Article

Matthew Polacko*

The Politics of Income Inequality: Redistribution, Turnout and Responsiveness

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Abstract: Income inequality is viewed as one of the greatest challenges facing democracies today. Democracy is predicated on the ideal of equality, but political inequality occurs when the preferences of some are systematically afforded more weight in the political process than others. This research paper investigates the causal chain that allows for political inequality to arise through preference formation, articulation, and aggregation, by outlining the effects that income inequality can have on preferences for redistribution, political participation, and policy responsiveness. It finds that the policy choices presented to the electorate substantially matter for democracy, especially so in this age of increasing income inequality. There appears to be a lack of policy choice provided by political parties resulting in unequal policy responsiveness to the preferences of lower-income earners.

Keywords: inequality, income inequality, redistribution, turnout, representation

Income inequality is viewed as one of the greatest challenges facing democracies today. According to the world's largest annual study on democracy, the Democracy Perception Index (DPI), economic inequality was by far the biggest perceived threat to democracy in 2021: 64% of the over 50,000 respondents viewed economic inequality as threatening democracy in their respective country. The perception of economic inequality as a threat to democracy is very strongly correlated with the sense that "government is acting in the interest of a minority of people" (Alliance of Democracies 2021).

Politics is largely about the distribution of power, namely who gets what, when, and how (Lasswell 1936). Accordingly, democracy is predicated on the ideal of equality, as one person equals one vote, irrespective of income or resources

***Corresponding author: Matthew Polacko**, Département de science politique, Université du Québec à Montréal, 405 Rue Sainte-Catherine Est, Montréal, QC, H2L 2C4, Canada, E-mail: polacko.matthew@courrier.uqam.ca. https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3311-646X

available. Therefore, each person is believed to have equal influence in the political process. However, political inequality can occur when the preferences of some are systematically afforded more weight in the democratic political process than others. Thus, when groups such as low-income earners do not participate in, or have much influence over the political process, then political power becomes highly concentrated amongst groups like the affluent, which can threaten democracy. Of the many different inequalities that exist in political participation, the relationship between income and political engagement comprises the most consistent finding of empirical work in the area (Dacombe and Parvin 2021).

The process whereby political inequality can arise in established democracies includes a three-step causal chain. The first is preference formation, whereby the redistributive policy preferences of individuals are formulated. The second is preference articulation, which is the degree that individuals participate and engage in the political process through demonstrations or voting in elections (Jensen and Van Kersbergen 2017). Preference formation and articulation are both inputs into the political process, whereas the final step, preference aggregation, is an output that entails the responsiveness of policymakers to the preferences of citizens. In each causal step, the preferences of rich and poor have been found to differ and income inequality can also incur dissimilar effects on each. The paper is focused on established democracies, owing to the second and third causal steps. For political participation to matter, political rights need to be widely enjoyed, and free and fair elections practiced. Similarly, for policy responsiveness to matter, then political corruption needs to be minimised and political accountability not be disrupted, so that voters are incentivised to participate in the democratic process.

Accordingly, it is the purpose of this review to shed greater light onto these issues of political inequality that persist throughout established democracies. It does so by investigating this causal chain that allows for political inequality to arise through preference formation, articulation, and aggregation, by outlining the effects that income inequality can have on preferences for redistribution, political participation, and policy responsiveness (see Figure 1 for illustrated causal chain). I discuss each of these key factors in turn, beginning with redistributive preferences.

1 Preferences for Redistribution

At the heart of the relationship between politics and income inequality is the issue of redistribution. Transfers via social spending and taxes comprise the leading avenue to combat income inequality. The most straightforward determinant of attitudes towards redistribution is individual self-interest, providing the

