

American Democracy in an Age of Rising Inequality

Task Force on Inequality and American Democracy
American Political Science Association

*Task Force on
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Lawrence Jacobs, Chair
University of Minnesota

Claire Jean Kim
University of California, Irvine

Ben Barber
University of Maryland

Suzanne Mettler
Syracuse University

Larry Bartels
Princeton University

Benjamin Page
Northwestern University

Michael Dawson
Harvard University

Dianne Pinderhughes
University of Illinois at Urbana-
Champaign

Morris Fiorina
Stanford University

Kay Lehman Schlozman
Boston College

Jacob Hacker
Yale University

Theda Skocpol
Harvard University

Rodney Hero
Notre Dame University

Sidney Verba
Harvard University

Hugh Heclo
George Mason University

Media Contacts:

Lawrence R. Jacobs:
Phone: (612) 625-3384
Email: ljacobs@polisci.umn.edu

Theda Skocpol:
Phone: (617) 876-8051
Email: skocpol@fas.harvard.edu

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American Democracy in An Age of Rising Inequality

Equal political voice and democratically responsive government are widely cherished American ideals. Indeed, the United States is vigorously promoting democracy abroad. Yet, what is happening to democracy at home? Our country's ideals of equal citizenship and responsive government may be under growing threat in an era of persistent and rising inequalities. Disparities of income, wealth, and access to opportunity are growing more sharply in the United States than in many other nations, and gaps between races and ethnic groups persist. Progress toward realizing American ideals of democracy may have stalled, and in some arenas reversed.

We have reached this conclusion as members of the Task Force on Inequality and American Democracy formed under the auspices of the 14,000-member American Political Science Association. As one of several task forces formed to enhance the public relevance of political science, our Task Force was charged to review and assess the best current scholarship about the health and functioning of U.S. democracy in a time of rising inequality. We have carefully surveyed the evidence about three important, interlinked areas of concern: citizen participation, government responsiveness, and patterns of public policy-making and their consequences. We speak for ourselves and not officially for the American Political Science Association. Our conclusions are meant to provoke discussion and debate, not only in professional circles but also in the broader public. We have done our work as experts, paying close attention to data and evidence in all of its ambiguity.¹ Yet we also speak as concerned citizens of American democracy.

Generations of Americans have worked to equalize citizen voice across lines of income, race, and gender. Today, however, the voices of American citizens are raised and heard unequally. 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 privileged 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 policy-makers 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 and income in the hands of the few. Progress toward realizing America's

democratic promise can surely be revived. But to counter current trends that undermine inclusion and fairness, we must work together for democratic renewal. Failure to take urgent and concerted steps to expand political participation and enhance democratic responsiveness — and failure to use democratic means creatively to temper rising social disparities — will surely endanger our longstanding democratic ideals at home and undermine our country's efforts to spread the hope of equal citizenship abroad.

Equal Rights, Rising Economic Inequality, and American Democracy

American society has become both more and less equal in recent decades. Following the Civil Rights revolution of the 1950s and 1960s, racial segregation and exclusion were no longer legal or socially acceptable. Whites and African-Americans began to participate together in schools and colleges, the job market, and all manner of political and civic organizations. Gender barriers have also been breached since the 1960s, with women now able to pursue most of the same economic and political opportunities as men. Many other previously marginalized groups have also gained rights to full participation in American institutions

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and have begun to demand — and to varying degrees enjoy — the dignity of equal citizenship.²

But as U.S. society has become more integrated across the previous barriers of race, ethnicity, gender, and other longstanding forms of social exclusion, it has simultaneously experienced growing gaps of income and wealth. Gaps have grown not just between the poor and the rest of society, but also between privileged professionals, managers, and business owners on the one hand, and the middle strata of regular white-collar and blue-collar employees on the other hand. Many middle-class families are just barely staying afloat with two parents working.³ And many African-Americans, Latinos, and women who head families find themselves losing ground. There are signs of increased segregation by, for example, income and race in our public schools.⁴ Meanwhile, the rich and the super-rich have gotten much more so — especially since the mid-1970s.⁵ Indeed, the very richest one percent of Americans has pulled away from not only the poor but also the middle class.

