

Political Participation and Unequal Representation: Addressing the Endogeneity Problem

Ruben Mathisen

Yvette Peters

Introduction

Research has demonstrated that public policy in many advanced democracies is biased towards the preferences of affluent and highly educated citizens. They respond little to the interests of the uneducated and poor—or even to those of the average citizen. These findings present a severe challenge for democracy, in which, theoretically, political equality is required. It is thus no surprise that scholars have sought to understand the workings of unequal representation. While there are various mechanisms that could potentially account for these outcomes, including the role of money in politics, descriptive representation, and a supply gap in the party system, we here focus on one of the mechanisms that have traditionally gotten the most attention in the literature: unequal political participation. Political research going back to the early 1970's has argued that systematic inequalities in, e.g., who votes, contacts elected officials, demonstrates, and signs petitions, are bound to produce a political system that caters more to those citizens that actively voice their opinions. Although the logic of this argument appears sound, and much empirical work points to its credibility, scholars have noted a problem of endogeneity. Namely, is responsiveness unequal because of unequal participation, or is participation unequal because of unequal responsiveness? It might very well be that citizens who rarely see their preferences translated to policy are discouraged from participating in politics, and likewise, that citizens who feel that the government is listening to them view participation as effective and meaningful.

Determining the direction of the causal arrow is hard. In this chapter we make an attempt at estimating the extent to which the reversed causality scenario (unequal representation affecting participation) occurs. Specifically, under the key assumption that unequal representation produces differences in participation mainly through citizens' subjective perceptions of the system, we can calculate to what extent these beliefs account for gaps in participation across income and educational groups. That is to say, we can estimate to what extent participation gaps are caused by gaps in perceptions on whether the system can offer adequate representation. To this end, we use Oaxaca-Blinder Decomposition to decompose education and income gaps in participation, and estimate counterfactually how large these gaps *would have been* if low educated and poor citizens had the same beliefs about the system as the more educated and affluent citizens. Using nine different measures of system satisfaction, and looking at nine different forms of political participation, we find that the gap in voting between the bottom and top education/income quintile would be around 15-20% smaller if those groups were equally optimistic about the workings of the system and their possibilities for influence. Gaps in other forms of participation would change even less,

or not at all. These results provide some evidence that unequal participation is mainly attributable to other factors than the system being unequally responsive.

Our chapter proceeds as follows. We first discuss previous findings regarding unequal representation, outlining the various approaches in this research, as well as the scope of the problem. We then highlight main findings regarding participation gaps in many developed democracies, including various forms of political participation. Further, we outline why participation would be expected to affect the representation of preferences, before dealing with the potential reversed causality puzzle.

Differential representation based on income and education

The last 15 years have seen an increasing number of studies exploring if, and to what degree, rich citizens are better represented politically than the less well-off in modern democratic states. Some of these studies compare public opinion with subsequent changes in public policy. Gilens (2005, 2012) and Gilens and Page (2014), the most extensive studies of the kind (but see also L. R. Jacobs & Page, 2005), estimate the relationship between policy outcomes and the opinions of affluent, middle-class and poor Americans with a dataset of nearly two thousand policy issues. They conclude that economic elites have “substantial independent impacts on U.S. government policy”, while average citizens “have little or no independent influence” (Gilens & Page, 2014, p. 564). Importantly, however, ordinary citizens “often get the policies they favor”, but only because they often agree with economic elites, “who wield the actual influence” (576). Some scholars have criticized their methods and conclusions (Bashir, 2015; Branham, Soroka, & Wlezien, 2017; Enns, 2015; Soroka & Wlezien, 2008), and the authors have in turn responded to the critiques (Gilens, 2009, 2015, 2016; Gilens & Page, 2016; respectively). Other studies of the US have demonstrated responsiveness bias in favor of the rich with respect to roll-call voting in Congress (Bartels, 2008), specific policies at the state level (Flavin, 2012), and the broader policy orientations of the Democratic and Republican parties across the states (Rigby & Wright, 2013).

Outside of the US, single-country studies using more or less the same research design as (Gilens, 2012) have been undertaken in Germany (Elsässer, Hense, & Schäfer, Forthcoming), the Netherlands (Schakel, 2021), Sweden (Persson & Gilljam, 2018) and Norway (Mathisen, 2021). All find similar results as Gilens, the only partial exception being Norway, where Mathisen (2021) finds the poor to have some independent influence on economic issues.

Other studies have taken a cross-national approach to unequal responsiveness, using more aggregate policy measures, such as spending or the ideological orientation of governments and parties. Peters and Ensink (2015, p. 596) match income-disaggregated support for redistribution with subsequent changes in government social spending for 25 European countries. They find that “[l]ower-income groups tend to be under-represented while higher-income groups appear over-represented” and that “low levels of turnout seem to emphasise” this pattern. Bartels (2017) similarly finds what he calls a “social welfare deficit” of 10-15% in affluent democracies due government spending being biased in favor of the preferences of the affluent. Examining congruence around the world by matching citizen and elite surveys, Lupu and Warner (Forthcoming-a) also find that the rich are generally over-represented compared to the poor, specifically on economic issues. Moreover, Giger, Rosset,

and Bernauer (2012, p. 57) find that “generally, the poor are represented worse than the rich” in terms of their distance to the nearest party and the government on a left-right scale. However, they observe “considerable variation in the effect” across 21 Western democracies. In subsequent work, the authors find that the unequal ideological proximity is smaller in PR systems (Bernauer, Giger, & Rosset, 2015), and in countries with lower levels of economic inequality (Rosset, Giger, & Bernauer, 2013).

So far, this relatively young empirical literature has produced robust evidence suggesting that rich citizens are substantially better represented politically than the average citizen and the poor in Western states. This finding is strengthened by the wide variety of empirical strategies that scholars have utilized, all leading to similar conclusions. Indeed, Bartels (2017, p. 10) notes that except for his unpublished manuscript on immigration in Europe (Bartels, 2017), he has found no study “providing positive evidence of egalitarian responsiveness to the preferences of affluent and poor people”. Recent work by Lupu and Warner, however, does find that the poor are over-represented on certain cultural issues (Lupu & Warner, Forthcoming-a).