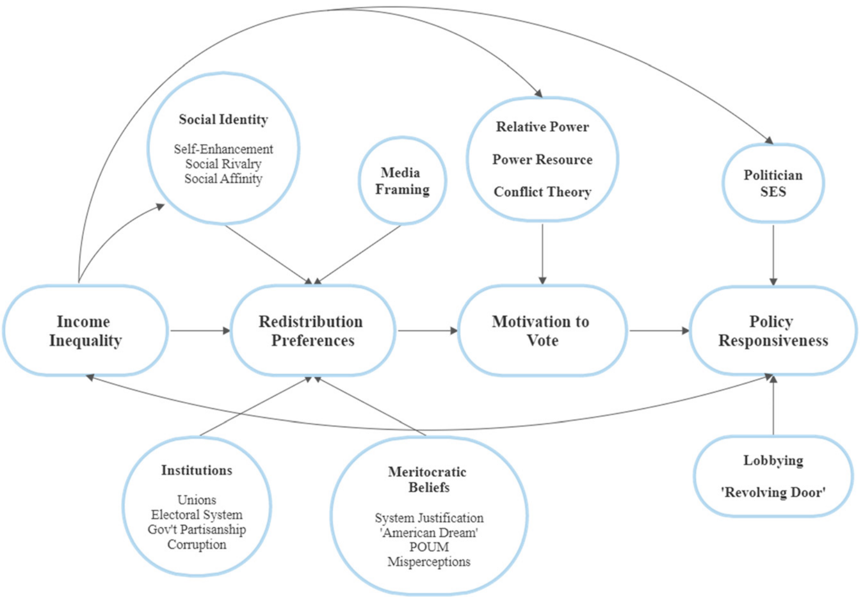

Figure 1: Causal chain of income inequality to political inequality.

motivation for the seminal median voter theoretical model associated with Romer (1975) and Meltzer and Richard (1981), whereby escalating inequality leads to greater political demands for redistribution, due to the median voter being made worse off from more inequality.

Yet, evidence for the Romer–Meltzer–Richard (RMR) theory is patchy because in practice redistribution is higher in more equal than in unequal countries, a phenomenon often described as the 'Robin Hood' paradox (Lindert 2004), and public opposition to rising income inequality is often surprisingly underwhelming (Kenworthy and McCall 2008). Figure 2 illustrates the Robin Hood paradox by plotting welfare spending as a percentage of Gross Domestic Product (GDP), on a sample of 22 OECD countries, over 280 country-years, from 1965 to 2019. There is a strong negative correlation as we can observe that when inequality is higher, countries, spend less on welfare, which is precisely the opposite of what the RMR model predicts.

Therefore, scholars have not yet adequately addressed the crucial question: why does more income inequality not lead to greater redistribution? The Robin Hood paradox has led to numerous explanations attempting to solve the conundrum, including social identity, media framing, beliefs in meritocracy, and institutional factors.

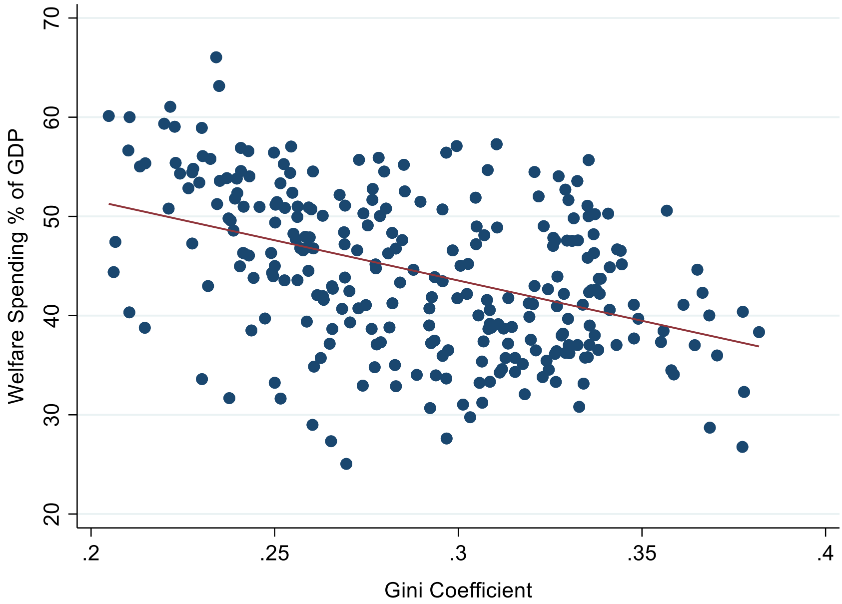

Figure 2: Welfare spending by Gini coefficient, 1965–2019.
Sources: Data on welfare spending from the Comparative Political Data Set (CPDS) (Armingeon, Engler, and Leemann 2021); data on Gini coefficients from Standardized World Income Inequality Database (SWIID) (Solt 2020).

