Political Inequality

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Abstract

In the classical model of democracy, governments are responsive to the mass public, making public policies favored by a majority of citizens while respecting the rights of minorities. In the real world, of course, no political system, democratic or otherwise, has ever fully realized this principle of political equality. The focus of this essay is an examination of research on how economic inequalities impact democratic politics. The question has become especially pressing as economic inequality has risen, in some countries quite dramatically, in recent decades. Political inequality may refer to either differential *inputs* into policymaking processes, in which some actors have more influence than others, or it can refer to policy *outputs*, in particular those which encourage or sustain income and wealth inequality. In this essay, I review four contemporary theories of political inequality (elite and oligarchic models, power resources theories, globalization models, and participatory inequality models). Each throws light on some aspects of political inequality, but none provides a completely satisfactory account. I conclude with some suggestions for future directions for research.

INTRODUCTION

Modern democratic political systems claim legitimacy by asserting that all citizens have equal opportunities to shape the composition of their elected governments and the resulting public policies. In the classical model of democracy, governments are responsive to the mass public, making public policies favored by a majority of citizens while respecting the rights of minorities. In the real world, of course, no political system, democratic or otherwise, has ever fully realized this principle of political equality (Dahl, 1998). However, in recent decades, rising income and wealth inequalities, combined with the seeming inability of democratic governments to promote a greater sharing of the fruits of economic growth, has prompted renewed interest in the question of how economic inequalities impact political systems. The potential for redistribution through democratic political systems in capitalist societies, where all citizens have the right to vote, is an issue that has exercised social science imaginations since the dawn of mass democracy.

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150 years on, it is clear that this scenario has not yet come to pass, and there are few signs suggesting the future might be different or even that the introduction of democracy necessarily leads to redistribution (Ross, 2006). The inevitable puzzle, as Shapiro (2002) pithily puts it, is "why don't the [vastly more numerous] poor soak the rich?"

If we take the long view, there is little doubt that democratic political systems have been associated with redistribution via the adoption of various social welfare policies and welfare state institutions, which have become universal and enduringly popular. The rise of the welfare state since the late nineteenth century has unquestionably enhanced economic opportunity and raised living standards across the entire population and across the life course (Garfinkel, Smeeding, & Rainwater, 2010). However, it now appears to most commentators that we have reached the end of the "golden age" of welfare state expansion (Pierson, 2001; Streeck, 2012). The political choices that have been made in the past couple of decades have allowed inequality to surge. In the longer run of history, the relatively egalitarian twentieth century (and the innovations in tax and transfer systems adopted, especially in the decades after World War II) may prove to be the exception to the long-run bias of capitalism toward inegalitarian outcomes (Piketty, 2014). And if so, the sources of inequality in democratic political systems are likely to provide one key to understanding this shift. (One could, of course, make similar claims about authoritarian capitalist societies, but that is not the target of this essay.)

My focus is to get at these larger questions with a somewhat narrower agenda: what have we learned about are the mechanisms through which economic inequality impacts democratic politics, and what should future research address more thoroughly? Political inequality can take one of two different forms: It may refer to either differential *inputs* into policymaking processes, in which some actors have more influence than others, or it can refer to policy *outputs*, in particular those which encourage or sustain income and wealth inequality. It is certainly not obvious that political inequality should be common feature of democratic political systems. In the classical pluralist vision of democracy, for example, the resources of affluent actors in democratic systems can be offset by mobilization of citizens and groups "from below"; in Galbraith's (1952) famous formulation, democratic political systems can be relatively egalitarian and produce redistributive outcomes so long as ordinary citizens have sufficient "countervailing power" to contest economic and political elites. Countervailing power is most likely to be produced by strong unions, social movements from below, or electorally competitive left (or social democratic) political parties advancing redistributive policy programs. However, in an era of nearly universal union decline (Silver, 2003; Wallerstein & Western, 2000) and the gradual retreat of social democratic parties toward less redistributive positions (Therborn, 2008),

the weakening of countervailing power now appears to be a central fact of contemporary democratic capitalism.

