

Why are certain interests represented in politics while others are not?

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A fundamental tenet of modern democracies is the equal consideration of each citizen's interests and preferences in the realm of policymaking. This is expressed in principles such as one person/one vote, equality before the law and more, meaning that every citizen is supposed to have an equal voice over governmental decisions, regardless of social status, education, ethnic background, or any other characteristics. Achieving an equal consideration of all citizen's interests and opinions requires equal political participation amongst citizens, as it provides the mechanisms to communicate their preferences and needs to governing authorities, through votes, campaign contributions, protests and many other activities (Verba, o. J.). Despite these constitutional rights of equality and means for political participation, even in the world's strongest democracies, patterns of social inequality are evident, which result in an unequal representation of political interests (Jacobs & King, 2009). This assignment will argue that the interplay between political participation and the socioeconomic status of a person or group determines the extent to which their political interests are represented. The influence of wealth, education and ethnic background on political participation will be elaborated and illustrate why certain interests are represented while others are not.

The distribution of wealth and income is a common cause for the unequal consideration of political interests. Governments tend to favor and prioritize the preferences and needs of affluent citizens and responsiveness tends to decrease if a political topic is primarily represented by lower strata of the population. This pattern can be observed across several democratic countries and is mainly caused by different levels of visibility, resources, and social ties (Traber et al., 2022). Wealthier citizens are more likely to have more refined preferences and exert direct influence via financial support for election campaigns or lobby groups. They are also more likely to vote and to have personal contact with public officials (Jacobs & King, 2009). Though there is little evidence of the direct influence of monetary

contributions, some sort of return, potentially in the form of increased attention to the donors' concerns is probable (Traber et al., 2022).

Another cause of the tendential emphasis on affluent interest is the high overrepresentation of the rich among professional politicians. In 2015 the median member of the US Congress was worth at least \$1.1 million, which is twelve times greater than the median US household (Kopf, 2018). Due to strong incentives for politicians to rely on their own experience and background when prioritizing political issues, collectively these priorities tend to be aligned with those of high-status citizens (Traber et al., 2022). Similar patterns can be observed in Indonesia, the third most populous democracy. Indonesian legislators are on average wealthier, better educated, and have a personal bureaucratic background. Across several policy areas, congruence with the preferences of politicians is predominantly highest for citizens with high income followed by either high education or professional background. Increased welfare support or unemployment subsidies, which are necessities concerning the poorer strata of the population are hence more likely to be neglected by the Indonesian politicians (Warburton et al., 2021). This political pattern shows that a low socioeconomic status itself correlates to unequal consideration of political interests.

The prioritization of certain political preferences is also reinforced by the strong influence of lobbyists and interest groups. Interest groups seek to affect legislative action and sway the political agenda in favor of their own interests through different mechanisms, including direct communication with government officials, campaign funding, or media appearances and comments (*Influence of Interest Groups on Policy-Making*, o. J.). While interest groups and lobbying are generally effective and legitimate means of political participation, they primarily advocate the interests of their members with tendentially higher socioeconomic backgrounds. Direct influence on the political decision-making process therefore usually pursues

very specific demands in the interest of its own members, which presumably do not correspond to the majority opinion and needs (Rom et al., 2022). Consequently, the interests of lower-class citizens, are not equally represented.

The educational level, as another major factor of a person's socioeconomic status, significantly influences the degree of political participation. Higher education has a positive causal effect on voter participation, support of free speech, the quality of civic knowledge, and the individuals' capacity to gather information on political issues (Dee, 2004 as cited in Bömmel & Heineck, 2020). The voting rates in the United States by educational level from 2016 illustrate the extent of this pattern. While voter turnout for bachelor's degree holders ranges from 60% to 83% depending on age group, it varies from only 20% to 48% for citizens without a high school diploma (*Voting Rates in the U.S., by Age and Education Level 2016*, o. J.). In addition to electoral behavior, a positive correlation between education and other variables of direct political participation can be identified by analyzing the effects of a schooling reform in Germany in the mid-twentieth century, which implemented an extension of compulsory schooling years. The study results have shown a correlation between additional education and an increase in participation in political actions, political interest, and internal political efficacy (Bömmel & Heineck, 2020). Furthermore, highly educated citizens tend to be wealthier and are more likely to belong to the ethnic majority, which reduces the probability of experiencing the same political challenges faced by those with less education and results in a more biased input into the policy process (Verba, o. J.).

Another cause of unequal representation of political interests is bureaucratic processes and legal frameworks that make political participation more difficult for certain groups of the population. Despite the constitutional right to equality, various regulations relating to the electoral process in the U.S. can be seen as suppressive towards ethnic minorities or the socially disadvantaged. The practice of

disenfranchising convicted felons, unequal resource allocation, and polling station closures, aggravates the electoral process and has a profoundly disproportionate impact on Black Americans and Latinx Americans („The Consequences of Political Inequality and Voter Suppression for U.S. Economic Inequality and Growth“, o. J.). Unrestricted elections and thus equal participation opportunities for all citizens have a demonstrable impact on more socially just politics and are essential to preserve an equal representation of interests. In the 20 years following the implementation of the Voting Rights Act, southern counties with higher shares of black Americans experienced a more substantial growth in state funding for institutions and government programs important to black citizens, compared to other counties. Counties with stronger protection of voting rights also experienced a larger reduction in the wage divide between White and Black workers by around 5.5 percentage points („The Effect of Political Power on Labor Market Inequality“, o. J.).

In conclusion, this assignment has illustrated that certain interests in politics are represented, and others are not because of inequality in political participation and an unequal emphasis on political opinions. By elaborating the influence of wealth, education, ethnicity and political framework on the degree and means of political participation, this paper has made clear that the socioeconomic status of a citizen or a group determines the extent to which their political interests are represented. It has been shown, that even in democratic countries, where equal representation is a constitutional right, political preferences and concerns with greater financial, social, or institutional resources tend to be prioritized.

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