Income inequality can affect redistribution by exacerbating social identity tendencies. For example, income inequality can make the world appear to be more zero-sum, therefore, 'self-enhancement bias' could occur, whereby people overestimate their own income position relative to others (Gimpelson and Treisman 2018). Similarly, 'social rivalry' thesis posits that middle income earners oppose redistribution for fear that it will enable the poor to gain access to middle-class neighbourhoods and social networks that could undermine their own relative status position (Lupu and Pontusson 2011: 319). Another possible social identity explanation lies with the 'social affinity' thesis. It suggests that members of a majority group are less likely to support redistribution when racial or ethnic minorities comprise a significant proportion of low-income earners, due to the increased social segregation that tends to occur with widening income differentials.

Kelly and Enns (2010) find that all income groups become more conservative in response to income inequality due to elite framing of distribution outcomes in the media that give "rise to a form of false consciousness amongst the poor" (ibid: 869). People rely on the media to make sense of complex issues. On related issues to inequality, news framing has been shown to significantly shape public opinion on tax cuts (Bell and Entman 2011) and wealth taxes (Chomsky 2018). While poverty typically receives much news attention, a persistent absentee in its coverage is the role of structural inequalities and income inequality itself (Harkins and Lugo-Ocando 2017; Kendall 2011; Petrova 2008). Similarly, McCall (2013) finds that US newsprint reporting of income inequality was extremely limited from 1980 to 2010, despite considerable increases in inequality. Meanwhile experiments show that cumulated media coverage of inequality has a significant negative impact on concerns about the economic situation of society (Diermeier et al. 2017). American media has also been shown to present class-biased economic news towards the wealthy (Jacobs et al. 2021) and afford more positive coverage to corporations (Kollmeyer 2004). This bias and reduced scrutiny of income inequality is likely due to the corporate-owned and increasingly concentrated mass media. An ownership structure that is particularly acute in higher inequality countries such as the United Kingdom (UK) and US.

Another reason why some people do not question inequality, lies with system justification theory. System justification is a subconscious impetus to avoid the discomfort that can arise from believing "that one's social system is unfair or illegitimate" (Trump 2018: 5). Trump's (2018) 'adjustment hypothesis,' extended this theory to inequality via four laboratory experiments that were conducted in the US and Sweden. She found that participants adjusted their perceptions of inequality by attributing legitimacy to it, due to inherent motivations to believe that their social system is fair. Similarly, 'American Dream' ideology (McCall et al. 2017), provides another type of system justification for inequality. Since its inception, the national ethos and ideal of the US has been the American Dream, whereby it has been promulgated and believed that the country is a world leader in offering the best upward social mobility despite much evidence to the contrary (Davidai and Gilovich 2015: 67). An extension of the American Dream ideology is provided by the 'Prospect of Upward Mobility' (POUM) hypothesis, which suggests that lower-income earners might not support redistribution because they believe that their children might be able to move up the income ladder, due to the tendency of people to have unrealistic expectations of their upward social mobility (Engelhardt and Wagener 2014).

This belief in meritocracy is a key tenet held throughout the West, asserting that anyone can achieve monetary success if they try hard enough and are talented enough. Even though a person's birth location and the social status of their parents account for between 80 and 90% of the variability in total global income (Reid-Henry 2015: 109). Frank's bestseller *Success and Luck* (2016), points out that people tend not to equate success with luck, which can lead to greater acceptance of inequality. Mijs (2021) builds on this research to show that the more unequal a society, the more likely its citizens are to believe in meritocracy and explain success in meritocratic terms, which is suggestive of environmental factors shaping inequality views.