Compared to the work on differential responsiveness based on income, there is little work on the issue with respect to educational differences. Gilens (2012) showed that in the US responsiveness does not increase with education the same as he found with income. On the other hand, Schakel (2019) and Mathisen (Forthcoming) find that responsiveness is actually more contingent on education than income in the Netherlands and Norway, respectively. Further, an additional study of the Netherlands found that the unequal representation of educational groups extended to both cultural and economic policy issues (Schakel & Van Der Pas, 2021). These studies indicate that differential responsiveness is not limited to affluence but extends to educational differences.

Understanding differential representation

Scholars have identified a range of possible causes for existing political inequality based on income, ranging from an unequal influence of interest groups (Gilens & Page, 2014), a supply gap in the policy space covered by political parties (Rosset & Kurella, forthcoming), money in politics (Flavin, 2015), the structural power of business (Young et al. 2018), skewed descriptive representation (Butler, 2014; Carnes, 2013; Carnes & Lupu, 2015), to the way that the media reports economic news (A. M. Jacobs, Matthews, Hicks, & Merkley, 2021). Recently, Lupu and Warner combined different explanations of why some countries experience more unequal representation based on affluence than others, and found that economic conditions and good governance are the most important determinants (forthcoming-b).

At the same time, scholars of political participation have long argued that the systematic inequality in participation is a main source for unequal representation (e.g., Dalton, 2017; Lijphart, 1997; Schlozman, Verba, & Brady, 2012). We argue that, indeed, unequal political participation likely contributes to unequal representation. Even if the important structural factors would not incentivize politicians to be more responsive to the rich and higher educated, politicians would still struggle to represent preferences more equally because poorer and lower educated citizens tend to be less involved in politics. In this section, we

provide an overview of the inequalities in participation that previous research has found, and present some data to suggest that gaps in participation on the basis of education and income still exist today. Second, we outline the potential mechanisms that would lead unequal participation to cause unequal representation. We consider participation beyond voting alone because, while often less immediately consequential to political careers, other forms of participation emphasize the communication of preferences. Indeed, politicians may learn more about citizen preferences through alternative participation than through voting.

Unequal political participation

Democracies need the participation of its citizens in order to function, and because political participation informs governments about the policies that citizens want, citizens should participate in more or less equal ways. Often, however, this is not the case. Research has shown that people with some backgrounds are more likely to be involved than others. In many cases citizens are not equally likely to engage in active forms of participation. Citizens with more resources, i.e., time, money, and skills, are more likely to participate politically than those with fewer resources (see in particular Verba & Nie, 1972; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995). For one, citizens need to be able to understand something about politics, both in terms of the contents as well as the participation procedures. Politics can be complex, and not all citizens feel equally capable of participating effectively. Indeed, Gallego (2010) demonstrates that in contexts where voting procedures are easier, and where there are fewer political parties, turnout inequality based on education is reduced. Moreover, with the decline of the welfare state and increasing labor market inequalities (Häusermann, Kemmerling, & Rueda, 2020), labor is now also more divided being more secure or more fragile. This development affects political preferences, but is also likely to affect the available time and energy that some people have. It may for example imply that some people work double or even triple jobs in order to earn a sufficient income, leaving these people with little time resources.. Labor market inequalities, thus, further emphasize a difference in resources, encouraging unequal participation.

The inequality in resources thus tend to lead to inequalities in participation. In their meta-analysis on the individual determinants of voting, Smets and van Ham (2013) show that most studies find education, income, and social class to be important predictors of voting. It appears that a social-status gap exists in terms of who votes, where higher-status individuals are more politically active (Dalton, 2017, p. 57), and are thus more likely to communicate their preferences through a vote. These inequalities are not limited to voting, however, but apply to many forms of political participation. Income, education, and citizens' occupation often affect the likelihood of being engaged in contacting, donating money, protesting, and online activism (see e.g., Dalton, 2017; Schlozman et al., 2012). People from a higher social class and with a higher income are also more actively involved in party politics (e.g., Whitley & Seyd, 1996).

These types of involvement are important, in part to voice preferences to the political elite, in part to place issues on the political agenda. One important way through which legislators get their information about citizen preferences and the issues that they find important is through contacting (Butler & Dynes, 2016; Fenno, 1977); but not everyone is equally likely to contact politicians. In a clear illustration of such inequality in involvement, a

survey among very wealthy Americans showed that these people are politically active through attending meetings, voting, and discussing politics, but are also very active in terms of contacting various politicians (Page, Bartels, & Seawright, 2013). The wealthy Americans seem to have access and be close to public officials, where respondents indicated some form of personal familiarity with members of the political elite.

The overall unequal patterns of participation have raised concerns for the health of democracy (Dalton, 2017; Lijphart, 1997; Schlozman et al., 2012; Verba, Nie, & Kim, 1978). What is more, while these patterns are often driven by socioeconomic status, they are also reinforced through parental socialization. For instance, research has shown that political interest in part depends on parental socialization (Neundorf, Smets, & García-Albacete, 2013), and that conversations about politics in the family directly affects the frequency of participation of the children (Cornejo et al., 2021). Moreover Burns, Schlozman, Verba, and Brady (2012) show that, besides own level of education and family income, the education of parents and their exposure to politics at home when younger affects the political activity by Americans. This research suggests that persistent socioeconomic inequalities through generations are to some extent also accompanied by persistent intergenerational inequalities in political participation.

