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Economic Inequality and Political Participation: Assessing Socioeconomic Disparities in Democratic Engagement

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ABSTRACT

Economic inequality has become a central challenge to democratic participation because disparities in income, wealth, education, employment, and social class can shape citizens' capacity to engage in political life. The study examines how socioeconomic inequality influences electoral and non-electoral participation, with attention to voting, campaign activity, protest, civic engagement, and other forms of democratic involvement. It synthesizes studies on the resource, relative power, political efficacy, grievance, and mobilization perspectives to explain why participation differs across socioeconomic groups. The evidence indicates that higher socioeconomic status generally provides greater access to time, money, civic skills, political information, social networks, and organizational opportunities, while poverty, unemployment, poor health, and economic insecurity can restrict engagement. However, the relationship between inequality and participation is not uniform. Economic inequality may depress turnout and campaign activity, yet perceived unfairness and redistributive grievances can encourage protest and collective action under some conditions. Institutional and contextual factors, including electoral rules, compulsory voting, trade unions, political parties, welfare arrangements, and clientelism, can either widen or reduce participation gaps. The literature further suggests that unequal participation can reinforce unequal political influence and representation, creating a feedback relationship between economic and political inequality. Future research should give greater attention to wealth inequality, digital participation, life-course disadvantage, subjective perceptions of inequality, and underrepresented democratic contexts. Overall, the review highlights socioeconomic inclusion as a condition for political equality and democratic legitimacy.

Keywords: Economic inequality; Political participation; Socioeconomic status; Democratic engagement; Political equality

1. Introduction

The issue of economic inequality is a growing concern in modern democracies, as differences in income, education, employment, and social status affect the capacity of citizens to be able to engage in politics. Democracy in theory provides equal political rights, but the ability to exercise those rights is not evenly distributed. Political participation is not something that happens in a single day; it involves time, funds, civic skills, political knowledge, and mobilising networks. This can then result in lower representation and an unequal political voice for people in socioeconomic disadvantage. The resource model of political participation offers an explanation for differences in this way, by focusing on the fact that those with more socioeconomic resources are more likely to participate in politics (Brady et al., 1995). It has also been found that at the societal level, inequality can have an impact on broader democratic engagement, as well as on individual participation (Solt, 2008). Political participation encompasses activities citizens undertake to seek influence on the institutions, representatives, and public policy. Voting rights are the most widely used form of democratic practice, but other forms include campaigning, contacting politicians, demonstrations, petitions, organizations, and various forms of collective action. These activities are closely linked to socioeconomic position because citizens have different resources and opportunities.

Social class remains a determinant of political participation in democratic societies despite claims that the power of class divisions has been diminished. Comparative studies indicate that although there are differences in the extent of disparities across countries and equally across forms of participation, there are still gaps between classes (Caínzos & Voces, 2010). These inequalities may be exacerbated by economic inequality, which can modify the political context for citizens to determine whether participation is worthwhile. Cross-national studies have investigated whether higher inequality diminishes voter turnout because it makes it less appealing to the less well-off people. There is a strong link between inequality and voter turnout and economic and political development, as evidenced in Stockemer and Scruggs (2012). This is a sign that economic inequality is not just a distributive problem, but also a problem with substantive consequences for democratic inclusion. One key issue is that socioeconomic inequality can lead to systematic inequalities in political voice. If the community is less well-represented in government, then the government may not be representative of the public's preferences.

Participation gaps are therefore problematic because parties, candidates, and policies are more likely to be seen by those active in the political process. Recent studies have revealed that income inequalities have led to significant disparities in voter turnout, especially in times of higher income inequality (Matsubayashi &

Sakaiya, 2021). The gap in income participation in voting is also found to differ with institutional and political factors, such as inequality and clientelist practices (Huijsmans et al., 2022). There are also differences in socioeconomic status when it comes to voting. The resources needed for participating in a campaign include financial, organizational, time, and political confidence. Between elections, economic inequality appears to be linked to differing rates of campaign involvement, with wealthier citizens having more opportunities to engage with the political process, as Ritter and Solt (2019) demonstrate. There may be indirect mechanisms of participation gaps as well. Nelson (2023) provides evidence of how health-related factors can lead to socioeconomic inequalities in electoral participation, thus showing how political inequalities can arise from complex economic, social, and individual factors.

The study assesses the relationship between economic inequality and socioeconomic position and democratic participation, both electoral and non-electoral. It takes into account voting, campaigning, protest, collective action, and other means of participation and separates the objective economic situation from inequalities that citizens may perceive. The distinction is crucial, since the degree of perceived unfairness has the potential to shape political reactions regardless of actual conditions. The evidence from Chile reveals that beliefs in inequality and distributive justice are related to political participation (Castillo et al., 2015) and that beliefs in inequality and redistribution can be related to whether grievances are converted to collective action (Jo & Choi, 2019).