FOUNDATIONS

The claim that entrenched biases toward favoring certain kinds of actors and interests over others arises from some very basic elements of capitalist democracy. No elected government (subject to periodic reevaluation by its citizens) can afford to allow a severe economic contraction brought on by declining business investment if it hopes to remain electorally competitive (Block, 1987; Lindblom, 1977). Maintaining conditions favorable to investment thus provides a kind of structural power available to the very largest of individual economic actors, and more generally to politically organized peak business associations. Block (1987, Chapter 4) nicely captures this idea with the notion of "business confidence" as the mechanism of structural power that all democratically elected governments must pay some heed to.

Further, there are easily demonstrable disparities in the class power of different groups, with corporate interests in particular having advantages not shared by poor people or a disorganized working class. Offe and Wisenthal (Offe, 1985, Chapter 7) offered one elegant formulation of this idea, arguing that while the working class had to organize large and often diffuse groups into unions or social movements, business interests could often exert power on governments with the mere threat of disinvestment or departure. A single large employer acting on its own has leverage that other groups can only acquire with high levels of organization.

Taken together, the business confidence and power disparities inherent to contemporary capitalism create structural conditions for a bias toward protecting and promoting the interests of economic elites and firms over everyone else. However, this "structural power" hypothesis has not proved easy to rigorously test. Classical examples of democratically elected left governments with an explicitly socialist policy agenda that would unquestionably threaten business confidence are few and far between. Where they have appeared (e.g., the experience of the French socialists led by President Francois Mitterand after 1981, the Chilean government under Salvador Allende in the early 1970s, or the Swedish social democrats in the late 1970s when the Party's radical Meidner Plan to promote worker ownership of private firms was shelved once in office) exemplify some of the rapid pressures that can arise to abandon their program in favor of moderation. However, systematic analyses with cross-national data are difficult; Przeworski and Wallerstein (1988) developed one such examination, finding little support for the structural power hypothesis.

Aside from being pitched a high level of abstraction, another key problem for the structural power hypothesis is to account for the fact that every rich democracy has adopted welfare state initiatives in the face of widespread opposition by economic elites. In no case have high marginal tax rates on individual earners—or indeed, any income or corporate taxes at all!—been adopted without significant ferocious opposition. Similarly, taxes on business profits were, and remain, bitterly contested. Pro-union legislation, which has enhanced the ability of unions to organize workers, carry out strikes, and promote collective bargaining over employment terms, has similarly been resisted (at least in its early stages); however, in most countries, measures to assist union organizing were eventually adopted. Finally, redistributive social programs—most notably national health insurance schemes and universal pensions—have often been unpopular with putatively power economic interests but steadily expanded throughout most of the twentieth century.

In view of such observations and examples, it would be folly to assume that democratic political systems in capitalist societies cannot promote redistribution, or that the structural power of capital precludes it. However, this still leaves a key puzzle: In the early decades of the twenty-first century, democratic governments appear mostly unable to provide continuing benefits and wage growth to the median voter, whereas in most countries, the very highest earners are seeing their share of income and wealth grow handsomely. Further, social programs benefitting either the median voter or the poor appear squeezed in a variety of ways, between rising cost pressures from below and an inability of national governments to increase revenue to pay for them (Gough & Therborn, 2010). Understanding these patterns suggests the need for a theory of political inequality. I explore leading theoretical models in the following section.

CONTEMPORARY THEORY AND RESEARCH

ELITE AND OLIGARCHIC THEORIES

One classical model of political inequality hypothesized that a small handful of actors eventually come to dominate all political systems, democratic or authoritarian (Michels, 1966 [1911]; Pareto, 1968 [1901]). In the modern reformulation of elite theory, beginning with Mills (1956), political elites are viewed as being drawn from a narrow set of institutions with similar social backgrounds and networks, and they will tend to use political power to serve their own ends. Elites dominate political offices via selection mechanisms they control (i.e., who gets into the elite, or who is eligible to be considered for key appointments in policymaking offices) and by having

disproportionate influence over the outputs of policymaking processes (Domhoff, 2010, Chapter 3). Elites typically hail from a narrow range of educational institutions, with schools increasingly displacing families as the locus of selection (Bourdieu, 1998; Kahn, 2009). Once selected into elite institutions, individual aspirants must exhibit appropriate levels of conformity and performance to be advanced up the ranks. Elite status is not necessarily linked to a particular ideology, political partisanship, or wealth (elites can have a range of views on political issues, can be found in all major political parties, and may or may not have personal or familial wealth). However, because of selection and shared training, elites will tend to share common views, or at least collectively maintain a narrow range of opinions that will differ from the rest of the public.