It is important to note, however, that gaps in political participation are not equally large in all countries, and there are even places where the pattern is reversed. Kasara and Suryanarayan (2015) show, for example, that the rich tend to turn out more than the poor in countries where redistribution preferences of the rich and poor diverge more, and where the state has the capacity to tax the rich. In a way, this implies that when the rich do not see a credible threat to their wealth, they also tend to participate less. Moreover, Amat and Beramendi (2020) show that the poor tend to turn out to vote at higher rates when inequality is high and capacity is low. In these cases, parties see a benefit and easy opportunity to mobilize poorer voters, conditioning “the political voice of the poor as opposed to excluding them altogether” (pp. 860). Gallego (2015) further highlights that the gap in voting based on education varies considerably between countries, to the extent that some countries do not experience an educational bias or that the bias is reversed. She demonstrates that institutional structures affect the inequality in voting, including electoral procedures, party systems, and unionization. This literature emphasizes that unequal participation among citizens can be remedied (or worsened) by how politics and participation is structured institutionally.

Looking at participation data from the European Social Survey (ESS) in 2018, we observe the inequality patterns discussed above; many countries tend to have participation gaps on the basis of both education and income. We also observe that the size of the gaps varies between countries, and that patterns are occasionally reversed (not shown). For example, while Estonia and Germany have a voting gap of over 40% between the top and bottom 20% educated, the lower educated tend to turn out to vote at higher rates than the 20% highest educated in Ireland and Cyprus. Gaps are smaller between the top and bottom 20% incomes, but also illustrate that in some cases, the poor turn out at higher rates (i.e., in the Czech Republic, Serbia, and Montenegro in the sample).

Figure 1 displays average levels of voting across the 29 European countries in ESS, and figure 2 provides this information for alternative forms of participation. They show that overall, there are substantial participation gaps between the rich and poor, and between the

higher and lower educated. This is true for all forms of participation, sometimes with differences of around 20 percent on average. This is especially the case for forms that are overall less used, such as signing a petition. Figures 1 and 2 further highlight that gaps in participation tend to be larger between the higher and lower educated, than between the rich and poor, emphasizing the importance of the role of education in politics (Bovens & Wille, 2017).

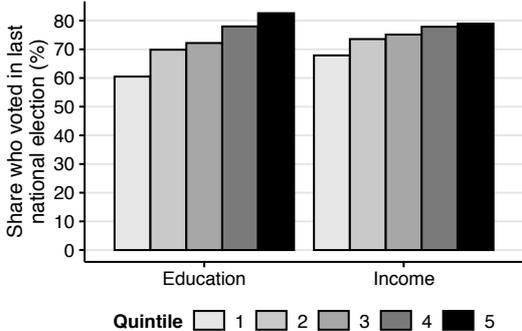


Figure 1: Voting, by education and income

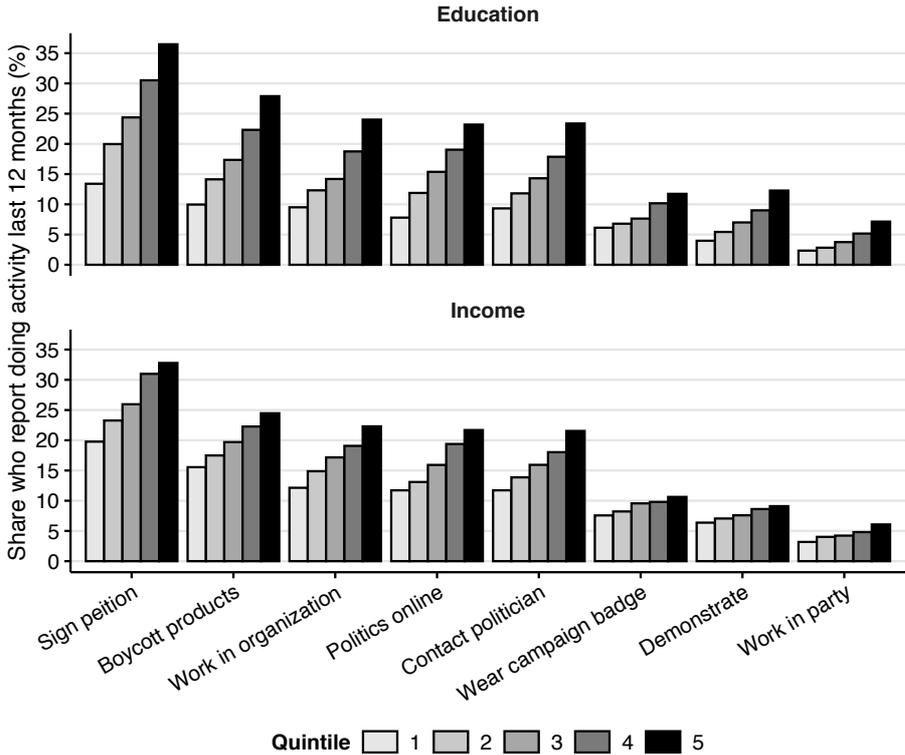


Figure 2: Alternative forms of political participation, by education and income

How unequal participation can translate to unequal representation

Political participation can affect political representation 1) through the selection of parties and candidates into office, 2) through the communication of preferences, and 3) through the representatives’ strategic behavior in response to known participation patterns (see also Griffin & Newman, 2005). First, through elections citizens effectively select the political

parties and candidates who will make up the legislature and government. To the extent that preferences in part depends on citizens' wealth and educational background, this implies that nonvoters' preferences are underrepresented in the legislative and executive bodies. With the larger absence of poorer and lower educated citizens, the pivotal median voter is richer and higher educated than the median citizen contributing to representational biases (Larcinese, 2007). This may hold in terms of both policy and ideology considerations, as well as the specific candidates that are elected. Since people tend to appreciate candidates that are similar to them in certain relevant personal characteristics (Arnesen & Peters, 2018), one may expect that a bias in who votes also translates to who is elected into office. Furthermore, how people tend to vote when they do vote may contribute to the representational inequality through voting. Some scholars have, for example, shown that some citizens tend to vote 'incorrectly', i.e., not in the way that their preferences or interests would suggest they would vote (e.g., Ha & Lau, 2015). Predictions in vote choice are less accurate for people with lower education and less political interest. Moreover, Bartels (2008) finds that the vote choice of the less wealthy is in part dependent on how much the wealthy improved their economic situation in an election year—not on their own economic situation. While there may be valid explanations for the deviations in expected vote choice, this research suggests some people may be more fortunate in the results of the elections than others in terms of preference reflection.