The study breaks away from the idea that economic disadvantage has a consistent dampening effect on participation. A lack of resources can be a barrier to traditional engagement, and a dissatisfaction with inequality can be a motivator for protest or other provocative behavior. It is important to know these competing processes in order to begin to account for the fact that inequality can lead to political demobilization or political mobilization, depending on the nature of political participation and the institutional setting in which that participation takes place. Therefore, the study has the following **objectives**:

- 1.To examine how economic inequality and socioeconomic status influence different forms of political participation, including voting, campaign engagement, protest, civic participation, and other forms of democratic involvement
- 2.To identify the principal mechanisms through which socioeconomic disparities generate unequal political participation, with particular attention to political resources, civic skills, efficacy, trust, health, social networks, and political mobilization
- 3.To assess how institutional and contextual conditions shape the relationship between economic inequality and democratic engagement, while identifying major inconsistencies, limitations, and research gaps within the existing empirical literature

2. CONCEPTUALIZING ECONOMIC INEQUALITY AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

2.1 Dimensions of Economic Inequality

Economic inequality is a complex phenomenon related to income, wealth, education, employment, employment security, occupational status, and opportunities for mobility. The dimensions influence citizens' ability to participate in politics in terms of access to time, money, information, and social networks. Income affects the cost of participation, and education and occupation affect civic skills and political confidence. Socioeconomic resources act both at the individual and societal levels, as demonstrated in comparative evidence. Lancee and Van de Werfhorst (2012) show that engagement is different in various European countries with regard to inequality. Economic inequality should thus be viewed as a system of unequal resources that affects opportunity for democratic engagement.

2.2 Forms of Political Participation

Political participation refers to what citizens do to try to affect the actions of political leaders, decision makers, or public policy. There are many forms of participation, most notably voting, but also campaigning, contacting officials, petitions, boycotts, demonstrations, organizational membership, and digital activism. Each of these activities requires a varying amount of time, money, information, and effort. Thus, socio-economic inequalities impact some aspects of participation more than others. Caínzos and Voces (2010) demonstrate that in a number of political activities, differences in classes can be observed. Corcoran et al. (2015) also show that participation is heterogeneous based on the costs and demands of collective action.

2.3 Political Equality and Democratic Engagement

Equality in politics is more than equality in rights; it is also equality in opportunity to engage in democratic life. With concentrated participation by richer and more educated citizens, democratic systems can create unequal influence. Low turnout is particularly significant as it can increase income disparities. In a natural experiment in Sweden, Persson et al. (2013) discovered that lack of turnout in the election widened the gap between richer and poorer, highly and less educated, and interested and uninterested citizens. However, Schäfer and Schwander (2019) reveal that inequality can also undermine political equality by dissuading poor and marginalized citizens from participating in politics when they believe they have few opportunities to affect political outcomes. Table 1 exhibits conceptual dimensions of economic inequality and political participation, and points out the central features through which economic inequality could affect the behavior of individuals in relation to political participation.

Table 1. Conceptual Dimensions of Economic Inequality and Political Participation

Conceptual area	Key dimensions/components	Relationship with political participation	Supporting evidence
Economic inequality	Income, wealth, education, employment security, occupational status, and socioeconomic mobility	Unequal socioeconomic resources influence citizens' access to time, money, information, civic skills, and political networks. These disparities can create unequal opportunities for democratic participation.	Lancee and Van de Werfhorst (2012)
Income and material resources	Income level, financial security, disposable resources	Higher income can reduce the financial and opportunity costs of participation, whereas limited income may constrain citizens' capacity to participate in political activities.	Lancee and Van de Werfhorst (2012)
Education and occupational position	Educational attainment, civic skills, occupational status	Education and occupational position can strengthen political knowledge, communication skills, confidence, and access to networks that facilitate participation.	Lancee and Van de Werfhorst (2012)
Electoral participation	Voting and election-related engagement	Voting represents a major institutional form of participation, but socioeconomic and class differences can produce unequal levels of electoral involvement.	Caínzos and Voces (2010)
Non-electoral participation	Campaign activity, contacting officials, petitions, boycotts, demonstrations, and organizational involvement	Different political activities require varying levels of time, money, information, and effort; therefore, socioeconomic inequalities may affect participation differently across activities.	Caínzos and Voces (2010)
Cost of political participation	Low-, moderate-, and high-cost collective action	Citizens' participation depends partly on the perceived costs and demands of political action, with resource limitations potentially becoming more important as participation costs increase.	Corcoran et al. (2015)
Political equality	Equal opportunities for political voice and participation	Formal political rights do not necessarily produce equal participation because socioeconomic groups differ in their capacity and opportunities to become politically active.	Persson et al. (2013)
Turnout inequality	Participation gaps by income, education, and political interest	Lower overall turnout can increase socioeconomic disparities because disadvantaged and less politically engaged citizens are more likely to withdraw from electoral participation.	Persson et al. (2013)
Democratic engagement and perceived influence	Political efficacy, perceived responsiveness, ability to influence outcomes	Economic inequality can discourage disadvantaged groups when citizens perceive that their chances of influencing political decisions are limited.	Schäfer and Schwander (2019)
Overall conceptual relationship	Economic resources → participation opportunities → political voice	Socioeconomic inequality can become political inequality when differences in resources and opportunities produce systematic disparities in democratic engagement and influence.	Lancee & Van de Werfhorst (2012); Schäfer & Schwander (2019)

