



# Political Inequality is International, Interdisciplinary, and Intersectional

Joshua Kjerulf Dubrow\*  
*Polish Academy of Sciences*

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## Abstract

Political inequality refers to the unequal influence over decisions made by political bodies and the unequal outcomes of those decisions. Political inequality is a subtype of power inequality, visible within the political processes of all kinds of political structures. In modern democracies, political inequality is simultaneously a dimension of democracy and a dimension of stratification. Two key theoretical and empirical questions are How much political inequality is there? and is political inequality rising, falling, or staying the same? The answer to these key questions requires us to specify the kind of political inequality – voice, response, and their subtypes – and whether we mean equality of political opportunities or of political outcomes. I argue that we need to understand better the form, duration, and magnitude of political inequality within and across nations. We need to study it systematically, continuously, and diligently, and in an inclusive, open-minded way, inclining our ears to the varied contributions of the many academic disciplines. We should begin by studying political inequality as an international phenomenon and as an interdisciplinary enterprise, and from an intersectional approach.

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How much political inequality is there? Is political inequality rising, falling, or staying the same? How would you answer these questions?

When the Occupy Wall Street movement reached its heyday in the autumn of 2011, spreading to cities all over the world, the protestors' rallying cry was "We are the 99 percent." They hoped for political change, among other things, but "99" was mainly understood as a statement about economic inequality. If you want to know how much economic inequality there is in your country, and whether this inequality been rising, falling, or staying the same, you can turn to the terabytes worth of publicly available economic data and grind them through the many inequality equations to derive a multitude of statistics. With decades of innovations in the study of economics and inequality, led by the disciplines of sociology and economics, we can, at least, have a debate over the form, duration, and magnitude of economic inequality and its dynamics over time.

Political inequality is a distinct form of inequality but has yet to attract sustained, systematic scholarly attention in the same way as its sibling inequalities. Although political equality is a foundation of modern democracy, we do not know how far from equality we are. Even the news media rarely addresses political inequality (Dubrow 2014). Unlike economic inequality, with political inequality, we are far from setting the terms of the debate.

I argue that we need to understand better the form, duration, and magnitude of political inequality within and across nations. We need to study it systematically, continuously, and diligently, and in an inclusive, open-minded way, inclining our ears to the varied contributions of the many academic disciplines. Scholarly focus should turn, in equal measure, to both the concept and the empirical assessment of political inequality. To accomplish these goals, we should study political inequality as an international phenomenon and as an interdisciplinary enterprise, and from an intersectional approach.

## What is political inequality?

The work of social scientists, philosophers, and other scholars offer many definitions of political inequality. Read together, they point to the idea that political inequality is at once a dimension of democracy and a dimension of stratification (Dubrow 2015: Chapter 1). Two key theoretical and empirical questions are “How much political inequality is there?” and “Is political inequality rising, falling, or staying the same?” The answer to these key questions requires us to specify the kind of political inequality – voice, response, and their subtypes – and whether we mean equality of political opportunities or of political outcomes (Dubrow 2015: Chapter 1).

Political inequality’s conceptual roots are temporally deep and spread-out in many disciplines, including philosophy, law and policy, and that of the social sciences. In the sociological literature, classic theories of inequality contend that political processes help to distribute economic resources (Weber 1946; Lenski 1966). Writing in the late 19th century, Karl Marx argued that these political processes are part of the ideational structure of society and are thus subservient to the economic structure from which classes and the bureaucracy of society are forged. German sociologist Max Weber borrowed from Marx, but thought that political organization is a distinctly political source of inequality. Weber argued that party differs from the class and status orders and that it directly impacts an individual’s life chances. Weber’s innovation improved on economic reductionist, unidimensional theories of inequality (Lenski 1966: 408). Pitirim Sorokin (1957[1927]), a Russian *émigré* writing in the early 1900s in America, read Weber and coined the term “political stratification.” Sorokin thought that along with economic and occupational forms, political stratification directly impacts social and cultural mobility.

