

THE FAULT IN OUR PARTIES
Income Inequality, Political Participation, and the
Consequences of Party Programmatic Shifts in
OECD Countries

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I, Constantin Manuel Bosancianu, hereby declare that the submitted dissertation contains no materials previously written and/or published by another individual, except in instances where an appropriate acknowledgment is made under the form of a bibliographical reference or note. No part of this work has been submitted or accepted at any other institution of higher learning for the purpose of obtaining an academic degree. No chapters or analyses presented herein have been produced with the direct assistance of another person.

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ABSTRACT

Growing economic disparities and declining turnout across a large number of consolidated democracies have been frequently linked in the literature. These accounts stress the willingness of wealthy elites, in conditions of higher inequality, to defend their gains by subverting democratic politics, along with the sensitivity of poorer voters to these attempts. The latter citizens' turnout calculus is affected by the knowledge that their odds of success in the democratic competition are slim, and this is reflected in decreasing political engagement. In spite of the consistent empirical support this *relative power* thesis has received, I argue that an expansion of the framework is needed, to adequately account for the role of political parties in shaping the association between inequality and turnout. In the updated framework I propose party ideological dynamics are causally antecedent to both trends in economic inequality and turnout rates. Parties influence the former by means of the policies they implement while in office, whether it be taxation, welfare provision, or public services. In terms of the latter, parties can shape an individual's turnout calculus by altering the perceived policy benefits she receives, by subsidizing some of the costs associated with participation, or by activating civic and collective norms that drive turnout.

Some of the links proposed above are tested on a custom-build data set, partly based on the *True European Voter* project. The data comprises individual-level information on turnout from 258 elections in 21 consolidated democracies, going back in some cases to the 1950s. The expanded longitudinal coverage, compared to existing data sources, provides a meaningful snapshot of inequality's and party dynamics' effects over time. The empirical analyses, employing multilevel models combined with a two-stage approach to estimation, largely confirm the posited links. To begin with, income inequality is shown not to have a meaningful connection to turnout in my data, either cross-sectionally or longitudinally. On the other hand, a party system's ideological center is related to turnout over time in the expected way: systems that are further to the Left are associated with a higher turnout probability at the individual level. Party policy, operationalized as a government's policy position, is also associated in the expected way with inequality a few years into the future. On a TSCS data set of 23 countries, between 1960 and 2007, I show that governments that are further to the Right also experience higher levels of inequality. Finally, I disaggregate party policy into its economic and cultural components, and show that both have an effect on the turnout gap between socio-economic groups. This effect is presumably transmitted through voters' perceptions of the utility of participation, and is shown to be disproportionately greater for voters from a lower socio-economic background.

The findings prove to be bittersweet. Although inequality is not found here to have a direct effect on turnout, party ideological dynamics are shown to exert such an effect. More important for the quality of real-existing democracies, this effect disproportionately impacts more socio-economically vulnerable voters. Further work, though, is needed to better probe the transmission mechanisms from party strategies to voter turnout calculations.

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List of Abbreviations

- ATE Average Treatment Effect, page 84
- CDA Dutch Christian-Democratic Appeal (*Christen-Democratisch Appél*), page 192
- CPI Corruption Perception Index (Transparency International), page 40
- CSES Comparative Study of Electoral Systems, page 36
- EB Eurobarometer, page 88
- ELPD Expected log posterior density, page 86
- ESS European Social Survey, page 36
- FGLS Feasible Generalized Least Squares, page 63
- IDEA International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, page 78
- ISSP International Social Survey Programme, page 36
- LDV lagged dependent variable, page 112
- LIS Luxembourg Income Study, page 51
- LO Swedish Trade Union Confederation (*Landsorganisationen i Sverige*), page 185
- LOO “Leave-One-Out” cross-validation, page 86
- MARPOR Manifesto Research on Political Representation, page 56
- MCMC Markov Chain Monte Carlo, page 65
- MLM multilevel models, page 36
- PRA Power Resources Approach, page 101
- PvdA Dutch Labor Party (*Partij van de Arbeid*), page 192
- PVV Dutch Party for Freedom (*Partij voor de Vrijheid*), page 196

- SAF Swedish Employers Association (*Svenska Arbetsgivareföreningen*), page 189
- SAP Swedish Social Democratic Party (*Sveriges Socialdemokratiska arbetareparti*), page 185
- SWIID Standardized World Income Inequality Database, page 38
- TEV True European Voter, page 41
- UKIP UK Independence Party, page 196
- VAP Voting-Age Population, page 173
- VVD Dutch People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (*Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie*),
page 194
- WVS World Values Surveys, page 36

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*FOR GRANDMA AND GRANDPA,
WHO CAN'T READ THIS,
BUT WHO CONTRIBUTED TO IT
MORE THAN THEY WILL EVER KNOW.*