3. Theoretical Perspectives On Inequality And Political Participation

3.1 Civic Voluntarism and Resource Theory

The concept of resource theory addresses socioeconomic disparities in political participation, focusing on disparities in access to time, money, and civic skills. Brady et al. (1995) contend that citizens engage in political involvement if they have resources that reduce the costs of political action. These resources are frequently cultivated in education, employment, organizations, and social networks, making it easier for better-off citizens to be politically active. Education is particularly significant because it enhances knowledge, communication, and confidence. Sondheimer and Green (2010) offer evidence that suggests that higher levels of education can lead to higher voter turnout rates in the future. The theory of resources then connects socio-economic inequality to unequal democratic participation abilities.

3.2 Relative Power and Political Efficacy Perspectives

Relative power theory concentrates on the impact of economic inequality on citizens' perceptions of political power. As wealth is concentrated, well-heeled groups might be able to gain access to decision-makers, campaign resources, and organizational strength. Citizens who have fewer resources may then perceive that participation is not "working" and be less politically involved. According to Solt (2008), citizens in groups with lower levels of development were more negatively affected by higher inequality, resulting in less engagement in democratic processes. Solt (2010) also demonstrated that inequality was negatively correlated with participation and income bias in participation. Overall, these results indicate that inequality of power may discourage involvement by lowering effectiveness among less privileged citizens.

3.3 Grievance, Relative Deprivation, and Mobilization

The grievance and relative deprivation theories suggest that inequality may motivate participation because it leads to dissatisfaction and a sense of unfairness. When citizens feel such disparities in income and wealth are unjust, they may be more inclined to protest or to support redistributive measures. Jo (2016) concluded that dissatisfaction with income and educational inequality was related to protest participation in South Korea. But this relationship is not consistently mobilizing. Solt (2015) showed that greater inequality decreased citizen nonviolent protest in Europe, except in the highest income group. The contradictory results indicate that the mere presence of grievances is not enough; there also needs to be a sense of effectiveness, opportunities to mobilize, and expectations of political change by citizens.

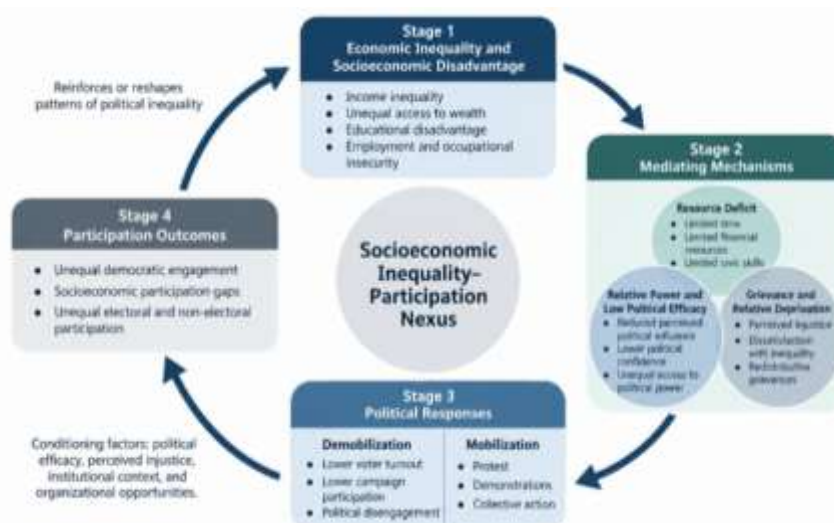


Figure 1: Theoretical Pathways Linking Economic Inequality to Political Participation

Note. The framework synthesizes theoretical perspectives discussed in the review. Resource-based mechanisms draw on Brady et al. (1995), and Sondheimer and Green (2010); relative power and political efficacy mechanisms draw on Solt (2008, 2010); and grievance and relative deprivation mechanisms draw on Jo (2016) and Solt (2015).