In the 1960s, and borrowing from Marx, Weber, and Sorokin, Gerhard Lenski (1966: 44) argued that the distribution of power is central to understanding inequality and the distribution of economic resources. In modern market societies, he thought political power is closely connected to wealth inequality. Lenski foreshadowed the now ubiquitous quantitative analyses that explore how economic resources influence the political process (e.g., Winters and Page 2009; Gilens and Page 2014). The modern interdisciplinary field of political economy owes an intellectual debt to Marx, Weber, Sorokin, and Lenski, as it promotes the idea that economics, including wealth and income inequality, impacts politics and vice versa (Anderson and Beramendi 2008; Jacobs and Soss 2010: 345–347).

Built on the classics, modern definitions of political inequality depend on whether one is concerned about equality of opportunities or equality of outcomes (Baynes 2008: 15; Kerbo 2003: Chapter 1; see also the philosophical literature, e.g. Ware 1981: 393). In short, equality of opportunities is about access to the political decision. Equality of outcomes refers to the law, symbols, policy, or other output that is the result of the political process. Most definitions are based on the idea of equality of opportunities, but they could be modified to include outcomes, as well.

A popular definition of political inequality that is rooted in equality-of-opportunities is what can be called the “distributional approach:” *political inequality is the structured differences in the distribution of political resources*. According to this definition, one group has greater or lesser access to, or acquisition of, political resources than another group (Ware 1981: 393–4; Wall 2007: 416). The notion of “political resources” is an appealing analogy to economic resources, but it presents dilemmas for concept and measurement. Political resources are anything one can use to influence a political decision: social or psychological factors – material, ideational, a personal attribute, a group level attribute, an authority position, and a network connection – or an action, such as political participation (Dahl 1996; Wall 2007; Yamokoski and Dubrow 2008: 418; for an exhaustive review of the political resources literature, see Piven and Cloward 2005: 38–40). The

use of these resources varies by whether you are talking about an individual, group, organization, or country – and by the context in which they are.

Another popular definition of the “equality of opportunities” variety is: *political equality is when everybody’s preferences are equally weighted in political decisions* (Agne 2006: 433–4; Baynes 2008:9; Dahl and Lindblom 1953: 4; Verba 2003: 663; and Ware 1981: 393). Here, political inequality is unequally weighted influence over political decisions. The definition of “everybody” matters, of course: Everybody could mean all citizens, or it could mean all who are potentially impacted by the decision.

Sorokin offered the simplest sociological definition of political inequality: *Political inequality is the existence of authority divisions*. Here, we speak of political inequality when groups have unequal political input into the decisions that affect them. The more layers of authority between the citizen and the decision, the greater the political inequality.

Sorokin’s definition applies to both the equality of opportunities and the equality of outcomes, but other scholars argue for a full shift of the focus from political opportunities to policy benefits, such that political equality is when outcomes are equal (Griffin and Newman 2008: 6–7, Chapter Two; Ware 1981: 401–406). Some democracy theorists and philosophers argue whether we need to distribute these benefits equally, or whether some should get more than others because of their historically marginalized status.

We can usefully combine these approaches with a definition that is both simple and flexible: *Political inequality is unequal influence over decisions made by political bodies and the unequal outcomes of those decisions*.

### **Where is political inequality?**

While some political inequalities can be short-term social things, changed by common agreement in small groups where the political decision lives and dies, the political inequalities that most interest us are those that are longstanding and that impact large groups or entire societies. Let’s define a social structure as an enduring pattern of behavior that sets limits on thought and action and that cannot be changed by any individual will. For example, pluralism – in which some win and some lose, but the rules of the game are fair and balanced – is not political inequality. Elitism is. That a man gets elected as President of the United States is not political inequality; that a woman has never been elected to that position is. Political inequality is not when government makes a law on economic resource distribution that favors the already advantaged over the disadvantaged. Where there is an historical pattern of these policies and when the disadvantaged unsuccessfully and repeatedly voice opposition to such policies, we can suspect political inequality.