In recent decades, as meritocracy as become an increasingly common foundation for elite selection (Hayes, 2010), diversity in terms of sociodemographic background is increased (e.g., women and members from minority group backgrounds have become more common) (see Kahn, 2009; Zweigenhaft & Domhoff, 2006). However, this alone does not necessarily mean that elite cohesion is declining; as long as the experience of socialization and selection remain robust. However, whether the elite can plausibly be said to have a set of common interests is more complicated. From Mills (1956) onward, there has been a tendency to identify the elite as all of those holding positions of power in important institutions. This wide-ranging view makes it difficult to specify the basis on which elites will have common interests. However, even if we limit the conception to the corporate elite, the problem is not solved. It is not difficult to show that conflicts within the corporate community are rampant (Mizruchi, 2013, pp. 15–17). Different firms and industries are inevitably going to favor different public policies, and perhaps only at the very top or under certain unique historical contexts is unity possible (Mizruchi, 2013; Useem, 1984).

In a wide-ranging recent work, Jeffrey Winters (2011) proposes an alternative to elite theory as the foundation for political inequality by focusing more narrowly on the ways in which the largest wealth holders use political means to protect their assets from forfeiture. No matter how it is drawn, the entire "elite" will not have a common interest in protecting large fortunes, as only a minority of their members will control such fortunes (2011, p. 26ff). Further, at least in democratic societies, political elites may well have motivations to promote popular policies, including redistributive ones, which enhance their electability (in this way, elite theory elides key contrasts between social democratic and conservative elites). By contrast, Winters argues that large wealth holders in all societies share a single decisive common interest in the protection of their fortunes. This motivates them to work within the institutional and political constraints of the context they are living to try to achieve

it. These individuals whom Winters refers to as oligarchs are defined by the possession of sufficient amounts of wealth to engage in what he calls income defense.

In Winters' comparative-historical framework, oligarchy can take a wide variety of forms in different society, depending on whether the principle threat to wealth comes is competition from other oligarchs, threats to their wealth holdings from governments (principally in the form of taxation), or from citizens from below (especially if there is no legal framework capable of securing protection of private property). In contemporary democracies, where private property rights are well secured by rule of law, the principle threat to oligarchs is exposure to taxation. Tax avoidance is assisted by the endless variety of strategies created by an "income defense industry" that specializes in reducing tax exposure and operates on an increasingly global scale (Winters, 2011, Chapter 5). Oligarchs are motivated to use political means to limit marginal income tax rates, estate taxes, and promote a stealthy politics in which wealth and income can be protected through loopholes and exemptions (most notably through overseas storage of wealth subject to minimal or no taxation).

Winters produces some startling historical evidence in favor of the basic insights of the oligarchy model as a key to understanding political inequality around the world and over time. For example, he shows that the gap between the richest 1% and the bottom 20% is likely far greater in contemporary societies like the United States (or even Sweden) than the gaps between the wealthiest 1% and lower strata, even in some cases slaves, in ancient Greece and Rome. The inability of social democratic countries in Northern Europe to rein in the wealthiest of families has allowed for the maintenance of wealth and even permitted the very top in recent years to take off. Finally, the increasing prominence of the financial sector in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, both for governments seeking to encourage or maintain growth and for high net-wealth individuals, creates the perfect synergy for both wealth and income defense (cf. Piketty, 2014).

In spite of its insights, the oligarchy model does not provide much leverage over the full range of policy inputs and outputs that shape the distribution of income and wealth across the population. There is also an open question as to how and why the most important policy shifts favoring oligarchs—first the rise, then the decline in high marginal rates on top income earners, and rise and decline of corporate income taxes as well—has happened in virtually all rich democracies since the 1960s. In the immediate post-World War II era, marginal tax rates on the highest earning households approached or in some cases exceeded 90% in many countries. Today, virtually no affluent country has a marginal income tax rate on top earners above 50%, and in some cases, effective tax rates are substantially lower. Further, the startling decline in the

rates—and in a number of countries, the outright elimination—of estate taxes provides another intriguing puzzle: Why would working and middle-class voters allow such reforms to proceed when they themselves have virtually no chance of benefitting from them? Oligarchs may have disproportionate power, but even on key questions of importance to oligarchs other actors play important roles.