Disparities in wealth and income have recently grown more sharply in the United States than in Canada, France, Germany, Italy, and many other advanced industrial democracies. Many kinds of statistics could be cited to document this statement. Figure 1 presents

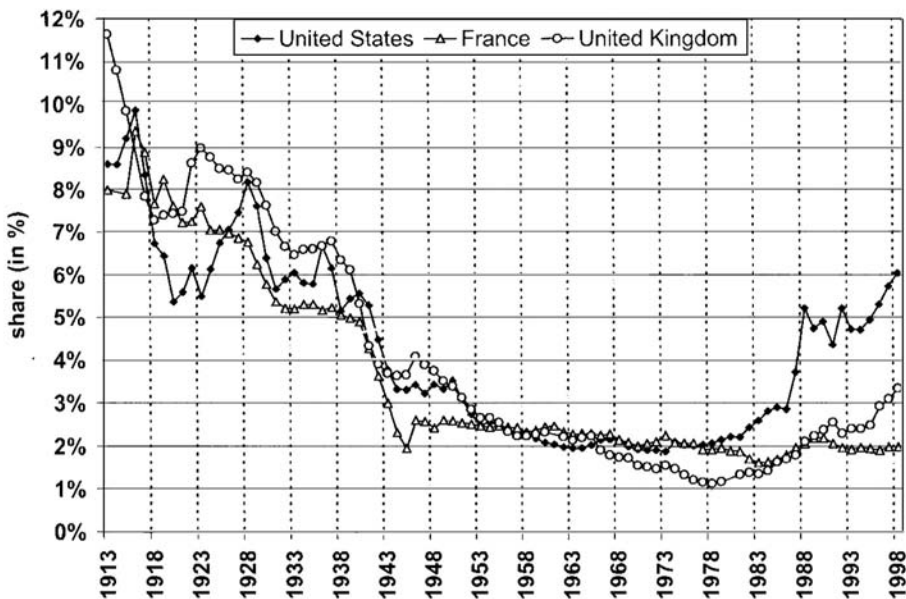
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information about income trends for American families compared with families in Britain and France. The proportion of income accruing to the top one-tenth of one percent of families ran along parallel tracks for much of the 20th century. All three countries reduced inequality from the end of World War I through World War II and until the 1960s. But from the mid-1970s on, the United States rapidly diverged from its two allies and became far more unequal. By 1998, the share of income held by the very rich was two or three times higher in the United States than in Britain and France.

Some Americans have moved up the income ladder. But upward mobility of the few has not offset the economic disparities among the many. Indeed, many Americans have to work harder just to maintain their current economic position.⁶

Disparities are particularly striking when it comes to comparisons across races. Even as the absolute economic circumstances of minorities have improved, the median white household earned 62 percent more income and possessed twelvefold more wealth than the median black household, with nearly two-thirds of black households (61 percent) and

Figure 1. Top 0.1 Percent Income Shares in the United States, France, and the United Kingdom, 1913-1998



Source: Analysis of tax returns in Thomas Piketty and Emmanuel Saez, "Income Inequality in the United States, 1913-1998." *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 118 (February 2003): 1-39.

half of Hispanic households lacking any financial assets, as compared with only a quarter of their white counterparts. Even young, married, black couples in which both adults work — the shining beacons of progress toward racial equality — still earn 20 percent less income than their white counterparts and possess a staggering 80 percent less net worth. Living conditions remain fragile for the black middle class, and continue to lag far behind those experienced by their white counterparts. And, of course, the life circumstances of African-Americans who have not reached the middle class are even more precarious.⁷ The Civil Rights era helped lift the absolute levels of income and wealth enjoyed by African-Americans and Hispanics, but they remain unacceptably far behind white America.

Persistent and rising economic inequalities in the United States result from a variety of causes — including changes in technology, new forms of family life, and market forces promoting global integration. Similar changes face many nations. Yet the policies pursued by various governments matter. Regulations, tax policy, and social programs can be used to buffer rising socioeconomic inequalities in an era of globalization and demographic and technological change.⁸ Policies pursued — or not pursued — help to explain sharper socioeconomic disparities in the U.S. compared to more muted inequalities in Canada, Germany, France, and other advanced industrialized countries.

How concerned should we be about persistent and rising socioeconomic inequalities? According to opinion surveys, Americans accept considerable disparities of income and wealth — much more than their European counterparts do.⁹ Unequal economic outcomes are seen as largely reflecting differences among individuals rather than flaws in the economic system. Americans support private property and free enterprise, and see much of the skewed distribution of wealth and income as a legitimate result of differences in individual talent and effort.

But it is important to remember that Americans accept economic inequalities only when they are sure that everyone has an equal chance to get ahead — to make the best of life for the individual and his or her family. Government is expected to help ensure equal opportunity for all, not to tilt toward those who already have wealth and power.

Even more clearly, Americans celebrate and expect equal democratic rights. Americans fervently believe that everyone should have an equal say in our democratic politics, helping to shape what government does. They embrace whole-heartedly the ideal enunciated by the U.S. Declaration of Independence that “all men are created equal,” which in our time means that every citizen — regardless of income, gender, race, and ethnicity — should have an equal voice in representative government.