Political inequality is a subtype of power inequality, visible within political structures (see also the very useful typology of the four theoretical traditions in American politics by Gilens and Page (2014)). This assumes that political power is a type of power and that politics has recognizable, if not entirely clear, boundaries (see also Rueschemeyer 2004: 77). Political inequality is a creature of the political process. This view does not reduce all political processes to political inequality; it merely points out where we suspect it. From the equality of political opportunities side, the study of political inequality is a hunt for these structured differences in individual, group, or organizational influence over government decisions. It also suggests how we should view situations in which political processes systematically and historically lead to a pattern of unequal political outcomes. Unequal influence and unequal outcomes should be understood, then, as social structures that live in modern democracies.

At this point, you might wonder: If political inequality is a social structure, how can it rise or fall? And if the fundamentals of democracy do not change, how can we move toward political

equality? This leads back to the classic sociological debate on the relationship between social structure and social change. From a conflict theoretical perspective, social structures do change over time, and these changes occur because society is marked by conflict over scarce and valued resources. Conflict brings changes to the grant of political rights and the distribution of resources, but inequality of some kind often remains. Through rights to the freedom of political expression and participation, democracy allows for social change. Change is slow, unless a revolution speeds it up. But even revolutions do not necessarily change the form, the duration or even the magnitude of political inequalities. For example, women remained under-represented in the parliaments of Eastern Europe from the dawn of the Communist era to fall of the Berlin Wall, and this situation continues even now (Dubrow 2012; Paxton et al. 2007).

This insight leads us to the idea that political inequality is both a dimension of stratification and a dimension of democracy. Democracy is the one of the world's most important ideas. Billions of dollars have been spent on promoting it (Coppedge et al. 2011: 248) and thousands of academic articles have been written about it (Dubrow and Kolczynska 2015).

Political equality is a foundation of modern democracy. Robert Dahl's (2006) *On Political Equality* called political equality "a fundamental premise of democracy" (ix). Others, including social scientists, theorists, and philosophers, have said as much (Bohman 1999: 500–1; Rueschemeyer 2004: 76; Verba 2003: 663, 2006: 500; Wall 2007: 416). In 2013, Freedom House, an organization that reports on the state of democracy worldwide, claimed that 90 nations are "Free," but they did not claim that these countries achieved political equality. With this new age of democracy, then, is the old age of inequality.

Democratic institutions set the rules of the political process and guarantee formal rights of political participation to a wide variety of citizens, but not to all of them (Markoff 2013). Many contemporary discussions of political inequality are debates about whether and how equality in democratic governance can be achieved (Dahl 2006; Rueschemeyer 2004; Verba 2006: 505). The coexistence of democracy with political inequality leads to the question of how realistic the idea is that all interested participants can enjoy equal influence on the governance decision or in its outcomes. A common thought is that we should seriously consider acceptable limits in who should be unequal and how to manage this inequality while still raising high the banner of democracy (Agne 2006; Bohman 1999: 500–503; Meuller 1992: 987–990; Verba 2006: 508–510). This leads to a conclusion that political inequality is the shadow of democracy.

In sum, political inequality is a particular form of power inequality whose domain is all things related to political processes. It is a multidimensional concept – composed of voice and response – that occurs in all types of governance structures, from social movement organizations, to local councils, to national governments, on to global governance (Dubrow 2013b). A flexible concept of political inequality can be applied across nations and across time and across all types of political decision-making systems.

### Measuring political inequality

Although the concept of political inequality is fundamental to modern theories of stratification and democracy, the key questions of "how much political inequality is there" and "is it rising, falling, or staying the same?" have few satisfactory answers. A main reason is that, while there are some recent exemplary empirical studies (e.g., Bartels 2010; Gilens 2012; Gilens and Page 2014; Griffin and Newman 2008), none takes on the whole of political inequality, especially in international perspective.