Second, various forms of political participation serve to communicate preferences to the political elite. In order for legislators to represent accurately, they require more or less accurate perceptions of public opinion (Miller & Stokes, 1963). Research has found that representatives tend align more with constituent opinion when they have more accurate information about it (Butler & Nickerson, 2011). Yet, some research has shown that legislators are indeed not always very accurate in knowing what citizens want (e.g., Belchior, 2014; Hedlund & Friesema, 1972). US legislators, for example, appear to have a systematic conservative bias in their perception constituents' preferences, which can be attributed to a bias in who contacts (Broockman & Skovron, 2018). A systematic bias in who participates politically would then also translate into a bias in the information that politicians have about their constituents, and may consequently lead to a bias in representation. Communication of preferences, here, can include various forms of participation, and especially contacting and involvement in parties may be important in this respect.

Third, participation may matter through the strategic considerations of political candidates. If candidates are motivated by (re-)election, they would primarily be motivated to please people that may help them to get elected. On the one hand, this may be citizens with larger voting power, i.e., groups that are a) more likely to vote, b) are less decided on who to vote, and c) larger groups (Griffin & Newman, 2013). This suggests that the persistent inequalities in voting form in part the basis for decisions on who politicians aim to represent. On the other hand, politicians may be motivated to cater to the preferences who make political donations and/or campaign contributions, something that candidates need in some election contexts. Indeed, joining campaign work and/or donating money is often undertaken with a motivation to increase one's impact beyond one's own vote (Schlozman et al., 2012, p. 239).

Some research has made an attempt to connect unequal participation to unequal representation, often suggesting that participation may have some effect but that it is not the main driver of differential representation. Some scholars find that voters are better represented

(Griffin & Newman, 2005), and that turnout levels affect the representation gap between the rich and the poor (Larcinese, 2007; Martin & Claibourn, 2013; Peters & Ensink, 2015), although it does not seem to be the main explanatory factor (Bartels, 2008; Lupu & Warner, forthcoming-b). At the same time, Leighley and Oser (2017) show that roll-call votes correspond better to the preferences of the politically active, and Adams and Ezrow (2009) show that parties in Europe respond better to the preferences of those who are politically engaged. Bartels (2008) finds some evidence that contacting reduces the inequality gap. Aligning with some of the arguments regarding the role of money in politics, Barber (2016) finds that US senators are in general not very congruent to their constituents, though they do tend to respond to the preferences of the average financial contributor.

In addition to the potential mechanisms through which participation affects representation, the context of political supply may further affect this relation. On the one hand, there is the pool of candidates that run for office, effectively defining who can be elected by voters. Carnes and Lupu (this volume) show that workers are strikingly underrepresented both in the pool of candidates and among the elected legislators in many European countries. Indeed, looking at the composition several European parliaments, Best (2007) also shows that few representatives have a background in the primary sector, and most have a university degree. Carnes (2013) shows that in the United States, such gaps also exist: citizens are much more likely to have a working-class background, be without college degree, or be worth less than a million dollar, than the political elite. The notion that not all citizens are likely to become part of the political elite is perhaps further supported by the change that political parties have experienced. European-focused research has indicated that parties are increasingly outside of civil society, the political elite has specialized and professionalized, and are more focused on output legitimacy (Mair, 2013). This suggests that the political elite has become a sphere on its own, without too strong ties to the citizenry in general terms. This type of bias, however, does not seem to be driven by specific citizen preferences for these higher socioeconomic candidates (Carnes & Lupu, 2016; Griffin, Newman, & Buhr, 2020), nor do working class citizens have less of a nascent political ambition (Carnes & Lupu, 2021). It appears that citizens are presented with a choice at the outset that limits the possibility to approach descriptive representation of poorer and lower educated citizens; something that may facilitate equal representation (e.g., Bratton & Ray, 2002; Carnes, 2012; Hakhverdian, 2015).

On the other hand, research has also shown that the political offer in terms of policies and ideology is biased towards higher socioeconomic citizens. Rosset and Kurella (forthcoming) show that preferences of the poor are less well reflected in the political offer that parties present. They show that parties cover different combinations of preferences for the middle incomes best, while both the rich and poor need to make a trade-off. In addition, they find that poorer voters take policy less in consideration, so that they do not make up their disadvantage in offer in the way that the rich tend to do. Furthermore, Weber (2020) discovers that party platforms cater mostly to male, educated, and affluent citizens while attempting to appear agreeable to others. This shows that already before electoral choices are made, the political landscape favors citizens with a higher socioeconomic background.

Is participation unequal because representation is unequal?

Can we conclude from the above discussion that policy outcomes are biased towards the preferences of the affluent and educated partially because they participate more in politics? Not necessarily. While we have discussed several reasons why one would expect unequal participation to translate into unequal representation, the causal arrow might very well go in the other direction. That is, participation could be unequal precisely because policy responsiveness is unequal. Citizens who feel that the system is rigged against them, that elected officials ignore their needs, and mainly attend to the interests of the privileged, might see little hope for changing the system through regularly used forms of political participation. Conversely, citizens whose views are well represented might feel that the system is working as it should and view participation as effective and meaningful. If the causal arrow in reality goes in both directions, which is not unlikely, one could imagine a vicious cycle by which unequal participation creates unequal responsiveness, which in turn exacerbates future inequality in participation. We are thus left with an endogeneity problem (see also Anderson & Beramendi, 2008), i.e., does the lower participation rate of poor and lower educated citizens lead to unequal representation; or does unequal representation lead to lower participation rates among those these groups?