Power Resources

If the elite and oligarchic models cannot tell us much about how distributive politics for the bottom 99% of the population, we need to turn to other models for an account of why the variation in redistribution policy outputs between, say, Norway and the United States are as wide as they are. The dominant political sociological model for studying comparative political inequality in recent decades has been what is loosely known as the *power resources* approach (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Korpi, 1983). This approach starts from the assumption that unequal economic relationships, particularly as exemplified in the class structure, facilitate the formation of organized groups (or classes, in the Marxian-inspired terminology of early power resources theory) and ultimately political parties with distinct and competing interests. Within capitalist democracies, elections—what Korpi (1983) once influentially called the *democratic class struggle*—is thus a central mechanism for political redistribution. However, because the political capacities of core classes such as industrial owners, farmers, and manual workers vary over time, as their size and organizational capacity shifts, the subsequent development of welfare states reflects the institutionalization of different patterns of class alliance. For instance, when a highly organized working class is successfully allied with farmers, this tends to facilitate the emergence of welfare states with extensive social provisions, as in the case of Sweden. There, universal social security programs were implemented in conjunction with price subsidies for farmers. By contrast, when the working class has high levels of regional or racial/ethnic fragmentation that inhibit class alliances, the interests of employers will figure more centrally in regime development, as in the case of the United States (Alesina & Glaser, 2004; Esping-Andersen, 1990). In such cases, social spending and the provision of government services are likely considerably more restricted.

One of the strengths of the power resources model is that it can account for variability of economic and political inequalities, depending on the organizational capacity of key social groups. Analysts have postulated the existence of different types of welfare state “regimes,” in which distinct combinations of social groups and political parties can be found. In the most common such typology, associated with the work of Esping-Andersen (1990), there are three

ideal types: social democracies (typically those of Northern Europe), Christian democracies (common in Continental Europe), and liberal democracies (primarily in the Anglo-American countries). In each case, a combination of similar political forces and political institutions give rise to similar kinds of policy outputs. The "three worlds" model has been vigorously tested over the years, with different analysts deriving different clusters depending on the question and dataset under investigation, but generally finding evidence supporting the utility of the regime clusters idea as a way of sorting through cross-national variation (cf. Arts & Gelissen, 2010). Alternative formulations of the distinctive institutional systems can be found in the "varieties of capitalism" literature (Pontusson, 2005; Soskice & Hall, 2001).

Despite its leverage over comparative outcomes, questions about the power resources model abound. Perhaps most importantly, in an era where unions and social democratic parties are declining or retreating from historic commitments, redistributive social spending in many countries has persisted at high levels (albeit not enough to reverse rising income inequality). This is a puzzle for power resources theory because the model predicts social spending to decline. An additional problem is that it assumes a unidimensional form of political alignment, from left to right organized along preferences for redistribution, which impacts political alignment (Iversen, 2010, pp. 187–188). Yet in many ways, real-world political contests are not structured that way. Multiple political cleavages, as Lipset [1981 (1961)] postulated many years ago, can undermine the expression of class politics, as when working-class voters prefer a right-wing anti-immigrant party, or the party opposed to affirmative action, or the party advocating "traditional" family values. Further confused divisions arise when middle-class voters are drawn to left parties advocating gender equality, tolerance and social rights for minorities, or stronger environmentalist policies. Such noneconomic motivations have the potential to break up class-based alignments, and where especially strong can undermine support for more equality.

The Globalization Hypothesis

A prominent focus of much social science work on the sources of rising political inequality in the modern world has centered on globalization, or more specifically how increased flows (of trade, people, and investment) across borders have reduced the capacity of governments to adopt or maintain policies that would limit economic inequalities. Globalization arguments have been marshaled to anticipate negative trends in contemporary welfare state development and, by proxy, political inequality. Here, the growing international mobility of capital is viewed as inducing "race to the bottom": that is, pressures on governments seeking to maintain competitiveness

and avoid disinvestment lead governments to avoid adopting tax and transfer programs that will discourage investment. In limiting the policy options available to national governments, economic globalization provides incentive for policymakers to turn away from traditional forms of social provision in favor of growth politics that favor capital accumulation.

Using established measures of welfare state output (e.g., as a percentage of GDP), globalization's core dimensions can at best be said to have had a modest, at times *positive*, influence (Brady, 2010; Iversen, 2010). The impact of globalization on the ability of governments to raise tax revenues has similarly been shown to be quite limited or nonexistent, even if governments have tended to move toward more market-conforming patterns of taxation (e.g., lowering the highest marginal rates, and reducing or eliminating direct corporate taxation in favor of broader based taxation such as consumption taxes; see Swank, 2006).