Figure 1 illustrates how inequalities of income and socioeconomic disadvantage affect political participation, either via resource deficits, via relative power and political efficacy, or via grievance-based mechanisms. Such routes can result in political demobilization or mobilization, with unequal participation effects that can aggravate the underlying political inequality in a democratic system.

4. Income And Wealth Disparities In Political Participation

4.1 Income Differences and Political Engagement

Income has an important impact on political involvement because of its relationship to the costs of participation. Those with higher income have greater financial security, free time, information, and access to politically active networks. There may be higher opportunity costs and economic disadvantage for lower-

income citizens. Jensen and Jespersen (2017) established that people who were below the national median income were statistically less likely to vote, but this was conditioned by the extent of national inequality and economic development. Similarly, Filetti (2016) demonstrates how income inequality may enlarge the participatory divide in Europe. Income must therefore be seen as a factor in the economic situation and not as a stand-alone individual factor.

4.2 Wealth Inequality and Political Influence

Political differences can be greater than income differences, as the accumulation of wealth creates a sense of security, status, and access to influential networks. Citizens can donate more resources to campaigns and political advocacy, and these funds give them more opportunities to influence public decisions if they are wealthier. In a recent paper, Franko et al. (2016) demonstrate the relationship between class bias in turnout and representation, government ideology, and income distribution. Theodossiou and Zangelidis (2020) also point to a two-way street: an increase in inequality leads to a decrease in participation, and a decrease in participation leads to an increase in inequality. These results indicate how economic and political inequalities can mutually reinforce each other, both through participation and influence.

4.3 Poverty and Economic Hardship as Barriers to Participation

Stress, lack of time, and strain on material needs are factors that may reduce participation because of poverty and economic hardship. These can also limit the availability of transportation, information, and supportive social networks. Economic distress has a direct impact on electoral behavior, as Rosenstone (1982) has demonstrated. However, more recent studies have indicated that these effects can start in early childhood. Weißenfels (2026) concluded that childhood poverty had a negative impact on adult political involvement, with some level of adjustment to these effects through family resources. Poverty is thus a short-term and a long-term constraint on political socialization. The effects of income, wealth, poverty, and economic hardship on political participation are summarized in Table 2. It illuminates the differential access to economic resources and how this affects opportunities for participation, political influence, and long-term dynamics of democratic involvement.

Table 2. Income and Wealth Disparities in Political Participation

Dimension	Main mechanism	Effect on political participation	Key evidence/findings	Supporting citation
Individual income	Financial security, available time, access to information, and political networks	Higher-income citizens generally face fewer costs of participation, while lower-income citizens experience greater economic and opportunity constraints.	Citizens below national median income tend to participate less electorally, although the relationship varies with national inequality and economic development.	Jensen & Jespersen (2017)
Income inequality	Unequal distribution of political resources and opportunities	Greater inequality can widen participation gaps between affluent and economically disadvantaged citizens.	Evidence from European countries indicates that income inequality can increase differences in political engagement between socioeconomic groups.	Filetti (2016)
Wealth and accumulated resources	Long-term financial security, status, organizational access, and capacity to support political activities	Wealthier citizens have greater opportunities to participate in campaigns, political organizations, and advocacy and can therefore exercise greater political influence.	Socioeconomic bias in turnout is associated with representation, government ideology, economic policy, and distributive outcomes.	Franko et al. (2016)

Economic-political inequality feedback	Reciprocal relationship between unequal resources and unequal participation	Economic inequality may lower participation, while low participation among disadvantaged groups can contribute to policies that reproduce inequality.	Evidence suggests a self-reinforcing relationship between income inequality and participative democracy.	Theodossiou & Zangelidis (2020)
Economic hardship	Financial stress, limited time, restricted information, and competing material needs	Economic adversity can discourage electoral participation by increasing the personal costs of political engagement.	Individuals experiencing economic adversity show lower levels of voter turnout.	Rosenstone (1982)
Childhood poverty	Long-term political socialization, family resources, educational opportunities, and development of participatory habits	Early socioeconomic disadvantage can reduce political participation later in adulthood, producing persistent participation inequalities.	Childhood poverty is associated with lower subsequent political participation, although family resources may partially moderate these effects.	Weißenfels (2026)
Overall relationship	Unequal material resources → unequal participatory capacity → unequal political influence	Income, wealth, and poverty shape both immediate opportunities for participation and longer-term political engagement.	The literature indicates that socioeconomic disparities can reproduce themselves politically through unequal participation and influence.	Jensen & Jespersen (2017); Theodossiou & Zangelidis (2020)