Tackling this question empirically is challenging. For example, trying to isolate the causal effect of unequal representation on participation is hampered by factors including a lack of comparable cross-country measures of unequal representation and the rarity of exogenously induced changes. However, under the key assumption that unequal representation, to the degree that it leads to unequal participation, would mainly do so through citizens' *subjective perceptions* of the system, we can estimate the effect. Specifically, we then estimate to what extent differential perceptions of the system account for gaps in participation across income and educational groups. We believe the assumption to be highly plausible. Of course, it cannot be ruled out that unequal representation could discourage the low educated and poor from participating without them knowing about it: Perhaps unequal representation produces certain societal outcomes (e.g., lower living standards for the poor) that have an independent effect on turnout, all the while citizens believe the government is listening to them. This appears far less likely, however, than the more direct route by which unequal representation leads to differential attitudes and beliefs about the system, which leads to differential participation. A similar assumption is tacitly made by Rennwald and Pontusson (2021), when they argue that “growing class bias in responsiveness can hardly be invoked to explain growing working-class support for populist parties” if “citizens have failed to register this development in their perceptions of political representation” (21).

In order to examine to what extent gaps in participation across income and education can be accounted for by different beliefs about how the system works we employ Oaxaca-Blinder Decomposition¹. Oaxaca-Blinder Decomposition (Blinder, 1973; Oaxaca, 1973) has become a standard method in economics for estimating how much of a wage gap (typically between males and females) is attributable to a set of predictors (typically occupation, working hours and experience). However, the method can be used to explain any average difference in a numeric variable between two groups. The method has so far seen limited use

¹ Implemented in R with the package *oaxaca*

in political science (for exceptions, see e.g., Dow, 2009; Kostelka, Blais, & Gidengil, 2019). We here use what is known as a “twofold” decomposition, which will decompose a difference in participation between two groups into the share that is attributable to group differences in a set of predictors, and the remaining, which is unexplained. The explained share is determined by counterfactually imputing the predictor levels of one group onto the other and then predicting with a regression model the level of participation under this scenario. The difference between this prediction and the actual observed level of participation is what is attributable to group differences on the predictors. Standard error for the estimates are calculated (Jann, 2008).

Our data source is the European Social Survey Round 9 (2018) for 29 European countries.² This survey is well suited for our purposes since it contains multiple measures of both concepts in which we are interested: political participation and perceptions of the political system. Our decomposition model includes three types of predictors from the ESS: nine predictors tap into satisfaction with the political system, four predictors measure internal efficacy (i.e., personal abilities, confidence, etc.), and four predictors are socio demographic variables about the respondent. Most of our predictors are measured on Likert-scales from strongly agree to strongly disagree, which we treat as numeric variables in the analysis.

Results

We begin by examining the relationship between beliefs about how the political system works and propensity to participate. If it is indeed the poor and lower educated citizens’ lower satisfaction with the political system that drives their lower rates of participation, then satisfaction with the system needs to be positively associated with participation in the first place.³ We use nine variables from the ESS to measure satisfaction with the political system: Agreement that the system allows people “like you” to have (1) influence and (2) say, (3) that everyone can participate, (4) that government considers the interests of all citizens, (5) satisfaction with the country’s democracy, (6) that the respondent feels closer to any of the parties, and lastly, trust in (7) politicians, (8) parties, and (9) parliament (see Table A1 in the Appendix). In order to test in a simple manner whether these perceptions are related to participation, we made an index by linearly transforming the variables to the same scale and then averaging them for each respondent. We then assigned the respondents into quintiles based on the index distribution in their respective countries.⁴ When it comes to voting there are clear differences between the people who think the system is working properly and the ones that do not. People in the bottom quintile of the index 65 percent are likely to vote, while this number is 82 percent for the people at the top quintile, and 76 percent for the middle

² These are: Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Montenegro, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom.

³ Not only that, this association needs to be at least partially causal (something we are not able to test here, but which seems a reasonable assumption). To the degree to which it is not causal, we are overestimating the effect of equalizing beliefs about the system on the income/educational gaps in participation. See the Discussion for details.

⁴ Hence, a respondent in quintile five would be among the 20 percent most satisfied with the political system in his/her country.

quintile. Furthermore, Figure 3 shows the estimated share of respondents who engage in different alternative forms of participation for different quintiles on the satisfaction with the system-index. The results show that respondents who are more optimistic about the system are more likely to participate. This is especially the case for respondents who are in the top quintile on the index for their country. Differences are particularly large when it comes to working in organizations and parties or contacting politicians.

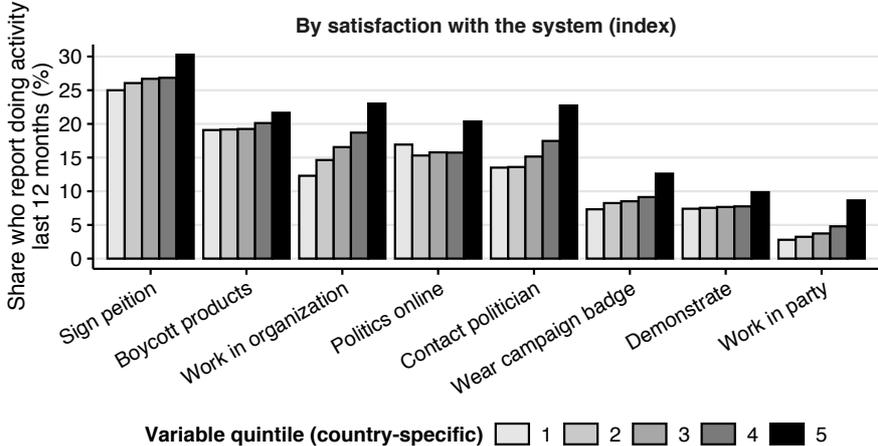


Figure 3. Participation by satisfaction with the system. Index averaging the 9 measures of satisfaction with the system (see Table 1). Quintiles are based on each country’s respective distribution.