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According to a host of opinion surveys and other indicators, Americans are increasingly worried about disparities of participation, voice, and government responsiveness. Citizens are much less likely than they were several decades ago to trust government to “do the right thing.” Between the mid-1960s and the mid-1990s the proportion of Americans who felt that “the government is run by a few big interests looking out only for themselves” more than doubled to reach 76 percent, while the number who believed that “public officials don’t care about what people think” grew from 36 percent to 66 percent.¹⁰ More than six in 10 respondents to a 1995 survey cited too much influence by special interests as a reason for not trusting government.¹¹

The evidence our Task Force has compiled suggests that our fellow citizens are right to be concerned about the health of our democracy. We find disturbing inequalities in the political voice expressed through elections and other avenues

of participation. We find that our governing institutions are much more responsive to the privileged than to other Americans. And we find that the policies fashioned by our government today may be doing less than celebrated programs enacted in the past to promote equal opportunity and security and enhance citizen dignity and participation. Indeed, worrisome trends in all three of these areas — citizen voice, government decision-making, and public policy — may be coming together to amplify the influence of the few and promote government unresponsive to the values and needs of the many. Such a negative spiral can, in turn, prompt Americans to become increasingly discouraged about the effectiveness of democratic governance, spreading cynicism and withdrawal from elections and other arenas of public life.

Nearly nine out of 10 individuals in families with incomes over \$75,000 reported voting in presidential elections while only half of those in families with incomes under \$15,000 reported voting.

Unequal Voices

Only some Americans fully exercise their rights as citizens, and they usually come from the more advantaged segments of society. Those who enjoy higher incomes, more occupational success, and the highest levels of formal education, are the ones most likely to participate in politics and make their needs and values known to government officials.

The Half of Americans Who Vote

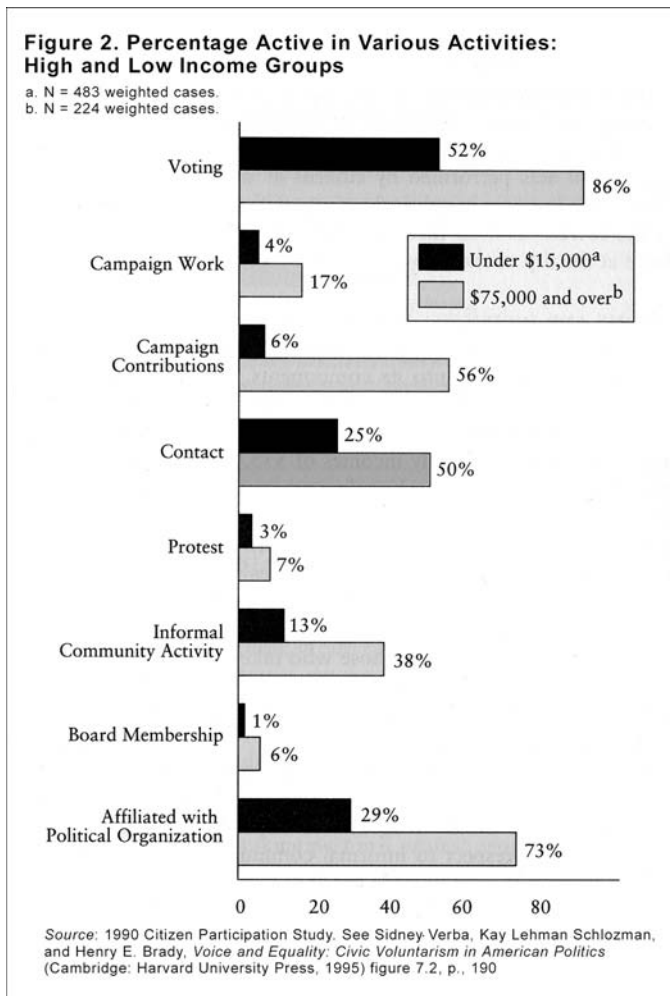
Voting is the most obvious means for Americans to exercise their rights of citizenship, yet only a third of eligible voters participate in mid-term congressional elections and only about half turn out for today’s presidential elections. Even voters in presidential

elections tend to be from the ranks of the most advantaged Americans. Figure 2 uses a national survey of Americans to compare the political activity of two income groups (each of which constituted roughly one-fifth of the sample) — those having family incomes below \$15,000 and those at the top of the income ladder with family incomes over \$75,000. Nearly nine out of 10 individuals in families with incomes over \$75,000 reported voting in presidential elections while only half of those in families with incomes under \$15,000 reported voting. This pattern of stratification has also been documented in all kinds of analyses, including those based on census data and validated votes.¹²

We should be surprised that the turnout of eligible voters is so low and uneven in the United States at the beginning of the 21st century. Turnout declined in the 1960s and has not rebounded since even though African-Americans in the South were brought into the electorate through the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and even though voting has been simplified

through a number of legal reforms — from easing residency requirements to making it easier to register and acquire an absentee ballot. Educational levels have also increased, and education instills skills and values that encourage voting. If more and more Americans had not received more education in recent times, the decline in voting would have been even sharper.

