The Local Roots of American Inequality

We agree with the Task Force on Inequality and American Democracy that not only the quality but the very legitimacy of American democracy is threatened by persistent and rising inequalities of political power and influence. Class conflict is as old as democracy itself, and there is an intrinsic tension between the inequalities generated by free markets and the political equality that is at the core of democracy. No institutional fixes or policy remedies will fully overcome this tension, and in some respects it may be a useful tension. But current institutional and policy arrangements—especially at the local level—are exacerbating inequalities and political divisions in ways that are toxic for democracy.

To fully assess the problem of economic and political inequality and its possible solutions we need to look not only at the aggregate disparities but also at the way inequalities are organized locally. To an increasing extent, better and worse off Americans live apart from one another: this is itself partly a consequence of the way our institutions are designed. American politics has always had a distinctively localist bent and decentralization continues to spur citizen engagement in politics. It is the form of local engagement that worries us, and the degree to which local publics are exclusive rather than inclusive, undermining the possibility of a national public. If a basic aim of institutional design is to nurture a sense of shared fate among citizens, local political institutions are failing badly. We believe this may be America’s deepest institutional problem.

We write to expand in two ways upon the important work of the Task Force. We emphasize, first, that political scientists give too little attention to the form and consequences of urban, suburban, metropolitan, and regional institutions and policies. We argue, second, that political scientists should go beyond describing and diagnosing the problems of democracy and consider ways of improving our institutions. Raising the question of reform is the best way of testing the limits of what we know.

We write as two of the 19 co-authors of Democracy at Risk: How Political Choices Undermine Citizen Participation, and What We Can Do About It (2005). This book is the fruit of an effort that ran parallel to the Task Force on Inequality and American Democracy. The American Political Science Association’s first Standing Committee on Civic Education and Engagement set out to understand how political participation—the overall amount of civic activity, its distribution, and its quality—is shaped by policy choices and the design of institutions. Our aim has been to broaden political scientists’ and the public’s understanding of the formative, indirectly educative influence of major policies and institutions. We did this not to disparage schools and other direct civic educators (which we also discuss) but to support their work. We pay special attention to electoral processes, metropolitan areas, and voluntary associations and the nonprofit sector.

The overall argument of our book is that citizens participate in public affairs less frequently, with less knowledge, too often on the basis of narrow interests and aims, and less equally than is healthy for our democratic polity. We argue that the choices we make in designing institutions and policies have a significant formative impact on all of these dimensions of participation, and we argue that we know enough as political scientists to suggest the value of at least some avenues of reform. Before giving in to pessimism about the capacities of citizens we urge our colleagues to consider how capable and active citizens might be under better designed institutions. We will sketch a few of the general contours of our argument in what follows, giving special attention to the role of locality in fostering inequality. In the end we briefly discuss possible remedies.

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We agree with Robert Weissberg (2006) that democratic participation and civic engagement should be understood capaciously, and we think it especially important to avoid overemphasizing national-level voting statistics at the expense of local politics.

Today, half a million officials—96% of all elected officials in the U.S.—are elected to local office; 80% of all Americans now live in metropolitan areas, which comprise nearly 88,000 local units of government (Census Bureau 2002). Americans living in metropolitan areas have access to a wide array of place-based participatory possibilities beyond voting, these include neighborhood organizations and councils, block watches, parent-teacher associations, community organizations, and homeowners associations as well as a host of new deliberative venues. Effective local political institutions can and do invite citizens not only to talk and listen, but to help decide important questions. Many public goods at the local level—including public safety and education—are, in effect, “co-produced” by public officials and active citizens.

Some argue that turnout in national elections is not a problem: nearly 60% of eligible voters went to the polls in the 2004 presidential election. Turnout in local elections, however,
is often around only 30% of eligible voters or lower, increasing the probability that election outcomes will be determined by small and unrepresentative groups (Macedo et al. 2005, 66; Hajnal and Trounstine 2005a; Wood 2002; see also Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995, 72). Further below the radar screen of normal political analysis, special districts and regional authorities—those ubiquitous but shadowy entities that wield tremendous influence over local development, sewage, and other important local services—often have no electoral oversight at all. (The levees around New Orleans are not controlled by the city or the state government but rather by one of these special regional authorities.) When elections do occur they may involve property qualifications and, in any event, turnout is often extraordinarily low, hovering around 5% (Burns 1994). Inadequate democratic oversight of these districts and authorities allows special interests to wield disproportionate power over regional development.