Next, Table 1 presents results from the Oaxaca-Blinder Decomposition for voting. Starting from the top of the table it shows the average gap in voting between the top and bottom education quintile (18.3 percentage points), and between the top and bottom income quintile (10.7 percentage points). Furthermore, the results show that all the predictors we have included in the model (listed in *italics*) together explain 18 percent of the educational gap, and 40 percent of the income gap. Simply put, this means that if the low educated and high educated had had the same values on all the predictors, the difference in voting would be reduced by 18 percent (from 18.3pp to 14.9pp; the income gap would go from 10.7pp to 6.5pp).

| | Education | | Income | |
|--|-----------------------------|----------|-----------------------------|----------|
| | Contribution (Std. Err.) | % of gap | Contribution (Std. Err.) | % of gap |
| Overall | | | | |
| Gap in voting between bottom and top quintile | 18.29 | 100.0 | 10.67 | 100.0 |
| Total explained | 3.35 (0.42) | 18.3 | 4.22 (0.35) | 39.5 |
| By variable | | | | |
| Satisfaction with the system | | | | |
| <i>System allows people like you to have influence</i> | 0.86 (0.13) | 4.7 | 1.03 (0.28) | 9.7 |
| <i>System allows people like you to have say</i> | -0.03 (0.06) | -0.2 | 0.00 (0.17) | 0.0 |
| <i>System ensures everyone can participate</i> | 0.45 (0.35) | 2.5 | 0.43 (0.04) | 4.1 |
| <i>Government considers interests of all citizens</i> | -0.05 (0.12) | -0.3 | -0.28 (0.10) | -2.6 |
| <i>Satisfied with working of democracy in country</i> | -0.02 (0.04) | -0.1 | 0.10 (0.02) | 0.9 |
| <i>Feel closer to any of the parties</i> | 1.28 (0.05) | 7.0 | 0.74 (0.21) | 6.9 |
| <i>Trust in politicians</i> | -0.37 (0.08) | -2.0 | -0.15 (0.04) | -1.4 |
| <i>Trust in parties</i> | 0.01 (0.08) | 0.0 | 0.09 (0.02) | 0.9 |
| <i>Trust in parliament</i> | 0.50 (0.20) | 2.7 | 0.23 (0.06) | 2.1 |
| <i>Sum</i> | | 14.3 | | 20.6 |
| Internal efficacy | | | | |
| <i>Able to take active role in political group</i> | 0.16 (0.87) | 0.9 | 0.52 (0.26) | 4.9 |
| <i>Confident in own ability to participate in politics</i> | 0.37 (0.18) | 2.0 | -0.01 (0.41) | -0.1 |
| <i>Interests in politics</i> | 3.06 (0.02) | 16.7 | 1.76 (0.06) | 16.5 |
| <i>News consumption (minutes per day)</i> | -0.01 (0.02) | -0.0 | 0.06 (0.01) | 0.6 |
| <i>Sum</i> | | 19.6 | | 21.9 |
| Socio demographic | | | | |
| <i>Income (education) quintile</i> | 2.18 (0.29) | 11.9 | 4.85 (0.24) | 45.5 |
| <i>Age</i> | -4.75 (0.17) | -26.0 | -5.97 (0.07) | -56.0 |
| <i>Gender</i> | 0.03 (0.02) | 0.1 | -0.50 (0.11) | -4.7 |
| <i>Born abroad</i> | -0.31 (0.09) | -1.7 | 1.31 (0.12) | 12.3 |
| <i>Sum</i> | | -15.7 | | -2.9 |

Note:

Percentages are interpreted as the expected share of the voting gap that would disappear if the bottom education/income quintile had the same levels on a given explanatory variable as the top quintile (or visa-versa, both scenarios weighted equally). Negative values suggest that the gap would be even larger if the two groups had the same levels. Source: European Social Survey Round 9 (2018).

Table 1: Oaxaca-Blinder Decomposition of the voting gap between high income/highly educated and low income/low educated.

If we look at the first block of predictors—those measuring satisfaction with the system—we see that they together account for 14 percent of the educational gap and 21 percent of the income gap. Among the survey items in this group, it is *The system allows people like you to have influence* and *Feel closer to any of the parties* that explain the most on their own. Still, in the counterfactual world where citizens with very different levels of income and education have the exact same beliefs on all these nine opinion variables, at least 80 percent of the gap in voting would remain.

For comparison, we also included a set of predictors measuring a respondent’s internal efficacy, i.e., one’s ideas on own political abilities and interests. These variables explain a little more of the voting gap than the previous block (20 percent for education; 22 percent for income). If we look closer however, it is clear that within this block, one survey item—*Interest in politics*—does almost all the work (17 percent for both income and education).⁵

⁵ It seems unlikely that unequal representation would cause differences in political interest independently (that is, unrelated to the fact that people who feel the system is not working might lose interest in politics). However if this somehow were the case, then we could add the 17 percent reduction to the sum of the satisfaction with the system-block, and we would get a 31 percent reduction for the educational gap and 38 percent for the income gap. This does not seem justifiable from a theoretical perspective, however.

Further, to separate the explanatory power of socio-demographic variables that are correlated with the first two blocks of opinion variables, we include a set of socio-demographic variables in the model. These are presented in the third block. They show, unsurprisingly, that equalizing income would reduce some of the educational gap in voting, and visa versa.⁶

In the next step we used the Oaxaca-Blinder method to decompose income and educational gaps in the alternative forms of participation. The results of this are summarized in Figure 4, which plots for each form of participation the percentage of the gaps explained by differential satisfaction with the system (i.e., the sum of the first block of predictors in Table 1). Two of the activities—working in organizations and wearing a campaign badge—would see the income/education gaps reduced about as much as voting (15-20 percent) if satisfaction with the system were equalized. The other six activities, however, would see less of a reduction or almost none. Inequalities in terms of who contacts politicians, works in parties, and signs petitions would be almost unchanged.