Although electoral participation ticks up somewhat when contests are closely fought and parties make extra efforts to mobilize voters, a number of ongoing trends discourage voting



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and reinforce inequalities in voter turnout. Rising economic inequality may discourage less privileged voters.¹³ And part of the decline in voting since the early 1970s results from laws in many states that forbid former (as well as current) prisoners from voting, sometimes for their entire lives. Millions of Americans, especially minority men, have been excluded from basic participation in our democracy by such laws.¹⁴ Below, we also discuss strategies pursued by the Democratic and Republican parties that place more emphasis on raising money and persuading the already active, rather than mobilizing eligible citizens who do not vote.

Less advantaged Americans vote less because they lack the skills, motivation, and networks that the better advantaged pick up through formal education and occupational advancement. In addition, political parties and campaigns focus their resources on citizens who are affluent and are already active politically.

Beyond Voting

Low and unequal voting is sobering in part because casting a ballot is America's most widespread form of political participation. Compared with the half of Americans who vote in presidential elections, much smaller proportions take part in more demanding and costly activities such as making a financial contribution to politicians, working in an electoral campaign, getting in touch with a public official, getting involved in an organization that takes political stands, or taking part in a protest or demonstration.

Campaign contributors are the least representative group of citizens. Only 12 percent of American households had incomes over \$100,000 in 2000, but a whopping 95 percent of the donors who made substantial contributions were in these wealthiest households.¹⁵ Figure 2 shows that 56 percent of those with incomes of \$75,000 and more reported making some form of campaign contribution compared with a mere 6 percent among Americans with incomes under \$15,000.

smaller proportions take part in more demanding and costly activities.

Giving money to politicians is a form of citizen activity that is, in practical terms, reserved for a select group of Americans. As wealth and income have become more concentrated and the flow of money into elections has grown, campaign contributions give the affluent a means to express their voice that is unavailable to most citizens. This undoubtedly aggravates inequalities of political voice.

Exercising the rights of citizenship requires resources and skills, which privileged

occupations disproportionately bestow on the economically well-off. Managers, lawyers, doctors, and other professionals enjoy not only higher education and salaries but also greater confidence and abilities to speak and organize than do individuals who sweep floors, clean bedpans, or collect garbage. These disparities in resources and skills are evident in a host of political activities shown in Figure 2:

- Nearly three-quarters of the well off are affiliated with an organization that takes stands in politics (like the AARP or advocacy groups) as compared with only 29 percent of the least affluent.
 - Half of the affluent contact a public official as compared with only 25 percent of those with low incomes.
 - Thirty-eight percent of the well-off participate in informal efforts to solve community problems compared with only 13 percent of those in the lowest income groups.
 - Even protesting — which might appear to demand little in the way of skills or money and is often thought of as “the weapon of the weak”— is more prevalent among the affluent. Seven percent of the better-off protest to promote such causes as abortion rights or environmentalism, compared with 3 percent among the poor who might march to demand the basic necessities of life.

Some argue that the Internet will be a democratizing force because it heralds a new frontier of virtual participation and new forms of citizen-to-citizen communication. Despite these hopes, however, the Internet appears to be reinforcing existing inequalities because it is disproportionately accessible to — and used by — the affluent, non-Hispanic whites, and the highly educated.¹⁶ The Internet also places a premium on knowing in advance that one wants political information, or knowing that one wants to enter a discussion or make a monetary contribution. People who are ambivalent about politics or not already involved may not readily be drawn in simply by the availability of the Internet. In short, the Internet may “activate the active” and widen the disparities between participants and the politically disengaged by making it easier for the already engaged to gain political information, to make political connections, and contribute money.

Interest Groups for the Well-Off Dominate Washington

Citizens express preferences not just by individual acts but also through the organized groups they support. Today, there are many more voluntary and interest group organizations than in the past. In the 2001 Washington Representatives — a publication identifying individuals, firms, and organizations registered as lobbyists — organizations that begin with the word “American” alone numbered more than 600, including the American Automobile Association, American Academy of Pediatrics, American Airlines, American Civil Liberties Union, and the American Corn Growers Association.¹⁷ Over the past four decades, Americans have organized a broader array of interest groups than ever before. Among the newly created groups are watchdogs for the previously

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unorganized — for example, poor children, gays, and the disabled. Many new groups have also formed to expand the representation of consumers, women, environmentalists, and African-Americans and ethnic minorities. All of this organizing amounts to an enrichment and enlargement of U.S. democracy.¹⁸

But even as the number of organizations speaking for underrepresented interests and preferences has grown, corporate managers and professionals have also increased their sway for a number of reasons:

- Since the 1970s, the proportion of the work force that is unionized fell by nearly half to 13.5 percent due to the decline of unionization in the private sector (where only 9 percent are currently unionized).¹⁹ Blue-collar trade unions have experienced especially sharp decline. A larger and growing proportion of higher-educated Americans belong to professional societies compared with those with less education who belong to trade unions.²⁰ Put simply, the already privileged are better organized through occupational associations than the less privileged.
- Contemporary advocacy groups that focus on social rights or public values (such as environmentalism or the family) tend to be professionally run and focus on appealing to more affluent and educated supporters rather than on mobilizing large memberships.²¹
- Corporations and professions have spawned a new generation of political organizations since the early 1970s in response to the rise of citizen organizations and global competition.²² This transformation reflected, in part, a massive mobilization into politics of advantaged groups that had not previously been active in Washington. It also reflected the decision of many existing corporate and professional organizations to expand their political efforts, often by establishing an independent office in Washington rather than relying on trade associations and lobbyists-for-hire to manage their political affairs.

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The number and diversity of interest groups have grown, and many formerly marginalized Americans have gained some voice in public debates. Yet, at the same time, the dominance of the advantaged has solidified and their capacities to speak loudly and clearly to government officials have been enhanced.

Contemporary Political Parties Exacerbate Inequalities

Most interest groups are the tool of the few who want to press for particular benefits

and breaks. Political parties, on the other hand, are the vehicle for reaching the broad public and mobilizing them into politics. Indeed, the United States invented political parties in the 19th century in order to mobilize ordinary citizens, and succeeded in ushering a far higher proportion of eligible voters to the polls than go today.

The problem today is that this mechanism for a broad and inclusive democracy—political parties—caters to some of the same narrow segments of American society that also disproportionately deploy interest groups on their behalf. Advantage begets additional advantage.

Both of the major political parties intensify the skewed participation in U.S. politics by targeting many of their resources on recruiting those who are already the most privileged and involved.²³ Democrats and Republicans alike have become highly dependent on campaign contributors and activists, and have gotten used to competing for just over half of a shrinking universe of voters. What is more, political parties ignore parts of the electorate that have not turned out at high rates in past elections.

Table 1, based on a national survey, shows that in terms of average family income individuals who identify with and regularly vote for the Democratic Party are substantially less affluent than their Republican counterparts. Just as striking, however, both the Democratic and the Republican parties seek campaign workers and campaign contributors among their more affluent adherents. Rather than correcting the existing bias of the electoral process toward the more advantaged citizens, many of the strategies used by today’s political

Table 1. Party Mobilization for Political Activity: Who is Asked?

Average Family Income of:

All Respondents: \$40,300

	Republicans	Democrats
Party Identifiers	\$45,400	\$36,900
Regular Voters	\$48,000	\$38,500
Those asked to work in a campaign by a fellow partisan	\$51,700	\$49,800
Those asked to contribute to a campaign by a fellow partisan	\$56,700	\$54,700

Source: 1990 Citizen Participation Study. See Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Henry Brady, "Civic Participation and the Equality Problem," in *Civic Engagement in American Politics*, eds. Theda Skocpol and Morris Fiorina (Washington D.C. and New York: Brookings Institution and Russell Sage Foundation, 1999) p. 452.

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parties thus widen disparities in political participation. The major parties have become less likely to personally contact large numbers of less privileged and less active citizens — even though research tells us that personal contact is important in encouraging citizens to vote.²⁴

The Uneven Playing Field

Disparities in participation ensure that ordinary Americans speak in a whisper while the most advantaged roar. The concerns of lower or moderate income Americans, racial and ethnic minorities, and legal immigrants are systematically less likely to be heard by government officials. In contrast, the interests and preferences of the better-off are conveyed with clarity, consistency, and forcefulness.

Unequal political voice matters because the advantaged convey very different messages to government officials than do average citizens or those who are the least well off. For example, Americans who take part in politics are much less likely than many of their fellow citizens to have faced the need to work extra hours to get by. The privileged are unlikely to have delayed medical treatment for economic reasons or cut back on spending for food or the education of children. Those Americans who would be most likely to raise issues about basic opportunities and needs — from escaping poverty to securing jobs, education, health care, and housing — tend to be the least likely to participate in politics. The less advantaged are so absent from discussions in Washington that government officials are likely to hear about their concerns, if at all, from more privileged advocates who try to speak for the disadvantaged.²⁵ Politicians hear most regularly about the concerns of business and the most affluent.

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Political voice is also unequal because Americans who are very active in politics often have more intense or extreme views than average citizens who participate less or only sporadically. Extreme partisans and fringe activists have become more prominent in U.S. politics in recent times and may have significant consequences for American governance. The intense and unrelenting expression of “extreme voices” (combined with the proliferation of interest groups speaking for very specialized constituencies) makes it harder for government to work out broad compromises or to respond to average citizens who have more ambiguous or middle-of-the-road opinions about a range of important matters, ranging from abortion to tax cuts.²⁶

How Government Responds

Generations of reformers have understood a simple truth: What government officials hear influences what they do. What citizens do — or don't do — in politics affects what happens in the halls of government. Because government officials today hear more clearly and more often from privileged and highly active citizens, policy-makers are unlikely to respond readily to the concerns of the majority. The skew in political participation toward the advantaged generates policies tilted toward maintaining the status quo and continuing to reward the organized and already well-off.

