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Guest Editor's Introduction

Defining Political Inequality Within a Cross-National Perspective

According to Huntington (1991), we live in the third wave of democracy: radical social transformations in Europe, Latin America, Africa, and elsewhere have ushered in political and economic liberalization, and the inclusion of previously voiceless disadvantaged groups into the legislative fold. During this third wave, revolutionary technological advances in travel and communication have greatly enhanced the ability of interest groups to form, to influence political elites, and thereby to transform the democratic process. Yet economic, political, gender, ethnic, health, and a host of other inequalities persist. Why?

Contributors to this issue of the *International Journal of Sociology (IJS)* are not the first to draw attention to the enduring nature of inequality: in 2004 the American Political Science Association Task Force on Inequality and American Democracy (hereafter, APSA Task Force) concluded that “[America’s] ideals of equal citizenship and responsive government may be under growing threat in an era of persistent and rising inequalities” (APSA 2004). Focusing on non-English-speaking countries, this issue of *IJS* brings together articles that discuss in a cross-national perspective the concerns raised by the APSA Task Force.

What Is Political Inequality?

In the study of political inequality, political resources are viewed as a dimension of social stratification, including the ability to influence both governance processes

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and public policy. Like economic goods and services, political resources are scarce, valued, and fought for. Political inequality refers to structured differences in the distribution and acquisition of political resources. It typically aligns along the other social stratification dimensions where its injurious effects are felt most deeply by society's disadvantaged groups.

The APSA Task Force identified three interrelated conceptual foci around which political inequality revolves: citizen voice, government responsiveness, and patterns of public policymaking. Citizen voice refers to the representation of social groups in governance bodies and their political participation; government responsiveness includes the extent to which governance bodies listen and react to citizen voice; public policymaking is manifested in the thought and deeds (e.g., legislation) of the government. The upshot is that the disadvantaged are less involved in political participation, government officials are less inclined to be responsive to the preferences of the disadvantaged, and public policy fails to address the needs of the disadvantaged.

The APSA Task Force makes clear that political inequality interacts with all other inequalities. Inequality in economic resources, for example, has been shown to influence government responsiveness, such that politicians are more likely to respond to and enact policy on behalf of the advantaged (Bartels 2002). These interactions have both causes and consequences that occur more or less simultaneously. In the above example, economic inequality causes political inequality while, at the same time, political inequality influences the form, duration, and magnitude of economic inequality.

Scholars debated how political systems, institutions and economic inequalities form and fit together well before the APSA Task Force did. Lenski argued that political regimes have the ability to influence the distribution of scarce and valued resources, such that "those who control the government are able to determine the rules governing the competition for rewards in society," along with the outcomes of this struggle (1966: 318). Verba, Nie, and Kim (1978) found that cross-national differences in political participation depended on country-specific interactions between institutional forces and disadvantaged groups. In his 1996 APSA presidential address, Lijphart warned that "unequal participation spells unequal influence . . . the inequality in representation and influence are not randomly distributed but systematically biased in favor of more privileged citizens" (1997: 1).

Although political inequality has been at the center of generations of social science research, key issues remain that have not been satisfactorily addressed. One reason for this is that political inequality lacks coherence as a field of study. Contrast it with voting behavior, income inequality, and social movements, all of which have a long literature and well-developed measures and theories; political inequality has the unenviable task of uniting all of these elements into coherent models that explain its causes and consequences. The APSA Task Force has helped to define the field of political inequality by providing a vocabulary (voice, responsiveness, and policy) and some suggestions for building empirically testable theoretical models.

Another reason for an insufficient understanding of political inequality is the

unbalanced focus on its causes versus its consequences: while research into causes of political inequality—for example, how gender inequality shapes women’s representation—is abundant, studies that explore consequences—for example, how women’s underrepresentation influences their societal position—are far too few. Rarer still are studies that examine reciprocal effects—how does political inequality reinforce other inequalities, and vice versa? Finally, even older questions, such as the causes of unequal political participation, require updated answers, as modern survey research and improved methodological tools allow for a more thorough analysis of the changing social fortunes of peoples and states. This issue of *IJS* addresses the causes and consequences of political inequality while contending with old and emerging questions.

