On Democratic Equality

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I. The problem

Equality points to one of the critical dimensions along which the quality of democracy varies.[1] What is at stake is political equality, not equality in everything human beings have reason to value, nor equality in the most important structures of social inequality – in class, status, and power. However, political equality is intertwined with, and profoundly shaped by these structures. Political equality is affected by social and economic inequality in two broad ways: dominant groups can use their social and economic power resources more or less directly in the political sphere, and they can shape the views, values, and preferences of subordinate groups by virtue of their status and their influence on education, cultural production, and mass communication, exerting "cultural hegemony". Political equality will be extremely limited unless these effects of social and economic equality are substantially contained.

Democracy – even in its minimalist, most formal varieties – creates some equality in the political sphere by giving every adult an equal vote. Yet the democratic ideal demands much more. In the formulation of Robert Dahl, it requires "the continuing

[1] This essay is being prepared for the conference on *The Quality of Democracy: Improvement or Subversion*, October 10 and 11, Center on Democracy, Development, and the Rule of Law, Institute for International Studies, Stanford University, organized by Leonardo Morlino and Larry Diamond. I thank Miguel Glatzer, Patrick Heller, Charlie Kurzman, and Jim Mahoney for very helpful comments on an

responsiveness of the government to the preferences of its citizens, considered as political equals" (Dahl 1971, 1). This ideal stands in tension with the fact that political decision-making is inevitably embedded in the social structures of power and influence. While the distance between the ideal and the reality of democratic equality varies greatly across countries and historical constellations, it represents in each instance a compromise between dominant groups and "the many," a compromise that is shaped by the power balance within society, by state-society relations, by international power constellations, by the cultural autonomy of subordinate groups and by how threatening the major actors see each other (Huber, Rueschemeyer, and Stephens 1997, Alexander 2002).

Even the most elementary forms of democracy need a realm of political decision-making with some autonomy. Politics has to be somewhat set off or, in the language of functionalism, "differentiated" from the overall structure of power and more broadly from the complex system of social inequality. Democracy as conventionally understood – defined by the freedoms of expression and association, regular elections with comprehensive suffrage, and the government's responsibility to the elected representatives – was impossible under feudalism, where political authority was fused with control of land and labor and with elevated aristocratic status. It also was impossible in twentieth century state socialism, where political authority was similarly amalgamated with control of the means of production and the labor force. Its critics call the conventional conception of democracy formal because it contents itself with limiting the accumulation of unequal advantage within a circumscribed political sphere through

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earlier draft. I also thank Ed Broadbent, an intellectual and political leader in the struggle for greater democratic equality, for our continuing conversations (cf. Broadbent 2001).

competition and the rights to free expression and association and neglects the interrelations between political decision making and social inequality.

The following will observe two distinctions that emerge from these observations. Structures and processes that advance political equality within the relatively autonomous sphere of politics must be distinguished from those that limit or foster "spillovers" from inequalities in other areas of social life into the political sphere. These latter issues deal with the insulation of the political sphere and, conversely, the "convertibility" of social and economic advantage into political gain. The central question here is: Is it possible to limit the conversion of wealth or status into political advantage and, if so, how?[2] A second distinction is premised on the assumption that any such insulation of the political sphere will be less than perfect. This entails that – beyond issues of insulation and convertibility – variations and changes in the structures of social and economic inequality themselves will be important factors shaping the degree and scope of political equality.

These distinctions seem of particular importance in the normative discussion of democratic equality. Advancing political equality is clearly not an uncontested goal. It is at odds with major interests, and it may involve the sacrifice of competing values. Both interest-based opposition and value-inspired objections are likely to differ when consideration is confined to the political realm narrowly conceived, when the conversion of socio-economic into political advantage and disadvantage is under discussion, and when the analysis concerns the residual impact of the systems of social inequality on the political sphere.

[2] This distinction is inspired by, but does not adopt Michael Walzer's conceptions of plural spheres of justice and "complex equality"; see Walzer (1983) and the important collection of commentary edited by Miller and Walzer (1995).