Money Buys Attention

Today, politicians are not usually directly bribed by political contributors or moneyed interests. Research does not support the idea that specific votes in Congress are directly determined by campaign contributions.²⁷ What wealthy citizens and moneyed interests do gain from their big contributions is influence over who runs for office and a hearing from politicians and government officials once they are in positions of authority. Access for the few can thereby crowd out attention to the many.

Money is the oxygen of today's elections, given the reliance of candidates on high-priced consultants and expensive media advertisements. The principal problem is where the money comes from and the influence it buys. Big contributors have the power to discourage or perhaps suffocate unfriendly candidates by denying them early or consistent funding. After the election, moreover, government officials need information to do their jobs, and research shows that big contributors earn the privilege of regularly meeting with policy-makers in their offices. Money buys the opportunity to present self-serving information or raise some problems for attention rather than others.

Adding to their greater voice through other modes of participation, generous contributors attend countless rounds of fund-raisers. They enjoy the privilege of building relationships with government officials who can vigorously undertake a host of helpful, low-profile actions — inserting a rider into an omnibus bill, expediting the scheduling of a bill that has been languishing in committee, or making sure that threatening regulatory legislation receives minimal funding for implementation.²⁸ Equally important, legislators can decide to pay more attention to the kinds of concerns that big contributors press forward, at the expense of spending time on problems of broader democratic import.

Congress Favors the Organized

Recent changes in how Congress designs legislation reinforce and expand the advantages of the organized. Government money to fund a host of projects — from building highways and waterways to constructing buildings — has long been allocated to well-organized and vocal groups with connections inside Washington. A century ago, the reforms of the Progressive Era aimed to end “machine” politics that doled out government funds or “pork” in exchange for votes and campaign contributions. Civil service exams, government oversight, and a more watchful press put a stop to the crudest forms of corruption. But the best-organized still feast on discretionary government spending because members of Congress remain convinced that pork produces votes and campaign contributors.

New developments within Congress have more finely targeted government pork to narrow factions. As each major political party has become more unified by chasing out moderates in their ranks and the Republican and Democratic parties have polarized into warring tribes, the majority party in Congress has funneled greater proportions of defense contracts, transportation funding, appropriation earmarks for higher education institutions, and other programs to the districts of fellow partisans. In turn, members of Congress have directed government funds coming into their districts to specific geographic areas that vote at higher rates and provide their greatest support.²⁹

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Party controls over the redrawing of the districts from which members of state legislatures and the House of Representatives are elected are also making government less responsive to average citizens. In an age of advanced information technology, it is possible for party strategists working through state legislatures to pick, in essence, the precise set of voters who will send members to state legislatures and Congress. Redistricting is happening not just every 10 years after the Census, but more often now. Artificial districts with very peculiar boundaries are becoming the norm, creating seats safe from electoral competition

for Democrats and Republicans alike. Legislators are picking voters, rather than the other way around. This situation furthers partisan polarization in our legislatures and makes representatives less responsive to large numbers of Americans with middle-of-the-road views.

Who Gets the Policies They Want?

Skewed participation among citizens and the targeting of government resources to partisans and the well-organized ensure that government officials disproportionately respond to business, the wealthy, and the organized and vocal when they design America's domestic and foreign policies.³⁰ Recent research strikingly documents that the votes of U.S. senators far more closely

Recent research strikingly documents that the votes of U.S. senators far more closely correspond with the policy preferences of each senator's rich constituents than with the preferences of the senator's less-privileged constituents.

correspond with the policy preferences of each senator's rich constituents than with the preferences of the senator's less-privileged constituents.³¹ Wealthier constituents from the top of the income distribution appear to have had almost three times more influence on their senators' votes than those near the bottom. And the better-off enjoyed even greater influence on the most

salient bills — legislation on the minimum wage, civil rights, government spending, and abortion. At the very bottom, moreover, the preferences of constituents in the bottom fifth of the income distribution have little or no effect on the votes of their senators.

The bias in government responsiveness toward the affluent is evident not only in Congress but also in national government policy more generally. Government officials who design policy changes are more than twice as responsive to the preferences of the rich as to the preferences of the least affluent.³² The rich have even greater leverage, moreover, when their preferences diverge substantially from the preferences of the poor. When "class warfare" proceeds in the cloistered confines of government offices, the rich generally win.

