

THE INEQUALITY RUSH

Revisiting the Inequality-Turnout debate

by

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A succession of recent studies into the link between aggregate-level income inequality and individual-level turnout unequivocally find a strong and negative causal effect from the former to the latter (Anderson & Beramendi, 2012; Scervini & Segatti, 2012; Solt, 2008). According to these authors the underlying mechanism can be found in the growing unwillingness of lower-income voters to participate in politics in the face of clear evidence (i.e. rising inequality) that the system consistently favors wealthier citizens. In this paper I show that existing results attributing a causal effect to income inequality are primarily due to a deficient causal framework, which ignores political factors which could lie at the root of both rising inequality and changes in patterns of turnout. In the interpretation presented here, shifts toward the ideological center by Left parties throughout the 1980s in Western European countries (Lipset, 2001) are the root cause of both inequality and declining turnout.

The analysis presented here puts these connections between Left party shifts, income inequality and individual-level turnout to the test, by relying on a data source compiled specifically for this project. By merging available country-level election studies from 13 OECD countries, going as far back as the 1950s in some cases, the data used here goes far beyond the primarily cross-national investigations on which existing results are based (e.g., WVS, ESS, or other data sources with a limited number of waves). A preliminary analysis, relying on three-level mixed-effects nonlinear models where individual-level turnout represents the dependent variable, indicates that adequately controlling for the effect of Left party shifts on the ideological spectrum and the associated changes in policies leads to an inconsistent effect of income inequality. The findings indicate that although income inequality might indeed have the detrimental effect on democratic life ascribed by numerous political theorists, the fluctuations in inequality observed in the past decades