Political Inequality in a Cross-National Perspective

Do the APSA Task Force findings hold in a cross-national and comparative context? This issue of *IJS* takes up the challenge of addressing this question. Contributors to the issue consider citizen voice, government responsiveness, and policymaking from a cross-national and comparative perspective, addressing two major elements of political inequality: its causes and its consequences.

Causes

Opening the section on causes, Aina Gallego describes what unequal political participation in Europe looks like now, by examining how inequalities in gender, age, ethnicity, and economic resources, along with social class, intersect with inequality in political voice. Recent literature in this area lacks a cross-national perspective; Gallego brings it in, as she employs the European Social Survey to examine four political activities—voting, working with parties and action groups, attending demonstrations, and boycotting products. Using a series of zero-order correlations and full model logistic regressions, Gallego finds that groups disadvantaged in terms of age and social class are less likely than their advantaged counterparts to participate in any of these actions. Gender and ethnic minority status also affect participation, but the relationship is less clear-cut. Overall, political inequality in voice persists and is evident across contemporary Europe.

Interestingly, Gallego’s findings align with studies from the United States; contemporary European countries are similar to the United States in that economic hardship depresses propensity for voting. Is this evidence of social and political convergence of industrial societies? Gallego’s article sets a foundation for future work in social stratification and political participation in Europe.

Melanie Hughes examines the causes of women’s unequal representation worldwide and over time with a unique data set and from a novel angle: elite turnover as a result of the destruction and creation of political regimes. Elite turnover—measured in terms of elections and legislative interruptions (i.e., dissolution of parlia-

ment by nondemocratic means)—provides women with opportunities to become parliamentarians; but can women capitalize on the opportunity? Data come from the Women in Parliaments Longitudinal Project, covering more than 150 countries and spanning more than 100 years. Hughes employs event history analysis on a subset of the data ranging between 1950 and 2000 to analyze the likelihood that women will attain 10 percent, 15 percent, and 20 percent of parliament. Hughes finds that women's representative voice within national legislatures is enhanced with repeated elections and muted by too-few and too-frequent legislative interruptions; significant differences exist across regions.

Hughes's research has the potential to open new areas of theorizing in understanding the variation in women's representation across time and countries. According to Hughes, the results can be viewed as an assessment of the differences between democratic and nondemocratic routes to enhancing political voice, where elections are more likely than legislative interruptions to enhance women's representation. However, if elections are the mechanism, why the great variation across democratic countries? In addition, the mechanism that causes the curvilinear relationship between length of legislative interruption and the likelihood of reaching 10 percent women in parliament is unclear; what may matter most is the interaction between type of legislative interruption and the strength of civil society during that interruption. Research that focuses on processes of elite turnover as they influence women's parliamentary representation is needed to address the compelling puzzles left by Hughes's innovative research.

Consequences

Christina Xydias's article on the relationship between gender quotas, descriptive representation (i.e., the legislative body resembles the demographics and experiences of the citizenry), and substantive representation (i.e., expression of interests) in contemporary Germany opens the section on the consequences of political inequality. Xydias models parliamentarians' gender, and whether the parliamentarian's party adopted a gender quota, as having separate and joint effects on the content of parliamentary debates. According to Xydias, a likely mechanism governing this relationship is that women parliamentarians feel compelled to think and act like descriptive representatives because they owe their position, in part, to pressure from women's interest groups that were instrumental in the adoption of gender quotas. This article is a welcome addition to the growing literature on the links between descriptive and substantive representation, as it is one of the few that considers a case outside of the United States.

Xydias quantifies the text of session debates in Germany's sixteenth Bundestag into variables for various types of statistical analyses. Substantive representation is measured in two ways: as a type of utterance (speech, question, and interjection) during the debates on bills of women's interests and the content of the utterances in terms of feminist and traditional expressions of women's interests. The results are

suggestive of the relationship between quotas and women's substantive representation. Women parliamentarians are more likely to ask questions and to express feminist interests during these debates. Parliamentarians from parties that have gender quotas are less likely to ask questions, but when they do participate, they are more likely to make feminist and traditional references. Taken together, women from quota parties are more likely than women from parties without a quota to participate in the debates—and in a meaningful way. Xydias's article demonstrates a link between the enhancement of women's voice through quotas and the potential for shaping policy through parliamentary debates. More broadly, this study suggests that the consequences of inequality of voice depend on how that inequality is reduced.