5. Socioeconomic Disparities In Electoral Participation

5.1 Income Inequality and Voter Turnout

Though voter turnout is one of the surest indicators of political inequality, the link between income inequality and turnout is not consistent. The impact of inequality is partially moderated by economic development and country context, as demonstrated by Stockemer and Scruggs (2012). The salience of elections also plays a role. Macdonald (2021) confirmed that inequality was better correlated with turnout in lower-salience U.S. midterm elections than in presidential elections. The results imply that inequality does not have an inherent effect of suppressing voting. Its impact is influenced by the intensity of campaigns, the institutional environment, and mobilization, which can complement or counteract socioeconomic obstacles to overall democratic electoral participation.

5.2 Social Class and Electoral Participation

Social class is more than just income, encompassing the occupational position, status, identity, workplace experiences, and networks. Citizens' sense of representation and politics' relevance to them can be influenced by these factors. When studies conducted analyses that controlled for socioeconomic factors, Walsh et al. (2004) identified a negative correlation between working-class identification and participatory orientations, suggesting that working-class identification is linked to less desire for participation even after such factors are taken into account. Indian studies also point to the multifaceted concept of class. Vaid (2023) demonstrates that income, wealth, occupation, and education offer different lenses to look at electoral participation. The inequalities in voting by class are thus not only those of material resources but also those of identities, social

contexts, and political incorporation.

5.3 Education, Employment, and Voting Behaviour

The relationships between education and employment with electoral participation are interconnected and involve social-psychological processes. Educational opportunities can increase political knowledge, communication, and confidence, and employment opportunities can offer networks and opportunities for political discussion. Increased educational attainment has been shown to increase voter turnout (Sondheimer and Green 2010), which reinforces the possibility of a causal explanation for the education-participation link. Workplace socialization and unemployment are also factors that are relevant for electoral participation in Sweden, as demonstrated by Österman and Brännlund (2024). The other political environments are thus the educational and employment settings, which impact citizens' resources and opportunities in becoming more politically engaged in general.

6. Economic Inequality And Non-Electoral Political Participation

6.1 Protest and Demonstration Participation

The participation of protesters tells us about the connection between inequality and engagement. Economic inequality can provoke action, and it can deplete participation when citizens feel powerless or deprived. Kołczyńska (2020) identified that the cross-country variation accounted for much of the correlation between inequality and protest in Europe and that the latter did not correlate with the former's level across countries over time. This subjective perception may be of particular significance. According to Jo (2016), being discontented with inequality was linked to South Koreans' protest attendance. The findings indicate that objective inequality does not lead to protest, but rather how citizens perceive inequality and whether opportunities for collective action exist.

6.2 Campaign, Civic, and Community Engagement

Unlike voting, campaigning and civic involvement take time, money, and organization, thus being particularly vulnerable to socioeconomic inequality. Those who have resources can volunteer, donate, attend meetings, and participate in political organizations more easily than citizens without those resources. Ritter and Solt (2019) demonstrate that economic inequality has an impact on campaign involvement. These barriers can be mitigated, however, through the provision of information and mobilization in the organizations. Leighley and Nagler (2007) found unions raise the turnout of members and nonmembers, particularly those with lower and middle incomes. If social and political inequalities in political participation are to be minimized, then civic and labour organizations with a good base of support can help fill in the gaps created by unequal personal resources.

6.3 Petitions, Boycotts, and Digital Political Participation

Participation in petitions, boycotts, and digital activism is sometimes viewed as more low-cost strategies, as they may involve less time, money, or travel than traditional political strategies. Yet, these gaps in socioeconomic status can be maintained through variation in such factors as political information, confidence, access to the internet, and social networks. In Europe, citizens' attitudes towards inequality matter for both traditional and non-traditional citizen participation, as evidenced by Loveless (2025). Corcoran et al. (2015) also show that differences in efficacy and perceptions of structural injustice have differential impacts on participation in activities that vary in costs. It is possible, therefore, that digital and low-cost participation can expand access and widen the political participation gap, but that it may not reduce the overall political participation gap. The data in Table 3 shows the relationship between economic inequality and levels of non-electoral political engagement, ranging from protest participation, campaigning, civic involvement, to petitions and boycotts, as well as digital activism. It emphasizes the importance of participation costs, political efficacy, perceived injustice, and organizational support in affecting such modes of engagement.

