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Who Speaks for the Poor?

Who speaks for the poor? More generally, why do parties and legislators represent the interests of some groups, and not others? In the United States, advocates for low-income citizens are hard to identify: Recent political science research demonstrates, for example, that elected officials often ignore low-income Americans' preferences and interests (e.g., Gilens 2012, Bartels 2008). Further, the absence of social democratic or workers' parties – parties that usually represent the interests of low-income citizens – distinguishes the US from all other post-industrial democracies. Why have social democratic or workers' parties formed and persisted in other countries? Why are legislators in other democratic societies more responsive to the preferences of low-income citizens, compared to their American counterparts?

By focusing on the political and partisan representation of low-income citizens, this book will offer an innovative explanation for a long-standing puzzle of comparative politics – why do parties represent the interests of some groups, while others are never mobilized as a partisan constituency? Specifically, this book will show that parties represent the interests of those groups who are favored by changes in electoral geography. In the case of low-income voters, political entrepreneurs saw electoral opportunities in the changing electoral geographies of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and responded by forming new parties and mobilizing low-income communities. Whether these "third-party men" developed populist or social democratic platforms reflects the location and interests of newly pivotal voters. That is, when the newly pivotal low-income voters were predominantly agricultural, new parties developed populist platforms; alternatively, social democratic platforms reflected the interests of newly pivotal industrial workers. Policy (i.e., poverty) responsiveness varied with the structure of local needs, and had lasting, cumulative effects on social policy in each country. Importantly, therefore, elections do not simply aggregate preferences (or grievances) around

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which parties and candidates mobilize. Rather, which preferences – whose interests – are expressed by parties and candidates is a direct consequence of which groups are favored by changing electoral geographies.

This explanation is quite different from existing accounts of cross-national variation in social policy, which typically emphasize tastes (or demand) for redistribution and beliefs about the origins of poverty, the historical role of unions and class-based organizations in Europe, the disenfranchising effects of increasing income inequality in the United States, or electoral rules and their effects on government formation. But, in addition to explaining important differences in the politics of contemporary democracies, this research also offers a reason for the muted political voice of American workers and their families, the limited efforts of American political parties to mobilize a low-income constituency, and the comparatively limited social spending and anti-poverty policy in the US. When the effects of electoral geography are understood, especially from the comparative perspective this manuscript will offer, the limited responsiveness of American legislators to low-income voters, and indeed, the absence of partisan representation for low-income and working-class voters, are no longer puzzling features of contemporary American politics. Instead, these are the clear consequences of the political economic incentive structures created by current and historical geographic distributions of income.

To provide theoretical justification for my emphasis on electoral geography, and to connect to the existing explanations of cross-national differences in the political representation of low-income citizens, this chapter uses a stylized account of democratic policy-making to show how electoral geography matters. Then, this chapter focuses on two features of this book that set it apart from earlier research on the political economics of social policy: the analytic advantages of using income groups, rather than class or occupational groups, as the unit of analysis, and the uncoupling of income and ideological preference.

Chapter 2 then offers a theory of strategic party formation and entry, and outlines the conditions under which we might expect a new party to enter electoral competition and mobilize a low-income constituency. This theoretical framework sets the stage for the broadly comparative analysis presented in Chapter 3, which accounts for the *timing* of new party entry into electoral competition by examining the timing of important changes in electoral geography, and for later analytic case studies (Chapters 4–7). If political entrepreneurs respond to changes in the distribution of electoral power in their decision to form new parties, then it ought to be the case that new parties *generally* form when there are important, concentrated changes in the local populations.

Changing electoral geography has implications, too, for *where* new parties recruit candidates and enter electoral contests. As we shall see, new low-income peoples' parties enter those electoral contests where the composition of the

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district has changed most dramatically, in ways that favor low-income voters. Chapters 4 through 7 examine the strategic recruitment of candidates and allocation of campaign resources in four analytic case studies, from the United States, Canada, Great Britain, and Sweden. In each of these cases, substantial changes in the composition of electoral districts created new incentives for political entrepreneurs to mobilize a low-income constituency, form new parties, and challenge two established parties in single-member districts (SMDs).[1] The new parties often recruited members of groups who were excluded from existing partisan networks, including recent migrants and immigrants. In several cases, the best electoral opportunities were in rural districts, and the political entrepreneurs developed platforms that incorporated the interests of a low-income, agrarian constituency. Elsewhere, it was the new concentration of low-income citizens in industrial districts that created the opportunities for party entry, and the "third-party men" crafted party platforms that reflected the preferences of an industrial working class. Finally, in the case of Sweden, we will also examine the impact of electoral reform on the long-term distribution of electoral power across income groups.