Business and other elites also exert far more influence than the general public on U.S. foreign policy, which not only guides the country's diplomatic and defense affairs but also has powerful consequences for domestic economic conditions through decisions on trade and the protection and promotion of American jobs and businesses.³³ The views of policy experts — and especially business leaders — closely corresponded to the foreign policy views of government officials from

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1974 to 2002. The preferences of ordinary citizens had very little discernible impact.

Even the recent rise of “public interest” citizen associations has not significantly corrected the bias of the system toward the more privileged. Professionally run advocacy groups — such as environmental or consumer groups — have developed an impressive capacity to go head-to-head with business groups in gaining publicity in the national media and shaping agendas of congressional debate. This means that concerns important to many Americans can receive a strong hearing in the national media and in Washington, D.C. But research also shows that, as professional advocacy groups speaking for broad public concerns have gained influence, they have become less likely to champion bread-and-butter issues of concern to less privileged Americans.³⁴

Missed Opportunities for Democratic Government

What government does not do is just as important as what it does.³⁵ What our government does these days is especially responsive to the values and interests of the most privileged Americans. Harder to pin down is the effect of disparities of influence on what government fails to do. Through much of U.S. history, our government has responded to the life circumstances of ordinary Americans by enacting major policies to spread opportunities and provide security to millions of individuals and families. Public education, Social Security and Medicare, the G.I. Bill, home-mortgage programs, certain farm programs, and many other efforts have enhanced the quality of life for millions of regular Americans.

What is particularly relevant for understanding political inequality in America today is that many these broadly inclusive government programs also encouraged ordinary citizens to become more active participants in our democracy — they helped equalize the voice of citizens in the halls of government. The United

broadly inclusive government programs also encouraged ordinary citizens to become more active participants in our democracy.

States pioneered schooling for all, spending about as much or more than many advanced industrialized countries. Promotion of education has helped to open the door to opportunity for students who work hard, to propel the country’s economy, and to lower economic disparities. It has also boosted participation in volunteer organizations and democratic life. In higher education, the G.I. Bill extended generous assistance to attend universities, community colleges, and vocational schools for millions of veterans of World War II and the Korean War.³⁶ Since the 1970s, federal programs like the Pell Grants and state initiatives have allowed millions of lower- and middle-income students to pursue post-secondary schooling.

Similarly, Social Security, which provides protection against low income in retirement to employees who contribute to the system, has helped to foster an extraordinary level of participation by the elderly in the electoral process and civic life. Social Security has

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America can boast, then, of a distinguished track record of government programs that not only enhanced opportunity and security for the many, but also promoted democracy by expanding political voice.

But what are the equivalents of such broadly responsive programs today? The educational and training benefits for America's all-volunteer military are modest compared with those in the original G.I. Bill and, consequently, have made less impact in boosting the schooling of veterans to the level of non-veterans.³⁸ Moreover, rising tuition, the declining value of individual Pell Grants, and state budget cuts have made higher education less affordable to non-veterans at a time when its economic value has risen and its contribution to counteracting the bias in political participation is invaluable.³⁹

While Social Security protects and engages seniors, few government programs ensure opportunity and security and encourage political engagement for Americans who are not elderly. This situation reinforces the preoccupation of political leaders with improving the programs of the aged rather than assisting young and old alike. The fact that non-elderly Americans are less engaged in politics than the elderly makes it less likely that our government will adequately address the many challenges faced by working-aged adults and their children — challenges such as gaining access to affordable health care, paying for higher education for offspring, and finding ways to care for family members when a single parent or two parents must work full time for wages. Judging from public opinion surveys, large majorities of Americans would like our government to find ways to support citizens of all ages as they face old and new challenges. Our government, however, is too often mired in the status quo and intent in responding to business or privileged constituents to provide sustained and responsible solutions to these challenges. Bias toward the needs and

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values of the most privileged — or those who are already very active — therefore affects not just what our government does for the few, but also what it fails to do for the many.

New Barriers to Equal Citizenship

One of the great stories of the past century in the United States has been the reduction of overt discrimination that once excluded millions of Americans from the core of political, economic, and social life. Women gained the right to vote and the right to run for office alongside men. Popular struggles by ordinary African-Americans culminated in the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which outlawed racial discrimination in public accommodations, prohibited federal funding of educational institutions if they discriminated, and forbade racial and gender discrimination by employers and unions. Another landmark was the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which cleared the way for all African-Americans to vote.

