

Article: “Restoring the Tradition of Rigor and Relevance to Political Science”

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Restoring the Tradition of Rigor and Relevance to Political Science

American society has witnessed an extraordinary widening of economic inequality in the period since World War II that is unmatched among advanced industrialized countries. In 2003, the most affluent fifth received 47.6% of family income, the middle class (the third and fourth fifths) earned 15.5% and 23.3%, respectively, while the bottom two quintiles each received less than 10%. (Twenty-one percent of family income went to the top 5%.) In other words, the richest 20% obtained nearly half of the country's income. That income (and wealth) is unevenly distributed is neither new nor necessarily disturbing. What is remarkable is the large and unmistakable *increase* in the concentration of income at the top (Mishel, Bernstein, and Allegretto 2005).

The concentration of income and wealth in the hands of a relatively small segment of the country over the past three decades is an indisputable fact widely documented by a host of authoritative sources including the Internal Revenue Service, the U.S. Census Bureau, the Congressional Budget Office, and the Luxembourg Income Study. The debate is not over whether this degree of income disparity exists, but over the sources and significance of widening economic inequality. Large and growing numbers of

economists, sociologists, social epidemiologists, and other analysts are now focused on studying the origins and impacts of rising inequality in wealth and income.

A critical part of the widening investigation

of rising economic inequality concerns its impacts on American democracy. For political scientists and many thoughtful Americans, these recent trends raise the question of what impact, if any, rising inequalities have on political participation, governance, and the role of government in either mitigating or exacerbating social, economic, and political inequalities.

The American Political Science Association (APSA) convened the Task Force on Inequality and American Democracy during the presidency of Theda Skocpol to examine what, if any, impact rising economic inequality had on political voice, governing, and public policy. The Task Force was chaired by Lawrence Jacobs. Under our leadership, the Task Force reviewed and assessed the best current scholarship about the health and functioning of U.S. democracy over recent decades. It concluded that the privileged participate more than others and are increasingly well organized to press their demands on government. Public officials, in turn, are much more responsive to the privi-

leged than to average citizens and the least affluent. Citizens with lower or moderate incomes speak with a whisper that is lost on the ears of inattentive government officials, while the advantaged roar with a clarity and consistency that policymakers readily hear and routinely follow. The scourge of overt discrimination against African Americans and women has been replaced by a more subtle but potent threat—the growing concentration of the country's wealth, income, and political influence in the hands of the few.¹

Here we discuss the process that guided the operation of the Task Force and the longstanding tradition of political science research that the Task Force continues. Although the Task Force has identified very important themes in the existing research, we are humbled by the great number of critical questions that remain. We conclude by discussing some of these.

Orderly Process for Reviewing Research

The APSA Council and the Task Force took a number of steps to ensure an orderly and responsible process. From the outset, the membership of the Task Force was selected to be diverse in terms of specialization, methodology, theoretical orientation, and political and ideological predispositions. Because the Task Force was designed to avoid a like-minded group, its many deliberations over nearly two years were often lively and at times contentious.

From the outset, the Task Force members agreed to concentrate on assembling and synthesizing the highest quality research that would relay to colleagues in other fields and disciplines the contribution political scientists have made in evaluating whether and how rising economic inequality has impacted American democracy. The starting point and sturdy foundation was literally hundreds of scholarly books and articles. The footnotes and scholarly references that inundate the Task Force's work document the basis for its conclusions. Its conclusions do not represent the idiosyncratic views of 15 individuals, but rather offer a collective statement of the findings of numerous scholars conducted over many years.

As leaders of the Task Force, we accepted certain critical assumptions:

- Some level of inequality is inevitable;
- Egalitarianism is neither feasible nor necessarily desirable;
- Our particular concern was the impact the change to economic distributions has wrought, especially the sharp rise in inequality;

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- Our primary responsibility was diagnostic rather than prescriptive—we insisted that the Task Force refrain from offering policy recommendations because of intense normative disagreements among ourselves, colleagues, and many Americans;
- We understood our primary responsibility as cataloguing what political scientists do and do not know on the topic. The work of the Task Force is unavoidably a starting or mid-point in research on inequality and American democracy; it is most definitely not an end point.

