

Challenging Inequality

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Together, the final reports of the APSA Task Force on Inequality and American Democracy and its three working groups constitute a remarkable resource for students of contemporary American politics. Most striking in these materials is the depiction of a reinforcing cycle of political and economic inequality. The task force report argues that inequalities in political voice reverberate in patterns of governance, which in turn give rise to public policies that reinforce political inequalities.

This portrait of interlocked inequalities presents a striking contrast to the optimistic account of countervailing powers and fungible resources in mid-century pluralist interpretations of American politics. Indeed, the task force report places politics and political actors in the pivotal role of refracting economic and technological shifts in ways that exacerbate inequality. These shifts have upended established economic and social patterns and challenged existing policies in all advanced industrial democracies, but American politics, the report argues, has especially magnified their unequal consequences.

Powerful and alarming, this portrait of interlocking inequalities offers little guidance for untying the knot. Despite the disturbing trends identified in the report, American politics is not monolithic; the links that connect dimensions of inequality are neither exclusive nor immutable. In fact, the American political system has always been noted for its untidiness and its capacity to sustain multiple, conflicting trends at the same time. Such points of dissonance create possibilities for attacking these interlocking inequalities. In this commentary, I sketch countertendencies and point out opportunities to lean against the forces creating inequality in the areas of voice, governance, and public policy.

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Mobilize Participation

A central theme of the task force report is the dominance of fragmented and narrowly cast interests in our politics. Political parties, which should play an aggregating role, instead intensify unequal patterns of participation. Each of the task force literature review reports also acknowledges the decline of organized labor as a key factor in the current increase in inequality. Yet contemporary political scientists have largely ignored organized labor's political role as a bulwark against fragmentation and as a force for advancing a broader set of interests. A generation ago, David Greenstone argued that organized labor in the United States represented "a *partial* equivalence to the Social Democratic (formerly socialist) party-trade union alliances in much of Western Europe."¹ Labor's critical role, he contended, was to aggregate interests and to pursue goals that would benefit lower-income citizens whether or not they were associated with the labor movement. After Greenstone's research in the mid-1960s, organized labor took a much narrower and defensive posture when faced with deep economic challenges and rifts over the Vietnam conflict.

Despite deep declines in strength, labor is still a potent political force in our demobilized political system. Moreover, after a prolonged period of decay, organized labor is in the midst of a major organizational revitalization.² These efforts at renewal bear close scrutiny. Labor's claims of dramatic success in mobilizing new voters have been questioned.³ But internal organizational changes and new ways of building networks with other liberal groups suggest that organized labor may take the lead in promoting broader approaches to politics, with efforts to address inequality as a central theme.

Labor's central role in Americans Coming Together (ACT), a 527 political organization dedicated to mobilizing low-income, minority, and working women voters, is a step in this direction. ACT received considerable publicity for receiving a multimillion dollar grant from billionaire George Soros, but the organization is most significant for its efforts to join labor, environmentalists, and women's organizations in a grassroots mobilizing campaign. The Democratic Party, worried about ACT's impact on party resources, initially did not welcome this organizing effort. Yet in many ways ACT is an updated version of labor's former role as a

key force for aggregation in the party. Whether the organization can make good on its aspirations to become a permanent feature of politics—not simply a campaign vehicle—remains to be seen.

Labor is not the only organization seeking to recraft its infrastructure to create a more engaged and mobilized base. The Sierra Club, also a membership organization, is launching internal reforms aimed at producing an activated membership.⁴ Political scientists who wish to understand these trends will need to focus on the organizational features of politics, especially the internal dynamics of groups and the way internal processes affect efforts to build intraorganizational connections across levels of government as well as alliances with other groups and parties.⁵

These alliances are important not only because they affect mobilization, but also because they influence what mobilized voices say. Effective cooperation among, for example, labor unions, low-income advocacy groups, women's rights coalitions, and environmental organizations, requires that each group modify its central interests to include broader, inclusive goals. In states such as California, where labor has sought to reclaim its role as mobilizer and voice for low-income workers, unions have championed (and won) such broad measures as paid leave for working families and near-universal health coverage. Likewise, the Sierra Club's adoption of a "smart growth" rather than no growth position has facilitated its participation in alliances with labor and social justice organizations concerned about jobs and housing.

