

Electoral participation has an impact on political and socioeconomic inequality

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By Democratic Audit UK

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*The UK has just had a General Election in which inequality was a much-discussed, though hardly dominant, policy issue. But what is the relationship between voting and socioeconomic inequality? **Yvette Peters** argues that there is a relationship, and explains it with reference to the relationship between what she terms ‘responsiveness’.*



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With the recent general election in the UK, a number of discussions related to the strength and health of democracy have taken place. For example, Matthew Flinders rightly pointed out [here](#) that while discussions are often about elections, democracy entails much more than just that. Indeed, democracy entails, in sum, [responsiveness](#), [political equality](#) and [citizenship](#). This implies that citizens should be able to (co-)decide on the policies that govern them, that they have equal opportunities to do so, but also that they have equal and free opportunities to voice preferences. In contemporary democracies, this process is mainly arranged through the popular election of representatives. And while some oppose this process in favour of a more direct form of democracy, Sander Ensink and I show that the current arrangement makes casting a vote important. More specifically, it is crucial to fulfil some minimal requirement of democracy.

Democratic representation must reflect some degree of responsiveness, i.e. to some extent, people should get what they want in terms of policies and regulations. Some scholars have previously shown that in general terms, such responsiveness is present in different contexts, including the UK (see for example [this](#), [this](#), and [this](#)). This is good news for democracy. However, Martin Gilens recently [showed](#) that responsiveness in the US is far from equal: most of the time it is the rich who get what they want in terms of public policies. This finding is highly problematic for democracy. To be sure, it is not and cannot be expected that everyone gets what they want all of the time. Nevertheless, people’s preferences should matter in a more or less equal way. Gilens’ finding suggests that economic inequality translates into political inequality—where the voice of one group of people systematically

weighs more than all the other voices. Especially with the more recent increases in economic inequalities, as [Bartels](#) and [Piketty](#) for example suggest, this may prove problematic.

These political inequalities have not just been identified in the US. We [show](#) that the 33% poorest are systematically under-represented compared to the 33% richest citizens. Moreover, [Rosset et al.](#) also find that relatively poor citizens are worse represented than the richer ones. This effect is specifically present in contexts where economic inequalities are higher, meaning that countries that have smaller differences in income are also more equal in terms of who gets what they want. So, the political inequality in terms of responsiveness is conditional on economic inequality.

One possible explanation for why some people seem to have more influence on what policies are made, is that some people communicate their preferences more clearly to their representatives than others. This communication, which can take the form of various types of political participation, is necessary so that representatives can actually know what people want. As the last general election in the UK illustrates, not every eligible citizen turns out to vote (just [60.5%](#) of the voting age population)—even though voting is one form of participation that is relatively easy to perform.

Previous research has shown that there are in fact many structural inequalities in who participates: income, education, gender and age are often good predictors of who will and who will not participate (see e.g. [here](#) and [here](#)). Of course, citizens should be allowed to decide themselves whether they want to participate in politics. But when it appears that the people that are not participating are similar in terms of certain personal characteristics, a lack of participation is a cause for concern. Both [Arend Lijphart](#) and [Sidney Verba](#) have been concerned with the unequal participation, mainly because of the idea that this inequality also leads to an inequality in representation. The concern is that, in short, social inequalities lead to political inequalities—(partly) because of unequal participation.

Together with Sander Ensink, I have [investigated this claim](#). We started with the idea that, if citizens are politically equal, we would expect no difference in responsiveness between the richer and poorer part of the population. More specifically, we would not expect much influence of either group on policies since the groups were each well below forming a majority. We expected little impact of either group—*unless* one of the groups has a preference that is similar or the same as the median voter. (This median voter would theoretically determine policy outcome, if responsiveness is not dictated by inequalities.) However, we find that, among European countries over the period between 2002 and 2010, there is a difference in responsiveness between the rich and the poor. Whereas the preferences of rich have a marginal positive effect on policy output, the third poorest segment of the population appeared under-represented.

As Jan [Rosset](#) and his colleagues, we find that the general pattern is conditional. But instead of testing for the conditionality on economic inequality, we now test for the conditionality on voter turnout. What we find largely supports the concerns that Lijphart and Verba expressed related to the effect of unequal participation on political inequality. Countries that have lower levels of voter turnout—and are thus more likely to have more unequal participation—also have a bigger gap in responsiveness between the rich and the poor. Thus, the higher the turnout, the more equal citizens seem to be politically. We find that differences in responsiveness for the rich and poor can become very small and possible even non-existent when turnout is higher. This may already be the case with turnout levels that are higher than 50%.

Our research thus shows that voter turnout is important. While the impact of other forms of participation and communication on (equal) responsiveness needs to be studied further, and while it needs to be investigated whether countries with higher inequalities in participation also have higher levels in political inequality (we tested only the *level* of turnout in countries), we have shown that voter turnout is a crucial element of representative democracies.

This is at least the case for economic inequalities (i.e. the rich vs the poor) within the issue of economic redistribution—other forms of inequality, over a wider variety of political issues still need to be investigated. In all, democracy

should be about much more than voting in elections—but with its explicit relation to responsiveness and political equality, it is nonetheless an imperative element.

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