Together, the broadly comparative analysis and the analytic case studies support a new and important explanation for the origins of cross-national differences in the quality of the political and partisan representation of the poor, and for variation in the representation of different groups, more generally. As we shall see, what matters for the representation of a particular group is whether they have been favored by changes in electoral geography that alter the distribution of electoral power. By focusing on electoral power, this research draws attention to a fundamental inequality that characterizes contemporary democracies: only rarely are votes counted equally. As the next section suggests, the nature of this inequality – differences in how groups' votes map into seats – creates policy-making incentives that undermine the equal consideration of interests. Instead, the incentives created by electoral geography and the distribution of electoral power within a society determine, to an important extent, the quality of political representation, with profound implications for the relationship between the democratic value of equality and contemporary democratic practice.

1 While the implications of electoral geography are most dramatic when elections are contested under SMD electoral rules, the argument here applies to multi-member district systems as well, although the effect of changes in the distribution of groups across districts is moderated by proportional representation (PR) rules for seat allocation. That is, particularly when districts elect large numbers of legislators, when seats are allocated proportionately, the change in the composition of the electorate necessary to create new opportunities for party entry is related to the number of legislators elected. Opportunities for entry resulting from changes in the composition of each district are also mitigated by compensatory tiers and national vote share requirements – other features more common in PR systems.

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1.1 ELECTORAL GEOGRAPHY AND DEMOCRATIC REPRESENTATION

How does electoral geography affect democratic politics, and the quality of representation? This section uses a stylized model of democratic policy-making, like Achen and Bartels's (2016) "folk theorem" of democracy and builds on Cox's (2004) representational loop to show how electoral geography shapes the incentives of legislators and parties to be responsive to different groups in society. Specifically, suppose that democratic policy-making proceeds in the following way:

Stage 0. Group Membership. A society is composed of groups that are associated with more or less coherent identities, and whose memberships may be overlapping. These groups may be defined according to ethnic or racial identities, occupations or status, income, wealth or resources, shared geographic locations, or other individual-level attributes that provide a sense of common interest.

Stage 1. Preference Formation. Individuals develop preferences over one or more policy dimensions, usually including social or tax and transfer policy. Certain preferences or policy positions often come to be associated with particular groups and their members.

Stage 2. Mobilization. This stage includes both the mobilization of parties and candidates – their "strategic entry" – and the engagement of voters in the electorate.

Stage 3. Elections. This is the crucial step in which the effects of electoral geography enter, but note that it is a purely mechanical step: votes are tallied and seats are allocated according to the current electoral rules.

Stage 4. Government Formation. Usually, governments are formed by the party that wins the plurality of seats in the legislature, sometimes in coalition with other parties.

Stage 5. Legislation. Once formed, governments will implement policy more or less in accordance with the preferences of the constituencies they (and their coalition partners) represent.

In this stylized framework, group identities (Stage 0) and preferences (Stage 1) are often treated as given and/or fixed, and mobilization results mainly from individual-level facilitative and motivational factors (Stage 2). Importantly, elections (Stage 3) represent the aggregation of preferences, and in this stylized model, provide the crucial mechanism that ensures accountability in government formation (Stage 4) and (usually) equal consideration in policy-making (Stage 5).

This book suggests that the ways in which votes are tallied and seats are allocated in Stage 3 directly contribute to political inequality, as suggested above, with important implications for which parties and voters – which

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groups – are mobilized, and indeed, which groups' preferences are articulated and ultimately given consideration. Put simply, this book suggests that the democratic folk theorem has the ordering of Stages 1–3 reversed: What happens at Stage 3 certainly affects what happens at Stage 2, and likely affects Stage 1, as well. (While group identities are also likely to be mobilized by political actors, Stage 0 may also represent a society's historical endowments; see, e.g., Bartolini 2000).

The stages represented in this stylized framework, nevertheless, provide a useful way to characterize the existing literature on the origins of differences in the quality of representation. When organized in this way, limitations of the existing literature also become clear. The rest of this section offers a review of current thinking about what contributes to effective and equitable political representation and social policy, and focuses on the mechanisms that link each stage of this framework to these outcomes.