This emerging consensus about the limited impact of globalization (see Swank, 2010) fits quite well with seminal early commentaries on issues of globalization and national sovereignty. For example, individual nation-states, particularly small polities whose economies have always depended on high levels of trade and participation in the world economy, have adjusted continuously in the postwar era to anticipate the uncertainties associated with globalization rather than merely being swallowed by them (Garrett, 1998; Soskice & Hall, 2001). Further, many social policies aimed at reducing poverty and inequality, such as jobs training programs and disability services, can actually enhance economic productivity and global competitiveness. Social policy innovations within many European nations can be viewed as a bulwark against deindustrialization and related economic threats arising from globalization (Iversen, 2010). In short, recent patterns of economic globalization thus appear quite compatible with the maintenance of contemporary welfare states, and need not increase political inequality.

Participatory Inequalities: Political Insiders and Outsiders

If the broadest of claims about globalization's impacts appear overstated, there at least one way that it is plausibly linked to rising political inequality: by enhancing the divide between those who have full access to politicians and policymakers, and those whose rights or powers are limited in some way. These participatory inequalities, as we might call them, have both domestic and international roots. The seemingly simple right to vote—foundation for democratic equality—is no longer so simple when growing proportions of national populations are immigrants (and thereby ineligible to participate). In the powerful analysis of McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal (2006) on the US

case, rising immigration (in first the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, and then again since the 1970s) is associated with both rising economic inequality and political polarization (with the latter seen as reinforcing trends toward disenfranchisement and making redistributive policies more difficult). McCarty *et al*. view that the critical mechanism of immigration's impact is political disenfranchisement. Because immigrants are disproportionately located at the lower rungs of the labor market, as they grow in size the median voter shifts upward while the bottom groups have artificially reduced political power.

Other types of participatory inequalities have been proposed. A classical question regarding political inequality concerns group differences in voter turnout; if well-resourced groups participate in elections at higher levels than everyone else, a type of de facto inequality emerges even if the right to vote is universal (Lijphart, 1997). One key conclusion in the literature is that when overall turnout rates are very high, there are not likely to be a meaningful skew among those who participate. However, as turnout rates drop—a phenomenon that is occurring in many countries, especially among younger voters (Franklin, 2004)—the potential for participatory disparities grows. In countries where turnout rates have historically been low, such as the United States, it is very likely that policy outcomes have been impacted in favor of higher resourced groups because of turnout skews (Leighley & Nagler, 2013). Participation disparities go well beyond voting to include many other ways in which citizens seek to influence politicians: writing letters or contacting politicians directly, participating in civic groups, donating money to political causes, and so forth (Scholzman, Verba, & Brady, 2012). The further away from the simplest political acts we look, the more likely that higher resourced individuals are going to be participating at much greater rates.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

A central challenge for contemporary research on political inequality has been to persuasively demonstrate the causal linkages between economic and political inequalities. The claim that unequal political inputs—or policy outputs—are, in fact, characteristic of modern political systems has not proved a simple or straightforward proposition. To go further, researchers will need to move beyond broad theoretical models that we have at present, to get "inside" the centers of decision-making, and also to pay more attention to the microfoundations of citizens' policy attitudes as an adjunct to understanding why inequality is rising without strong pushback from below.

To give a brief flavor of these challenges, my discussion in this section will consider in a bit more detail some of the research on the country where rising economic inequality has been most rapid, and where the political system is

widely thought to be the most open to elite influence: the United States. It is hard to imagine a national context that would be more likely to have a political system characterized by inequality than the United States. Yet even here the mechanics of political inequality have proved difficult to specify in adequate detail. There are no shortage of leading contenders that social scientists have explored in recent years, and I will consider three: (i) The extraordinary amount of money donated to candidates running for office, which is vastly higher than in all other democratic countries and has grown steadily over the past four decades with growing contributions from both affluent individuals and corporate political action committees; (ii) The system of interest group lobbying of legislators and regulators, again unique in American politics in terms of the amount of expenditures devoted and the growth over time in lobbying activities; (iii) The limits of a two-party system, in which there is no traditionally social democratic party and one in which party polarization has increased in recent decades.