Concluding this issue of *IJS* is the article by Gábor Tóka and Marina Popescu on the potential electoral consequences of two forms of political inequality of voice—political knowledge and electoral turnout—in the new democracies of Romania and Moldova. The authors ask a provocative question: if these forms of political inequality were eliminated, would the results of the past election be different? Toka and Popescu's article makes an important methodological contribution by providing separate estimates for equal increases and complete equalization of political knowledge across social groups and analyzing how this could influence actual election outcomes. They help to clarify a fundamental theoretical debate on how well elections function in reducing political inequality.

Toka and Popescu use two nationally representative samples from 2007 surveys commissioned by two major polling organizations—Center for Urban and Regional Studies (CURS) in Romania and Institutul de Marketing și Sondaje (IMAS) in Moldova. They employ simulation techniques to model variations in political knowledge and turnout and their estimated effects on outcomes of the most recent elections. They find that while knowledge and turnout are stratified across social groups, the likely effects on election outcomes are small to nil; there would have been no substantial changes had political inequality in voice been eliminated.

Toka and Popescu's findings have profound implications for democratic theory. If knowledge and elections were the only measures of inequality of voice, this suggests that these inequalities have no detrimental effects for disadvantaged groups. However, a paradox exists: democratic election as a mechanism for aggregating preferences is not flawed, but the end result is that inequalities persist. How is this possible? According to Tóka and Popescu, a likely possibility is that inequality in voice is not due to elections per se, but rather to the choices in the political market, that is, the parliamentarians and parties on offer in elections. Thus, the electoral system could potentially be a mechanism for reducing political inequality of voice, if only the choices were oriented toward that end.

Implications

Taken together, and in light of the APSA Task Force's framework for analyzing political inequality, these articles provide directions for building models that explain

the causes and consequences of political inequality in cross-national perspective. Political inequality in voice exists, and its causes are rooted in the interaction between it and other forms of inequality, such as gender, economic, status, and so on. Political voice (e.g., representation and participation) can be heard more loudly through democratic, as opposed to nondemocratic, processes. The consequence of augmenting this voice in terms of representation for women is enhanced substantive representation. Thus, there are empirically verifiable consequences for reducing political inequality for disadvantaged groups, most likely through changing how governments respond, and through forcing new patterns of policymaking. The consequences of enhancing voter turnout and knowledge—two other indicators of voice—depend very much on what is on offer in democratic political markets. Elections can function to reduce political inequality, even in the new democracies of Europe, but this requires changes in the political elite and their political organizations.

Speculated, but not directly tested, are the effects that actions of social movements and other organizations (nongovernmental organizations [NGOs], international NGOs, etc.) have on political inequality. Both Hughes and Xydias argue that women's interest groups are active and effective agitators that foster women's descriptive and substantive representation. Toka and Popescu argue that the choices on offer for elections are influenced by vocal interest groups, themselves influenced by the advantaged segments of society. These interest groups engage in contentious (and noncontentious) politics that seek social change through forcing government responsiveness and influencing government policy. Thus, social change organizations of all types are important actors that influence the production and reproduction of political inequality. Successful models explaining the causes and consequences of political inequality should take these actors into account.

Uniting these articles is a recognition of the nuanced contextual work required to understand the causes and consequences of political inequality: as some of the features of inequality, in its all-encompassing sense, persist and some change, a complex mapping of the interaction between political inequality and all other types of inequality across time and space is necessary. Thus, research in this area would greatly benefit from engaging with comparative methods and the questions arising from that literature. In the face of more than 190 independent states, and more than 60 dependencies and areas of special sovereignty (www.state.gov/s/inr/rls/4250.htm), this issue of *IJS* reminds us that the cross-national study of political inequality is a marvelously ambitious project with a promising future.

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