Classic political economic accounts of the generosity of social policy often begin with fixed distributions of types (Stage 0) and preferences (Stage 1). In Romer's (1975) and Meltzer and Richard's (1981) accounts, for example, the preferences of the median voter matter most for redistributive politics. To the extent that the median voter stands to gain from a lump-sum tax-and-transfer policy (i.e., when levels of income inequality are high), she will prefer higher tax rates and more redistribution. While comparative political economists have been able to provide only limited empirical support for the main implication of the Romer–Meltzer and Richard account – that income inequality contributes to demand for redistribution – many analysts have built on the key intuition of these models to show that the structure of national income distributions contribute to redistributive policy preferences (e.g., Lupu & Pontusson 2011), and that these preferences are correlated with actual levels of social spending (Brooks & Manza 2006, Soroka & Wlezien 2005, although see Bartels 2015).[2] Of course, what is obvious in the stylized framework proposed above is that the path from preferences to legislation is mediated by representative institutions. For example, the national median voter may hold preferences that are different from the median voter in the median SMD, or from the median supporter of the governing party or coalition, and so on. The question of *whose* preferences, therefore, are (or ought to be) reflected in policy immediately arises.

A second tradition (corresponding to Stage 2) in the study of comparative politics emphasizes the historical balance of power among class-based organizations – "Power Resource Theory" – and attributes cross-national differences

[2] Other accounts that emphasize preferences attribute cross-national differences in social policy to, for example, levels of income inequality (Anderson & Beramendi 2012, Lupu & Pontusson 2011), employment risk (Cusack, Iversen, & Rhem 2007, Iversen 2005, Iversen & Soskice 2001, Moene & Wallerstein 2001), differences in earnings and expectations of benefits across racial and ethnic groups (Shayo 2009, Alesina & Glaeser 2004, Gilens 1999), and the role of religion (Scheve & Stasavage 2006).

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in the political representation of low-income and especially working-class citizens to the strength of unions and social democratic parties (e.g., Huber & Stephens 2001, Bartolini 2000, Hicks 1999, Esping-Andersen 1990). Even when social democratic parties are excluded from government, Pierson's (1996) emphasis on path dependence suggests, their contributions to earlier governments increase the likelihood of current social policy that is generous and responsive. Related to this work are analyses that emphasize differences in rates of voter mobilization. For example, Pontusson and Rueda (2010) find that the success of left parties in responding to increases in income inequality is dependent on levels of rates at which low-income voters are mobilized (see also Anderson & Beramendi 2012). The sources of original power distributions, however, are unclear: Is there some other feature that systematically accounts for variation in the success of class-based organizations?

Political economists have focused, as I do in this book, on the election stage (Stage 3) of policy-making – that is, the mapping of votes to seats – and its implications for social and redistributive policy. Accounts that focus on preferences, or the distribution of power across class-based organizations, simply miss how electoral institutions moderate the translation of preferences to policy, and might contribute to the success of different parties. Persson and Tabellini (2003, 17), for example, outline the now-standard assessment of the relationship between electoral rules and social spending:

> The winner-takes-all property of plurality rule reduces the minimal coalition of voters needed to win the election, as votes for a party not obtaining plurality are lost. With single-member districts and plurality, a party thus needs only 25% of the national vote to win: 50% in 50% of the districts. Under full proportional representation it needs 50% of the national vote. Politicians are thus induced to internalize the policy benefits for a larger proportion of the population, leading to the prediction of larger broad spending under proportional representation.

Persson, Roland, and Tabellini (2007), Iversen and Soskice (2006), and Bawn and Rosenbluth (2006) have further developed arguments that clarify the mechanism that links electoral rules to levels of social policy. In each of these later analyses, coalition governments are more likely to result from elections contested under proportional representation rules, and in fact, are more likely to invest in public spending in ways that reflect the preferences of low-income voters than are the single-party governments elected under plurality rules (Stages 4 and 5).[3]

Clearly, the distribution of electoral support (Stage 3) affects which party forms the government (Stage 4) and what legislation will pass (Stage 5). However, the ways in which the mechanical mapping of votes to seats affect incentives for candidate and party mobilization (and, probably, preference

3 In Iversen and Soskice (2006), this is because coalitions between low-income and middle-income parties are more likely, and more extensive redistributive policy will be implemented. In Bawn and Rosenbluth (2006) and Persson, Roland, and Tabellini (2007), coalition governments "log-roll" across a variety of policy dimensions.

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formation) are often assumed or taken for granted. Usually, the political economic models that link electoral institutions to redistributive policy, for example, take the nature of party competition as exogenously determined: Iversen and Soskice (2006) and Austen-Smith (2000), for example, assume that while three parties compete under (single national district) PR rules, electoral competition is limited to two parties under SMD rules (Lizzeri & Persisco 2001, Persson & Tabellini 2000, for example, assume two-party competition, regardless of the electoral rules).

