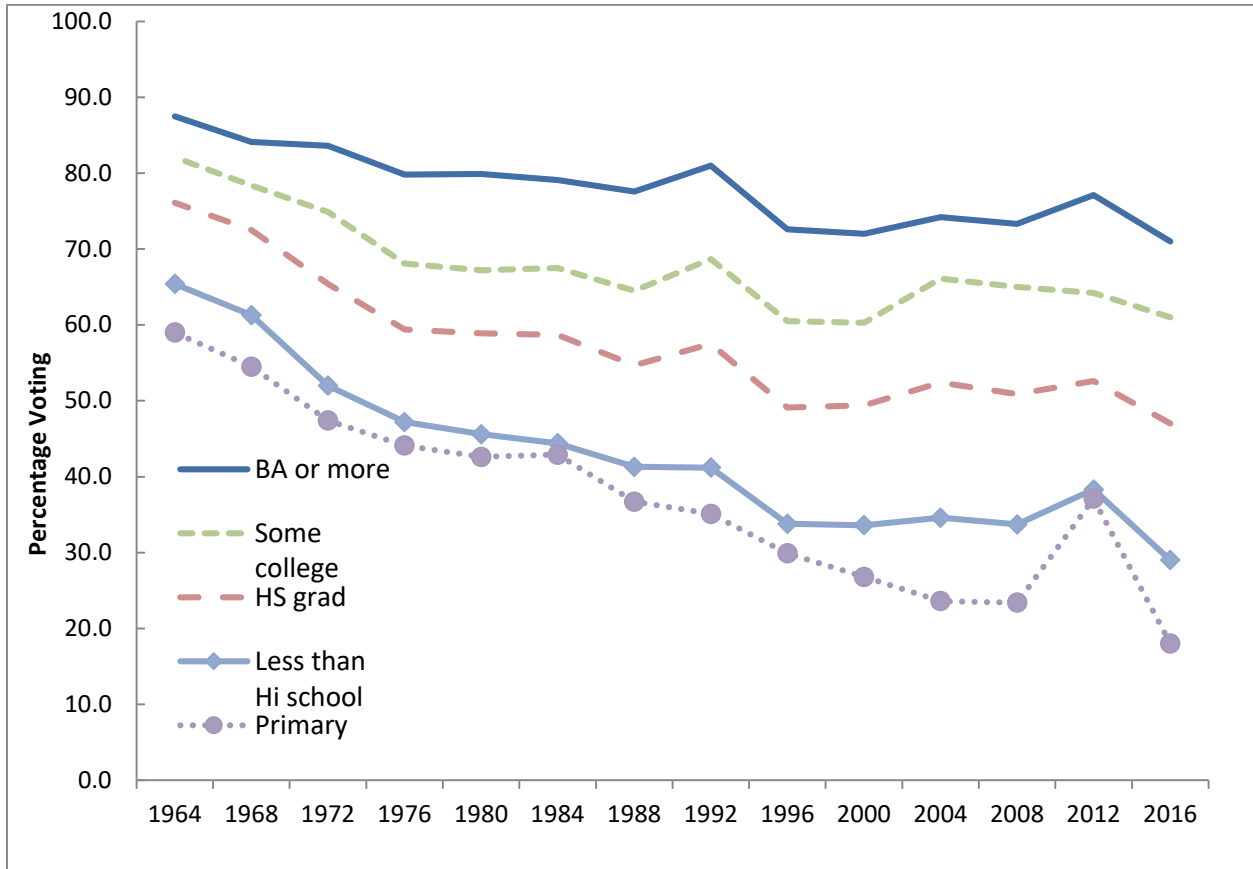
Clearly, none of these options can fully resolve the dilemma of the participation gap. Maybe all of these ideas provide only a partial solution, and more ideas for increasing the equality of voice are needed (Smith 2009). Otherwise, the status quo produces inequality of voice that benefits parts of society over the legitimate needs of others—and democracy falls short of its ideal in theory and practice.

Figure 1. Social Inequalities in Participation

Source: 2014 International Social Survey, 28 democracies combined.

Note: The figure entries are Pearson r correlations that summarize the differences in participation for each trait.