The task force report contains striking evidence about how unequal voice affects government responsiveness, tilting government action to benefit upper-income Americans and funneling resources into the hands of narrow, well-organized interests. Disrupting this cycle of mutual benefit is not simple, since it threatens the lifeblood of the current system. It is possible, however, to modify existing policy in ways that let more people in. By encouraging participation, providing for disclosure, and creating alternative implementation mechanisms, new voices and priorities can enter the closed loop of mutual benefit between politicians and their monied supporters.

Transportation, as the report notes, is a quintessential pork policy. Yet in 1991, and again in 1998, the late Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, working with environmentalists, authored legislative provisions that allowed new voices and priorities to affect transportation decisions. Among these provisions were more local flexibility in how federal funds are spent; small new categories of funding for innovations; and participation requirements and organizational changes that offered more possibilities for metropolitan areas to influence spending. As a result of these changes, in many localities, community organizations that had never participated in transportation politics joined with environmentalists and organized labor to support initiatives that would increase opportunity rather than exacerbate inequality. Although these changes have not had the dramatic impact their authors

had hoped for, they have altered state and local debates about transportation and have opened a notoriously closed policy arena.

Requirements for disclosure may similarly alter the policy dynamics, inviting in new groups and, ultimately, altering resource flows. Disclosure of bank lending patterns, for example, was critical to the success of the Community Reinvestment Act, which became the cornerstone policy supporting low-income housing during the Clinton administration. Access to information allowed community groups to challenge bank redlining practices in a process of "regulation from below."⁶

Granted, the insertion of policy levers into patronage-oriented legislation cannot by itself transform the entrenched pattern of unequal responsiveness. Such levers do, however, highlight entry points that help to transform the rewards of privilege into instruments that expand opportunity. Moreover, because they require active participation from below in order to achieve results, such mechanisms provide a focal point for democratic participation. Policy levers have allowed community-based organizations across the country to tap into resource pools much larger than those available through fiscally constrained local governments. They have also assisted organizing networks in their mobilizing efforts. For example, the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN) has been especially active in using the Community Reinvestment Act to expand its base of support and challenge inequality in many localities.

Attack Inequality in State and Local Policy

The task force report focuses on the actions of the federal government, but many key factors that produce and exacerbate inequality fall in the province of state and local governments. Despite the rights revolution highlighted in the report, racial residential segregation has remained a potent force for stunting opportunity and enhancing inequality. In the 1970s, Supreme Court decisions that upheld the prerogatives of local governments greatly limited the scope of the rights revolution. By declaring cross-district busing off-limits as a remedy for racial segregation in schools and by approving zoning regulations that effectively barred whole swaths of suburban communities to low- and moderate-income residents, the Court circumscribed the promise of equal opportunity that animated the rights revolution.

The resulting concentration of poor African Americans and, to a lesser extent Latinos, in low-income urban areas had spiraling effects on inequality as the basic elements of opportunity—access to good schools, jobs, and higher education—became largely unavailable to residents of these neighborhoods. The political consequences were likewise devastating, as the menace of the ghetto replaced the more class-oriented politics of the 1930s.

Unfortunately, policies crafted to address the problems of low-income minorities either exacerbated inequality or were ineffective. The list of failures is depressingly familiar. The task force report notes, for example, how mass incarceration policies launched in the 1980s have diminished the voice of the poor. Public housing, widely acknowledged as one of the greatest policy failures of postwar liberalism, reinforced the isolation of the poor.⁷ Even the best programs could offer only modest compensation for the overwhelming concentration of the disadvantaged in inner-city America. Addressing the entrenched inequalities that are written into American spatial arrangements requires understanding and altering the core factors that support segregation by race and income. Remedies include provisions for building affordable housing in the suburbs (for renters as well as homeowners), transportation that connects poor neighborhoods to the centers of regional economic activity, and open access to public schools throughout metropolitan areas.

