

THOUGHTS ABOUT POLITICAL EQUALITY

WHAT IS IT? WHY DO WE WANT IT?

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Of the various kinds of inequality, political inequality is one of the most basic, intrinsically valuable and valuable as the key to equality in other realms. It is also a form of equality for which we, at least those of us who live in democracies, set a very high standard. All citizens are supposed to be equal -- in terms of their rights, in terms of the consideration given to their interests -- before the government. Yet it is a form of equality that is difficult to define precisely and difficult to measure. This paper attempts to spell out some of the complexities associated with political equality. For data on the subject, see the various publications by the author and his associates in the bibliography.

Je participe
Tu participes
Il participe
Nous participons
Vous participez
Ils profitent¹

From a Wall in Paris,

1969

¹ Epigraph from Verba and Nie, Participation in America (1972)

I. THOUGHTS ABOUT POLITICAL EQUALITY AND PARTICIPATION²

Of the various ways in which citizens in the United States can be unequal, political inequality is- one of the most significant and troubling. By political equality we refer to the extent to which citizens have an equal voice over governmental decisions. One of the bedrock principles in a democracy is the equal consideration of the preferences and interests of all citizens. This is expressed in such principles as one-person/one-vote, equality before the law, and equal rights of free speech. Equal consideration of the preferences and needs of all citizens is fostered by equal political activity among citizens; not only equal voting turnout across significant categories of citizens but equality in other forms of activity. These activities include work in a political campaign, campaign contributions, activity within one's local community, direct contact with officials, and protest. Equal activity is crucial for equal consideration since political activity is the means by which citizens inform governing elites of their needs and preferences and induce them to be responsive. Citizen participation is, thus, at the heart of political equality. Through their activity citizens in a democracy seek to control who will hold public office and to influence what the government does. Political participation provides the mechanism by which citizens can communicate information about their interests, preferences, and needs and generate pressure to respond.

Participatory Equality: Why Do We Want It? Why Might We Not?

Equality in all domains of social and political life is complex. It can be about many different valued goods (income, education, health, etc.), it can be across individuals or groups, it can be calculated with different measures, and on the basis of different criteria. There are, as the title of Douglas Rae's book, Equalities, makes clear,

² This paper draws on previous work by myself and my collaborators, in particular on Verba (2000), Verba, Schlozman and Brady (1995), Verba and Nie (1972), Verba, Nie and Kim (1979), and Burns, Schlozman and Verba (forthcoming, 2001).

many forms and versions of it. And in most of its forms, it is something of mixed value. For most valued things -- income or education or health or respect or political influence -- gross inequalities are something we dislike. But complete equality is rarely unambiguously desirable. It is usually impossible to attain, or the process of attaining it would be too costly, or its consequences would be negative. It thus may be useful to consider why political equality -- defined roughly as equal influence over government policy across citizens -- might be desirable within the framework of democratic governance.

Why do we want it?

Political equality is a valued good per se. The ability to express one's political views is constitutive of membership in the polity. It confers a sense of selfhood, of agency, of belonging. Put another way: There are some who denigrate the importance of voting, since voting rights and voting participation, when achieved, (as among blacks in the American South or in South Africa) does not bring with it the solution to all or even most problems. But those who denigrate the importance of the vote are almost certainly people who already have the right to vote.

Political equality builds community: societies are bound together by cooperative activity toward shared goals. This is how that precious commodity of social capital is formed. Since this involves horizontal connections, it implies the engagement of equals.

Political participation creates legitimacy: Democracy depends on voluntary acquiescence to the government: obedience to laws without constant police control, acceptance of election outcomes by the losing side, etc. That the laws or electoral outcomes one might not favor deserve respect derives from the fact that they were selected, through proper procedures, by the people (or at least the larger number of the people.)

Political participation is educative: people learn about politics and about democracy and about their own needs and preferences through participation for all. Equality in political activity is valuable just as equality in education is.