Table 3. Economic Inequality and Non-Electoral Political Participation

Form of participation	Main mechanism	Effect of socioeconomic inequality	Key evidence/findings	Supporting citation
Protest and demonstrations	Grievance, perceived injustice, political efficacy, and opportunities for collective action	Inequality may encourage protest when citizens perceive economic disparities as unfair, but it may also suppress action when disadvantaged groups lack resources or confidence.	Cross-national differences explain much of the inequality-protest relationship in Europe, suggesting that rising inequality does not automatically increase protest within countries.	Kołczyńska (2020)

Perceived inequality and protest	Subjective dissatisfaction with socioeconomic inequality	Citizens who perceive inequality as unjust may be more willing to engage in protest and contentious political action.	In South Korea, dissatisfaction with income and educational inequality was associated with greater protest participation.	Jo (2016)
Campaign participation	Time, money, organizational access, and political resources	Higher socioeconomic groups are generally better positioned to volunteer, donate, attend meetings, and participate in campaign activities.	Economic inequality is associated with differences in campaign participation, indicating unequal access to resource-intensive political activities.	Ritter & Solt (2019)
Civic and organizational engagement	Mobilization through unions and collective organizations	Organizations can reduce participation gaps by providing information, recruitment, and political networks to citizens with fewer personal resources.	Union membership and union strength increased political participation, particularly among lower- and middle-income groups.	Leighley & Nagler (2007)
Petitions and boycotts	Lower participation costs, perceptions of inequality, and political attitudes	These activities may be more accessible than conventional participation, but socioeconomic differences can still shape who becomes involved.	Attitudes toward inequality influence both traditional and non-traditional forms of political participation across European societies.	Loveless (2025)
Low- and high-cost collective action	Political efficacy and perceptions of structural injustice	The effect of inequality differs according to the cost and demands of the political activity being undertaken.	Perceptions of injustice and efficacy influence participation differently across low-, moderate-, and high-cost forms of collective action.	Corcoran et al. (2015)
Digital political participation	Access to information, internet resources, confidence, and social networks	Digital activism may lower some practical barriers, but socioeconomic inequalities can persist through unequal access to information, skills, and networks.	Existing evidence on non-traditional participation suggests that lower participation costs do not automatically eliminate socioeconomic disparities.	Loveless (2025); Corcoran et al. (2015)
Overall relationship	Inequality → grievances/resources → mobilization or disengagement	Economic inequality can either stimulate or suppress non-electoral participation depending on perceptions, available resources, organizational support, and the type of activity.	The literature shows that non-electoral participation is highly context-dependent and cannot be explained by inequality alone.	Kończyńska (2020); Ritter & Solt (2019)

7. Mechanisms Linking Socioeconomic Status To Political Engagement

7.1 Political Resources and Civic Skills

Linking socioeconomic status to participation are political resources and civic skills. Political engagement takes time, money, communication skills, information, and organizational experience. These resources are not evenly distributed predominantly found in specific social groups. In Europe, inequality can exert a negative influence on the participation gap between rich and poor citizens, as demonstrated by Filetti (2016). Low Socioeconomic Status (SES) also appears to lower political involvement via psychological pathways, according to experimental evidence. Furst et al. (2026) see political efficacy as one of the more significant ways that low status is related to low participation. Socioeconomic inequality, then, is not only a lack of material resources, but also a decrease in political influence and trust.

7.2 Political Efficacy, Trust, and Political Interest

Citizens' opinions on the value of participation are influenced by political efficacy, trust, and interest. Poorly-positioned individuals may feel unable to grasp politics, or feel that institutions are not responsive. The results of Furst et al. (2026) imply that socioeconomic status is negatively related to engagement, and that political efficacy accounts for this relationship. These effects can be exacerbated by other forms of disadvantage. Nelson (2023) also shows that health is an influence on socioeconomic differences in voting, suggesting that socioeconomic characteristics partially mediate voting participation gaps. Engagement, therefore, can be indirectly affected by economic hardship because of the impact it has on the level of confidence, well-being, and responsiveness.

7.3 Social Networks, Organizations, and Political Mobilization

Social networks and organizations disseminate information, motivation, and participation in politics. Norms can be established in families, workplaces, parties, unions, and voluntary groups to facilitate participation and reduce barriers to participation due to resource constraints. This inequity in access to these networks could then further create inequities in social and economic participation. Huijsmans et al. (2022) demonstrate that conflicting patterns of income and voting are linked to levels of inequality and clientelistic political behavior, suggesting that lower-income individuals' voting behavior can be influenced by mobilization. Citizen engagement is thus influenced not only by the resources they have at their disposal, but also by whether they have been contacted, recruited, and incorporated into groups that can leverage their social networks for political action.