The persistence of meritocratic myths has contributed to mounting evidence that the perceptions that people hold about the true extent of income inequality are largely incorrect and underestimated, often by substantial amounts, which can then impact support for redistribution (Engelhardt and Wagener 2014: 2). Misperceptions about inequality and redistribution can also occur due to the complicated nature of both subjects, as income inequality itself is an abstract concept that is difficult to comprehend without the aid of graphs, numbers, or long explanations, and the Gini coefficient is not easily understood. People are also generally unaware of the long-term consequences of major re-distributional policy such as tax cuts. For instance, low-income earners were supportive of the George Bush tax cuts of 2001 and 2003 in America, which disproportionately benefitted the wealthy and would predictably lead to regressive tax increases and spending cuts in programs for low-income earners (Franko and Witko 2018: 105).

Nevertheless, inequality misperceptions vary cross-nationally, as Americans typically underestimate actual levels and changes over time much more so than Europeans, with Norwegians proving to be relatively accurate (Hauser and Norton 2017). Although the elevated Norwegian accuracy most likely stems from regulations outlining public disclosure of income tax returns. In fact, it appears that there exists an “inverse correlation between trends in inequality and perceptions of inequality and fairness” (Stiglitz 2013: 185). However, when people are informed of the true extent of income inequality, their demand for redistribution is typically much greater, so much so, that the inequality rankings of countries can change (Gründler and Köllner 2017: 953). Moreover, people’s ideal levels of inequality are also far more equal than their perceptions of inequality, as Norton and Ariel (2011) found that Americans overwhelmingly favour Swedish levels of inequality when asked to construct ideal income distributions.

Lastly, institutional factors can impact support for redistribution. Countries with lower inequality have greater institutionalised support and advocacy in place (such as unions) for redistributive polices (Korpi 1983; Loveless 2016). Proportional electoral systems redistribute more, partially because they provide better representation for low-income earners by better facilitating alliances between the working-class and middle-class (Iversen and Soskice 2006). Recent meta-analyses (Bandau and Ahrens 2020; Potrafke 2017) also indicate that leftist government control has a positive relationship to redistribution, even though it has declined in recent decades. Income inequality itself weakens trust in government institutions (Goubin and Hooghe 2020; Macdonald 2020), especially among low-income earners (Gallego 2016). Consequently, Kuziemko et al. (2015) found that decreasing trust in government has a causal effect on diminishing support for redistribution. Correspondingly, higher government corruption, bureaucratic inefficiency, and ineffective enforcement of the rule of law, are associated with lower levels of support for redistribution, due to lost faith and trust in government (Holland 2018; Petrova 2021).

Understanding the relationship between inequality and redistribution is essential for examining the effects of inequality on politics. Preferences for redistribution influence the second step in the political inequality causal-chain, motivations for political participation, which I now turn to.

2 Political Participation Motivations

Voter turnout in general elections has declined steadily downwards from 82% in the 1970s to 72% across Western democracies (Schäfer and Streeck 2013: 11). The trend is nearly universal, as only Luxembourg and Spain have not witnessed declines. This decline in turnout is particularly steep in Switzerland and three Anglo-Saxon countries (UK, US, and Canada). While declining turnout has many correlates, such as declining youth participation and socioeconomic factors, many have now pointed to income inequality (Anderson and Beramendi 2008; Galbraith and Hale 2008; Lancee and Van de Werfhorst 2012; Polacko 2021; Polacko et al. 2021; Schäfer and Schwander 2019; Schäfer and Streeck 2013; Solt 2008, 2010; Steinbrecher and Seeber 2011; Szewczyk and Crowder-Meyer 2020). These academics have developed three principal theories attempting to explain the effects of income inequality on voting, namely ‘relative power theory,’ ‘resource theory,’ and ‘conflict theory,’ which follow below.