Equal protection of interests: Those who express political voice -- by voting or by speaking up or in other ways -- are more likely to have government policies that pay attention to their needs and preferences. In this sense, political voice represents a general capacity to achieve many goals. Equality in such general capabilities is, as Amartya Sen has pointed out, a basic form of equality.

Democracy implies equal consideration of the needs and preferences of all citizens. This instrumental aspect of political equality -- the ability to inform the government of one's needs and preferences and to pressure the government to pay attention -- is the key to that equal consideration.

Note that some of these reasons for wanting equal citizen participation rest more heavily on the participation part of the term and others on the equality part. Conveying a sense of membership or building community or creating legitimacy would seem to depend on the level of participation. Democracy seems weaker if few take part. On the other hand, the equal protection of interests depends more on who participates. The the voice of the public were conveyed via a random sample of the public, it might suffice. (Why sample surveys, which can approximate a randomly selected voice, do not not quite do this, is an interesting issue which I will not pursue here.) (But see, Verba, 1995 and Brehm, xxxx)

Why might we not?

True political equality, where all ordinary citizens (i.e., those not in governmental decision making positions) have equal influence, would be impossible to attain and probably very bad. In considering the data on political equality and how one might

respond to those data, it is important to keep this in mind. In brief form, here are some reasons why that is the case.

Achieving actual equal voice would be very difficult, involve severe governmental intervention, and require limitation on freedom. It could be achieved by putting a floor and a ceiling on activity. A floor would require all to be active at some defined level -- making voting compulsory or attendance at political meetings or political contributions compulsory. Voting is compulsory (usually with minor penalties for failure to vote) in some countries. It is innocuous, perhaps, but would go against the grain in America and not add much to political equality. Compulsory attendance and contributions smacks much more of authoritarian techniques than democratic ones.

Ceilings are difficult: A ceiling on political activity exists in relation to the vote -- one person, one vote. But ceilings on money have run up against court interpretations of the First Amendment, and any limitation on other activities -- on writing letters, protesting, attendance at meetings -- would certainly do so.

The above refer to governmental attempts to equalize the political clout of individuals. But what about political equality achieved -- if it could be -- without government intervention. Are there reasons to be skeptical of it?

Citizen incapacity: One concern might relate to the incapacity of the citizenry to make the informed and wise judgements needed to guide policy. One consequence of unequal activity is that the better educated tend to be more active when there is unequal activity. If all were active, there would be government by the less well informed, the less reasonable citizens. This is a powerful argument, that can only be mentioned here. There is a great deal of literature on citizen knowledge and competence.³ Much shows how ill-informed the average citizen

³ Lippmann (1927), Della Carpini and Teeter (1996), Popkin (1991), Sniderman (1991) and others.

is. But much also stresses how citizens can “get by” with limited information by using informational shortcuts. Democracy does seem to survive a citizenry that is not made up of philosopher kings -- or even princes or dukes. But would things get worse if there were actual equality among citizens of any “quality”?

Citizen support for democracy: The active minority in America is more committed to social tolerance and political freedoms than is the less active (some might argue because the former are more active.) A non-stratified participant population might be more tyrannical towards minorities.⁴

Equal political voice is inevitably equally weak voice: If each citizen has an equal voice -- one vote, one small contribution -- it gives great power to governing officials who can dominate. An equal polity is a mass polity not a democratic one.⁵

Surrogates can speak for you: Equal voice isn't necessary because others can speak for you. It is not necessary for someone to be active to have their interests represented. Children, the mentally handicapped, etc. are represented by others in the political arena. More and more interest and advocacy groups have few members but speak for disadvantaged groups and other social causes. (Berry, 1999; Skocpol). Affluent liberals contribute money to support policies that are not in their narrow self-interest.

Quality and equality

The discussion above highlights one of the great democratic dilemmas: the possible conflict between the equality of instrumental participation and the quality of citizen participation. As I will illustrate in the data section of this paper, political participation that is stratified in favor of the more advantaged members of society -- in

⁴ Stouffer (1955), Sullivan et al (1992).

