

**Article: “On Inequality and Political Voice: Response to Stephen Earl Bennett's Critique”**

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# On Inequality and Political Voice: Response to Stephen Earl Bennett's Critique

In the assembled critiques, the report of the APSA Task Force on Inequality and American Democracy is labeled simultaneously “dangerous quackery” and a “timid document.” Are we all reading the same report? At least when it comes to Stephen Earl Bennett’s commentary (2006), probably not.

The only plausible explanation for the content of his criticisms (and the page numbers to which they refer) is that Bennett read only the summary report of the Task Force (2004a) and neglected the three more extended reports that it distills. At a level of detail and complexity impossible within the brief confines of the summary report, the three longer reports raise a variety of additional issues and buttress their arguments with systematic evidence and references to the appropriate scholarship. They have been, and still are, posted on the APSA web site, and every reference to the work of the Task Force—including the abbreviated report itself and the version printed and criticized in *Perspectives on Politics*—refers to the longer reports and specifies the appropriate web address (www.apsanet.org/section\_256.cfm).<sup>1</sup>

Taken together, they have sufficient intellectual heft that, in slightly condensed form, they have re-

cently been published as a book (Jacobs and Skocpol 2005). It is disappointing and puzzling that Bennett did not bother to read the full materials on which he comments. I have always respected his work, and his first-rate review of the participation literature (Bennett and Bennett 1986) is cited in the longer report on “Inequalities of Political Voice.” I would have been interested in his reactions to the whole report instead of to an abbreviated version.

I could use my allotted pages to demonstrate, point by point, how many of Bennett’s criticisms are, quite simply, off the mark when viewed in the context of the full report. Instead, because the issues on which he focuses are significant, I shall attempt to return the discussion to the serious work of the Task Force and to the research that it reviewed so carefully—summarizing briefly what the full reports actually said about these matters and suggesting how political scientists might devote ongoing attention to such issues. In so doing, I shall perforce elide the many details, subtleties, and qualifications of the extended discussions in the longer reports. The curious reader is encour-

aged to consult the longer reports and the political science literature on which they are based.

Bennett (2006) begins with a discussion of declining trust in government, a topic on which he is an expert. The erosion in trust in government, and its association in public perceptions with undue influence by special interests, is tangential to the main concerns of the Task Force report. In fact, only four sentences are devoted to this subject. Still, Bennett makes the useful point that political scientists really have not been able to account fully for the drastic erosion in trust in government that began some time in the 1960s. He also cites data showing that, as a source of distrust in government, dissatisfaction with the way the government spends money figures even more importantly in the public mind than does concern with special interest influence. He makes another point as well: that recent American National Election Studies (ANES) data show no relationship between family income and trust in government. However, he does not make clear why this finding is “troublesome for the Task Force’s interpretation” (51). A substantial decline in trust in government, especially one tied in part to a perception that special interests wield too much influence, need not be associated with social class to be a worrisome development for democracy. That said, Bennett raises an important area for continued inquiry in the discipline: the roots of changing levels of trust in government and their consequences for the comportment of citizens and the effective functioning of government in a democracy.

## Do Inequalities of Political Voice Really Matter?

Bennett’s reliance on the abbreviated report presents a greater problem when it comes to the themes of inequality of political participation that are at the core of the Task Force’s concerns. He raises the important question as to whether inequalities in political voice make any difference. This objection usually refers to the undeniable fact that political participation is only one among many sources of influence on policy outcomes and to the difficulty political scientists have in assessing whether inequalities of voice are translated into inequalities of influence. This challenging issue—to which we refer in the full report on “Inequalities of Political Voice” (2004b, 16–17)<sup>2</sup>—is the principal concern of the second part of the full

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report, "Inequality and American Governance" (2004c), which makes a clear case for the consequences of inequalities of public voice for what public officials do. Still, penetrating the black box to understand the multiple factors that shape policy outcomes remains a major challenge for political scientists, one that the Task Force not only acknowledges but identifies as a critical area for additional research.

