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Understanding unequal representation

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Income and class biases in political representation have attracted a great deal of scholarly attention in recent years. The reasons are understandable: since the 1980s, very few democratically elected governments in the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) undertook new initiatives to compensate low- and middle-income citizens for the unequal rise of top-income shares and concentration of wealth. Instead, redistribution actually declined in the United States and many Western European countries from the early 1990s to the early 2010s (Pontusson & Weistanner, 2018).

This apparent puzzle might partly be explained by pivotal middle-income citizens failing to perceive rising inequality, by their belief in trickle-down economics or by their perception of the poor as undeserving. But it is also tempting to interpret this puzzle as revealing something about the political influence of different socioeconomic groups in the political processes that determine redistributive policy. The recent rise of new populist parties – and populist politicians within some mainstream parties – lends some credibility to this interpretation. The populist claim that policy-making favours the interests of privileged elites clearly resonates with many working-class and lower-middle-class citizens (Rennwald & Pontusson, 2022).

Students of American politics pioneered the study of unequal representation, and much of the US literature on this topic implicitly assumes that affluence bias is a distinctively American phenomenon. More recently, however, scholars have produced cross-national analyses and case studies of other countries that suggest unequal representation by income and class is actually a common feature of contemporary democracies. The breadth of these studies further implies that the explanations commonly advanced by Americanists – low voter turnout among the poor and the 'outsized role of money in politics' (Gilens, 2015) – leave something to be desired.[1]

This Symposium seeks to advance this comparative turn in the study of unequal representation. It features six contributions that originated in two workshops we organized at the University of Geneva and the University of Amsterdam in 2019.[2] The articles are diverse both in how they conceive unequal representation and in the research designs they employ. Our purpose is not to present a unified approach to the study of unequal representation, but rather to identify key analytical issues for this important field of inquiry and to illustrate how these issues can be addressed empirically.

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In what follows, we briefly summarize the contributions of the featured articles in terms of how they conceptualize and measure unequal representation, the causal mechanisms they identify and their empirical strategies. We then raise lingering issues and point to avenues for further research.

Observing unequal representation

Empirical studies of unequal representation typically focus either on congruence or on responsiveness. Studies of congruence focus on the degree to which elected representatives reflect the preferences of citizens, an approach exemplified by Lupu and Warner's contribution to this Symposium. The classic version of this approach situates elected representatives and citizens on some preference scale (often the left-right scale) based on survey responses, then estimates the distance between the positions of representatives and different categories of citizens (typically grouped by income). Analyzing a large cross-national dataset, Lupu and Warner show that elected representatives tend to be more closely aligned with affluent citizens relative to poor citizens, but they also show that the extent of this bias varies a great deal across countries and over time.

Studies of responsiveness focus instead on comparing citizens' preferences to policy outcomes. The approach pioneered by Gilens (2012) identifies levels of support for policy change among different groups of citizens based on available survey data and then estimates their effects on the probability of policy change being adopted within a window of time. Among the contributions to this Symposium, Elsässer and Haffert's study of unequal representation in Germany exemplifies this approach, convincingly showing that policy outputs are consistently more responsive to the preferences of business owners relative to those of unskilled workers.

One limitation of this approach to unequal representation is that it generalizes across a wide variety of policy issues without taking into account their salience for different citizens. Policymakers may cater to the preferences of affluent citizens on issues that do not matter to poor citizens and still respond to the most salient concerns of the poor. Moreover, the samples of survey items used in these kinds of studies are country-specific, complicating cross-national comparisons.[3]

Following Schakel et al. (2020), Alexiadou's contribution addresses these problems by analyzing citizens' support for welfare-state generosity by income and its effects on policy change. Focusing on this policy domain, which is evidently salient to low- and middle-income citizens, Alexiadou's comparative analysis still yields clear evidence of pro-affluent bias in policy-making. The contribution by Traber, Hänni, Giger, and Breunig instead renders responsiveness more tractable for comparative purposes by focusing on policy priorities. Their analysis identifies differences between low- and high-status occupational groups in what they consider to be the most important issues confronting their country and show that legislative activity is higher in policy domains that high-status occupational groups consider important.

Exploring the alignment between the spending preferences of different citizens and spending commitments in the electoral programs of political parties, Schakel and Burgoon's contribution might be classified as a study of congruence. As party programs reflect strategic calculations, however, their contribution illustrates the overlap between congruence and responsiveness.