⁵ Kornhauser (1959)

particular the more educated -- is likely to be of higher "quality". The participants will be better informed, can make more competent political judgements, and they will be more tolerant of alternative political positions -- a fundamental requirement in a democratic polity. But at the same time, they will have needs and preferences that differ from the less advantaged members of society. And, thus, a participatory system dominated by the participants of "higher quality" will violate the democratic ideal of equal consideration of interests.

Liberty and equality

These two words are often linked when it comes to discussions of democracy and they are often seen as contradictory one with the other. Liberty creates the opportunity to become unequal. In the work of my colleagues and me, we have stressed the way in which the strong ideal of equality in the political domain (an ideal of substantive equality with each person having equal voice just as they have an equal vote) is undercut by equality of opportunity (a close cousin of liberty) in the economy. (Verba and Orren, 1985, Verba, Schlozman, and Brady, 1995) The latter created inequality of resources which then are used in the political sphere. Two opposite ways of thinking of their relationship have appeared in recent literature. In a recent book, John Mueller (Mueller, 2000) argues that liberty (the right to participate) is, in fact, the key form of political equality. Any other kind of political equality is superfluous and harmful to democracy. If people are free to develop their political capacity, the right kind of equality of citizen voice emerges -- one that (following the title of his book: Democracy and Ralph's Pretty Good Grocery Store) is pretty good and certainly good enough. Amartya Sen in a recent book (Sen, 2000) turns the issue upside down. Equality, he argues, is crucial to create liberty. Unless individuals have the right and the capability to control their own lives (and that includes a substantially equal voice in political matters) they are not free. The difference between the two views lies, I believe, in the distinction between the right to equal participation and the capability, in fact, to participate effectively. Sen stresses the

need for basic resources (literacy, health, enough income) so that one can indeed be an equal participant.

What is Participation?

There are many definitions of political participation. It can involve a variety of acts, pursued more or less intensely and effectively, directed at a range of government officials. Voting is the most common act and the most studied, but participation can also working for a political candidate or cause, writing letters to officials, taking part in community activity, protesting, etc. It can involve giving time or giving money. These acts have in common that they are aimed at influencing the actions of government officials or their identity (that is, who gets into an official position.) The action of officials that the participation seeks to influence may range from influencing who gets into office (without much of an additional agenda), to the creation of public policies, to the provision of pork and special selective favors. If representatives are to do their job of representing the preferences and interests of their constituents, they need information about those preferences and interests and there must be inducements to make them carry out their representative functions. Acts of political participation are crucial to this process. They convey information about the public (or at least the participant part of the public) and/or convey inducements that might motivate the recipient of the message to respond to those preferences and interests.

Some further distinctions.

Equal rights to participate. This is, of course, the main democratic requirement: universal adult suffrage, freedom of speech for all, etc. As far as the U.S. is concerned, these are pretty much in place since the 19th amendment and the Civil Rights Acts.

Equal capacity: As the old saying goes, freedom of the press is a wonderful right if you own a press. Various rights require resources if one is effectively to use them. Here is where inequality rears its head in the context of equal rights. And

this is what links political equality to equality in the other major spheres of life. If an equal ability to influence governmental outputs through one's political activity is what we are looking for, then having the legal right to vote or speak up or take part in a political campaign or organization needs to be supplemented by the capacity so to do. This capacity involves the skills, the resources (these days, especially the money) to do what one has to do. The extent of political equality, this means, is deeply dependent upon equality in other domains that foster that capacity -- on the extent of equality in education, in income, in health and well-being.

Equal voice: One may have the right and the resources to be active but, for various reasons -- from the absence of opportunities, to ignorance, to indifference --, one may choose not to participate. So equal rights and equal capacity do not necessarily mean equal voice.

In this paper, I will not deal with the first issue: rights to participate. Most of the data I will present refer to the second two issues above: equal capacity and equal voice -- that is, once rights are secured who has the capacity to use those rights and who actually uses them. The literature on these issues is substantial. But the real result of participation requires the consideration of three additional issues -- issues that are less well researched.