There are five main problems in measuring political inequality. The first is how to measure influence. Political influence is notoriously difficult to measure because it is an interaction

process that is more inferred from the interaction rather than directly observed (see Bachrach and Baratz 1962; Dahl 2006: Chapter 6). The second problem is that the range of potential political resources is extremely diverse and heavily context dependent. In international perspective, this is further complicated by seeking a measure that is functionally equivalent across nations. The third problem is in measuring outcomes. To answer the question “does political inequality matter?”, we would have to empirically demonstrate that governmental decisions systematically favor some groups over others. Some recent work in the United States is exemplary (Bartels 2010; Gilens 2012; Gilens and Page 2014; Griffin and Newman 2008). Similar work outside the American context is rare, and even these exemplary works are focused on economic or racial and ethnic groups, rather than on women, age groups or, most glaringly, their intersections. A fourth problem is whether political equality is a real, empirically visible end of the continuum; if political equality is an ideal then does a theoretical endpoint belong in an empirical measure? (Allison 1979).

A fifth problem is in specifying the particular type of political inequality. Political inequality can be found anywhere within the political process. The 2004 American Political Science Association Task Force on Inequality in American Democracy took this approach. This APSA Task Force identifies three foci around which political inequality revolves: citizen voice, government responsiveness, and patterns of public policy making. The upshot is that the disadvantaged are lesser represented and lesser involved in political participation, government officials are less inclined to be responsive to the preferences of the disadvantaged, and public policy often fails to address the needs of the disadvantaged. Let’s simplify their schema to just two parts – voice and response, as patterns of public policy is a type of response. Voice refers to how constituencies express their interests to decision-makers directly or through representatives. Response refers to how decision-makers act and react to their constituencies and is expressed via policy and symbols.

A recent article on inequality and policy outcomes by Gilens and Page (2014) highlights the promise and the difficulties in measuring political inequality. Their unique data consist of 1779 policies taken up by the US Congress from the 1980s to the early 2000s. Each policy is matched to a public opinion survey research question asked during the time the policy was introduced (“this policy says X, to what extent do you agree with it?”) and to a set of interest groups who have taken a position on the policy. With these data, they gauged the extent to which the policy outcome reflects (a) the will of the median voter – identified within the surveys and (b) types of interest groups, such as economic elites, business interests, and mass public interest groups. They found that policy outcomes tend to favor the will of economic elites, not the median voter.

Their study provides solid, further evidence of the paucity of pluralism in American democracy, but their measure of political inequality has shortcomings. First, they chose policies based on whether they were asked in public opinion surveys, and that means the many, not-so-famous policy debates that also shape key economic distribution policies were excluded. Nor can it account for the policies that are off the Congressional agenda, the type of power that Bachrach and Baratz (1962) warned that is most pernicious: the power to compel voters to not even ask for the policy in the first place. It is also specific to the American experience; though it can be replicated elsewhere, and so far, there is no cross-national equivalent to these data. Gilens and Page (2014) conducted what is likely one of the best empirical studies on American political inequality, and it’s just a start.

Considering the many parts of the political process, there is not a single study of political inequality that could be characterized as truly comprehensive. Voting, for example, is simply a measure of political inequality of the electorate and should not be confused with political inequality of non-electoral voice (such as attending a public demonstration), let alone with government response. At the same time, too few explicitly identify the form of political inequality

they empirically analyze (a good exception is Griffin and Newman 2008: Chapter Two). If political inequality can be adequately measured, theoretical and empirical studies must be clear as to what kind of political inequality they are talking about.

### **Political inequality is interdisciplinary**

Interdisciplinarity is the integration of two or more disciplines that produces emergent, original, interesting, and useful knowledge (Dubrow 2011; Jacobs and Frickel 2009; National Academies 2004; Wagner et al. 2011). The strength and symmetry of relationships between disciplines vary by the relative similarity in objects of study, methods of inquiry, the size of the profession and its disciplinary apparatus, and evolutionary history (Dubrow 2011). Even when many of the prerequisites of interdisciplinarity are fulfilled, interdisciplinary synthesis of knowledge can fail to emerge (Dubrow 2011; Jacobs 2014; Jacobs and Frickel 2009). Such has been the case for sociology and American Studies (Dubrow 2011), and sociology and political science (Dubrow and Kolczynska 2015). Disciplines hold a central place in academia, a privileged position that the recent surge of interdisciplinarity in universities and research institutes has yet to dislodge (Jacobs 2014).