Finally, Wüest and Pontusson address the question of why members of parliament are themselves typically better-educated and wealthier than the citizens they represent and only indirectly engage with the question of unequal representation. As Wüest and Pontusson make clear, their contribution supposes that descriptive (mis)representation matters for agenda-setting and

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policy choices and takes a step back to shed light on the sources of descriptive (mis)representation. In a similar vein, the studies of congruence included in this Symposium suppose that the ideological dispositions of elected representatives (Lupu and Warner) and party platforms (Schakel and Burgoon) feed into government policy. The diverse ways of observing unequal representations illustrated by this Symposium are complementary, capturing different dimensions of the same phenomenon or different steps in a long chain of representation.

Explaining unequal representation

What causes unequal representation? Answering this question involves identifying, conceptually and empirically, two kinds of mechanisms by which unequal representation emerges. The first type are *mediating* conditions that link affluence to power. Such mediating conditions lie somewhere in the causal chain of representation that begins with citizen preferences and ends with legislated policy outputs. Does affluence confer power because affluent citizens participate more in politics than poorer citizens? Because only affluent-friendly political candidates get selected? Because the affluent set the legislative agenda? Because parties cater to the preferences of the affluent? Or because the affluent disproportionately influence the policy-making process itself? To use Schakel and Burgoon's metaphor, where on the road to substantive representation does political inequality arise?

Finding the causes of unequal representation also involves identifying *moderating* conditions, factors that shape how affluence confers political influence at any step in the chain of representation. Do we see more unequal representation in some kinds of political settings than in others – for instance, where representatives from particular class backgrounds populate legislatures, where private money plays an important role in politics, or in majoritarian rather than proportional electoral systems? Identifying such causal 'switchmen of history' might be the key to understanding the causes of unequal representation.

In the growing literature on unequal representation, surprisingly few studies directly explore either kind of explanation. Instead, studies typically focus on a particular stage in representation. While a handful identify key moderating conditions like lobbying and campaign finance (e.g., Bartels 2008; Gilens 2012), we still know little about which conditions moderate the extent and incidence of unequal representation around the world.

The contributions in this Symposium offer insights into the causes of unequal representation by examining particular mediating or moderating conditions linking affluence to influence. Wüest and Pontusson focus on one of the earliest mediating factors in the process of representation, candidate selection. They experimentally examine possible biases in that stage, finding that middle-class voters tend to dislike working-class candidates. Also, relatively early in the process, Traber et al. show that the policy priorities of elected representatives tend to better reflect the priorities of affluent citizens than those of poorer citizens, suggesting that the agenda-setting stage may be central to unequal representation.

Further down the road to unequal representation, Schakel and Burgoon focus on the position-taking of political parties, finding that party platforms (particularly right-wing parties) appear more responsive to the preferences of the rich than to those of the poor. Alexiadou studies a later stage, finding that the individuals populating cabinets over-represent classes and professional orientations associated with affluence and under-represent working-class backgrounds. Notably, both contributions also show that unequal congruence – in terms of either party platforms or cabinet

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composition – is also associated with unequal policy outcomes, making social welfare policies less generous.

This Symposium also identifies a range of political and economic factors that *moderate* whether unequal representation emerges. Most sweeping is Lupu and Warner's analysis, which identifies factors overlooked by prior studies, including clientelism and corruption, economic growth and inequality. Equally important, their analysis suggests that some factors emphasized in the literature seem not to be important moderators, including economic globalization and proportional representation. Other contributions focus on a single moderator. Elsässer and Haffert find that while affluent citizens are generally better represented in policymaking, fiscal constraints do seem to reduce their influence. But those constraints reduce the influence of less-affluent citizens too.

The contributions in this Symposium point to economic conditions, descriptive representation and party ideology as sources of unequal representation. Importantly, they also suggest that other factors may matter less than previously thought, including economic constraints and electoral rules.

Empirical strategies

To study these conceptually different manifestations of representation, the studies in this Symposium employ diverse methods and cover a variety of empirical cases. These range from hundreds of country-year observations to single-country studies, including both observational and experimental datasets, and employing both statistical and computational techniques. The breadth in scope and the heterogeneity of the methods in these analyses offers a wide lens with which to study unequal representation.

At the broadest end is Lupu and Warner's study, which provides a very broad, macro-comparative perspective on unequal representation, measured by ideological congruence between citizens and their elected representatives in 33 countries over the period 1967–2015. Based on a dataset that includes thousands of elite survey responses and millions of mass survey responses, Lupu and Warner employ machine-learning techniques to determine what features of the economic and political system seem most important in producing legislatures that are biased in favour of affluent citizens.

Schakel and Burgoon's analysis of alignments between mass spending preferences and the platforms of political parties similarly covers a large swath of countries (39) over an extended period of time (1985–2017). Their analysis allows us to see that the spending preferences of affluent citizens are better reflected in party platforms than those of poor citizens and that this holds particularly for the platforms of right-wing parties.