Equal attention: Two citizens may be equal in their voice (they both vote or they both write frequent and compelling letters to government officials or they both attend town meetings regularly), but one may (for varied reasons) receive more attention than another.

Equal output: The ultimate purpose -- or, at least, one of the main purposes -- of political activity is to get the government to do something in one's favor, whether that be a favorable policy, or a political favor. Political equality in its fullest sense would be equal output.

Equal outcomes: Policies (outputs) do not always accomplish what they were intended to do. Full equality of treatment might be a set of policies, the results of which treated all citizens equally.

In some sense, these last three aspects of political equality represent its “true” meaning and are the ultimate payoff from equal participation and equal voice. They are difficult to observe and measure. Indeed, given differences in needs and preferences among citizens, the last two are probably impossible to achieve. Most of the data I will present refer to the first three steps. But it is important to keep the other steps in mind.

Communication, inducements, and response.

Let me pursue the distinction between conveying information and motivating a response through communicating inducements a bit further. How would one recognize and measure political inequality in sending the message and in receiving a response.? The first task is crucial to the second. It is not an easy one. The second task is much harder. Most of my own work has focussed politics from the bottom up: on the ordinary citizens to see what they do, how what they do differs across individuals and groups, and why it is that there are these differences. But from a broader perspective, one ought to look at participation as an interaction between the senders of messages and the recipients. For both the activist senders of messages and the government officials or political candidates who are the targets of these messages, we can look at them as people with preferences and motivations -- people who want by their actions to achieve some state of the world. Citizens may seek the enactment of some policy that benefits them or perhaps just fits into a general ideology or philosophy (our data show that many citizens are active for that purpose despite what the literature says they should do if they are rational), or they may seek some particular selective benefit, or they may act with no particular response in mind (to please a friend or relative or fulfill a civic obligation.) Similarly, the recipients of the message may act out of varied motivations: they may be motivated to respond to the preferences expressed by the message senders (because they think this the right thing

to do); or to respond not to what the message senders want but what will be better for them (perhaps as normatively committed trustees); or the officials and candidates may be motivated by their selective self-interest (to obtain the perks of office or perhaps the adulation of the people so they will respond to those who can offer these selective benefits); or they might be motivated by that middle and complex motivation that we political scientists focus on, the desire to achieve office and remain there (which they might calculate would be served by following the expressed preferences of the activists or perhaps by meeting their needs even if they are not aware of them -- under the assumption that the citizens will reward beneficial outcomes rather than seemingly responsive policies). In sum, citizen participants and governing officials can be understood as people with motivations or utilities or preferences or ideologies or philosophies.

This indicates, I think, why it is difficult to develop a measure of the degree to which any two citizens are equal or unequal in their political voice, or any two groups of citizens (rich or poor, white or black, women or men) are, on average equal in their political voice.

Even if we limit ourselves to the easier part of the picture -- as I and my colleagues have done in much of our work on participation (that is to the input deriving from what citizens do)- it is hard to compare the voice of one citizen to another because they can express it in so many ways. Perhaps the vote is the most comparable act because it can be cast in a very limited way -- it does not matter with what vigor or skill you pull the lever.⁶ But for other acts, there are many variations -- and variations that may be systematic across groups. Political work in a campaign or a contribution can be limited in amount or large in amount. A letter can be more or less convincing. And given the bundle of things some one can do, there is no easy metric to compare the significance or political value of a letter with a contribution; of a vote with attendance at a political meeting.

⁶ This was obviously written before the 2000 election crisis over punch cards, dimpled chads and hanging chads. The general point still holds.