In short, the Task Force took on a carefully circumscribed mission: identify the best research on inequality and American democracy and crystallize its central themes and findings, acknowledging nuances and contradictions when they clearly existed. Many of the commentaries in this forum and the roundtable in the December 2004 issue of *Perspectives on Politics* confirm our hope that the Task Force report would stimulate critical thinking, debate, and new research on the political effects of rising inequality.

Given the importance of its work, the Task Force took three steps to make sure that it did the best job possible in accurately and fairly reviewing the existing research. First, the Task Force itself engaged in a nearly two-year process of collectively writing and critiquing each other's work. Put simply, we were watching over each other's shoulders. Second, we solicited outside peer reviewers who came from different disciplines (economics to political science), areas of specialization (economic inequality, the politics of race and ethnicity, and American governance and policy), and ideology (from liberal to conservative). This feedback produced a number of revisions. Third, the APSA Council reviewed the Task Force's reports.

We knew from the outset that the issue of economic inequality and its implications for American democracy was complex and likely to be highly contentious. On the other hand, the importance of the topic convinced us and the APSA Council that these challenges should not deter us. Although the Task Force is certainly not infallible and some may identify individual sections of our work that they would have handled differently, we hope that colleagues of good faith will appreciate that the Task Force set up a reasonable process and worked very hard (on a volunteer basis amidst many other responsibilities) to provide a service to scholars and citizens alike. For our part, we personally are enormously proud of the Task Force's hard and collective work. It was an extraordinary effort by a remarkable group of public-spirited colleagues. Individuals sacrificed for a collective purpose.

Speaking to Students and Citizens

Academics are often criticized for being hermetic, hiding in an "Ivory Tower" apart from the travails of the world around them. Teaching is seen by some political scientists as a chore to be avoided.

The Task Force took these criticisms to heart. First, it put a significant amount of time into developing materials for the classroom, which are available on an APSA web site (www.apsanet.org/section_256.cfm). The purpose was to show in concrete ways how cutting-edge research on the political implications of economic, racial, and ethnic inequalities could be translated into a curriculum that would stimulate students and leave instructors significant latitude in designing an entire course or a segment of a course at any level of instruction—from high school and community college to graduate school seminars. The materials include a number of possible teaching modules as well as a "model" undergraduate syllabus and assignments. To ensure that the word filtered out, we held a re-

markable roundtable at the 2004 Annual Meeting with teachers from diverse teaching settings—from community college to college to large university settings.

Second, we put together several different types of research products. On the one hand, the Task Force broke into working groups to draft critical reviews of the three distinctive areas of research on American politics—political participation and public opinion, the governing process, and public policy. After extensive collaboration with the full Task Force, these three research reports became the basis of a longer report on the APSA web site and were revised and expanded into the core chapters of a recently edited book, *Inequality and American Democracy* (Jacobs and Skocpol 2005a). On the other hand, the Task Force decided (after some discussion) to develop a shorter and more thematic report culled from the hundreds of pages of our specialized research reviews. The purpose of this synthetic piece was to make our collective work approachable and interesting to non-specialists in the media and the broader public. We fully appreciated that the nuance and caveats in the detailed research reports might be lost, though we expected that specialists would appreciate our efforts and read the longer reports for a more thorough discussion. Kay Schlozman's essay (2006) in this forum, for instance, offers a more detailed review of our analysis of research on political voice than we were able to put into our shorter and more thematic documents. The recent book chapter on this research (Jacobs and Skocpol 2005a) is chock full of candid acknowledgements of uncertainty: phrases like "We cannot be sure" (28 and 70) and "we tread carefully" (46) are sprinkled throughout.