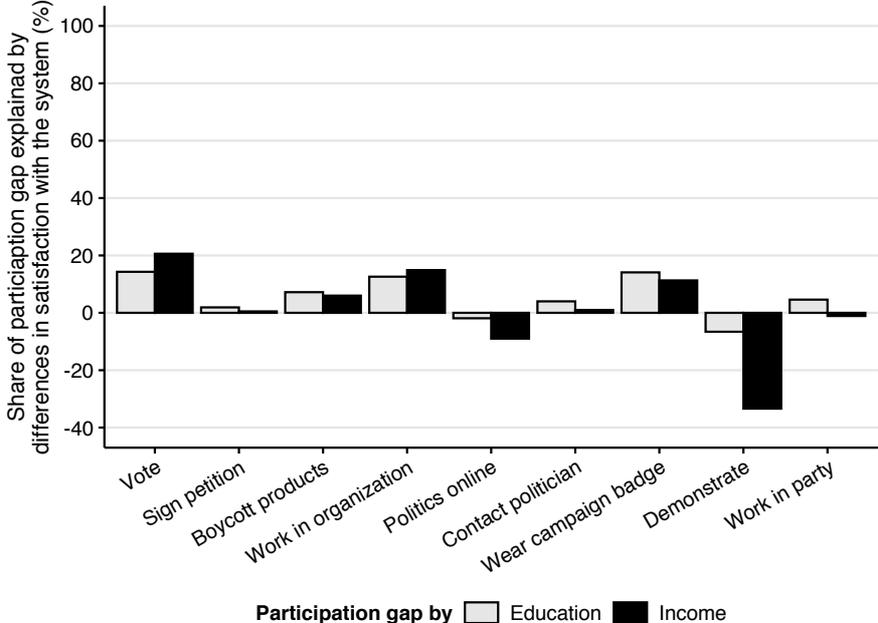


Figure 4. The power of differential satisfaction with the system in explaining differences in participation across income and education. Estimated with Oaxaca-Blinder Decomposition using the same model as presented in Table 1 for different forms of participation.

In the last part of the analysis, we look at variation across countries in terms of how participation gaps would change if people at high/low income and education had the same satisfaction with the system. We do this for voting since it showed some of the largest

⁶ The large negative effects of age suggest that voting gaps would be even larger if the poor and low educated had had the same age as the affluent and high educated. This is because older people have relatively low income and education (the latter is probably a generational aspect), but are more likely to vote than younger people, offsetting some of the voting gap across income and educational levels.

reductions among the different forms of participation. Furthermore, since the Oaxaca-Blinder models are computationally demanding we employ a simpler way of estimating the effect of equalizing beliefs about the system. Specifically, we estimate an OLS model for each country where the dependent variable is a vote-dummy and the main independent variable is a dummy for whether or not the respondent is in the first or fifth education quintile (only respondents in one of the two group are included in the analysis). We also include the set of socio-demographic variables from the third block in Table 1. From there we compare the coefficient for the education dummy with the same coefficient after we add the nine variables measuring satisfaction with the political system to the model. The difference represents the amount that the voting gap between the first and fifth education quintile is reduced when holding constant these nine variables. We then do the same for income.

Figure 5 shows the results of this analysis. As one would expect, most of the countries follow the general pattern of little difference before and after taking satisfaction with the system into account. This goes for countries such as France, Germany, Sweden, and the Netherlands. On the other hand, in some of the Eastern European countries, such as Bulgaria, Lithuania and Latvia, differential beliefs about the system explain more of the voting gaps than in most other countries. However, in none of the countries that have substantial voting gaps in the first place (e.g., above 5pp), would the gap reduce by more than half if satisfaction with the system had been equal for income and educational groups.

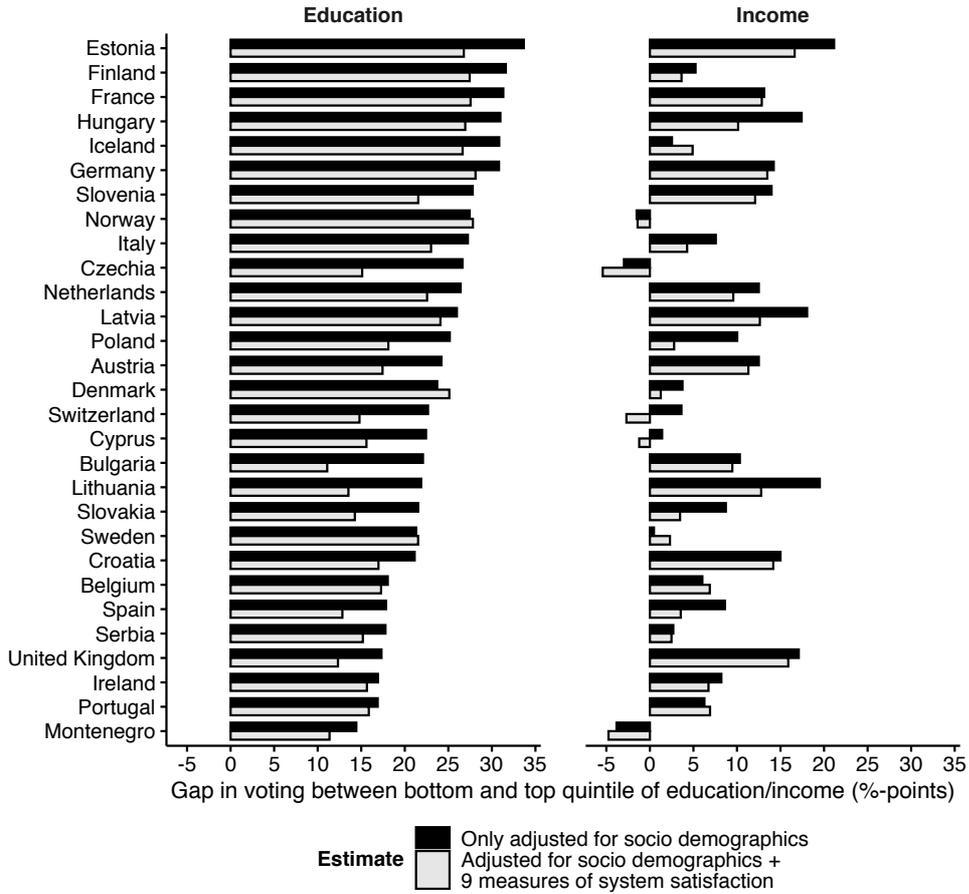


Figure 5. Country variation in the voting gap by income and education, and those gaps while holding constant satisfaction with the system.