If we move from the task of comparing what individuals do to what effect it has, the task of comparing across individuals and groups is more complex yet. The vote ceases to be so equal. Voter skill becomes important: has he or she made the most appropriate choice given the motivation behind the vote. I suppose it does not matter much if we are talking of the individual voter since the individual's vote is not going to make much of a difference. But it might matter for groups of voters whose aggregate votes might swing an election. In addition, the structure of the electoral system affects the equality of the vote. Are votes counted honestly? Are district sizes equal? What form of PR is used with what consequence? Political science has an entire industry working on differing electoral rules and how they affect the value of the individual's vote. What about permanent minorities: groups whose votes never lead to the election of representatives because they are too small in number to be successful under the particular electoral rules? Whether that is a serious violation of the equality of participation might depend on another contextual characteristic -- the seriousness of the basis for their minority status. A racial or economic or religious minority in a society where many of the main issues revolve around that fault line is deeply deprived of political voice if their votes lead to no success -- even if they have the equal right to cast it and do so at the same rate as other groups.

And, of course, the situation is more complex when one goes beyond the vote. Letters, contributions, protest marches are all part of a participatory repertory. But their effectiveness also depends on many contingencies: is the target of the act a target that will pay attention? Is it a target that can act on the issue? Will it act on the issue? I write a letter to Ralph Nader commenting on one of his positions? Will he get it and read it? It may not reach him since he is traveling so much and is bombarded with communications? And if he reads it, will it move him? And even if it moves him, so what? He is not going to be elected anyway. I may still get the gratification of having sent a message to

someone I admire in relation to a cause or issue I hold important. But if we are considering the impact on the policy I was concerned with, the act is less effective.

One more problem: what is a responsive output? For an election, it would seem to be having your party win the election. But it might not be that simple a dichotomy. The winning candidate may not deliver because she is in there for the selective benefits of office. Or she may deliver what she thinks will be good for you in the long run, not what you want. She may deliver something designed for those who voted against her -- and that for varied reasons. And if the outcome is not an election result but a policy, the calculation becomes harder still. Policies are complex. The citizen input may shape a policy at the margin or in relation to a particular feature. Even if the overall shape of the output seems non-responsive there may be some important responsiveness hidden between the lines.

The problem of comparing across political acts can be illustrated by considering the vote and a letter written to some governing official. The individual vote is a very weak and a very blunt instrument. My vote has no chance of affecting the election and my vote carries little information about what I want to get out of it -- I vote for George Bush but my vote does not say why. The mandate is always uncertain. Yet the aggregate of the votes determines whether Bush or Gore becomes president. Add them up and it counts. A letter is different. It can give (reasoned or unreasoned) arguments for a position. If read it can move a person. But the odds are slim that it will be read carefully given the volume of mail into the White House or into a Congressional office. Yet, a reasoned letter can have an effect. (Jacobs and Shapiro, 2000). If you are lucky and your letter is pulled for notice, you might have an effect -- even though letters in the aggregate do not have the final authority that the aggregate of votes does.

So which group has more voice: a group with high voting turnout but not much letter writing or a group with prolific letter writers who do not go to the polls so much. (The two forms of activity are correlated, so the example is unrealistic.) As for the vote:

each vote is trivial and conveys little information but each vote is counted and the sum of the votes is dispositive. The letters may contain compelling arguments but there is no law that says they must be read, let alone followed. And the odds that a particular letter will be read may be very small. Yet if there is a letter writing group -- it sends a lot of thoughtful letters -- its clout may be great.

The difficulty of measuring the extent of political inequality can be seen if we compare it to another, more fully discussed and studied, aspect of inequality: income inequality. To begin with, of course, the metric is simpler. We can more easily compare incomes across individuals than we can political. A dollar is a dollar, but even a vote is not a vote -- and who knows how a vote compares to other acts. The value of income is, of course, not measurable simply in terms of the dollar amount. Individuals differ in how skilled they are in using their dollars. Some are better located to be effective consumers -- they have access to good stores with decent prices, etc. But the variation in the effectiveness of a dollar to provide utility is small compared with the effectiveness of a political act.

The biggest difference between income and political equality is that income is an individually held resource that is used largely to purchase selective, individual goods. You pay your money in a store and you take out the bundle of goods. Political activity is, at least in good part, aimed at collective outcomes. Thus, whatever you have in political voice, it does not mean you will get political benefits. I have spelled out a lot of that above.