Restoring the Political Science Tradition

Political science has a long and honorable tradition. Its history goes back over a century and is characterized by a determined effort to introduce rigorous thinking to debates about government and its institutions. In the last few decades, certain segments of political science research drifted from this tradition of rigorous scholarship in the service of informing pressing problems of public life. Increasingly insular and self-referential bodies of research emerged, with little or no relevance to broader public debates. After decades in which generations of political scientists served as advisers or sources of expertise for government officials, the profession became increasingly ignored. Looking back on this break from the longstanding and valuable tradition of public-spirited research in political science, Richard Neustadt observed toward the end of his life:

"[T]he standing of our profession [in Washington] . . . is not high. That is partly because so many of us cease to discipline ourselves to write in accessible language. . . . Partly our standing is not high because so many of us nowadays appear to dislike politics, a common American attitude, not least in the professional middle class, but offputting to politicians when combined with an ostensible commitment to the subject of their profession. Partly our standing reflects the hopeful commitment of so many [scholars] to pursuing regularities in political behavior . . . [that] seem quixotic to practitioners." (2000, 462–63)

The leadership of the APSA (including a string of recent Association presidents) and many scholars have made concerted efforts to restore the tradition of rigorous research that is geared toward the most important challenge facing our society—protecting and improving democratic life. Robert Putnam (2003) stated in his presidential address:

"I believe that attending to the concerns of our fellow citizens is not just an optional add-on for the profession of political science, but an obligation as fundamental as our pursuit of scientific

truth. And yet . . . I do not believe that ignoring and even ridiculing quantitative and mathematical rigor is the right path forward.”

We share Putnam’s insistence (2003) that “scientific rigor and public relevance are mutually supportive and that both are at the core of our professional obligations.” The marrying of rigor and public-spirited research has united scholars who pursue divergent substantive issues and methodological approaches—encompassing the pioneers of behavioralism (such as V. O. Key) and the rise of positivism in the discipline (e.g., David Easton).

Political science is uniquely positioned and qualified to offer rigorous analysis of democratic life, checking the claims of partisans, powerful sectional forces, and ill-informed commentators. Rather than self-imprisoning ourselves in a gilded cloister, our independence offers a powerful vantage point to evaluate American politics and its democratic vulnerabilities. David Easton (1953) reminded political scientists in the 1950s that the powerful found critical analysis of the distribution of power and resources to be “discomforting, if not inherently dangerous [because] the underlying myth concerning the location of power is seldom borne out by the facts” (50–51). Abdication by political scientists of their professional responsibility to both publicly and rigorously study power and its uneven distribution in American politics may leave damaging threats to democracy without serious scrutiny.

The Task Force continues the tradition of political science. It is those who seek to “silence” the use of rigorous research to scrutinize political inequalities that are heretical; they stand outside the long and sustained tradition of the discipline. Our professional obligation to harness careful scholarship to the task of monitoring democratic life is especially important in an era of political polarization and dramatic expansion of economic inequality.

Addressing the fundamental issues of our day invites debate, which was a main purpose of the Task Force. Referring to the same document, Robert Weissberg (2006) warns in this forum of “draconian egalitarianism” and a “totalitarian” move to “muzzl[e] the verbose ‘privileged’” while Francis Fox Piven (2006) laments that the Task Force was “timid” and “understate[d]” the severity of the problem. We fervently hope that these exchanges continue and evolve into a new body of rigorous research about democratic life in America.

An Agenda for Critical Studies of American Democracy

One of the enduring projects of students of politics has been to describe and analyze, as Easton (1953) put it, the “tendency in mass societies for power to concentrate in the hands of a minority.” Questions about the asymmetries of power and its sources have animated scholars as diverse as Max Weber and Karl Marx, Robert Michels and Robert Dahl, and V. O. Key, Charles Lindblom, and E. E. Schattschneider. This commitment to studying power stems, in part, from the development of disciplinary responsibility for analysis of government authority and its use and from the normative concern (as Easton described it) to “transfer a large share of political control to the people” (Easton 1953, 41, 121; Bang 1998). The sustained focus on power has provided a common focus for social science research, offering a valuable counterbalance to the hyper-fragmentation into ever more disconnected research communities that are of diminishing importance to understanding the state of democratic life. This is an important contribution to political science research.