Here, I take a different approach, and suggest that behavior at Stage 2 – voter, candidate, and party mobilization – is structured by incentives created in Stage 3, when votes are mapped into seats. Vote-to-seat mappings vary across groups in a society; variation in the geographic distribution of groups across electoral districts will ensure that some groups are over-represented in the legislature while others are under-represented. Importantly, parties and candidates will represent those groups whose support is essential to their electoral success. And, new parties will form and contest elections when changes in electoral geography favor their constituency. This reversal – Stage 3 affects Stage 2 – implies that elections do not simply aggregate voters' preferences, which are then incorporated into party and candidate platforms. Rather, *which* preferences are expressed by parties and candidates is determined by of differences in the ways groups' votes map into seats.

The distorting effects of electoral rules on the ways votes map into seats, and thus on opportunities for fully equitable representation of partisan constituencies, are well known and well explored (recently, Chen & Rodden 2013, Rodden 2011). In some ways, an emphasis on electoral geography is old-fashioned. Political analysts, especially those in SMD systems, have long been concerned with how electoral rules interact with the social geographies of their societies to create or undermine support for specific parties (e.g., Tingsten 1975, Gosnell 1937, Krebheil 1916). What is often missing from these earlier "input/output" analyses of electoral geography is a recognition of how electoral geography shapes the strategic incentives of voters, candidates, and parties – specifically, which parties will form, which candidates will be recruited, and which voters will turn out.[4] This book is premised on two important departures from the existing literature:

First, this book focuses on low-income citizens, and *not* on a specific partisan constituency or occupational group. As the next section will argue, this focus offers important analytic advantages.

The second departure is closely related to the first. By focusing on low-income citizens, their geographic distribution and preferences, this book

4 Johnston *et al.* (2005), though, do include "local pressure" in their revised list of Miller's (1977) list of mechanisms by which neighborhood effects might operate, but do not consider how mobilization incentives vary across districts, or evaluate local pressure, relative to other mechanisms.

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is able to explain the form that partisan representation of low-income citizens takes. Specifically, this book will show that the political entrepreneurs that formed and mobilized social democratic parties were responding to the same incentive structures as those who established the agrarian/populist parties. On both sides of the Atlantic, political entrepreneurs saw opportunities created by changes in the electoral power of low-income voters, and crafted policy platforms that were responsive to the needs of newly pivotal voters; that this responsiveness more often took a social democratic form, rather than populism, in Europe simply reflects the geographic location of these opportunities. Chapter 2 will develop this theoretical account more completely.

The next two sections of this chapter address these departures from the literature, and highlight the advantages of focusing on a (hypothetical) low-income voting bloc, first, before justifying the broad classification of low-income peoples' parties.

1.2 WHY FOCUS ON LOW-INCOME CITIZENS?

This book's attention to low-income citizens – here, defined as the lowest-earning third of the national market income distribution – as the basis for analysis offers both normative and analytic advantages.

Many analysts, for example, have documented the ways rates of political participation vary across income groups. In their now-classic study, Verba, Nie, and Kim (1978), for example, show that low-income citizens in seven countries are least likely to participate in electoral campaigns, contribute money, or participate in organizations and meetings. More recently, Gallego (2007) reaffirms this participation gap in 24 countries, and in an analysis that includes participation in demonstration and boycotts. In the US, differences in participation rates are especially stark: Leighley and Nagler (2014) find that citizens with very low incomes (i.e., in the first quintile) of the national income distribution turn out to vote about half of the time, while about 80 percent of the wealthy regularly cast ballots.

These persistent participation gaps suggest that, in the absence of the explicit mobilization of low-income citizens by parties and candidates, the preferences of low-income citizens are unlikely to be expressed in politics. As a consequence, attention to low-income citizens provides insight into the quality of democratic representation provided through *elections*, rather than through lobbying, campaign contributions, or other forms of political participation, and from the perspective of those who are unlikely to be well represented.