The overall level of participation is one general concern about democracy in America, but another is unequal participation: in particular the lower levels of participation among poorer Americans, among some racial and ethnic minorities, and among the young. The voices of the disadvantaged are especially faint in American politics, and according to some Americans, among some racial and ethnic minorities, and about democracy in America, but another is unequal participation. Special interests to wield disproportionate power over regional authorities.

In spite of this, local governments have been sites of especially important—and growing—electoral successes for minority candidates (Macedo et al. 2005, 85; Bositis 2003; NALEO 2002). The local concentration of minority voters has helped make electoral success possible, but place-based sorting of the population by race and class also has heavy costs. Local office holding in places characterized by concentrated disadvantage can be a “hollow prize” (Friesma 1969; Kraus and Swanstrom 2001; Yates 1977; Peterson 1981; Browning, Marshall, and Tabb 1984).

The third and final dimension of participation that concerns us is the quality of participation, and this is also shaped by the organization of local politics. We suggest that the quality of participation includes at least these considerations:

- How well informed are citizens? Are they capable of offering reasons to explain their positions and do their positions appear to be rationally connected with their stated reasons and interests?
- Is politics excessively polarized? Does political participation seem to issue in constructive attempts to solve problems rather than mere bickering and partisan sniping?
- Insofar as citizens are politically active, does it tend to be on behalf of narrow and exclusive or broad and inclusive interests?

With respect to whether citizens are well-informed, suffice it to say that we worry that in spite of rising levels of educational attainment, Americans’ knowledge of and interest in politics appears to be stagnant or in decline. By some measures, college graduates nowadays know as much about politics as the average high school senior did 50 years ago (Macedo et al. 2005, 36; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1995, 196).

With respect to polarization, while we allow that there are important advantages in having two parties that represent real alternatives, we worry that the parties have become excessively polarized, to the point where partisanship hinders rather than advances democratic deliberation and constructive governance.
exclude poorer people. The relevant mechanisms include more than public finance: the quality of schools is influenced by the available resources and also by the composition of the student body. Schools composed of children from better off backgrounds have enormous educational advantages over schools composed predominantly of children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Housing prices meanwhile vary along with the relative quality of local schools, and homes represent Americans’ largest investment. As a consequence, even those homeowners with egalitarian political and moral impulses have a powerful personal incentive to practice the politics of exclusion (Daniels 1976; Macedo et al. 2005). Once again, local politics gives them the means to do so because local communities exercise a great deal of control over the composition of local housing via zoning laws (that can, for example, specify minimum lot sizes for homes) and other development decisions. Local politics as currently organized makes all of us into stakeholders in undemocratic exclusion.

Important political and social scientists once celebrated the choices that metropolitan areas provide to citizens without adequately considering the civic consequences: the ways that opportunities for poorly framed and structured choices could undermine the possibility of an inclusive public sphere. Charles Tiebout (1956) argued that metropolitan areas should be viewed as a kind of marketplace of jurisdictions in which “the consumer-voter may be viewed as picking that community which best satisfies his preference patterns for public goods.” From this perspective, metropolitan consolidation should be avoided because a multiplicity of local governments fosters greater choice and market efficiency (Ostrom, Tiebout, and Warren 1961). The basic premise of this public choice approach to metropolitan governance is that citizens can “vote with their feet” on the particular bundle of local taxes and services that best meets their preferences. Citizens’ ability to “exit” a jurisdiction whose policies they disapprove of might be viewed as a substitute for other forms of political “voice” and citizen participation. Fragmented local institutions would, it was thought, sort citizens according to their preferences for local public goods and reduce the need for traditional forms of participation. The exit option thus means that citizens can satisfy their policy preferences via private choices, making public participation far less significant.

In our view, this model of metropolitan governance impoverishes civic life: it promotes exclusion rather than inclusion and worsens political inequalities. Local governments compete not so much to satisfy different preferences as to attract residents and businesses that will contribute more in taxes than they cost in services. Most significantly, households’ capacities for “exit” and entry vary a great deal. The recent experience of poor residents of New Orleans exposed this fact in brutal ways (see, for example, Harden 2005). “Voting with one’s feet” is not a way that poor people can effectively hold governments accountable; it is often a way that better off people hold governments accountable to their interests at the expense of the poor. Furthermore, voting with one’s feet can communicate information about personal preferences to local governments, but that does not make it a form of political or civic engagement. The choice to move often has more to do with fleeing the necessity of deliberating with others: it is the search for a private benefit rather than an engagement in public activity. Stephen L. Elkin (1987) puts it well: action is “public” when “others have to be convinced, justification is essential. I must, that is, move beyond assertions of what is beneficial to me.” “Exit” is often an alternative to political “voice,” and in today’s metropolitan conditions, we believe it discourages civic engagement and undermines a sense of shared fate among richer and poorer citizens.