Focusing on 18 parliamentary democracies, Alexiadou's contribution draws on an original dataset on the occupational backgrounds of cabinet ministers that goes back to 1945. She estimates both the direct effects of these backgrounds on welfare policy and how they condition government responsiveness to the preferences of low- and high-income citizens. Her analysis also interacts the occupational backgrounds of cabinet ministers with government partisanship.

Traber et al.'s study of legislative responsiveness to the policy priorities of different occupational groups presents two sets of analyses: a pooled analysis of data for 10 European countries from 2003 to 2016 and separate time series analysis with data going back to the 1990s for Germany, Spain and the United Kingdom. Both analyses confirm that legislative activity is higher

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in policy domains that affluent citizens prioritize than in policy domains prioritized by less-affluent citizens.

Whereas Traber et al. combine pooled cross-national data with single-country analyses, the final two papers in this Symposium focus exclusively on single countries. Elsässer and Haffert's study of unequal policy responsiveness in Germany leverages a longitudinal dataset consisting of more than 800 mass survey questions asking respondents' opinions on federal policy proposals over the period 1980–2016. The authors identify policy proposals with budgetary implications and explore the conditioning effects of fiscal pressure on responsiveness to the policy preferences of occupational groups.

Finally, Wüest and Pontusson analyze an original conjoint survey experiment fielded in Switzerland in 2019 to assess voter preferences for parliamentary candidates with different class profiles. Relative to previous studies of this kind, their survey experiment distinguishes between different categories of workers and middle-class professionals, revealing a strong bias against candidates with routine working-class backgrounds as well as very rich candidates.

Next steps

Comparative research on unequal representations is still in its infancy and many fundamental questions remain unanswered. The contributions to this Symposium are diverse both in how they conceptualize representation and in how they study the causes of unequal representation. This diversity helps to expand our understanding of the many facets of unequal representation while also highlighting conceptual and empirical issues for future research.

As we build explanations for unequal representation, it will be important to distinguish among at least three different stages of the chain of representation: the pre-electoral stage of candidate recruitment and platform development, the electoral stage that incorporates campaigns and voter choice, and the post-electoral stage involving legislative bargaining and lobbying. The contributions to this Symposium touch on each of these stages to differing degrees, but the causes they identify can contribute to unequal representation in different ways at each stage. There is still much work to be done identifying how each of these causes contributes to patterns of unequal representation.

A common challenge for studies of representation is how to address the question of salience. Are democratic governments more responsive to the preferences of less-affluent citizens on the issues they care about most? In this Symposium, the contribution by Traber et al. focuses exclusively on issue priorities, while other contributions focus exclusively on issue positions. Combining the two is especially challenging because surveys rarely ask citizens both their position on an issue and how important it is to them. But we cannot fully understand unequal representation without studying both preferences and salience, and future research will need to develop innovative approaches to doing so.

Much of the research on unequal representation, particularly the work outside the US case, identifies inequalities by comparing the most and least affluent socioeconomic groups in a country – the rich versus the poor, or business owners versus workers. Many of the contributions to this Symposium make similar comparisons, Wüest and Pontusson's piece being an exception. Of course, these are only one subset of comparisons that might be made in any given society. How does the representation of the rich compare to that of the middle-class? How do skilled workers fare

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relative to unskilled workers? How do these socioeconomic inequalities intersect with inequalities in representation by gender or ethnicity?

Studying these types of comparisons will undoubtedly help us better identify the causes of unequal representation. For instance, finding that democratic governments are biased against the poor but about equally responsive to the rich and the middle-class might suggest causes having to do with participation gaps or candidate recruitment rather than campaign donations from the very rich. If unequal representation is most pronounced at the intersection of socioeconomic disadvantages and gender or ethnicity, this could imply an important role for descriptive representation.

Beyond understanding unequal representation, we also need more research on its consequences. To what extent are citizens aware of unequal representation, and how does it shape their political behaviour? Many scholars in this field link unequal representation with the rise of populism and declining support for democracy around the world, but there is little systematic evidence documenting connections between these phenomena.

The articles in this Symposium exemplify the comparative turn in studies of unequal representation, highlighting the breadth of the phenomenon and contributing to our understanding of it. Yet, we are still far from understanding why representation is unequal across so many liberal democracies and how it is shaping their politics. We hope more scholars take up these critical questions.

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Notes

1. We refer the reader to the Symposium articles for references to this literature.
2. One of the articles, by Lupu and Warner, was published in the February 2022 issue of *EJPR* (vol. 61, no. 1). The other five articles are in the current issue.
3. See Mathisen et al. (2021) for further discussion.

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