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How Roadblocks to Voting Make Income Inequality Worse

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States have recently enacted changes in election rules that make it harder for many citizens to vote. Supporters of such changes claim they are necessary to reduce voter fraud. Pointing out that the cited types of fraud almost never happen, opponents decry the new restrictions as just the latest episode in a history of attempts to disenfranchise certain voters. While this disagreement rages on, it is important to ask about the practical effects of voting restrictions. Our research suggests that making it harder for some Americans to vote is likely to exacerbate the political effects of economic inequality. Income gaps have risen sharply in the United States, and new voting restrictions could prevent governments from acting to limit or counter this trend.

Can Elections be the Great Democratic Equalizer?

American democracy certainly fosters its share of inequalities. Residents of small states are overrepresented in the Senate; not everyone has unfettered access to high-level policymakers; only a few have the skills and resources necessary to run for office; and the rich are certainly more likely to give money to campaigns than other citizens. But voting is supposed to be the great equalizer – especially in the modern era of one person, one vote, where men and women and citizens of all races are, in theory at least, on a level playing field. Elected officials may collect campaign contributions from the rich and hear regularly from lobbyists speaking for the privileged, but if they ignore the interests and concerns of middle-income constituents for too long, they supposedly can be replaced on Election Day.

The problem with this nice scenario is that even when elections are procedurally fair and every vote is counted, some groups of U.S. voters are more likely to vote than others. Our research explores one aspect of voting inequality and its potential impact. We focus on differences in turnout between rich and poor voters in various states – and probe the impact of "class bias," defined as the degree to which the rich are more likely to vote than the poor.

Elected Officials Respond to Voters

As class bias in voting goes up, we hypothesize, income inequality is likely to increase in tandem. The reason why is straightforward, documented in previous research: elected officials have stronger incentives to respond to the interests of voters than non-voters. Voters, after all, are the ones who decide which politicians are retained in office and which ones are fired.

If there were no important differences in the interests of voters versus non-voters, the fact that politicians court voters would have little effect on policymaking. But voters and non-voters typically do differ in important ways. As we've noted, citizens who vote tend to have higher incomes, and the more affluent are generally less supportive of policies that serve to make incomes more equal. We therefore decided to test the hypothesis that the more class bias in voter turnout is skewed toward the rich, the less likely egalitarian policies are to be enacted, resulting in higher income inequality than in states where class bias in voting is less pronounced.

The Extent and Impact of Class Biased Voting

Looking across the U.S. states from 1976 through 2006, we asked whether higher levels of class bias in voting were indeed associated with higher levels of income inequality. Statistical analysis allowed us to take into account other possible explanatory factors as well. Here are some of our key results:

- 21 states had decreases in class biases in voting from 1976 to 2006, but 29 states saw increases in class voting bias – and the increases in class bias were much larger than the decreases.

- Within states, class bias in voter turnout is associated with increases in income inequality. This is true even when we take into account other factors that could affect economic inequality, such as the age and racial composition of the state population, loss of industry, trends in economic growth, and the liberal-mindedness of people in the state.

How, exactly, does class-skewed voting contribute to rising inequality? We identified two important pathways:

- **States with higher levels of class bias in voting have been less likely to enact minimum wage increases.** This increases gaps, since higher minimum wages are known to be associated with reductions in income inequality.

- **As class bias in voter turnout becomes more pronounced, state governments become less responsive to public opinion supportive of steps that could reduce inequality.** More specifically, state governments where class bias in voting is high are less likely to pursue policies catering to increasingly liberal citizen views than are governments where skewed voting is less pronounced. Liberal public opinion tends to favor egalitarian policy interventions, so governments that are not responding when the public moves in that direction are less likely to take steps that could mitigate economic inequalities.

Clear-Cut Implications

Our findings have practical importance for those who aim to reduce the economic inequalities that have been so steadily growing in the United States in recent times:

- In addition to any disparate impacts by race or age group, **revised election rules that disproportionately discourage lower-income voters are likely to exacerbate economic inequality** by encouraging elected officials to pay even more attention to the needs and policy preferences of the affluent than they already do.

- **Voter mobilization efforts really matter – especially when they focus on helping poor and middle class voters register and get to the polls.** Government policies to enlarge economic opportunity and limit or reduce glaring income gaps are unlikely to happen without expanding and equalizing voter participation in American democracy.

Read more in William Franko, Nathan J. Kelly, and Christopher Witko, “Class Bias in Voter Turnout and Income Inequality,” Auburn University, University of Tennessee, and University of South Carolina, November 2013.