Figure 2 Educational Trends in U.S. Turnout



Source: Current Population Surveys, U.S. Bureau of the Census.

Note: The figure presents the percentage voting among citizens, even if not registered.

Table 1. Education and the Participation Gap in Voting and Non-Electoral Activities

Nation	Voting	Non-electoral
Australia	-.04	.31
Austria	.07	.28
Belgium	.04	.34
Chile	.06	.36
Croatia	.02	.27
Czech Republic	.19	.33
Denmark	.11	.21
Finland	.09	.29
France	.06	.32
Germany	.21	.34
Hungary	.15	.23
Iceland	.08	.31
India	.12	.20
Israel	.15	.33
Japan	-.01	.15
Lithuania	.10	.31
Netherlands	.17	.31
Norway	.09	.25
Poland	.16	.34
Slovak Republic	.11	.26
Slovenia	.12	.33
South Africa	-.02	.06
South Korea	.01	.27
Spain	.09	.39
Sweden	.01	.34
Switzerland	.21	.39
Taiwan	-.12	.36
United States	.33	.44
All nations	.12	.30

Source: 2014 International Social Survey, 28 democratic nations.

Note: The table entries are the Pearson r correlations between education and turnout or an index of four non-electoral activities.

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Endnotes

¹ Portions of this chapter draw upon Dalton (2017).

² There is, however, a countercurrent that argues citizens are not sufficiently engaged to make reasonable choices and thus political voice should be limited or mediated (Brennan 2016; Achen and Bartels 2006).

³ For example, the correlation of gender and turnout in the 2014 ISSP is $r=.01$; the correlation of female gender with other forms of participation is also modest: contact $r= -.10$, contribute money $r=.01$, protest $r= -.02$, and internet forum $r= -.09$ (compare to figure 2). Age is another potential source of inequality, but it is a changeable trait over the life cycle (Dalton 2021).

⁴ Our thanks the ISSP principal investigators who shared these data. The data and documentation are available from the GESIS data archive in Germany. The table presents the 28 nations that asked about voting in the last election and that are scored as “free” by the Freedom House. Reports of turnout in surveys typically overstate voting because of its social desirability. This limits the correlations with turnout. To lessen this effect, we weighted the data so that reported turnout matches the official turnout percentages.

⁵ The Multiple Correlation Coefficient, R , summarizes the total influence of these five social status measures. Because there is substantial overlap between measures, the Multiple R is not simply the addition of individual effects but measures their cumulative influence on participation. The Multiple R is: .xx for voter turnout; .29 for contributing; .26 for contacting; .36 for protest; and .19 for participation in an internet forum.

⁶ The protest index includes signing a petition, political consumerism (buying a product for political, environmental, or ethnical reasons) and protest activity.

⁷ Because of the large size of these samples and the higher response rates, scholars often consider these surveys as more definitive than the ANES trends. Yet all survey data suffers from the over report of turnout by survey respondents. See Karp and Brockington (2005) and Dassoneville and Hooghe (2017).

⁸ A methodological complication of survey-based studies is the increasing tendency of these samples to over-report turnout, which biases the results unless statistical adjustments are made.

⁹ The four non-voting measures (contributing, contacting, protest, and internet forum) are coded 0-1. The four measures were added together and divided by 4 to produce a 0-1 summary index.

¹⁰ The Pearson correlation between vote and non-electoral inequality is $r=.39$ for these 28 democracies. The standard deviations also show slightly lower variability in inequality for non-electoral participation.

¹¹ For example, the United States again displays a wider educational divide for protest than most other societies ($r=.41$), but 17 other nations with varied institutional structures have relationships greater than $r=.30$.

¹² To this point, Dalton and Weldon (2017) find that national income inequality is unrelated to SES differences in participation rates; Quaranta (2015, ch. 4) finds that the development of a social welfare policies in a nation have little impact on the inequality of educational groups in protest activity.

¹³ The interests of lower-social status are a mix of liberal and conservative views. I used the 2004 ISSP to identify those parties where a majority of their voters came from the working class or those below the media education of the nation. These parties are about equally distributed between leftist parties and extreme right parties.

¹⁴ The current California governor wrote of his frustrations in trying the develop such reforms as mayor of San Francisco (Newsom and Dickey 2014).