Relative power theory predicts that income inequality has a negative effect on turnout and that the turnout of all income groups is expected to decline. This occurs due to inequality generating a greater concentration of wealth into the hands of high-income individuals, who then translate that increased wealth into more political power, as policy makers respond to their interests over the poor (Goodin and Dryzek 1980). Consequently, low-income earners become disengaged from the political process as they “conclude that politics is simply not a game a worth playing” (Solt 2008: 57). Eventually, the turnout of high-income individuals also declines (although not to the same extent), as less engagement is then required to maintain their dominant position in the political process (Steinbrecher and Seeber 2011).

Solt (2008) finds evidence in support of relative power theory both cross-nationally and at the US state level (2010). He has produced the most pronounced results, whereby political participation is lower in countries with above average income inequality, particularly among those on low incomes. Similarly, Galbraith and Hale (2008) find that higher US state-level income inequality leads to lower turnout in presidential elections in their study covering 1980–2004. Beyond the US context, Steinbrecher and Seeber (2011) find in a round four European Social Survey (ESS) sample of 27 countries, that income inequality lowers turnout at the individual level but also reduces the income gap in turnout. Most recently, Schäfer and Schwander (2019) confirm and expand on Solt's cross-national results in a comprehensive study of 21 OECD countries over 30 years. They find a 7 to 15 percentage point difference in turnout between the most equal to the least egalitarian countries (Schäfer and Schwander 2019: 13). Lastly, in a 1996–2009 Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) cross-national study, Gallego (2015) finds that higher gross income inequality increases the income gap in turnout but also that net income inequality reduces turnout equally for all income groups.

Figure 3 provides descriptive evidence for relative power theory cross-nationally on a sample of 22 OECD countries, over 332 elections, from 1965 to 2019. The scatter plot shows that turnout and income inequality are negatively related. When moving

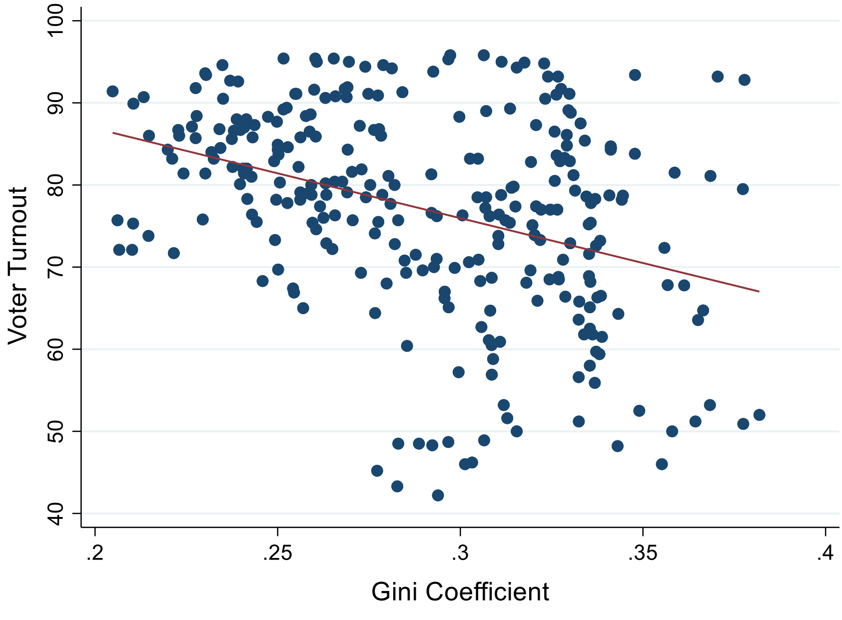

Figure 3: Voter turnout by Gini coefficient, 1965–2019.
Sources: Data on turnout from (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance IDEA 2021); data on Gini coefficients from SWIID (Solt 2020).

from the lowest to the highest point of income inequality turnout declines from roughly 85 to 67%.