8. Institutional And Contextual Factors

8.1 Electoral Systems and Political Institutions

Electoral institutions can affect participation in a variety of ways, including by creating incentives for mobilisation, electoral competitiveness, and voting costs. While the effects of proportionality and registration rules are found to be more mixed, Boyle (2024) shows that compulsory voting is associated with turnout inequality. Some socioeconomic participation gaps, however, can be addressed through institutional arrangements. Levels of overall turnout are also important. Persson et al. (2013) reveal that inequalities among socioeconomic groups grew with a drop in turnout during an election in Sweden. These results have shown that political inequality is not only due to resources. The social selectivity of the voting process can be increased or decreased by electoral rules and environments and thus affect democratic inclusion.

8.2 Political Parties, Trade Unions, and Civil Society

The provision of information, civic skills, collective identities, and direct mobilization by parties, unions and civil society organizations can help to ease socioeconomic inequalities. These institutions play a significant role for citizens who have limited resources. Leighley and Nagler (2007) discovered that unions boosted participation of union members and nonmembers, and that union decline had a negative impact on the participation of lower and middle incomes. This means that class-based resource inequalities can thus be addressed by an organisation. If parties and campaigns are targeted primarily at those already likely to vote, though, inequality can be exacerbated by the organizational mobilization. Democratic inclusion relies in part on the extent to which intermediary organisations are welcoming of disadvantaged citizens to political life.

8.3 Welfare Systems and Cross-National Differences

Cross-national differences show that socioeconomic inequality has different political consequences across democracies. The nature of the political disadvantage of low incomes can be shaped by welfare institutions, economic development, political culture, and social protection. National context matters, as Lancee and Van de Werfhorst (2012) find differences in participation across 24 European countries. The connections between individual income and turning out are also shown to be dependent on the inequality and prosperity of the nation by Jensen and Jespersen (2017). The results indicate that gaps in participation in the socioeconomic sphere can be mitigated or exacerbated by the welfare and institutional context. Comparative analysis is, therefore, key to grasping the dynamics of unequal democratic participation. Table 4 summarizes how socioeconomic differences in political participation are affected by electoral institutions, political institutions, welfare institutions and national context. It draws attention to the fact that institutional structures can either lessen or strengthen the unequal democratic engagement across various political contexts.

Table 4. Institutional and Contextual Factors Shaping Political Participation

Institutional/contextual factor	Main mechanism	Effect on socioeconomic participation gaps	Key evidence/findings	Supporting citation
Compulsory voting	Reduces the individual costs of voting and strengthens incentives to participate	Can narrow turnout inequalities between socioeconomic groups by bringing less politically engaged citizens into elections.	Compulsory voting is associated with lower turnout inequality, although the effects of other electoral rules are less consistent.	Boyle (2024)
Electoral rules and registration arrangements	Shape accessibility, competitiveness, and incentives for mobilization	Depending on design, electoral institutions may either reduce or reinforce socioeconomic differences in turnout.	The effects of proportionality and registration rules are mixed, indicating that not all institutional reforms have equal effects on participation inequality.	Boyle (2024)
Overall turnout environment	High-turnout contexts mobilize groups that are otherwise less likely to vote	Lower turnout can increase disparities between advantaged and disadvantaged citizens.	In a Swedish re-election, declining turnout was associated with wider inequalities by income, education, and political interest.	Persson et al. (2013)
Trade unions	Provide political information, civic skills, recruitment, and organizational networks	Can compensate for limited personal resources among lower- and middle-income citizens and reduce class-based participation gaps.	Union membership and union strength increased turnout among both members and nonmembers, while union decline disproportionately affected less affluent groups.	Leighley & Nagler (2007)
Political parties and civil society organizations	Mobilization, recruitment, information provision, and collective identity formation	Inclusive mobilization can reduce inequality, while selective outreach to already active citizens may reinforce participation gaps.	Organizational effects depend on whether disadvantaged citizens are actively incorporated into political networks.	Leighley & Nagler (2007)
Welfare and social protection systems	Reduce economic insecurity and cushion the effects of low income	Stronger social protection may weaken the extent to which socioeconomic disadvantage translates into political disengagement.	Participation patterns differ across European countries, indicating that institutional context conditions the relationship between inequality and engagement.	Lancee & Van de Werfhorst (2012)
National economic development and prosperity	Influence the resources available to citizens and the meaning of relative income position	The impact of low income on turnout varies according to national prosperity and broader inequality.	The relationship between individual income and turnout is conditioned by both national inequality and economic development.	Jensen & Jespersen (2017)