Sharp increases in economic inequality make it imperative that we renew and reinvigorate the study of political power. We

want to be clear, though, that research by colleagues as well as our own analysis does **not** support a simple economic explanation: profound changes in the distribution of income and wealth have important implications for American democracy, but the sources and nature of those impacts are quite likely to involve interactions as well as indirect and reciprocal effects related to developments in political organizations, governmental institutions, and elite mobilizing strategies. Indeed, the Task Force’s work repeatedly emphasized that rising economic inequality corresponds with persistent levels of unequal political voice and influence, but that direct covariations of changing economic and political distributions are not readily evident at this point.

Three critical areas in the analysis of economic and political inequalities demand attention (Jacobs and Skocpol 2005b). First, what are the direct and indirect effects of rising economic inequality on individual participation and collective actions? Instead of simply being used as “control variables,” income levels and changes in income distributions deserve to be treated as variables of primary interest in future research. Voter turnout is a particularly important area in need of more attention. Changes in income inequality may have influenced voter turnout and behavior (see the debate between Freeman 2004, and Leighley and Nagler 1992). How much of the correlation between increased economic skew and the patterns and trends in voter turnout can be explained by the effects of immigration—such as illegal status or the failure of legal arrivees to connect to U.S. political routines—and how much results from other causes?

In addition, research on political behavior can also make a valuable contribution by linking individual opinions and behavior to broader organizational, institutional, and policy contexts in order to explore potential threats to representative democracy (Skocpol 2003; 2004). How are individual attitudes and behavioral options affected by changes in political party mobilization, interest group campaigning, and the formation of social movements? What impact has the decline in union membership to below 10% of the private-sector labor force had on turnout, partisanship, and attitudes not just of union members and their families, but of citizens more generally? Similar questions can be asked about the rise of evangelical Protestant churches and associations.

Moreover, we need more research and theorizing about the formation of public opinion and the influences of elite mobilization strategies. The common assumption in much research on political behavior and public opinion is that shifts in mass attitudes and behavior drive politics. In an era of rising economic inequality and structural changes in elite politics, politicians are using the capacities of government and allied organizations to attempt to manipulate the evaluations of voters (Page 1996; Smith 2001; Jacobs and Shapiro 2000; Druckman, Jacobs, and Ostermeier 2004). Whether this represents a change in past elite mobilization strategies is an important topic for future research.

The second area in need of more attention is the relationship between rising economic inequality and American institutions. In comparison to the sustained commitment to studying inequalities in political participation and voice, issues about inequality and governance have received relatively little attention. Nobel Prize economist Amartya Sen (1997) criticized orthodox “welfare economics” for focusing on Pareto optimal equilibria at the expense of studying the **distribution** of goods and services. A similar criticism could be made of much institutional analysis: too much attention is devoted to institutionally induced equilibria without considering the implications of institutional norms and dynamics for the distribution of political power and influence. The close attention paid to the internal workings of Congress, the executive, and the judiciary needs to be widened to consider broader implications for democratic governance.

Nowhere is the need for additional, more sophisticated research more obvious than for understanding how monetary contributions and flows of money affect U.S. politics and governance. Too much research on the political effects of campaign contributions has been limited to roll call voting. We need to learn more about how money affects legislative decisions other than through floor votes—decisions about which issues to raise, which issues to push hard, and decisions about how to process bills in committees. We also need to know how big money contributors might influence the interpretation and implementation of legislation, after it is enacted. Statistical studies are valuable (perhaps indispensable for some research questions) but they may not always be the best way to learn about such matters. Political scientists may also need to revitalize traditions of in-depth interviewing and ethnographic observation focusing on case studies. In addition, we need to expand research on how money influences which candidates succeed. Which kinds of challengers raise competitive sums of money? What kind of policies and positions do these candidates favor?