In contrast to relative power theory, conflict theory predicts the opposite effect on turnout. It builds on Meltzer and Richard's (1981) median voter model, by predicting that higher income inequality will lead to a more conflictive politics because increasing income inequality stimulates more engagement in the political process for all income groups. This occurs because low-income individuals will start to push for more redistribution, due to being made worse off from increased inequality. This in turn becomes costlier for the rich, who then become more politically engaged so that they can counter the adoption of redistributive policies.

Evidence for conflict theory is sparse. Utilising the 2012 and 2016 American National Election Studies, Szewczyk and Crowder-Meyer (2020) find evidence that community-level inequality increases various forms of political participation, although predominantly for the affluent. Leighley and Nagler (2014) find some support in a case study of US presidential elections from 1972 to 2008. They find that people who perceive greater policy differences are more likely to vote and that the poor are less likely to perceive policy differences than the wealthy. Moreover, Polacko (2021) finds cross-nationally utilising CSES data that income inequality significantly reduces turnout, while widening the turnout gap between rich and poor. However, when party systems are more polarised in times of inequality, low-income earners are mobilised the most, resulting in a significantly reduced income gap in turnout. Thus, party offerings on redistribution appear to be a key mechanism moderating income inequality and turnout, since greater demand for redistribution engendered via increased income inequality, only spurs mobilisation if appropriate economic policy choices are offered (Polacko et al. 2021).

Lastly, power resource theory posits that an individual's participation in the political process depends on the extent of resources available to them (Verba, Kay, and Henry 1995). Greater income inequality typically results in less resources for lower class citizens and more for upper-class citizens. Thus, the greater the amount of income inequality in a society, the less politically active the poor become, as opposed to the wealthy, who increase their political engagement. More equal societies should also have a more equal system for provisioning services to all members of society and make it easier for the lower classes to participate in civic life (Lancee and Van de Werfhorst 2012). It is possible that overall turnout can still rise with increased inequality because if all income groups are getting richer in absolute terms, then they will still have more resources available to participate in politics, even though the poorest are getting poorer in relative terms. However, the theory generally predicts that greater inequality is positively related for high-income earners and negatively related for low-income earners (Solt 2008). This tends to lead to overall declining turnout, as well as greater turnout inequality.

Cross-national support for power resource theory can be found in a couple studies. Anderson and Beramendi (2008) find in a World Values Study from 1999 to 2001, that inequality suppresses turnout across national contexts because individuals living in more unequal countries are less likely to vote, with a consistent linear pattern for all income groups. Using data from the 2006 wave of the European Social Survey, Lancee and Van de Werfhorst (2012: 1176) demonstrate that "inequality seems to isolate low-income individuals from civic and social life," while simultaneously promoting "the social integration of the rich."

In sum, the results are still mixed from over a decade of work examining inequality as a factor in declining turnout. It has been established in the literature that voting is positively associated with income and countries with higher inequality tend to vote less. However, when greater economic policy choice is offered by political parties, then the income gap in turnout has been shown to be reduced through greater participation of low-income earners. It would appear then that lower-income earners are becoming disengaged from politics due to a lack of effective representation in the economic policy space. Thus, the next section examines the final link in the causal chain in the politics of inequality, by shedding further light on the issue of unequal policy responsiveness in democracies.

3 Elite Policy Responsiveness

A defining characteristic of democracy is "the continuing responsiveness of the government to the preferences of its citizens, considered as political equals" (Dahl 1971). Thus, for a complete understanding of the effect of income inequality on politics, it is essential to examine the policy responsiveness of government to citizen preferences. The literature in this field has so far been heavily concentrated on the US, due to its high levels of income inequality and outsized prevalence of money in its political system. Adherents to this theory of 'unequal democracy,' argue that income inequality has profound implications for political inequality by creating a pronounced feedback cycle, whereby:

> increasing economic inequality may produce increasing inequality in political responsiveness, which in turn produces public policies that are increasingly detrimental to the interests of poor citizens, which in turn produces even greater economic inequality (Bartels 2008: 286).

