CHAPTER 7

Contextual Income Inequality and Political Behavior

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Income Inequality and Political Behavior

Politics is often defined as a competitive struggle by individuals and groups over scarce resources: who gets what, when, and how (Lasswell 1936). In a democratic society, elections could serve as a means for individuals to translate their preferences over income redistribution into policy outcomes (Hill and Leighley 1992). Yet, if those of lower class are supportive of redistributing wealth, they do not translate well this desire into action. Scholars of American politics consistently find those of lower socio-economic status are less likely to participate in a gamut of civic activities, including voting (e.g., Lazarsfeld 1944; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980, Verba, Shlozman, and Brady 1985). The overwhelming evidence in support of a negative relationship between socio-economic status and voting further fits a stylized cross-national comparative correlation (Costa and Kahn 2003, 107) that the United States’ high level of income inequality (United Nations 2006) contributes to its comparatively lower voter turnout (Hill 2006) by sculpting the electorate along the broad contours of income divisions within its society.

Differential participation rates of citizens by socio-economic status do not address directly how income inequality shapes political behavior. For inequality to affect individuals’ behavior they must perceive its existence, how government functions to address it, arrive at judgments, and take – or fail to take – action. In the presence of income inequalities, those who believe the political system is working against them may become more distrustful and disengage from the political process (Costa and Kahn 2003; Uslaner and Brown 2005). Alternatively, dissatisfaction with the economic structure could stimulate participation as the disadvantaged petition the government about their economic grievances (Schattschneider 1960; Deutsch 1961). With the exception of a study of American municipalities (Oliver 1999), scholars generally find that income inequality is related to lower participation (Kawachi et al. 1997; Alesina and La Ferrara 2000; Tolbert and Hero 2001) or come to “surprising” (Uslaner and Brown 2005, 887) inconclusive findings.
Context matters. Oliver’s (1999) seemingly contradictory finding with these other studies is a consequence of his choice to explore local level income inequality while other studies focus on state level income inequality. Both lines of research are supported here given their measurement of income inequality. Income inequality at the state level is negatively related to voting rates while at the county level it is simultaneously positively related. This insight helps resolve the scholarly debate, and presents new opportunities to understand how income inequality relates to civic participation and other political and social phenomenon such as trust, conflict and mobilization.

**Linking Income Inequality to Voter Turnout**

A long tradition of political thought argues that people perceive the world through the lens of inequality in their environment, “The nearer men are to a common level of uniformity, the less they are likely to believe blindly in any man or any class...[b]ut they are readier to trust the mass” (de Tocqueville 1969, 255). Three potential causal pathways linking income inequality to political participation are sketched in Figure 1. In a trust model income inequality affects an individual’s trust towards other people, which in turn, affects voting propensities. The trust model also allows for a reverse, endogenous, relationship whereby participation builds trust through the act of participating. In a policy conflict model inequality breeds political conflict, which stimulates political participation. In a mobilization model elites act as political entrepreneurs within their communities through mobilization efforts. No single model may fully explain the link between income inequality and participation as all three models may act simultaneously.

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**Figure 1**  Three causal models linking income inequality and political participation