Before entering a more detailed discussion of the conditions favorable or unfavorable to political equality, it may be useful to address some of the normative issues involved. At the same time, some of the large factors shaping democratic equality and inequality will come into view.

II. DEMOCRATIC EQUALITY AND COMPETING VALUES

Does increasing political equality constitute an unqualified good? Or does it involve sacrificing important other values? If there are "tradeoffs", how do we judge different outcomes? This essay will not resolve these normative issues. But given the intertwining of normative positions and empirical claims in the discussion of equality and constitutional form, it seems reasonable to sketch some of the major questions of evaluation and to indicate my views of them.

Even if we stay purely within the political realm, there are three major objections to advancing political equality as much as possible. The first two are pragmatic arguments. They claim, first, that the many lack the competence for choosing reasonable policies. Second, increasing the number of participants creates mounting problems of coordination; it is said that an overload of demands can make the political system ungovernable. The conventional form of democratic rule, representative democracy, takes care of a good deal of these objections as it interposes a state apparatus, staffed by experts and responsible to elected officials, between the electorate and collective action outcomes.[3] On the residual form of these problems once representative democracy is

[3] At the same, it must be noted that the decision power of the executive state and its control by elected representatives constitute a major limitation on full political equality, a limitation that is taken for granted in today's political discourse. An excellent synthesis of research and theory on the question of whether –

taken for granted, both of these arguments make empirical assumptions that are likely to be correct only in varying degree, and this variation may be decisive in assessing them in any particular case. More important, both point to efficiency costs, and this seems relevant for a *prima facie* normative evaluation.

However bothersome the efficiency costs may be in practice, efficiency considerations seem in principle outweighed by three arguments of a different kind. First, what is efficient or inefficient depends on material and immaterial interests that are not necessarily shared; it is only relative to these preferences that the notion of efficiency acquires substantive meaning. Second, a reasonable principle (taking off from the maxim "No taxation without representation") holds that all members of a political community whose interests are affected by collective decisions should have a say in the formation of those decisions. The consideration of affected interests seems to override objections based on limited competence. Finally, political equality is an acknowledgement of the dignity of all citizens as human beings who are entitled to the rule of reciprocity. Neither of these arguments, of course, prevents us from seeking to reduce efficiency costs pragmatically.

A third objection to advancing equality within the political realm as much as possible argues that a vigorous democracy has to be able to curtail political action that is aimed at undermining the democratic process itself. The constitution of the Federal Republic of Germany responded to the experience of the legal takeover of government by the National Socialists in 1933 by providing for a prohibition of parties that the Supreme Court finds aiming to subvert democracy itself. The Anglo-American democracies rely

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and to what extent – electoral control makes a difference under contemporary conditions of "big government" is offered by Paul Pierson (2001).

on their electoral systems that make it difficult for third parties to grow, though during the Cold War American Communists were so constrained that their situation came very close to political prohibition.

Limiting the conversion of assets in other spheres of life into unequal political advantage is much more contested. And objections mount even further against policy proposals to level differential assets outside the sphere of politics because spillover effects are too difficult to contain.

The most prominent discussion swirls around the political uses of economic assets. The United States Supreme Court has ruled in a decision, which many still consider outrageous, that spending money in campaigns for political office enjoys the protection of the First Amendment much like speech.[4] The decision sees freedom of expression as a value competing with and overriding the concern for democratic equality. It treats in effect economic inequality as irrelevant for the integrity of the democratic process and refuses to limit the conversion of economic advantage into political gain by direct proscription. There are other ways to achieve such a limitation, among them public campaign financing that is conditional on voluntary acceptance of limits on private contributions as well as making the use of television time, the most expensive form of campaigning, free of charge to all qualified candidates. But these face different political obstacles, and none is likely to shut off the flow of money into politics completely.

Economic inequality has consequences for political equality that go far beyond the issues of a level playing field in electoral campaigns. Disproportionate wealth is of particular importance. Monopolistic and oligopolistic market power can easily be translated into political bargaining advantage. Different levels of government are

dependent on investment decisions of large corporations; the greater the international mobility of capital movement is, the more this applies to national governments as well. In addition, the majority of the population depends for its economic security on employment. The threat of unemployment, graduated according to desired levels of firm loyalty, is taken for granted in capitalist societies, but it has a major impact on the political dynamics of western countries.