That one is using the resource of political activity -- the allocation of time or money to it -- to achieve a collective goal, means that a lot depends on what others do. You spend your money wisely, and you get what you buy. Political activity faces much greater coordination problems. You spend your political resources wisely -- you contribute with careful calculations combining your money with messages as to what you want, you communicate in a compelling manner with officials and they hear what you say -- but

much depends on others including the opposition. If you increase your contributions, but the other side increases theirs' more, you have not gained but lost. This leads to an important distinction between income and political inequality. The latter is much more a matter of relative standing. True, if envy rules the world, then income inequality is relative too -- my income my go up but it will not make me happier if yours goes up too. Nevertheless, both of us can get richer and happier. But in political life, it is more of a competition with the opposition.

If So Hard to Measure, Why Do We Care?

Participation Makes a Difference.

One reaction I sometimes get from cynical non-social scientists and from social scientists of various stripes when I tell them that I study political participation is: why bother? It doesn't make any difference. It's all decided on the inside by the politicians, the interest groups, and the bureaucracy. They agree that it is "all decided around the green table" as my landlady in Vienna once told me in explaining Austrian politics many years ago.

I don't believe it. I don't believe it, in part, because I don't want to. Those of us who study various aspects of politics develop unprovable commitments to one aspect of politics or another. And I believe that all the calculation of how to appeal to the public cannot be mere show. Nor is all the activity by citizens mere futile gesturing -- and there is a great deal of all kinds of activity at all levels even in an era when Americans are spending all their time by themselves in bowling alleys.

But we don't have any clear estimate. The problem is that everything is endogenous. Preferences surely are. And this involves a preference for political activity as well as preferences for outputs that such activity might foster. Citizens send messages about their preferences to the government, but their preferences are in part shaped by elites, perhaps mediated by the media. Are they sending merely echoes of what the leaders want to hear? Some, like Ben Ginsberg, consider citizen-official or mass-elite

interaction a situation in which elites dominate and manipulate citizens. John Zaller also stresses elite shaping of opinion (Ginsberg (1986), Zaller (1993)). Zaller, however, found a good deal of public autonomy when it came to Monica Lewinsky (Zaller, 1999); apparently there are some subjects about which the public knows what it thinks.

Jacobs and Shapiro, in their new book (2000) on political pandering (or rather its absence) give an interesting mixed picture. Politicians pay attention to the public -- they read polls, they read the mail, they read the various tea leaf indications of public opinion. But they do not do it in order to follow the public. Rather they do it in order to figure out how -- through what the authors call crafted talk -- to bring the public around to favor the policies they want to pursue. It's something like elite manipulation, but not completely -- or at least not as cynically as some might have described it. And, it is a form of citizen control. They need to convince the citizenry -- and that is certainly suggests a flow of influence from the bottom up. The public is not ignored. And they have to craft communications that appeal. Nor does it violate our notion of democracy if leaders lead - - if they educate the public.

The issue here is paralleled by a complex issue when it comes to political mobilization. One of the main sources of citizen activity is mobilization. Rosenstone and Hansen assign a good deal of the cause of the decline in activity to a decline in party mobilization (1993). In *Voice and Equality* and subsequent work, Brady, Schlozman and Verba (1995, 1999) show how mobilization shapes the amount as well as the distribution of political activity. Input from below is mobilized by stimuli from above. Is that democratic responsiveness or not? When Mayor Daley (the real, earlier, one) brought out the vote on the South and West sides of Chicago, was he mobilizing and manipulating them for his purposes, or was he making them into real actors in the political process? Is mobilization more like Albania in the old days when it led the world in the proportion who voted, or more like the civil rights movement where blacks were brought into politics through mobilization, but to pursue goals to which they were committed.

Probably it is some of each. The two parties are now trying to bring out the vote -- in order to elect themselves and reap the selective benefits of office. That's part of it. But they are doing do to pursue an agenda that they believe in the interest of the people they are mobilizing. They need to mobilize them on the basis of things that appeal to them.

Why we care about equal participation?