Bennett's query as to whether inequalities of public voice really make any difference raises a more subtle matter: whether unequal political voice on the basis of such characteristics as socio-economic status, race or ethnicity, gender, or age necessarily implies distortion on the basis of attitudes, partisanship, and other politically relevant characteristics. This matter is discussed at some length in the longer version of the report (2004b, 30–33). Bennett makes the point that, although the electorate is not demographically representative of the public at large, voters do not differ from non-voters in their partisan leanings or their opinions on policy matters as expressed in surveys. This finding, which also holds for activists who undertake other forms of political activity, might suggest that demographic distortion in participation does not compromise equal voice. As Bennett appropriately points out, in spite of their similarly large bank accounts, George Soros and Richard Mellon Scaife have nothing in common politically. (I know nothing about Cindy Sheehan's political attitudes beyond her questioning of the war in Iraq.)

However, in a variety of politically relevant ways, those who take part in politics differ from those who are inactive. For example, the longer report provides systematic data showing that, compared to those who benefit from means-tested government programs like Medicaid, those who benefit from their non-means-tested counterparts such as Medicare are much more politically active—more likely not only to make voting decisions on the basis of concerns about the program, but also to make a contribution in relation to that program, to contact a public official about it, or to belong to an organization concerned with the program.

What about the actual issue content of participatory input? Systematic data show that, in spite of the fact that inactive citizens do not differ substantially from activists in their responses when survey researchers choose the issues, when political activists choose the issues on which to take part, members of various underrepresented groups have distinctive participatory agendas. When asked about the issues and problems that animate their political activity in the kinds of participatory acts that permit the communication of explicit messages to policymakers—for example, contacting, protesting, or serving as a volunteer on a local board—members of different groups have distinctive policy concerns attached to their participation. For example, compared with those who enjoy SES advantages, those who have limited income and education are considerably more likely—and those who receive means-tested government benefits are substantially more likely—to discuss issues of basic human need (that is, matters involving poverty, jobs, health, housing, and the like) in association with their participation. However, because they are so inactive, public officials actually hear fewer messages about these matters from the disadvantaged than from more advantaged activists. Moreover, it is not simply that members of various groups talk about different issues when they take part, they also say different things. When the SES-disadvantaged communicate about policy issues of basic human needs, they inevitably urge greater government attention to these concerns. The more numerous messages on these subjects sent by advantaged activists are much more mixed with respect to whether they advocate greater government efforts on behalf of basic human needs. In short, when we consider what policymakers actually hear, the demographic stratification of activist publics is of political consequence.

## Changing Political Inequalities?

As documented by a host of authoritative government and non-government sources, the decades since the late 1970s are widely acknowledged to have witnessed an unambiguous increase in inequalities of income and wealth. How have the socio-economic inequalities in political voice changed over the same period?

Bennett takes the Task Force to task for relying on a single survey, the 1990 Citizen Participation Study, and for ignoring longitudinal data. True, the data about political participation contained in the brief report—one figure and one table—derive from the same data source. However, the longer report on "Inequalities of Political Voice" from which it draws brings together data from a variety of sources—including longitudinal data from three sources. These longitudinal data shed light on the important issue of whether the stratification in political voice has become more pronounced over the last generation.

Our bottom line is that "there are no easy conclusions when it comes to changing inequality of political voice" (2004b, 35)—hardly the kind of conclusion one would expect in a report that Bennett characterizes as having a "tendency to over-generalize, to make global conclusions even when the data presented . . . indicate greater nuance than often seems appreciated." The reason that it is so difficult to come to a simple conclusion about the direction of change in the level of inequality of political voice is that political voice is multi-faceted, and developments with respect to various modes of expressing political voice—for example, campaign giving, protest, or activity in political organizations—need not operate in tandem. Studies of various forms of participation, including voting, are unanimous in finding that the strong association between political activity and socio-economic status has not been ameliorated in recent decades. Beyond that, the answer seems to depend upon the realm of citizen politics under scrutiny.

Taking the forms of political voice separately, when it comes to voting, the evidence is unclear and scholars differ in their assessments, but there may well be some aggravation of political inequality. With respect to various kinds of individual activity, a study using an additive scale of numerous kinds of political participation found fluctuations in the stratification of political activity over a 20-year period but no net change from the beginning of the period to the end. However, the increasing dominance of political giving—a form of activity that permits the affluent to achieve disproportionate political voice—among the modes of citizen involvement would seem to have the consequence of aggravating inequalities of political voice (2004b, 71–72).