Discussion

Over the past two decades, research has shown that representation of political preferences in established democracies tends to favor the richer and higher educated citizens. Since these findings present a severe challenge to the democratic idea of political equality, scholars have sought to find the various causes for the gaps in representation. One of the main explanations that has been discussed, even before the actual representational inequalities were demonstrated, is unequal participation. There tend to be structural inequalities that make it more or less likely for citizens to participate, mainly centering around the idea that individuals are facilitated in their political engagement through their resources (i.e., time, money, and skills). Consequently, those who participate more determine election outcomes, communicate their preferences, and are strategically better catered to by politicians who seek re-election. Indeed, while this area needs more research, there are some studies that have found a link between unequal participation and representation—even if it may not be the main explanatory factor.

However, because there are good arguments for the idea that people decide not to participate because they do not experience representation (while they may observe it for (some) others), we are presented with an endogeneity problem. In this chapter we sought to address this problem, at least in part, by examining whether participation gaps would narrow if the rich and poor, and higher and lower educated, would view the political system equally well-functioning. We find, in overall terms, that these participation gaps would likely be reduced in such a scenario—but only in fairly limited ways.

Although there seems to be some support in the data for the argument that the poor and low educated participate less because they feel the system is not working properly, such perceptions account for a rather small part of the gaps in political participation across income and educational groups (15-20 percent for voting; less for other forms of participation). And in fact, if anything, we are probably overestimating rather than underestimating the effects. The reason for this is that the results from the Oaxaca-Blinder models assume that *all* of the relationship between satisfaction with the system and participation is causal. To the degree to which this is not the case (and the relationship is for instance explained by people viewing the system more favorably *as a result of* participating), the gap would see an even smaller change as a result of equalizing beliefs about the system. Moreover, it is not certain that having perfectly equal political representation at the system level *would* in fact equalize beliefs about the system. The poor and low educated could distrust the system for other reasons than unequal representation. Therefore, we should be careful with inferring from our analysis a specific amount by which unequal participation would be reduced if the political system was perfectly equally representative. Given the ways in which we are likely to overestimate that quantity here, a gap reduction on the order of 15 to 20 percent should be viewed as an upper bound.

While the reduction in the gap does not appear that large, it needs to be noted, however, that even such smaller effects may be consequential. We mentioned that the relationship between representation and participation is likely to go in both directions, at least to some extent. This means that, if unequal participation exists it may lead to (more) unequal representation. This in turn would affect gaps in participation somewhat, which then again

translates into increased representational inequality. So, even if the effect of unequal representation on participation is minimal, we may be observing a part of the vicious cycle we highlighted earlier. Importantly, this cycle may reach a(n unspecified) threshold level, with potential severe consequences for democracy. Consequently, we could on the one hand conclude that certain systems are in fact no democracies at all, but rather oligarchies (or plutocracies). On the other hand, however, we may also observe a strong, potentially revolutionary, reaction among citizens who do not accept to be underrepresented while being told they are. Such processes have uncertain outcomes and may lead to even worse situations.

Before concluding, one aspect needs to be highlighted. While most studies have found unequal representation of richer citizens, we see that especially education is a dividing factor regarding participation. And indeed, some research have already suggested that, at least in some contexts, the educational representational gaps are more important than the ones based on income (Mathisen, 2021; Schakel, 2021). Other research has also highlighted the importance of educational divides in politics (e.g., Bovens & Wille, 2017; Gallego, 2010), and it suggests that cleavages may have shifted within society. It also suggests that research should perhaps focus more deeply on the relation between education and politics, paying also special attention to potential country differences.

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APPENDIX

| | Variable name | Literal question | Original scale |
|---|----------------------|---|--|
| 1 | psppipla | And how much would you say that the political system in [country] allows people like you to have an influence on politics? | 1 Not at all; 2 Very little; 3 Some; 4 A lot; 5 A great deal |
| 2 | psppsgva | How much would you say the political system in [country] allows people like you to have a say in what the government does? | 1 Not at all; 2 Very little; 3 Some; 4 A lot; 5 A great deal |
| 3 | frprtpl | How much would you say that the political system in [country] ensures that everyone has a fair chance to participate in politics? | 1 Not at all; 2 Very little; 3 Some; 4 A lot; 5 A great deal |
| 4 | gvintcz | How much would you say that the government in [country] takes into account the interests of all citizens? | 1 Not at all; 2 Very little; 3 Some; 4 A lot; 5 A great deal |
| 5 | stfdem | And on the whole, how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in [country]? | 0-10: 0=Extremely dissatisfied; 10=Extremely satisfied |
| 6 | clsprt | Is there a particular political party you feel closer to than all the other parties? | 1 Yes; 2 No |
| 7 | trstplt | Using this card, please tell me on a score of 0-10 how much you personally trust each of the institutions I read out. 0 means you do not trust an institution at all, and 10 means you have complete trust. Firstly... ...politicians? | 0-10: 0=No trust at all; 10=Complete trust |
| 8 | trstprt | [Same as 7] ...political parties? | 0-10: 0=No trust at all; 10=Complete trust |
| 9 | trstprl | [Same as 7] ...[country]'s parliament? | 0-10: 0=No trust at all; 10=Complete trust |

Table A1. Measures of satisfaction with the system. Source: ESS Round 9 (2018)