There are different measures that seek to limit the conversion of corporate power into political clout. All advanced capitalist countries have legislation that seeks to constrain the creation and the use of monopolistic power. But this has at best slowed the trend toward concentration of the corporate structure and limited the use of this power in the economic sphere proper rather than its impact on politics. Employment security through legal constraints on firing is somewhat stronger in some countries than in others. While these measures are currently under attack as "labor market rigidity," they have largely a delaying, possibly in the long run even a worsening effect on unemployment. More important are macro-economic policies, provisions for training and retraining, and differences in the policies of income replacement for unemployed workers and staff. The significance of some degree of income security becomes clear if one compares the political impact of high unemployment in the 1930s Depression, when the unemployed often had no economic resources to fall back on, with that of similar rates in post-communist eastern Europe and parts of western Europe after 1989/90, when a higher standard of living and public supports provided at least some buffer.

Attempts to go further in limiting the conversion of economic power into political gain are subject to fundamental objections on ideological grounds and, perhaps more

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[4] For a legal analysis of this Supreme Court decision see Dworkin (1996).

important, to pragmatic arguments that pit the prospect of economic growth against widening the scope of political equality. While the value of the economic freedom of entrepreneurs and capital owners is on grounds of principle hardly a match for the value of increased political equality, pragmatic claims that economic growth will be impaired by measures that compromise the functioning of the market have persuasive power in all western countries. The more comprehensive welfare states in advanced capitalist countries insist, however, that this protection of the market mechanism has to be combined with relatively generous compensatory measures, which make the functioning of the market socially sustainable.

If measures to limit the conversion of economic advantage into political power have only a very partial effect, does the pursuit of political equality warrant measures that reduce inequalities of income and wealth more directly? There can be little doubt that differences in the distribution of income and wealth across countries and over time within countries significantly affect political equality.

Pragmatic objections to policies changing the distribution of income and wealth are vigorously advanced; but here competing value claims dominate the discussion. It is on the issue of direct political action reducing income and wealth differentials that the claims of an inherent contradiction between equality and freedom have concentrated. These claims are plausible when we think of sudden policies of increased taxation and expropriation aimed at leveling incomes and wealth. Such policies would be fought by the privileged with all means at their disposal, and breaking this opposition could indeed lead to ruthless dictatorship. Quite clearly, much reduced levels of economic inequality would then coincide with the destruction of democratic equality. On the other hand, we

know of examples – the Scandinavian countries are the most prominent – where popular policy orientations that remained roughly steady over decades resulted in significant reductions of after-tax and after-transfer income inequalities, and it is plausible to claim that the scope and quality of political participation in these countries indicate higher levels of democratic equality. As to efficiency considerations, it is worthy of note that these policies did not result in a long-run decline of economic growth.

The other major issues that are similarly beset by value controversies are the problems of cultural hegemony. There is little question that the views of the better educated and of people with high status occupations have a disproportionate influence on the production of culture as well as on its diffusion, on education and mass communication. If we just mention a few other major sources of disproportionate influence on popular and high culture – corporate funding, tax-supported private charities, and religious authority – it is clear that in most advanced capitalist countries the groups with disproportionate cultural influence are quite heterogeneous in character. The pattern of influence, then, is pluralistic; but it is decidedly unequal nevertheless. And unequal cultural influence creates substantial political inequality. If the material and immaterial interests of the more influential groups have a strong if varied influence on the production and communication of culture and entertainment (an influence that may include distracting from social and political problems), large numbers of citizens will be inhibited in recognizing and advancing their own best interests in society, economy, and politics.