When it comes to organized interest activity, it is especially difficult to specify the net effect of contradictory trends. On the one hand, there has been an overall increase in the number of organized interests and business supremacy in this sphere has been challenged by enhanced advocacy on behalf of a number of underrepresented interests—for example, racial and ethnic minorities, women, gays, the disabled, and such public goods as environmental preservation and lower taxes. On the other hand, business organizations continue to dominate in this domain, and advocacy on behalf of the economically disadvantaged has not been correspondingly expanded. When coupled with the weakening of the labor unions, the organized representation of the economic needs of the less well-off has suffered in relative terms.

Ironically, Bennett, who chided the report for overlooking longitudinal data, dismisses the brief reference in the summary report to the weight of business interests in organized interest politics by asking, "But, is this new?" (52) His reference to E. E. Schattschneider's 1960 observations about the "upper-class

bias” in the pressure system is right on target. However, much has changed in American politics since 1960. One would not want to base an understanding of the composition and partisan habits of the Southern electorate on data from 1960. Rather than relying on Schattschneider’s significant but possibly obsolete insights, political scientists should take up the challenge of producing systematic evidence that would help us to understand whether participatory bias is changing; empirical analyses that would allow us to track the changes and to understand their sources; and theoretical insights that would permit us to integrate across participatory inputs that use different kinds of political currency—hours spent campaigning, letters and calls to public officials, dollars contributed to political causes, organizations involved in political influence.

## Class Inequalities in American Politics

As a theme in American politics, class conflict has a curious and sometimes reluctant history. In recent years, the rhetoric of class conflict has been quite muted and political references to class difference have had little traction. During the 2000 campaign, George W. Bush brushed off his opponent’s criticisms of his tax-cut plan: “I’ve heard all the talk about rich people versus poor people. That’s class warfare that Mr. Gore likes to put into people.”<sup>3</sup> Recent months have seen increased attention to matters of class, and its interaction with race—in, for example, a series of articles on class in the *New York Times* during May and June, 2005, and media attention to a book (Bowen, Kurzweil, and Tobin 2005) about the overrepresentation of the offspring of the affluent and well-educated among students at elite colleges and universities. Then, in the wake of Katrina, concern

about class came roaring back with hurricane force in media reports about social class differences in experiences of disruption and devastation. Media accounts documented the strategies for survival among the affluent—hiring private security guards to protect their homes, escaping by helicopter to the safety of their weekend houses, relying on swimming pools to supply water—while the poor sweltered in unspeakable conditions in the Superdome (See Cooper 2005; Higgins 2005).

At this point, it is impossible to gauge the long-term political fallout from the trauma of Hurricane Katrina. Will the rhetoric of social class and concern with the consequences of economic disadvantage become more central to our political discourse and political contestation? What lesson will be learned from, on the one hand, the relative success of the disaster plans in place at Wal-Mart and certain nursing home chains and, on the other, government failure to heed warnings about the lethal potential in undermaintained levees in a hurricane zone and FEMA’s shortcomings after disaster struck? That governments inevitably fumble when the going gets tough and that the only hope for effective action is to rely on the private sector? Or that we can expect no better from governments when they are starved for both legitimacy and cash and that public agencies will perform at a high level only when we provide sufficient political and financial support? These are questions that go to the heart of the understanding of American politics. Political scientists would do well to stay tuned. I look forward to a lively dialogue on such matters—dialogue that will be, I hope, informed by rigorous research, a careful and complete reading of the relevant scholarship, and a commitment to understanding the challenges facing our democracy.

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## Notes

1. The Task Force was divided into three working groups, each charged with a report. The working group of which I was a part wrote the report on “Inequalities of Political Voice” (2004b).

2. Here and elsewhere, page numbers refer to the longer report that can be found on the APSA web site.

3. Gore eventually rejoined that Bush’s tax-cut plan constituted “class warfare on behalf of billionaires.” This exchange is reported in “In Speech Bush Says” (2000, A10); and Seelye (2000, A1+). From today’s vantage point, it makes for very interesting reading for a variety of reasons, not all of them germane to the concerns here.

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