We also need research into the disparities of government representation—the unequal responsiveness of government policy to the preferences of distinct segments of citizens. As Larry Bartels (2006) notes in this forum, a small but growing body of work shows that legislative votes and government policies are more highly *correlated* with the preferences of the privileged and business leaders than with the preferences of the poor, middle class, or majority public opinion (Gilens forthcoming; Bartels 2002; Jacobs and Page 2005). But what are the mechanisms that may cause government to respond differentially to constituents with different characteristics and resources? Do officials simply not hear from some groups of citizens—such as those who do not vote or organize as often as others? Do officials respond more assiduously to the concerns of those who can give money—and, if so, how does this work when large numbers of voters have contrary preferences? Or are there other reasons for differential responsiveness? Moreover, are disparities in representation an inherent feature of government or do they vary over time, rising and falling in reaction to changing political and institutional developments?

Analysis of policy feedbacks is the third and final area of research that can contribute to understanding the interconnections of economic inequality and American democracy. Research on the mass political effects of social policies is a growing new area in which exciting challenges loom (Mettler and Soss 2004). This fertile line of research should be expanded to “hidden welfare state” policies (Howard 1997; Hacker 2002). Social policymaking through tax breaks, for example, is increasingly common in U.S. politics—witness the expansion of the Earned Income Tax Credit in recent times. How do such relatively invisible programs influence citizen perceptions of government and their likelihood

of become politically engaged? The same questions can be posed about more longstanding “hidden welfare policies” such as government-backed yet privately managed educational loans or tax breaks given to employers who provide health or retirement benefits. U.S. government policies play a central role in stimulating and channeling such indirectly managed social benefits, but do citizens perceive government’s role? What does it mean for policy feedbacks in general that the overall mix of U.S. social policies has shifted in recent times toward measures that reduce regulation and taxes, and away from direct social expenditures?

We also need more research on the organizational effects of established policies. Government initiation of new policies or modalities—for example, substituting regulations for direct expenditures—is likely to influence the goals and capacities of social movements and voluntary organizations, not just individual citizen behavior. For instance, how have government policies affected the prospects for trade unions to organize and flourish, not to mention the stances that trade union leaders are likely to take in partisan politics? In addition, considerable work has already been done on ways in which U.S. government policies in the 1960s and afterward stimulated the proliferation of voluntary associations, encouraged the professionalization of associations, and both fostered the proliferation of nonprofit institutions and drew them into closer partnerships with government (e.g., Baumgartner, Leech, and Mahoney 2003; Berry and Arons 2003; Skocpol 2004; Walker 1991). But much more can be learned about the reciprocal, temporally unfolding relationships between government action and the goals and capacities of organizations in civil society. And such research is likely to have important implications for our understandings of political equality, because the disparate organizational capacities and orientations of different slices of the citizenry have important consequences for the messages politicians and government officials hear, and the degrees of support they are likely to receive for difference lines of public action.

Like members of other professions, political scientists have responsibilities and obligations in return for our privileges. One of our responsibilities is to maintain rigorous standards for research and to self-govern ourselves to ensure that these standards are upheld. For more than a century, though, political scientists have also appreciated that our obligations do not stop there. We also—like other professions—have broader responsibilities to use our research capacities and teaching opportunities to scrutinize the health of our democracy. Rising economic inequality is a fact; its implications for American democracy appear threatening but more research and debate is urgently needed. In the face of this potential threat, silence is professionally irresponsible and a violation of our duty as citizens in a democracy. It is time again for more political scientists to pursue rigor in the service of the public good.

Notes

1. The original research reports and teaching materials prepared by the Task Force can be found at the following web address: www.apsanet.org/section_256.cfm.

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