Stratification is especially harmful to those who live amidst concentrated disadvantage. Although many poorer neighborhoods exhibit impressive levels of civic activity, people’s capacity to become involved in civic affairs is diminished greatly where inequalities are “cumulative rather than offsetting” (Rae 2003, 421; Alex-Assensoh 1998; Bolland and McCallum 2002; Berry, Portney, and Thomson 1991; Cohen and Dawson 1993). Impediments to civic engagement in disadvantaged areas include greater health problems, transportation difficulties, and safety concerns. Surrounded by neighbors who may not have developed critical civic skills, residents of disadvantaged communities have comparatively fewer effective models of civic engagement. Even if they overcome these obstacles, they are likely to encounter local public institutions that lack the resources to respond to their needs.

Inequalities that attend separation by race and class across suburban jurisdictions thus undermine democracy. As Rae (2003) explains,

Too often, the end of urbanism has undermined [the democratic] experience by promoting social homogeneity within municipalities, leading to the evolution of regional hierarchies in which “purified communities” [Richard Sennett’s term] . . . bring likes together, safe from contact with persons different from themselves. . . . The bottom rung more often than not lies in the formerly working-class neighborhoods of central cities, where opportunity is scarce, danger is commonplace, and democracy in any plausible sense seems out of reach.

“Boutique” suburbs—homogeneous upper-income enclaves—trivialize and dampen public engagement because important issues involving race and class never make it onto the agenda. As Grant McConnell (1966) observed of narrow constituencies in general, “It often appears that the achievement and defense of particular status and privilege are the central goals of narrow and cohesive groups.” Indeed, some would argue that such exclusionary appeals to localism often mask underlying racist motivations. It is hard to deny that the prospect of racial integration was among the factors that encouraged “white flight” to the suburbs. Local political structures and the ideal of local control (or “home rule”) allow for the defense of what amounts to class-based and (to some degree) racial exclusion without explicit appeal to either class or race, as Thomas Byrne Edsall and Mary Edsall (1991) argue.

Metropolitan regions carved into balkanized pieces marked by concentrations of wealth or poverty, with few institutions capable of effectively addressing the larger problems of the region, and with no opportunities to hold political authorities in general accountable to all of the citizens of the metropolitan region, suffer from serious democratic deficits. Such balkanization impedes cross-class communication and intercourse, narrows citizens’ interests and understandings, and sets them in competition with one another. The formation of broadly encompassing public interests across metropolitan areas is prevented by the structure of local politics (Young 2000; Farley 1995; McConnell 1966; Dreier, Mollenkopf, and Swanstrom 2004).

Political boundaries help shape citizens’ interests and identities pre-ideologically: they demarcate communities of shared interests. When inequality is geographically concentrated, it is conveniently hidden from the view and purview of the better off, and it requires some shock or eruption to force our attention. Hurricane Katrina was such an event, which vividly revealed in New Orleans a reality of unequal vulnerability defined by geography. Of course, all races and classes suffered, but poor
and Black residents suffered disproportionately, both because they tended to live in low-lying areas with poor infrastructures and because their lack of resources left them stranded when the evacuation call came.

This episode drew public attention (temporarily) to one instance of place-based inequality: unequal vulnerability to crime, to dysfunctional schools, to poor conditions for health, recreation, and raising families—in fine, to pervasively unequal life chances. Public institutions are supposed to guarantee every child an equal opportunity to succeed, and to provide every child with an adequate preparation to participate in politics. Whatever the sins of the parents, children are innocent, and public policy should help insure these fundamental and broadly supported pillars of the American Dream. New Orleans helped make vivid the extent to which we have allowed local institutions to fail us and to defy our deepest ideals.

What is to be done? What can be done to repair the institutional failures that undermine citizen activity and the promise of American life? Do political scientists know enough to make recommendations for reform, and is it appropriate for a group of political scientists working under the auspices of an APSA committee to advance a public agenda for reform? We grappled with all of these issues and address them in our book. Here we would only emphasize that, of course, the authors of Democracy at Risk, like the authors of the Task Force on Inequality, speak only for themselves. In addition, we have sought throughout our work to emphasize the limits of what we know, and also to be clear that recommendations often depend upon complex trade-offs and, of course, difficult value judgments.