Cultural hegemony represents inequality of a peculiar kind: Its effects remain largely invisible to those whose views, values, and preferences it shapes, and they are

taken for granted by those whose material and immaterial interests find expression in it. Many regard arguments about cultural hegemony as spurious expressions of Marxist ideology – the claims of "false consciousness" in a new guise. Yet even though its effects may be hard to pin down empirically in a given time and place, each ingredient of the pattern seems beyond doubt in principle. People in advantageous positions take much of their own situation for granted and are less concerned with the deprivations of others. Private sponsors of news, entertainment, and the production of high culture may defer to norms and traditions of autonomy of journalism and scholarship, but they are not above seeking to attach influence to their funding where it does not directly clash with these standards. In turn, the standards themselves impose a non-partisanship on news journalism, teaching, and research that is informally defined in terms of "mainstream" notions of what constitutes partisanship; yet mainstream values and views may be strong and pervasive, but they may also be far from even-handed and all-inclusive. Finally, a model of politics that presupposes a citizenry in which everybody has roughly the same capacity of identifying his or her best interests as well as the means of pursuing them is clearly at odds with reality. This model rejects claims of hegemonic inequality as unpersuasive by simply *assuming* an essential autonomy and equality of all participants.[5]

Policy responses to issues of cultural hegemony and normative arguments about actual and potential policies are complex. Most rich democracies have policies hindering,

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[5] The conception of cultural hegemony just sketched does not presuppose false consciousness. It merely argues that elite views and interests tend to shape the views and preferences of subordinate groups more than *vice versa*. It does not make a claim to a superior knowledge of people's "objective interests". While I am grateful to Jim Mahoney for a supportive comment in which he makes this distinction, I am hesitant to banish the idea of ill- or well-understood interests from social discourse altogether. Although the objective interest of any group or category of people is ultimately indeed an "inherently contestable concept", I agree with Steven Lukes that empirical evidence and theoretical argument can be used to narrow disagreements considerably before the question does become the subject of conflicting views that cannot be reconciled

if not obstructing the trend toward concentration in newspapers, radio and television, book publishing, and mass entertainment. Most also support public broadcasting systems with a special degree of autonomy, though the generosity of support and the degree of autonomy vary. The standards of news journalism and of academic freedom and analytic universalism constitute an important protection against conversions of wealth and political influence into control over news and research. The critical voices of those who disagree with the tone and the "slant" of news reporting as well as the frequent complaints of the funders of right-wing think tanks about the persistent mainstream liberalism prevailing in American elite universities attest to this. (However, it seems unreasonable to claim that the array of perspectives informing scholarship in the humanities and the social sciences in these universities is representative of the full range of points of view in society.)

At the same time, measures that would go beyond these broadly accepted policies of insulation of cultural institutions and spheres against direct partisan influence are not much discussed. The reasons seem clear. Most people who care about undue influence in cultural production and diffusion are part of the dominant, though internally heterogeneous mainstream. Curtailing such influence comes, furthermore, quickly under the verdict of two important and commonly accepted injunctions: Do not limit the freedom of expression; and: Respect the autonomy of different cultural spheres – of art, news journalism, or academic research. Given that some existing protections against the conversion of economic and political clout into cultural influence rely precisely on these

except by moral suasion. (See Lukes 1967, 1974 and, on the social construction of class interests, Rueschemeyer, Stephens and Stephens 1992, 53-6)

principles, it seems doubtful whether more far-reaching policies that are at odds with these principles would be reasonable or even have a chance of success.

In conclusion of this very cursory first examination of major sources of political inequality and of some of the value conflicts that emerge when relevant policies are considered, it is worthwhile emphasizing a simple point. The normative assessment of equality and competing values is analytically distinct from factual assertions about what advances or undermines political equality, even if both are intimately linked in many arguments. If competing values argue against containing processes that subvert political equality, the effects of these inegalitarian processes are not made any less real by the normative argument; provided, of course, that we identified them correctly.

III. Unequal Power Resources and the Expansion or Subversion of Democratic Equality

While some of the major factors shaping political in/equality have already been touched on, the following will examine how inequalities in different power resources affect political action by "the few" and "the many." Though we cannot make detailed distinctions among them, these political activities include voting, lobbying parliament and administration between elections, influencing the opinions of others, and participation in political organizations.