We care about equality of political influence because it is important. Societies with healthy democracies in which there is real control by citizens over the government -- as there is in the U.S. though it is hard to say how much -- are better societies. They do not commit massive crimes against their own citizens -- or are at least less likely to and they will be less massive. Amartya Sen has made the major and very striking point that famines do not take place in democracies -- since famines come less from a sheer absence of food than from an inadequate distributional mechanism. (Sen, 2000). And democracies are under some pressure to provide such mechanisms. Political participation -- open and free -- makes the state of the society clear; that's one step to the government being responsive. And it makes clear that there are negative consequences for the government if it does not respond. That's the second step to responsiveness.

We cannot get precise estimates, but it seems fairly clear that the citizens who are worse off are those who are not active and whom nobody wants to try to mobilize. If a group gets into the system -- by this I mean that they come to be active autonomously, or more likely some political entrepreneurs (in the good sense of the word) decide to try to arouse them, or more likely still both happen in an interactive fashion -- it will begin to see its needs taken into account. The biggest revolution in recent American political history is the democratization of the American South since the sixties. Once the legal barriers were broken, African-Americans became potential participants -- combining their own motivation to be active as voters and in other ways with the mobilization activities of black leaders who wanted to see the system change and with candidates for office, black and white, who wanted to get elected. And who can deny that their participation changed

their place in society and changed society. Or consider the elderly and social security. California will be different now that Latinos are moving from a quiescent to an active category. It makes a difference what one does.

The gradient of income or education in relation to political activity is, for a variety of reasons, steeper in the United States than in almost any other industrialized democracy. (Verba, Nie and Kim, 1979) It is likely no accident that the United States ranks at the top or near the top among such nations in the degree of income inequality. Most directly related to the political effects on income inequality is that nations are more similar in the degree of inequality of income before government intervention and quite different after governmental taxes and transfers are taken into account. Kenworthy (in Solow, 2000) shows that in the U.S., what the government does -- its tax policies, its social service policies -- produces a lot less equalization than in other comparable countries. Is this connected to the greater political clout of those lower on the socio-economic scale in these other countries? It is hard to get a definitive answer -- but it is not unlikely that that is the case. In an interesting recent paper, Kelly and Stimson tentatively -- tentative because they are just beginning work on this -- show a connection across the usually unconnected phenomena of input, output, and outcome. (Kelly and Stimson, 2000). They show that public mood is connected to government welfare and spending policies which in turn affect income inequality.

Also, there are social judgements we make on the basis of less than precise criteria. Despite what I have said about the greater ease of measuring income inequality, the overall question of whether there is too much inequality in the income in the United States is not answered by any particular body of data. It becomes a matter of judgement, of philosophy, of a general evaluation of the kind of society one wants. Somewhere between the impossible and undesirable goal of complete equality of income and a complete caste like bifurcated system into the haves and the have nots -- where the haves have it all and the have-nots have nothing -- are many distributions. Thomas Scanlon in

his recent book, What We Owe to Each Other, (1998) a book with a Rawlsian scope and richness, says that we ought to reject discrepancies across groups that a reasonable person would reject. This is vague, but useful. A lot depends on who is reasonable. I, of course, tend to find some people more reasonable than others -- they are the ones who share my social values and philosophy. The reasonableness definition is difficult -- but useful.

In the end, a concern with political equality is a moral concern. Even if we go about it as we should as social scientists; even if we understand the difficulties of studying or measuring it; even if we are aware that political equality is an unattainable goal; even if we understand that it is not a fully desirable goal, indeed, that a system in which all had equal voice would be unworkable and perhaps dangerous to democracy; we recognize that it is a goal worth striving for. Gross inequalities of political influence across social groups -- the existence of group with little voice and little hope of gaining it -- is dangerous to our democracy. It violates that sense we have that each citizen is a worthy participant, that he or she is -- to go to the deepest philosophical formulation -- a person capable of reasoning and capable of having a conception of the good; and is, therefore, a person who should have equal voice in American democracy.

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