The 2000 census reveals intriguing trends, which suggest that such remedies might be more possible, and more necessary, than ever. Census data show that poverty has become less concentrated over the past decade and that black/non-black racial segregation has continued its three-decade decline.⁸ At the same time, massive immigration has altered the face of the suburbs. More immigrants now live in suburbs than in cities.⁹ Our metropolitan areas are becoming more geographically diverse, and the old dichotomy of black poor city and white rich suburb is increasingly a thing of the past. These changes suggest possibilities for altering politics and policy as suburbs experience many problems once described as “urban.”¹⁰

Large-scale immigration to metropolitan and rural America is a major trend that the task force report does not address. Yet, with 12 percent of Americans now foreign-born, the successful political and economic incorporation of immigrants is critical to the health of our democracy. Because immigrants tend to have higher rates of poverty than native-born Americans, their voice is especially significant in public debates that affect inequality. A 2001–2002 survey of the California workforce, for example, showed that noncitizens and foreign-born U.S. citizens were considerably more concerned about the gap between the rich and the poor and about low wages than were native-born U.S. citizens.¹¹ Without these voices, our public debates are likely to display a distorted sense of the causes and consequences of inequality.

In the 1930s, the political energy of the New Deal and the wave of labor organizing brought immigrants into American politics and set them on the road to the middle class. There are few comparable forces today to bring immigrants into the American polity and secure their economic mobility.¹² The atrophy of urban political machines and the paucity of suburban organizations to promote incorporation make new efforts at integrating immigrants especially vital.

This is not a task that is solely for government, but governments at all levels must facilitate it by promoting citizenship, voter turnout, and access to education.

Because immigrants live in so many different areas of the country, each with distinct political traditions and social institutions, immigrant incorporation efforts must proceed on many different tracks. Noncitizen voting, once common, is drawing new attention as a way to amplify the voices of noncitizens. In a handful of localities, including Chicago, noncitizen permanent residents are permitted to vote in school board elections. Where noncitizen voting is likely to prove controversial, it is still possible to invite immigrants to sit on local advisory boards. Unless they are actively recruited, however, immigrants are unlikely to flock to such forums. A recent study of South Central Los Angeles, for example, showed that Latino immigrants were significantly underrepresented in the neighborhood councils set up to give residents a voice after the 1992 riots.¹³

Many immigrants who may avoid public arenas *are* actively involved in churches. Churches are central to teaching the skills of participation, and collaboration between churches and organizing networks has proved a powerful means for involving immigrants in local politics.¹⁴ Finally, where unions have been able to organize immigrants, as in Los Angeles, the effect on immigrant political engagement and on local politics has been striking. Because of the many barriers to unionization, unions have also employed alternative methods for reaching immigrants. Workers centers, set up by unions in many parts of the country, provide immigrants with services, including English classes, and information about citizenship and employee rights, which are critical to giving immigrants a voice on issues relating to inequality.¹⁵

Engage the War of Ideas

Finally, an important battle against inequality must be waged in the war of ideas. Students of American urban politics have traditionally distinguished between “machine” cities, where organized political forces offered working people (an admittedly distorted) voice, and reform cities, where voter turnout was dismal, elites ran the show, and the local newspaper (owned by an important local elite family) exercised exceptional influence over political debate. The whole of the United States can now be likened to an elite-dominated reform city with popular organization thinned out and politics dominated by the voice of the elite projected through the mass media. In this context, the war of ideas takes on magnified importance.

As Lloyd A. Free and Hadley Cantril argued nearly forty years ago, Americans tend to be philosophical conservatives and programmatic liberals.¹⁶ In fact, over the past two decades, the main liberal strategy has been to defend a list of government programs—many of which indeed enjoy broad support. By contrast, conservatives have pursued

big-banner ideas with antigovernment messages at their center. But at a time when technological and economic trends are creating new insecurities and jeopardizing established ways of life, simple antigovernmentalism amounts to endorsing unchecked inequality. Ceding the ideological terrain to antigovernmental messages like “the era of big government is over” is not good enough in a polity in which simple media messages are not counterbalanced by organized politics. A strong, big message about how government is “on your side” or is “there to help you” is essential to counteract antigovernment messages.¹⁷ This message connects naturally to policies that promote basic security and broad opportunity. And, as the task force report notes, the U.S. government has always taken on this role, as evidenced in a range of policies including public education, Social Security, Medicare, and the GI Bill, to name a few. The reassociation of Americanism with active responsive government is long overdue.