Many disciplines have contributed to our understanding of political inequality. In a recent study, I had examined over 120 article abstracts focused on the topic of political inequality/equality published from the 1990s to the early 2010s and found that the journal articles come from anthropology, archeology, area studies, international relations, law and policy, philosophy, political science, social work, sociology, and gender studies (Dubrow 2015: Chapter 1). About a third is political science journals, with the rest spread out across the other disciplines. If there is a “typical” kind of political inequality research, one might say that it is driven by political science and law, most often theoretical or analyzing policy, and about modern democracies.

For political inequality, the challenge is to take what is currently fragmented and multidisciplinary and make a coherent interdisciplinary knowledge of concepts, measures, causes and consequences of political inequality. While disciplinary knowledge has led us this far, we need more attempts at bridging disciplines to create an emergent field that yields knowledge that all disciplines can consume.

### **Political inequality is intersectional**

In the social sciences, the idea that people are composed of multiple, overlapping demographics, with an explicit relationship with social stratification is commonly accepted. This is why almost every journal article that features quantitative analysis of survey data with individuals as the units of analysis employs regression equations that include gender, age, ethnicity, and social class, to name some of the most prominent, as the “standard demographics” that capture important social dimensions of human beings. Accounting for demographic dimensions is at the heart of intersectionality for almost two decades, a major topic of feminist and gender studies (Crenshaw 1991; Dahmoon 2011; Davis 2008). Intersectionality as a concept and paradigm was created and popularized mostly by feminist and gender studies scholars in their research on inequality (Davis 2008). Many forms of inequality are discussed in these literatures, with a focus on how structures of inequality impact members of long-standing disadvantaged groups. Out of these discussions came the idea that no disadvantaged category stands on its own; while gender is a major category of inequality, for example, women and men also belong to age groups, ethnicities, and social classes.

The meaning of intersectionality is hotly debated (Dahmoon 2011; Hancock 2007, 2011). Paying close attention to the many varieties of intersectionality, some argue for its relevance in building social and political theory (Choo and Ferree 2010; Hancock 2007, 2011; McCall 2005), while others comment on methodological issues (Dubrow 2008; Weldon 2006).

Although the basic idea of intersectionality is commonly accepted, social scientists engaged in quantitative analysis of survey data do not often explicitly incorporate intersectionality (Dubrow 2013a,b).

While there are various conceptual strands of intersectionality, there are three principles that most share: (a) Individuals belong to multiple demographic categories; (b) some categories provide advantages and some disadvantages, with each category rooted in the social stratification structure; and (c) the intersections of categories influence access to and acquisition of scarce and valued resources. This is akin to the concept of “social cleavages.” Social cleavages are typically thought of as a single demographic, presenting them as, for example, either ethnicity or class. Intersectionality combines demographic groups into social cleavages that are, at once, ethnicity *and* class.

Modern scholars of political inequality draw inspiration from the American Political Science Association Task Force report (2004) on “American Democracy in an Age of Rising Inequality.” While a landmark project, the APSA Task Force did not discuss several critical issues in detail, including how feminist and intersectional approaches can improve our understanding of the causes and consequences of political inequality. Glaringly, gender was underemphasized: across nations, women’s parliamentary representation and political participation are important features of the nexus of democracy and inequality.

Intersectionality is reality and should guide theoretical and empirical political inequality research. According to Hancock (2007, 2011), intersectionality is a paradigm that should go beyond demographics, whereby the “intersections” include the contexts in which groups are embedded. Hancock’s great insight is that, when investigating any social phenomenon, we should think in terms of intersections first and foremost.

