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Outline and Recommended Readings for Graduate and Advanced Undergraduate Courses

*We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal...*

*Thomas Jefferson*

*Declaration of Independence, 1776*

Americans, at least since the Founding era, have cherished the ideal of political equality. Unlike European nations, the United States inherited no economic class distinctions from a feudal past. Time and again, American social reformers and mass movements have highlighted inconsistencies between the value of equality and the actual practice of democracy. Through the extension of rights to citizens who were previously excluded or treated as second-class citizens, such as women and African Americans, the polity has become more inclusive over time. Over the last three decades, however, American citizens have grown increasingly unequal in terms of income and wealth. Economic inequality is now greater than at any other point in American history except for the Gilded Age, and it continues to escalate. Far greater economic inequality exists in the United States today than in other western, industrialized nations. This new inequality began to emerge soon after the “rights revolution” had ended formal, legal discrimination. Tragically, economic divisions now reinforce many of the old divisions of race, ethnicity, and gender, undermining the promise of greater equality.

The central question posed by this course is the implications of such vast economic inequality for American democracy. Do these disparities between citizens curtail, limit, and perhaps threaten the functioning of genuinely representative governance? The material in this outline examines this question from several angles. By way of introduction, it explores what other social scientists—mostly economists and sociologists—know about contemporary inequality, particularly in terms of its causes, manifestation, and socio-economic effects. Second, this curricular framework considers the concept of inequality in political theory and in American political thought, and examines American public opinion with respect to matters of inequality.

The major focus of the course outline involves the current relationship between economic inequality and each of three major aspects of the American political system: political voice, governance, and public policy. First, the outline examines the implications of inequality for those processes and mechanisms through which citizens can influence the political process and have their voice heard. It considers citizen participation in political activities, interest groups, political parties (mass level), social movements, and civic associations. In each case, the materials in this outline ask how class intersects with other social divisions such as gender, race, ethnicity, and educational level. Second, the curricular outline examines the implications of inequality for the allocation of power in American government institutions and processes of making policy by exploring the following: influence and decision-making in Congress and the executive branch; the agenda of political parties at the elite level; and the allocation of tasks of governance between the national and sub-national government through federalism. The relationship between money and politics will be examined in this section. Third, the materials in this outline examine the relationship between public policy and inequality by considering the following: the extent to which United States policy ameliorates or exacerbates inequality, in both historical and comparative perspective; the extent to which growing inequality undercut the promises of the “rights revolution;” how some policies have ameliorated economic inequality and, in turn,
elevated the political participation of affected citizens. Finally, this course outline raises the question of whether public policy can make a difference in rectifying the extreme levels of inequality facing the United States today.

This outline and reading list offers considerably more—and in some ways, no doubt, less—than any instructor is likely to include in a particular syllabus. We offer it as a broad menu, arranged according to an overarching structure that makes sense to us given our work in reviewing the “state of the discipline” with respect to inequality and American democracy. Of course, instructors may elect to use some modules and not others, or to collapse some groupings of modules. In addition, within each module, instructors will want to make selections among readings.

I. Introduction

1. Introduction: The State of Economic Inequality

What does economic inequality in the United States look like today, and how has it changed over time? We will examine the shifting dispersion of income and wealth over time: changes in real wages for various groups of Americans defined by such demographic characteristics as educational level, race and ethnicity, sex, employment sector, employment status, job experience, and family status.


2. Economic Inequality Today: Its Manifestation and Causes

Here we look, in a more in-depth manner, at the causes, manifestations, and known socio-economic effects of growing economic inequality. We will discuss the relative importance of such factors as technological change, the demand for skill, globalization of the economy, immigration, changing family structure, and the entrance of women into the workforce. We will explore how inequality in the United States today compares to that of other nations; compare the well-being of the poorest citizens across nations; and consider the extent to which social mobility offsets inequality over time. We will consider the extent to which public policies alleviate growing income inequality, comparing the United States to other nations.


3. Inequality and Struggles for Equality in American Political Development

Here we examine, in historical perspective, how Americans of the past struggled against inequalities of gender, race, and class. Under what circumstances and to what degree have they met with success? How have American political institutions and processes shaped the nature of such struggles and the form and sustainability of their achievements? Which kinds of political action led toward reform, and of what sort?


4. Poverty, Downward Mobility, and Wealth in the United States

This module explores, in a more contextual manner, the experiences of different groups within the American population as economic inequality has grown. We look at the fate of the poor, the middle-class, and the wealthy. In each case, we ask about the extent to which their status has emerged from economic factors, broadly conceived, compared to the role of public policy.


5. Theories about Inequality and Equality

How have political theorists thought about economic inequality? What is the relationship between inequality and both social and political justice? How can and should states manage conflicts between equality and other political goods?


6. Inequality and Equality in American Political Thought

How have American political thinkers thought about equality and inequality? How did Alexis de Tocqueville perceive Americans and their government to grapple with such questions in the mid-nineteenth century? How has the Supreme Court understood the Constitution, namely the 14th Amendment, with respect to the role of government in guaranteeing equal protection of all citizens?