Coercive power is a fundamental power resource that is inherently distributed unequally. Most states strive to monopolize coercion, though they do so with uneven success. Where private coercive power is widely used or threatened, democratic rule is compromised. If the state succeeds in monopolizing coercive power, democratic equality

is protected only if use of that power is regulated by law and if equality before the law is sufficiently realized to rule out political advantage from differential intimidation. While this can be taken for granted in most contemporary rich democracies, pockets of private coercive power, sometimes tolerated by the state, and gross imperfections in equality before the law are major factors subverting political equality in many countries.

The *administrative apparatus of the state* represents another power resource of great reach, combining expertise, tax-based funding, ready-made organizational capacity, and ultimate recourse to coercion. In liberal political theory the state looms large as the great adversary of society in the process of democratization. By contrast, the civil servants of modern states see themselves as neutral executors of the political directives that in a democracy are defined by elected political representatives, though this self-conception antedates the rise of democracy. Hegel considered the officials of a well-ordered state the "universal class" that pursued the common good. Even though views like that may be a valuable part of the ethos of a well functioning civil service (Heclo 2002), the realistic tradition of political theory from Locke to Marx and Weber has always maintained that civil servants not only tend to take care of their own interests unless contained by effective injunctions but they are also likely to see the interests of their peers and of their betters with more favor than those of others. While self-serving arrangements such as special health insurance and pension plans are in most countries not a major ingredient in patterns of inequality, differential access to administrative decision-makers can make a substantial difference. Imperfectly steered by small political elites, the complex administrative organizations of modern states preempt a good deal of decision making and can create substantial imbalances in political equality.

If in the nineteenth century the most prominent means of curtailing democracy and democratic equality were limitations of the suffrage, later two other methods became the tools of choice (though they were practiced in the earlier period as well). They are less visible but at least as effective – unequal rules protecting the freedoms of speech and association, and *de facto* and *de jure* reductions in the responsiveness of the state to the elected representatives.

Economic class is, as already indicated, a major obstacle standing in the way of realistic political equality. It is no accident that until well into the nineteenth century there was a silent consensus among political thinkers that only those with property could be voting members of the political community. Only slowly did the idea of a democratic community inclusive of all classes become common, and equal rights for women came to be accepted even later.

Capital ownership carries power over marketing, investment, and employment unless competition reduces ownership decisions to an automatic function of the market, a textbook claim that applies to pure models as well as – in a rough way – to small owners in competitive markets, but not to major concentrations of capital. This economic power appears in the political sphere as direct bargaining power and more indirectly as persuasive influence. Since capital ownership is – aside from house ownership and small fractions of ownership in large public corporations and pension funds – highly concentrated even in the richest capitalist countries, both of these forms of political power are the privilege of a very small number of decision-makers, and they are often virtually unrestrained by political competition and supervision. Aside from legislative

and administrative attempts to curb growing corporate concentration, encouraging political competition may be the most promising antidote.

The distribution of incomes is much less uneven than the distribution of property ownership. At the same time, income distributions vary greatly across countries and time periods. The two ends of the distribution have the greatest significance for democratic equality. Poverty means not only a lack of economic resources but also a loss of standing in the community, and those who fall below a certain level of income and status tend to lose political voice as well. The poor are never as powerful a political constituency as their formal voting potential would indicate. In turn, people who earn incomes that exceed average earnings by factors in the hundreds rather than the teens will have disproportionate political clout despite the best measures seeking to stem the influence of money in politics. Both poverty and the income share of the highest earners have complex determinants, but differences across countries and developments over time suggest that they are not impervious to political measures. Whatever the role of other determinants, the extent of poverty and of exorbitant income wealth has most powerful direct and indirect effects on democratic equality.

We misunderstand *social status* if we think of it simply in terms of prestige. It is a relational category involving social association, attachments, and aversions. Social status shapes interaction patterns, offering entrance to, and imposing exclusion from different social circles. Politically most important, it defines the chance to be heard and to be trusted; it increases or diminishes one's political "voice" (Hirschman 1970).

The importance of status differentials varies considerably across countries, but both their salience and the steepness of the status hierarchy tend to persist over time and

are not easily changeable through political intervention. However, some major correlates of status, including economic position and level of education, are not policy-independent and these can override even persistent differences grounded in ethnic, racial, and gender status. Broadening access to secondary and tertiary education and flattening the distribution of post-tax and post-transfer incomes are likely to reduce both the salience and the inequality of social status in the long run.