This perspective is based on the theory of 'redistributive democracy,' which assumes that the preferences for redistribution and interests of the rich and poor differ markedly. Mounting evidence for this perspective has appeared from a growing list of American (Bartels 2008; Bowman 2020; Epp 2018; Gilens 2012; Hayes 2013) and European (Elsasser et al. 2021; Lefkofridi and Giger 2020; Rosset, Giger, and Bernauer 2013; Schakel 2021) academics in recent years.

For instance, in the US, Gilens collected hundreds of thousands of individual public opinion-poll responses, regarding an assortment of government policies and found that subsequent government policy decisions were strongly tilted towards the most affluent and that "the preferences of the vast majority of Americans appear to have essentially no impact" on policy (2012: 1). The preferences of low-income earners also appear to only be taken into consideration if they happened to share the same attitudes of the affluent. Similarly, both Hayes (2013) and Bartels (2008), examined the voting behaviour of US Senators and discovered that the opinions of low-income earners exhibited little to no relationship with their voting behaviour, whereas the opinions of high-income earners strongly predicted voting behaviour.

Outside of the US, studies confirming unequal responsiveness based on income, have recently appeared in multiple European countries and cross-nationally. In a comprehensive study of legislative reform proposals in Germany from 1980 to 2013, Elsasser et al. (2021) find that irrespective of partisanship or policy type, decisions are skewed towards upper occupational and educational groups. Similarly, Schakel (2021) finds in a Dutch study linking public opinion surveys to policy from 1979 to 2012, that policy responsiveness is much stronger for high incomes than for everyone else. Lefkofridi and Giger (2020) find that the poor are systematically under-represented by EU institutions. Lastly, in the most comprehensive work yet, analysing 92,000 elite and 3.9 million citizen observations across 565 country-years, Lupu and Warner (2021) find that legislator preferences are consistently more congruent with those of affluent citizens than everyone else on economic issues. However, they are more congruent with the poor on cultural issues.

Various mechanisms allow the wealthy to achieve influence over the policy realm. Political donation is a key process, as it has been well established that high-income earners and the groups that represent their interests, are far more likely to donate to political campaigns than low-income earners (Flavin and Franko 2017: 659). For example, the 2016 US election cycle has been estimated to have cost $7 billion in advertising. Political donations do not have to be declared in the US either. As Jane Mayer (2016) has documented the opaque nature of American political finance, whereby billions of dollars of *Dark Money*, stemming from a small network of extremely wealthy conservatives has bought enormous influence over the Republican party and their supportive infrastructure. Similarly, Hacker and Pierson (2010) comprehensively trace the successful "organised combat" waged by large corporations and the rich, which ensured public policies would align with their interests and having led to policy drift – the "politically driven failure of public policies to adapt to the shifting realities of a dynamic economy and society (ibid: 170)." On the few occasions when governments attempt to introduce policies that go against corporate interests, they are almost always subject to immense pressure from lobbyists to reverse such policies (Stilwell 2019).

Another key mechanism lies with the fact that politicians are increasingly wealthy and tend to come from the business world (Carnes 2018). This has led to a 'revolving door' whereby large companies hire former government officials and politicians to gain access and influence over government policy (Franko and Witko 2018: 39). Members of the working class and people with low socio-economic status have also all but disappeared from the ranks of parliamentarians (O'Grady 2019). For example, the share of British Labour Party members of parliament from a working-class background has declined from 40% in 1965, to less than 10% today (Evans and Tilley 2017: 128–129). Across the OECD the average share of national legislators of working-class background is just 5%, compared to 58% in the general population (Carnes and Lupu 2021).

Scholars have also found that income inequality can exacerbate this unequal responsiveness. Using CSES data, Rosset, Giger, and Bernauer (2013) finds that party systems represent the preferences of poor citizens worse in more unequal societies. Epp and Borgetto (2021) expand on this analysis to find in the US and five European countries, from 1981 to 2012, that there is a distinct migration in legislative attention away from issues dealing with the social safety-net in the policy process, as elites act as gatekeepers early in the policy process.