None of these standard explanations has provided a firm and robust set of conclusions, and each remains in need of further explication to understand. Let us start with political money. American politics have always been awash with cash, as First Amendment principles have equated "free speech" with the right to invest in politics and permitted Congress relatively little scope for setting limits on political investment. Therefore, how and in what ways might the increased flow political money in recent decades matter? Theories of "investor" influence on the parties and legislation have proved difficult to definitively test and validate. The dominant thrust of the recent literature, however, strongly suggests that the impact of money is modest at best (for an authoritative review, see Ansolabehere, de Figueiredo, & Snyder, 2003). In particular, it is never the case that the amount of money coming from any one donor is of sufficient magnitude to insure a legislator's vote, especially as the totals being raised have grown so dramatically. Other factors—party membership, legislator's ideology and beliefs, public opinion (perceived or actual), or strategic calculations about how a vote will impact future career prospects—have greater measurable impact on legislative behavior in the most serious research on the topic. This does not mean that large political donations are irrelevant; they can provide the donor with a kind of insider access to elected officials that enable donors to press their case or perhaps gain tax breaks or exemptions inserted into legislation that is largely hidden from the public view (Clawson, Neustadtl, & Weller, 1998). However, to see how such access works, social scientists will have to develop new sorts of data and evidence than we have at the present time.

The system of interest group lobbying has similarly failed to show conclusive evidence that in spite of the mammoth sums spent by corporations, business associations, professional associations, unions, and others, the direction

of policy is skewed in one direction or the other. The most comprehensive and systematic recent examination (Baumgartner, Berry, Hojnacki, Kimball, & Leech, 2009) finds that well-funded corporate lobbies do not prevail any more often than poorly citizens groups, and perhaps more importantly it is simply very difficult for any group to shift (or re-frame) the status quo no matter how much they spend attempting to do so. Other scholarship has reached similar conclusions (Burstein, 2014; Gilens, 2012, Chapter 5; McKay, 2012). Political lobbying is perhaps better viewed as an arms race—given its pervasiveness, few groups will feel comfortable not participating, so everyone does it, but the impacts are mixed, hard to pin down, and in general cannot systematically explain political inequality.

The party system is the third leg of the trio of factors most often pointed to account for political inequality in America. In particular, changes in the two major parties since the 1970s appear plausibly linked to policy outputs favoring economic elites, but here again some caution in reaching firm conclusions is warranted. The Republican Party has unquestionably moved significantly to the right in recent decades (cf. McCarty *et al.*, 2006), developing and maintaining an anti-tax, anti-government agenda, and enforcing discipline on members in a unique way for an American party (cf. Hacker & Pierson, 2005, 2010; Orenstein and Mann, 2011). When in control of both the White House and Congress, the Party has sponsored major tax reductions and more recently pressed for substantial reductions in the size and scope of government responsibility. Time-series analyses suggest that Republican presidents since the 1950s have allowed inequality to grow faster than Democratic Presidents (Bartels, 2008; Kelly, 2009). Yet several questions remain in need of further research before the party-centered account could prove adequate. For example, many key policy initiatives adopted or promoted by Republican politicians appear to have had broad public support (cf. Gilens, 2012, Chapter 6, noting that in his dataset, the most responsive Presidency since the 1960s was that of George W. Bush). To what extent were these policies the result of *party* activism, or were they more simply the result of underlying views of the mass public that made it easy to adopt (as Bartels, 2008 has suggested)?

CONCLUSION

Democracy as a political system promises equality of participation and influence to everyone. Political inequality is not necessarily inevitable, but the experience of the past couple of decades suggests that democratic political systems may struggle to contain rising income and wealth inequality in the twenty-first century, and perhaps even more strongly rising economic inequality has the potential to increase political inequality. There are a variety of contemporary theoretical models that point to various factors to

account for how and why political inequality arises, or when it is muted. No one of these models, however, appears to provide a bulletproof explanation. Perhaps more pressingly, future research needs to get inside capitalist democracy more fully than it has. Much of the current theorizing is at a macro level of abstraction that would benefit from deeper exploration of how policy inputs and outputs are related. To sharpen this point, this essay concluded with a discussion of the dilemmas and difficulties of explaining political inequality in the United States, seemingly the easiest case. Certainly, we can be sure that pressure on social scientists to account for the political sources of economic inequality is likely to grow in the future.

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