A focus on low-income citizens, rather than groups defined by ethnicity, race, occupation, or social class, for example, also offers analytic advantages: First, by defining low-income status in relative terms (i.e., location in the national income distribution), this book fixes the size of the group and provides a benchmark for equitable electoral geographies. The *electoral power* of low-income voters – the share of seats in the legislature that a low-income voting bloc can

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elect, if all low-income voters turn out to vote, and all vote for the same party – is the key explanatory variable in this analysis. In a fair electoral system, low-income voters who comprise a third of the population should elect about a third of the seats in the legislature. As we shall see, however, the electoral power of low-income voters varies substantially across systems and over time. By fixing the size of the group studied to 33 percent of the electorate, this cross-national and temporal variance can be attributed to changes in electoral geography, rather than the group's size, subscription, or status.[5]

With an emphasis on low-income citizens, this book also offers a concreteness to political representation that cannot be accommodated by studies that analyze, instead, ideological congruence in the distributions of preferences of legislators and citizens. Put slightly differently, the mapping of preferences to party positions and policy is more straightforward when defined in terms of the interests of a specific group. This book can examine, for example, the extent to which new party platforms incorporated the preferences of newly pivotal low-income voters: Do new party platforms incorporate concerns specific to the constituencies they mobilized? Similarly, in the contemporary period, the quality of the political representation of low-income citizens can be evaluated through the generosity of anti-poverty programs.

There is a final, important, advantage in focusing on an "imagined" or hypothetical voting bloc. One might worry, for example, that defining "low-income" as the lowest third of the national income distribution might seem arbitrary, particularly in light of political science research on class consciousness (see Katznelson 1986). However, the identification strategy employed in this manuscript *requires* an arbitrary definition. In order to identify the strategic actions of political entrepreneurs in party formation and mobilization, the analysis must proceed in anticipation of their incentives, rather than their realization. Specifically, by focusing on a "hypothetical" group, instead of a group with an already-activated identity, this manuscript can investigate the conditions under which political entrepreneurs will mobilize that group *as a group* – a cohesive, partisan constituency. Further, if the definition of "low-income" is different from the way political entrepreneurs in each case thought about which groups were "ripe for mobilization," then the relationships between changing electoral geography and new party entry decisions are likely to be observed with more variance.

A related concern emphasizes the ways in which ethnic, racial, or religious group identities potentially work to undermine the existence of a low-income voting bloc. Particularly for the US case, some analysts have argued that the important political cleavages cut across class lines to sustain racial and ethnic cleavages, particularly between white and African Americans (see, e.g.,

5 As Stoll (2013) shows, group size is also important: By defining "low-income" as a third of the population, under an equitable electoral geography, the benefits of representing this group in the legislature would be substantial.

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Shefter 1986). Further, race is an important part of the contemporary politics of social policy in the US (see Gilens 1999). Nevertheless, some of those who have built electoral coalitions have worked to overcome the resistance of white Americans to the incorporation of black voters, particularly when it furthered their office-seeking goals (e.g., the New Deal Coalition).

To the extent that this analysis measures changes in electoral geography in a way that incorporates low-income groups that are, in fact, divided by social cleavages, electoral opportunities will appear where they do not actually exist. That is, the empirical analysis presented in later chapters exaggerates incentives to enter particular electoral contests, if some proportion of (those who are identified here as) newly pivotal voters were unavailable to new parties' candidates because of their racial or ethnic identity. Their inclusion in measures of local electoral opportunities biases later analysis against the main hypothesis of this book, and introduces further variance into the relationship between changing electoral geography and strategic entry decisions.[6]

In sum, if voting blocs are endogenous to party entry – that is, to the extent that electoral geography favors a particular group, and candidates and parties have incentives to mobilize that group *as* a bloc – this analysis must proceed in anticipation of these incentives, rather than their realization. The presence of alternate salient group identities, or other policy dimensions, heightens the challenge both for political entrepreneurs and for this analysis. Therefore, by focusing on the electoral power of a hypothetical group, we gain analytical leverage on the conditions under which political entrepreneurs will mobilize *that* group, rather than another, as a partisan constituency.

The next section of this discussion focuses on that effort – the mobilization of low-income voters as a partisan constituency. It is not simply the case that low-income voters are represented by only social democratic, labor, or other left-leaning parties. Early in the twentieth century, particularly, low-income citizens' preferences were also incorporated into the platforms of new agrarian and populist parties. The next section provides some early evidence that political entrepreneurs carefully crafted their parties' platforms to be responsive to the newly pivotal low-income voters (more detailed evidence will follow in the analytic case studies presented in later chapters), and justifies attention to this broad class of parties.

1.3 IDENTIFYING LOW-INCOME PEOPLES' PARTIES

How did political entrepreneurs – those who bore the initial costs of forming a new party, often by organizing conventions, announcing platforms, and

[6] In other places, e.g., Jusko 2015b, I have examined how differences in the rates of turnout vary across income groups, and with their electoral power. Similar analysis could examine the extent to which low-income voters act as a voting bloc, as a function of electoral power.

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