Figure 4 illustrates the positive cross-national relationship between income inequality and unequal responsiveness on a sample of 22 OECD countries over 312 country-years. Unequal responsiveness is calculated by subtracting the policy responsiveness of the poor from the affluent (Lupu and Warner 2021). The scatter plot shows higher levels of income inequality are correlated with higher levels of unequal responsiveness, whereby the affluent receive higher responsiveness than the poor.

In sum, intense and widespread evidence in favour of unequal economic responsiveness through various outlined mechanisms, produces profound ramifications in the policy process. Most importantly, they suggest that income stratification shapes policymaking so that redistribution designed to combat rising income inequality is much less likely to be implemented.

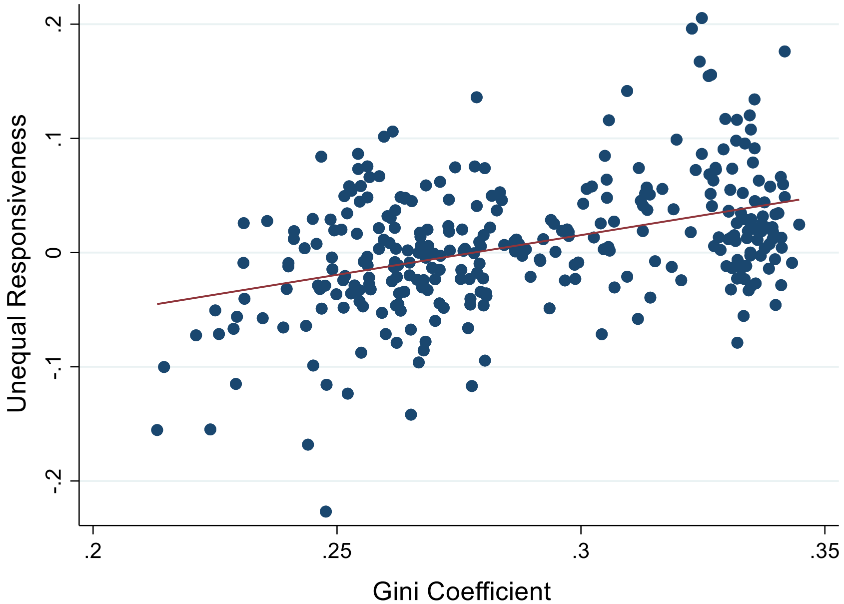

Figure 4: Unequal (income) responsiveness by Gini coefficient, 1967–2015.
Sources: Data on unequal (income) responsiveness (Lupu and Warner 2021); data on Gini coefficients from SWIID (Solt 2020).

4 Conclusion

Freedom House (2021) reports that democracy has been on the decline worldwide for 15 straight years and countries experiencing deterioration outnumbered those with improvements last year by the largest margin recorded since the negative trend began. Accordingly, the world's largest annual study on democracy, the Democracy Perception Index (DPI), recently reported that economic inequality was by far the biggest perceived threat to democracy in 2021. Therefore, scholars have started to examine the relationship between inequality and democracy in recent years.

This paper has reviewed this literature by examining the causal chain that allows for political inequality to arise in democracies through preference formation, articulation, and aggregation. It has done so via outlining the effects that income inequality can have on preferences for redistribution, political participation, and policy responsiveness. The paper finds that there is much evidence now suggesting that the policy choices presented to the electorate substantially matter for parties and for political behaviour, especially so in this age of increasing income inequality. There appears to be a lack of policy choice provided by political parties resulting in unequal policy responsiveness to the preferences of lower-income earners. Thus, despite widespread concern over rising inequality and supermajorities continually in favour of greater redistribution, the lack of economic policy choice likely provides a partial explanation for the paradox of redistribution, whereby democracy does not automatically reduce inequality.

Much evidence exists that this is also leading to reduced voter turnout and increasing political inequality. This perpetuates a vicious cycle of economic marginalisation that depresses the participation of different groups, which then leads to even greater representation of the wealthy and less public effort to combat inequality. It is also likely increasing the pool of disenfranchised voters, which can then form an attractive prospective reservoir of support for populists and authoritarians to draw from – especially on the radical right (Engler and Weisstanner 2021).

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