The change in women's status in the most advanced industrial countries over the past century and a half provides ample evidence of change and persistence as well as of the mechanisms of change. Recent comparative work on the election of women to political office offers an interesting glimpse. Women have better chances in systems of proportional representation than in winner-take-all single-member district arrangements (Matland and Montgomery 2003). This suggests that it is easier for women to get elected as members of a party list, whose composition is determined by activist organizations and party members, than in the direct confrontation between individual candidates often chosen in broad-based preliminary voting. Changes in gender status in the wider population seem to lag behind politically more active organizations, even as they are influenced by them.

The *unequal influence on the production and diffusion of culture* exerted by varied but small cultural, religious, and economic elites constitutes, as noted, a major problem for political equality. It is a problem easily underestimated by simplistic rational choice analyses because what is influenced are the values, views, and preference structures of people, factors whose variation tends to be neglected by simple rationalist individualism.

Perhaps it is useful to explore these problems of inequality in regard to the specific issues of politically relevant *knowledge*. Political knowledge is surely a major power resource and its distribution is profoundly unequal. This is true most obviously in the simple sense of information. Those who are favored by education and position in the networks of information have clear advantages over those less favored. Furthermore, the claim of unequal distribution of knowledge holds also for the background knowledge necessary for judging and absorbing the flow of information and for the ability to resist spin. This is largely a function of education and repeated use of such background knowledge.[6]

Beyond these forms of knowledge there is however another, more basic kind – the knowledge that is generated by research. And here the question is not only and not so much how this newly generated knowledge is diffused, but rather whether the problem formulations and specific questions asked in research are informed by concerns and presuppositions as well as by blind spots that correspond to the concerns and blind spots of select groups while neglecting the interests and perspectives of others more or less completely. An example may make the point more specific. Talcott Parsons reflected faithfully the consensus of family sociology in the 1940s and 50s when he claimed that the gender division of labor of the American middle class family with a single breadwinner had a strong functional fit with the prevailing structures of advanced industrial societies and that it in fact reflected on a more abstract level near-universal patterns of sexual division of labor across cultures (Parsons 1943, Parsons et al. 1955). It

[6] Pierson (2001) emphasizes in his review of the chances of democratic control of big government the issues of information and cognitive capacity of the electorate. Recognizing that simple techniques such as taking one's cue from trusted others and the collective superiority of aggregates of people who are individually only moderately informed curb the impact of ignorance and lack of judgment on the part of

was only after the famous attack on these claims by Betty Friedan (1983/1963) that research on the gender division of labor in modern societies came to quite different empirically based results (see, e.g., M. Rueschemeyer 1981, on dual career marriages of professionals in three countries). It would be easy to multiply similar if perhaps more subtle examples dealing with working class issues or matters of race.

That feminists and African Americans have succeeded in establishing scholarly niches staffed exclusively by women and Blacks, respectively, may go against norms of scholarly universalism, but it certainly is an indication that for a long time these norms had rather disappointing results. Here it may be useful to note the obvious fact that an under-representation of the problems of subordinate classes in scholarly research cannot be tackled in the same way as an under-representation of the interests and concerns of ascriptive status groups. Researchers from a lower class background acquire in the process of their training and career a new social and economic status, and they have better career chances if they stay within established theoretical frameworks of basic assumptions and problem formulation.

That the orientation of research is of great importance for long-term political gains is also reflected in the proliferation of privately financed (though tax supported) think tanks in the United States, the majority of which have – to put it modestly – a right-of-center outlook. In many other western countries, the orientation of similar centers is less weighted toward one side and often balanced by publicly supported institutions. German universities, for instance, have sustained since generations professorships and

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most voters, he remains skeptical that these mechanisms are sufficient to insure electoral control of government based on at least rough equality.

institutes devoted to welfare state policies.[7] Cumulative effects of public policy shape to some extent orientations in the academic world. Thus it seems a reasonable guess that the long political dominance of Roosevelt's New Deal was one of the factors accounting for the prevalence of liberalism in American higher education before the "L-word" became a fighting word in the conservative counterattacks.