There are dozens of things we recommend to improve democratic performance: the amount, quality, and distribution of civic activity. Political participation has declined steeply among the young, for example, but evidence shows that arming young people with concrete information about polling places, ballots, and the mechanics of voting can have significant effects on turnout—preliminary studies suggest that the increase may be as large as 20 percentage points (Addonizio 2004; Wolfinger, Highton, and Mullin 2005). Active systems of school government that give real voice to students can have similarly powerful effects on youth civic engagement (Niemi and Junn 1998). The number of civics courses taken in public schools has declined by two-thirds: their place has partly been taken by social studies courses.

The inequalities rooted in local political structures will not be easy to ameliorate. The interests of the better seem quite effectively yoked to local political boundaries. Local political institutions function as “consciousness lowering” devices; “consciousness raising” experiences are about encountering unfamiliar, previously hidden perspectives, and recognizing their previously unglimped familiarity. Local institutions serve to do just the opposite: they widen differences and place the unpleasant realities of class disparity at a distance, while also insulating us from their impact. If we do nothing, the situation will continue to worsen: local inequalities seem quite capable of feeding on themselves.

Even when there are no easy answers, political scientists should not shy away from participating in public discussions.

The most important thing we could do is to find ways to reduce concentrations of rich and poor across metropolitan areas, as well as the segregation of races and ethnicities, in order to create more diverse communities. Vigilant enforcement of fair housing laws already on the books would give some Americans a fairer shot at living in desirable neighborhoods. We should find ways to encourage municipalities to provide a mix of housing that reflects the needs of the people who work in the area. Madison, Wisconsin, for example, recently passed an inclusionary zoning law that requires all new development to include low-income housing. Given that federal policies helped create the problem, federal and state governments should consider a variety of more ambitious housing policies for economic integration.

In addition, we should encourage citizens to participate directly in decisions that affect their lives including the provision of such local services and amenities as neighborhood planning, local school governance, public safety, and local economic development. All government agencies should explore methods to involve citizens in shaping and administering policy through advisory boards, public meetings, and greater citizen involvement in the “co-production of public goods and services.” Cities should enhance neighborhood governance, in which fully one quarter of all urban residents now participate each year. Effective and empowered neighborhood councils can improve both the quantity and quality of participation—in even the most disadvantaged parts of the metropolitan area—by fostering citizens’ knowledge, tolerance, and sense of efficacy, while also improving government’s responsiveness (Fung 2004; Berry, Portney, and Thomson 1993).

Third, we should explore new metropolitan governance institutions to enable citizens and their political representatives to confront problems that cannot be addressed effectively within current local institutions. The challenge here is to devise structures that overcome the fragmented nature of many metropolitan areas without suppressing opportunities for popular political engagement. Research on such structures is especially scant.

State and local policy makers should therefore consider experimenting with a range of institutions that alter municipal powers and create arenas that encourage citizens from different localities and their political representatives to confront issues of common metropolitan concern. Special purpose governments—authorities and special districts that often provide mass transportation, sewage, or other basic services—should be more open and transparent. Corporations and real estate developers have used special districts to confer benefits on a few and impose burdens on the many—in ways that are almost invisible to the public at large. Special purpose governments should allow meaningful input from citizens and prevent private interests from pursuing their goals invisibly.

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about policy alternatives. Public debate needs the discipline of rigorous analysis and systematic evidence. Political scientists since ancient times have sought to understand and help repair faulty statecraft; so doing requires a frank engagement with basic normative principles as well as careful empirical work.

Notes

1. Such evidence of the effect of turnout on local election outcomes contrasts sharply with the mixed results regarding the effects of turnout on outcomes at the national level.


6. Middle-class suburbs are defined as suburbs with per capita incomes between 75 and 125% of the regional per capita income. Todd Swanstrom, Colleen Casey, Robert Flack, and Peter Dreier, *Pulling Apart: Economic Segregation in the Top Fifty Metropolitan Areas, 1980–2000* (Brookings Institution, Center on Urban and Metropolitan Policy, October 2004).

7. We thank Todd Swanstrom for his invaluable assistance and insight in reviewing the literature we discuss here.


11. Compounding the problem is the fact that local political institutions and groups in civil society are not doing all they could to incorporate and facilitate the civic engagement of new immigrants.

12. When the federal government decided in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, to subsidize home ownership and home construction, it did so in ways that had a devastating effect on inner cities and African Americans. Highways were built through the poorest parts of cities—not surprisingly—destroying poorer but often vibrant communities (another way in which poverty created vulnerability). When the Federal Home Mortgage Administration devised a mortgage guarantee program to encourage home ownership and housing construction it explicitly favored home construction in “homogeneous” suburban developments which were considered a better bet for retaining value. The renovation of older inner-city homes was not allowed, and entire inner-city neighborhoods were “red-lined” as poor in order to facilitate the civic engagement of new immigrants.

References