For intersectionality to be effectively employed, we need to address some methodological difficulties. A recent work by Melanie Hughes (2013) is exemplary in this regard. Hughes advocates for a shift in thinking about demographics and political representation from the idea that gender is distinct from ethnicity to an explicit measurement of its intersection. This shift creates a worthwhile complication because intersectionality better reflects empirical reality. Hughes (2015: 51) writes “By focusing on women as an undifferentiated collective, we ignore intersectionality: the ways that race, ethnicity, class, religion, language, and sexuality intersect with gender to impact women’s identities, interests, and outcomes.” Accounting for intersectionality in a quantitative way has many methodological pitfalls, and Hughes’ previous work (Hughes 2011, 2015) contributes to the growing literature on how to overcome its challenges (see also Dubrow 2008, 2013a,b).

## Conclusion

In this brief article, I made the case for a more comprehensive and rigorous study of political inequality. Unlike other inequalities, we know comparatively little about the form, duration, and magnitude of political inequality cross-nationally. There are many definitions and all of them relate to the distinction between equality of opportunities and the equality of outcomes. Political inequality is a specific intersection of power and inequality, and as such is simultaneously a dimension of democracy and a dimension of stratification.

As we discuss where political inequality is – within political organizations and between political bodies – and whether we mean equality of political voice or of political response, we should be mindful of its measurement. Measurement of political inequality is fraught with problems and a truly comprehensive measure may not be possible. To get closer to a valid and reliable cross-national measure, we should specify the kind of political inequality we are studying: of voice, or of response, and of their many sub-types (see also Dubrow 2015).

A creative and proper address of the following empirical questions would mark true advancement in the field:

- How much political inequality is there? And is political inequality rising, falling, or staying the same?
- How does political inequality interact with economic, gender, racial, ethnic, educational, and other inequalities?
- How does social and political change impact political inequality?
- What are the consequences of political inequality on peoples, societies, and social structures?

Creative and proper address of these key empirical questions starts by seeing political inequality as, simultaneously, international, interdisciplinary, and intersectional. All of these may be obvious, yet there has been little scholarly movement to see the field of political inequality this way. Internationalization of political inequality is obvious: as world events, ranging from globalization to climate change and pandemics, push nations toward global governance, it is no longer acceptable to see political inequality purely from the vantage of one's own country (Chase-Dunn et al. 2013; Dubrow 2013a,b; Markoff 2013). Yet, a comprehensive cross-national measure has thus far eluded the field. Interdisciplinarity is obvious: the sources of our understanding are already multidisciplinary, and their explicit combination makes for emergent knowledge. Intersectionality is obvious: no one disputes the basic premise, but the intersectional methodology that would bring it to the mainstream of empirical social science requires innovation.

Political inequality is an important topic for our times. As scientists, we must be aware that the objective and subjective realities of political inequality rouses people to action. That political inequality lives in democracies across the world is a troubling fact of life, and if we want to move closer to political equality, we can do better to understand it.

### Short Biography

Joshua Kjerulf Dubrow received his Ph.D. from The Ohio State University and is an Associate Professor at the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, Polish Academy of Sciences, and Program Coordinator for Cross-national Studies: Interdisciplinary Research and Training Program (CONSIRT) of The Ohio State University and Polish Academy of Sciences. He is the head of the Working Group on Political Inequality in the Committee on Political Sociology (CPS) of ISA and the International Political Science Association, and has recently been elected to the CPS Executive Board. Josh has organized several sessions at recent ISA conferences on the topic of political inequality and social change. His research has appeared in *Social Forces*, *Party Politics*, *Journal of Urban Affairs*, *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, *Sociologias* (Brazil), the *Polish Sociological Review*, and the *International Journal of Sociology*, among others. Josh's recent edited book, *Political Inequality in an Age of Democracy: Cross-national Perspectives* has been published by Routledge in 2014.

### Note

\* Corresponding address: Joshua Kjerulf Dubrow, Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, Polish Academy of Sciences, Room 211, Nowy Swiat 72, 00-330 Warsaw, Poland. E-mail: dubrow.2@osu.edu

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