It is instructive that antigovernment activists rarely attack broadly popular programs head on. Instead, the main attack has taken a circuitous route through the tax system. But when tax cuts are directly pitted against government spending on popular social programs—as they were during President Clinton’s showdown with Congress over taxes and Medicare in 1995—broad social spending wins. When the public dialogue lacks strong arguments for a robust government role in providing basic security and opportunity, broadly popular programs become unnecessarily vulnerable.

The task force report especially emphasizes broadly responsive programs because of their recursive effects on democratic participation. But to address inequality, it is necessary to directly confront low wages, unfair employer practices, and the paucity of opportunities. It is an auspicious time to address these issues head on: the problem of nonwork among the poor is being overshadowed by concern about the working poor. Moreover, appeals to basic fairness—“if you work hard and play by the rules you shouldn’t be poor”—have always resonated widely in the American context.

Getting this message into the war of ideas has proved challenging. The liberal proclivity to talk in dull technocratic language—who does not cringe remembering Al Gore’s complicated discussions of the “social security lockbox” during the 2000 presidential campaign?—does not sell well in the high-volume entertainment media of the twenty-first century. A little moral outrage on the part of those concerned about inequality is in order. During the past two decades, the right has framed government activity as an affront to the American culture. A similar appeal to deep cultural values needs to arouse Americans to the dangers of declining opportunity, growing inequality, and the failure of our government to set decent standards for corporate governance.

What has been striking about the antigovernment message is the many different ways it has been broadcast over the past several decades, from think tanks, to radio, to cable

television. This broadband approach has allowed a set of ideas deeply antagonistic to government to permeate many different cultural arenas. To combat this message, some combination of copying the opponents’ techniques and invention makes sense. On the invention side, methods that allow more face-to-face discussion about ideas are needed to counteract the mocking cynical tone of much of the media. The Internet has come of age as an alternative channel of communication, as has the documentary film. In the 2004 presidential campaign, both devices were used to bring people together at house parties and meetings, where face-to-face discussion offered an alternative to the media shrills.

Religious institutions could also play a much more prominent role in prompting discussions about inequality. The National Interfaith Committee for Worker Justice provides one model. With branches across the country, this group has raised issues related to low-income workers in communities across the country. Churches could have a much greater public presence on issues related to child poverty and the broad availability of healthcare.

Finally, music has played an important role in promoting alternative ideas, especially for young people. There is no reason that music cannot be a force for connecting stories about struggles to get by with ideas about how to challenge inequality. Musicians are also important cultural figures, who can encourage political participation among people who do not see politics as relevant to their lives. MoveOn PAC’s Vote for Change Tour and the Hip Hop Summit Action Network are both examples of how musicians are uniquely positioned to reach disengaged young people, in particular.

For too long, ideas about inequality and government responsibility have been confined to sober deliberations about public policy. We sorely need a variety of cultural outlets that get people thinking, talking, and imagining new forms of democratic engagement.

The task force report is right to sound the alarm about the danger that sharp inequality poses to our democracy. Connections among declining democratic engagement, unbalanced governance, and public policies that disproportionately benefit the wealthy few threaten our ability to respond to economic and technical challenges in ways that strengthen our bonds as a nation. There are multiple entry points for an inventive politics that challenges inequalities. Organizations must strive to reinvent themselves, activists must use innovative policy levers and multiple venues to encourage new priorities and voices to enter into old debates, and the people must support and defend a government that responds to the needs of the majority.

Notes

- 1 Greenstone 1969, 361.
- 2 Levi 2003.
- 3 Freeman 2003.

- 4 Ganz 2003.
- 5 Mayhew 1986.
- 6 Fishbein 1992.
- 7 Hirsch 1983; Jackson 1985.
- 8 Glaeser and Vigdor 2001.
- 9 Singer 2004.
- 10 Orfield 2002.
- 11 Weir 2002.
- 12 Bloemraad 2003.
- 13 Martinez 2004.
- 14 See, for example, the analysis of immigrants and school politics in Oakland, CA, in Palacios 2001.
- 15 On the unions and politics in Los Angeles, see Meyerson 2004; on workers centers, see Fine 2003.
- 16 Free and Cantril 1967. They in fact argued that a major restatement of American ideology was needed to bring it into line with what people actually wanted.
- 17 See, for example, Dionne 2004.

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