Organization for collective action in voluntary associations, unions, and parties is the most promising power resource of "the many". It is here that there are possibilities of compensation for the impact of social and economic inequality on democratic politics. Collective organization can mobilize voters and campaigners; it can raise substantial funds if membership and small contributions are numerous enough; it can represent otherwise dispersed interests between elections; and it can compensate to some extent for the cultural hegemony of the most influential groups and institutions by advancing its own views and symbols and shielding the followers against the dominant influences.

This compensation for the impact of social and economic inequality requires, however, that these organizations are relatively autonomous from dominant groups. Quite often, dominant interests seek to protect themselves by sponsoring sympathetic organizations and parties with broad appeal. Many voluntary associations rely on private (though, again, often tax supported) funding from a relatively small number of wealthy patrons. A simple measure of participation in civil society, then, is not sufficient to gauge the compensatory potential of collective organization. What is decisive is the relatively autonomous organization of otherwise disadvantaged interests.

[7] This does not mean however that their social and economic science faculties were or are politically balanced. Of the dozen or so full professorships in social science and economics at the University of Cologne only one, a professor of social policy, was known in the 1950s to be a Social Democrat, while a professor of statistics was reputed to be a Communist.

The importance of autonomous collective organization in parties and politically relevant voluntary associations for leveling political inequality can hardly be exaggerated. If the economic and political power of concentrated wealth, the cultural hegemony of a limited set of elites, and the decision making power of an imperfectly controlled state apparatus are the most important factors underlying political inequality, strong and autonomous organization of subordinate interests is the most important counterbalancing factor. It offers political competition to the influence of wealth and high status and limits the relative autonomy of the state of the vis-à-vis subordinate interests. It gives subordinate groups some protection against hegemonic influence by offering alternative views and orientations. And it strengthens the universalistic norms of academic social and political analysis as well as of news reporting by sponsoring research informed by the concerns and interests of subordinate groups.

Among the conditions favoring or hindering the development of such forms of collective organization are mutually reinforcing processes in the political sphere. Generally, the prospect of political success stimulates political participation while its absence stifles it; this seems to be a major reason why in many countries politically oriented participation is more prevalent among the middle classes than in the working class or among the dependent poor (Rueschemeyer, Rueschemeyer, and Wittrock 1998). Gaining or losing political influence on decisions about legislation and implementation can in turn favor or hinder collective organization. Thus, it seems reasonable to argue that the growing influence of environmental concerns in many western countries has had a positive feed-back on their green parties. It is well known that the long dominance of the Social Democrats in Swedish politics is one reason for the extraordinary strength of labor

unions in Sweden. And the strength of public employee unions in different American states is partly explained by how much state politics favors or discourages unionization (Miller 1988), while unionization of workers and employees in private industry has declined since 1960 due to structural changes in employment as well as adverse national political developments.

In countries whose institutional setting has been shaped by strong unions, strong parties of the left, and significant participation of these parties in government, class and status differences in social and political participation are much reduced or eliminated. This may strike some as a suspect partisan claim, but it has empirical support, and on simple reflection it makes good theoretical sense. It is no real surprise that the sustained impact of successful self-organization of subordinate interests and of the representation of these interests in the governance of societies diminish the factors maintaining political inequality and lead to a leveling in the social and political participation of different socioeconomic strata.[8]

These interactions between collective organization and political success make for path-dependent patterns of advance or decline in political equality, which may continue beyond critical turning points. That means that the chances of a political self-organization of subordinate interests and their potential effects on political equality will be dependent

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[8] The high electoral participation rates in the northwestern European welfare states would not be possible if there were similar socioeconomic differentials in voting as are common in the United State. See the analyses of Dalton (1988) and Verba, Nie and Kim (1978) and the discussion in Huber, Rueschemeyer and Stephens (1997) and Rueschemeyer(2001).
The significance of government support for collective self-organization raises for some a normative question: If collective organization beholden to dominant interests has little value for compensating the power advantage of dominant groups, why should one approve of a dependence on the state for the success, stagnation, or failure of collective organization? At least in the memory and imagination of liberal argument, dependence on the state seems worse than dependence on private support. Political support does entail some loss in autonomy, but the fact that the support comes from sympathetic political forces seems to account for a historical record of the relations between left-of-center governments and unions that includes

on historical conditions that vary across countries but may no easily be changed in any given political system.