America's extension of basic citizenship rights expanded the political participation of minorities and women and improved their living conditions. Public opinion toward African-Americans and other minorities experienced a remarkable shift: while only 45 percent of Americans agreed in 1944 that "Negroes should have as good a chance as white people to get any kind of job," a near-unanimous 97 percent espoused this view only three decades later.⁴⁰ In terms of economic conditions, a number of indicators point to real improvements in the lowly economic circumstances of minorities. African-American men have moved into the highest-income categories at an impressive rate over the last few decades; and the number of women in managerial and professional jobs rose impressively, as did their wages.⁴¹ On the political front, the gap in

the historic accomplishments of the "rights revolution" are now threatened by widening economic and political inequalities.

voter turnout among African-Americans and whites has narrowed considerably. Yet the historic accomplishments of the "rights revolution" are now threatened by widening economic and political inequalities. The reduction of overt discrimination has been countered by growing gaps in income and wealth, which are undermining the economic progress and political inclusion of many African-Americans, Latinos, and women, even as they also threaten equal opportunity and citizenship for many white men. Income gains among African-Americans relative to whites have slowed dramatically since the late 1970s and the racial wage gap returned in the 1980s to the levels last seen in the 1950s.⁴² This situation threatens continuing economic progress for many minorities who remain disproportionately in lower-wage jobs or out of work. The story of minorities is complex but ultimately sobering:

the economic circumstances of racial and ethnic minorities have improved in absolute terms even as many members of minorities have fallen further behind white America.

As the relative economic conditions for many in the ranks of America's minorities have stagnated or declined, improvements in minority participation and political influence have also stalled. The political playing field remains highly unequal, and the immediate gains of the rights revolution have not yielded sustained equalization of political voice. Four decades after the crowning legislative achievements of the rights revolution, racial and gender inequalities continue to hamper educational attainment, employment prospects, income, and other factors critical to the distribution of the skills and resources that generate political participation. Some believe that the creeping constraints caused by growing economic disparities have been exacerbated by policy shifts against affirmative action and other efforts to narrow racial and gender gaps.⁴³

When less-advantaged Americans experience stagnating economic fortunes and loss of political voice, the promise of greater equality for minorities is compromised.

Renewing American Democracy

The Declaration of Independence promised that all American citizens would enjoy equal political rights. Nearly every generation has returned to this promise and struggled to elevate the performance of American democracy to its high ideals. But in our time, the promise of American democracy is threatened again. The threat is less overt than the barriers of law or social custom conquered by earlier generations. Today, the risk is that rising economic

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inequality will solidify longstanding disparities in political voice and influence, and perhaps exacerbate such disparities. Our government is becoming less democratic, responsive mainly to the privileged and not a powerful instrument to correct disadvantages or to look out for the majority. If disparities of participation and influence become further entrenched — and if average citizens give up on democratic government — unequal citizenship could take on a life of its own, weakening American democracy for a long time to come.

As citizens, we believe that steps need to be taken to break worrisome, mutually reinforcing trends. As professional political scientists whose natural subject is the place of government

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in society, we are convinced that responsive government itself encourages greater citizen engagement — creating a benign circle for healthy democracy. Yet government must work alongside journalists, business leaders, and community organizations and churches. The nation's current campaign to expand democracy abroad should be a bugle call at home to make the birthright of all Americans — equal voice and influence in the affairs of government — more of a reality than it is today.

Narrow political participation and unequal influence can be challenged on three fronts. First, as we debate public programs, we need to keep in mind that broad efforts to spread opportunity and assure security for large numbers of Americans can also have the salutary side-effect of enhancing democratic citizenship. People are more likely to get involved when they have faith that government can and will address the needs and values of the majority.

We challenge our fellow citizens to with join us in a vigorous campaign to expand participation and make our government responsive to the many, rather than just the privileged few

Second, non-governmental institutions also play an important role in fostering participation in America's civic and political life. For many decades, unions drew large numbers of low-income Americans into the political process, but the future role of unions in fostering citizen involvement depends on reversing recent declines in union membership. Meanwhile, religious organizations continue to be a kind of coral reef pulsating with democratic life. They instill basic skills and habits necessary for political participation and advocacy and help to offset much of the bias in favor of the affluent and well-educated that is common in American politics. Simply attending religious services enhances turnout for elections. Helping to run a church soup kitchen, organizing a youth group's visit to another religious institution, or serving on a congregational committee can all be bridges to wider community and political involvement.⁴⁴ In addition, America's political parties have much to do to place more emphasis on expanding the electorate than on raising money from the wealthy or mobilizing those who are already very active.

Third, the media have a civic responsibility both to inform citizens about policy and to deepen involvement in community life. Journalists and their editors have an obligation to go beyond creating echo chambers that amplify the voice of the involved. Treating politics more respectfully and less cynically, and sponsoring debates among candidates and policy advocates are useful steps. Yet journalists will also need to invent better ways to broaden the involvement of associations and citizens whose voices are normally unheard.

Our Task Force has discovered disturbing deficits and trends that undermine the promise of American democracy in an era of persistent and rising social inequalities. We challenge our fellow citizens to with join us in a vigorous campaign to expand participation and make our government responsive to the many, rather than just the privileged few. For those who would preserve and expand American democracy, every era offers new challenges — and none have been more pressing than those we must face in our time.

End Notes

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