Thomas Jefferson, “Declaration of Independence.”
Abraham Lincoln, “Gettysburg Address.”
Martin Luther King, “I Have a Dream.”

*Economic Equality/Inequality*

Theoplius Fisk, "Capital Against Labor" (1835).
Andrew Carnegie, "Gospel of Wealth" (1889).
J. B. Weaver, "A Call to Action" (1892).

Social & Political Equality/Inequality

Thomas Paine, Common Sense.
Frederick Douglass, Autobiography, or “What to the Slave is the 4th of July?”
David Walker, Appeal.
Noah Webster, “Slavery, Emancipation & Colonization” (1793).
Henry David Thoreau, “Civil Disobedience” (1848).
William Graham Sumner, What Social Classes Owe to Each Other (1883).

7. Inequality, the U.S. Constitution, and Constitutional Law

How democratic is the American Constitution? To what extent and in what ways has
equality been understood as a value protected or guaranteed by the Constitution?

Robert A. Dahl, How Democratic is the American Constitution? (New Haven: Yale
Plessy v. Ferguson, 1896.
Romer v. Evans, 1996.

8. Inequality and American Public Opinion

What do Americans think about economic inequality? In what circumstances and to what
extent do they consider it a problem for democracy? Do they think that government should take
measures to lessen inequality? If so, does that support extend to fostering equal outcomes, or,
rather, providing equal opportunity? What policy alternatives do Americans most support toward
such ends?

Everett Carll Ladd and Karlyn H. Bowman, Attitudes toward Economic Inequality
David L. Weakliem, Robert Andersen, and Anthony F. Heath, “The Directing Power? A
Comparative Study of Public Opinion and Income Distribution.” (Storrs, CT:
Department of Sociology, University of Connecticut, 2003).
Herbert McClosky and John Zaller, The American Ethos: Public Attitudes toward
II. Inequalities in Political Voice

What are the avenues by which citizens in American democracy have an opportunity to exercise political voice—as individuals and in concert with others? How representative are expressions of political voice both in terms of who takes part and what they say? Why is the propensity to take part in politics so stratified by income, occupation and, especially, education? What are the implications of the social stratification of participation for the exercise of political voice for disadvantaged groups defined along axes of cleavage other than social class—among them race and ethnicity, gender, and age? How do the mediating institutions and processes of citizen politics—in particular, political parties, organized interests, and social movements—function to shape who is brought into politics and what public officials hear? In an era of both rising levels of education and rising levels of economic inequality, how has the stratification of political voice changed in recent decades—with respect to individual political activity as well as activity through electoral politics, organized interest politics, and social movement politics?

9. Political Participation


10. Political Parties

11. Organized Interests


12. Social Movements and Civic Associations


III. Inequalities in Representation and Governance

13. The Role of Policymaking Institutions

How does economic inequality relate to political power in governing institutions? Do those with greater resources have greater influence on the political process? Is “representative governance” compromised by inequality?


### 14. Federalism, Urban Governance

What difference do the institutions of federalism make for inequality of citizens and or political influence? Is one level of government or another more effective in ameliorating economic inequality? How do the politics of place in the federal system affect political power and the well-being of citizens?


### 15. Money and Politics

Does money buy influence and access in the political process? If so, to what extent, and through what kinds of dynamics?


IV. Implications of Inequality for Public Policy, and Vice Versa: Some Examples

16. Contemporary U.S. Policy: Ameliorating or Reinforcing Inequality?

To what extent do public policies in the United States ameliorate and/or exacerbate inequality? What aspects of social well-being are assumed by government, which are left to private employers or families, and how do such efforts compare to those of other nations? Which tools of public policy are most and least effective in alleviating inequality? How are different groups in the population affected by particular programs, depending on employment status, income or wealth, and age?


17. The Rights Revolution Meets Economic Inequality

During the 1960s and early 1970s, American policymakers acted to rectify long-established patterns of racial and sex discrimination in government, the workplace, educational institutions, and other institutions of American society. Yet, no sooner had new laws been enacted than economic inequality began to grow, lowering especially the wages of workers in the lower rungs of the income spectrum. What have been the implications of growing economic inequality for the success of the rights revolution? How does the widening class divide intersect with divisions of race, ethnicity, and gender, and what are the implications for American citizenship?


18. Policy Cases
Looking in a more in-depth manner at particular types of public policy, to what extent does each alleviate or worsen economic inequality in the United States? How do policy design and the institutional arrangements for program implementation matter? What are the implications of each policy for particular groups of citizens, for example, in terms of race, ethnicity, and gender? How could government respond more effectively?

a. Educational Policy, K-12


b. Family Support


c. Health Policy


d. Tax Policy


e. Incarceration


How do policies, even those geared toward social and economic goals, affect citizenship? Through what dynamics do policies with distinct design promote or discourage civic engagement? How do they shape citizens preferences and sense of political efficacy? What is meant by social citizenship, and does it matter?