IV. Comparing Inequalities: Indicators and Metrics

Since the different determinants of political in/equality vary in their weight across countries and time periods, it seems neither possible nor useful to propose a single composite measure of democratic equality. While it may be possible to construct a list of major manifestations of in/equality as well as of their most important determinants, the latter will have different consequences in different polities as they interact with other factors in contrasting context. Nevertheless, such lists are a useful, if often underestimated component of theoretical frameworks guiding social and political analysis. It may even be possible to offer rough guesses as to which factors are of the greatest importance under certain typical circumstances. These guesses may hold across countries if one takes care to delimit carefully their scope conditions, distinguishing different kinds of polities and looking separately at, for instance, rich and well established democracies, newly established ones in poorer countries, and countries in the early phases of transition.[9]

Our foregoing reflections suggest a somewhat different list. It compiles the most promising possibilities of improving democratic equality that can be shown to have had a significant impact and that have a realistic chance of political realization, at least in some

complex tensions but seems remarkably free of instances when organized labor interests were drastically subordinated to and compromised by state and political elite interests.

[9] Other criteria for defining the scope conditions of even rough hypothesis bundles might involve the previous experience with non-democratic regimes and the prospects of economic success in periods of transition.

countries and at least in the long run. This, of course, implies another list of policies and possibly politically modifiable developments that subvert democratic equality.

Possibilities of Improving Democratic Equality

A Tentative List

- Providing basic education of near-equal quality enabling participation
- Curbing poverty that subverts participation
- Encouraging collective organization of subordinate interests
- Counterbalancing the role of extreme wealth and income in politics
- Curbing the growth of wealth and income inequality
- Engaging in effective policies that answer pressing concerns of subordinate interests

In spite of the fact that these developments and policies are in some countries out of the realm of realistic possibilities (not to mention likely outcomes), it may be possible to construct a model of current "best practice".[10] This could make a difference in political discourse. Advancing democratic equality ranks high among the values of those who cherishes democracy as more than a form of government that promises stability and keeps discontent quiet by offering an outlet. This is the position of the vast majority of social, cultural, and political leaders in rich democracies, but the affirmation of the ideal often has a ritualistic character cut off from the realities of political life. Introducing a realistic description of "best practice" would take the value of political equality out of the realm of unrealistic idealism by giving flesh and blood to really existing approximations

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[10] Sweden has in fact held this place for some time as is indicated not only by the many references that "little kingdom of the North" receives from the left of the political spectrum but also by the attention its

and by revealing social mechanisms that account for the falling-short of other democracies.

V. CONCLUSION

Democratic equality is a critical dimension of the quality of any system of democratic rule. It stands in tension with the structure of social, economic, and cultural inequality. Democracy as conventionally conceived – defined by regular elections with comprehensive suffrage and responsiveness of the state to the elected representatives and underpinned by the freedom of speech and association – is only possible if political decisions are to some extent separated from the system of class, status, and power. Since structured inequality can never be entirely eradicated and political decision making can never be fully emancipated from the inequality in power resources, democratic equality is a goal that only be approximated at a considerable distance. At the same time, democratic equality is a value not only praised in Sunday speeches but grounded in many practices and commitments common in modern societies. The principle of an equal vote is only one but not the least among these.

The tension between democratic equality and the impact of differential economic, cultural and social power is not a constant across modern democracies. There exists a great deal of variation that ranges from Lenin's conception of democracy as the "ideal shell of capitalism" to realistic, if limited approximations to democratic equality that are built on a significant empowerment of socially, economically, and culturally subordinate groups.

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intermittent economic difficulties as well as its mythical troubles (such as high suicide rates) get in conversations and publications of a mainstream or conservative character.

Finally, formal democracy is more than what its critics denigrate. It is an opening to greater democratic equality because even in its thin version it embeds the ideals of democracy in social and political life.

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