Cross-national political context	Political culture, welfare arrangements, institutional design, and mobilization interact	Similar levels of socioeconomic disadvantage can generate different participation outcomes across democracies.	Cross-country variation demonstrates that inequality does not produce a uniform effect on democratic engagement.	Lancee & Van de Werfhorst (2012); Jensen & Jespersen (2017)
Overall institutional effect	Institutions mediate the translation of socioeconomic resources into political action	Political systems can either buffer or amplify participation inequality depending on electoral rules, organizational strength, and social protection.	The evidence suggests that socioeconomic participation gaps are partly institutionally produced and therefore potentially reducible.	Boyle (2024); Persson et al. (2013)

9. Democratic Consequences and Gaps in the Literature

9.1 Unequal Political Voice and Representation

Unequal participation is important because it can result in unequal political voice. Elites are more likely to hear citizens' preferences when they vote, give money, volunteer time, and reach out to officials. Elites are more likely to listen to citizens' voices when they vote, give money, volunteer time, and contact officials. The participation of affluent citizens on a regular basis may lead to their interests being better represented. Franko et al. (2016) tie class bias in turnout to ideology of the government, economic policy, and income distribution. Theodossiou and Zangelidis (2020) also point to a feedback dynamic where inequality is linked to decreased participation, and decreased participation is linked to increased inequality. Political and economic inequity can thus perpetuate itself, with underrepresented groups having less influence in democratic processes.

9.2 Economic Inequality and Democratic Legitimacy

Democratic legitimacy is undermined by socioeconomic participation gaps if citizens feel that political institutions are more responsive to the richer slices of society. Influences may be unevenly distributed, leading to a lack of meaningful participation. Solt (2010) demonstrates that inequality can play a role in reducing turnout and increasing income-based turnout differences. But it is not necessarily a sign of political equality if the turnout is the same. In some cases, income inequality works to decrease turnout bias, according to Matsubayashi and Sakaiya (2021), who note that poorer voters can be mobilized and richer citizens can be demobilized. Democratic legitimacy is dependent not only on high participation rates, but also on voluntary, informed, and meaningful engagement.

9.3 Research Gaps and Future Research Directions

There are still key research gaps with regard to inequality and participation. Research results are inconclusive about the relationship between inequality and engagement, indicating that more research is needed on nonlinear and context-dependent relationships. An inverted U-shaped relationship between inequality and turnout has been identified at the province and state level in Canada and states of India by Dash et al. (2023). The Wilford (2020) result also demonstrates how economic hardship and income inequality can have opposing impacts on voting. Wealth inequality, digital participation, life-course disadvantage and the interplay between socioeconomic factors and other social inequalities should be explored in future studies. More sophisticated longitudinal, multilevel and experimental designs are required to further elucidate causation and enhance evidence from less well-researched democratic settings.

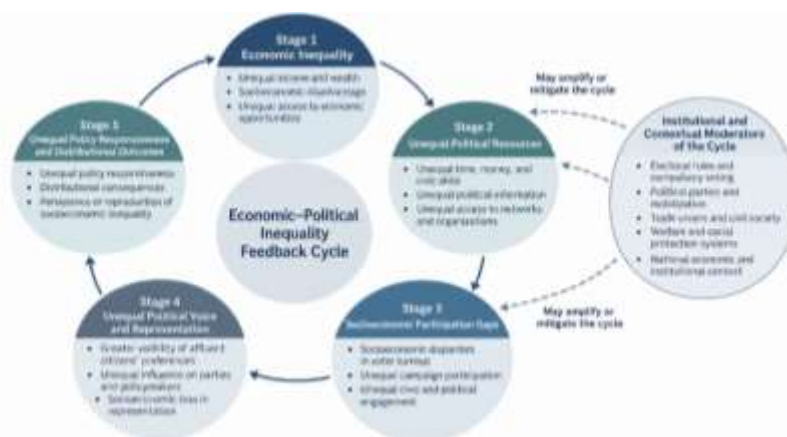


Figure 2: The Self-Reinforcing Cycle of Economic and Political Inequality

Note. Figure 2 summarizes how economic inequality can reinforce unequal political resources, participation, representation, and policy outcomes, while institutional factors may amplify or mitigate the cycle (Franko et al., 2016; Theodossiou & Zangelidis, 2020; Boyle, 2024; Persson et al., 2013; Leighley & Nagler, 2007). Figure 2 shows the cyclical relationship in which economic inequality can lead to unequal economic resources, unequal participation, unequal representation, and unequal economic outcomes, and on which institutional and contextual factors can enhance or diminish the connections.

10. Conclusion

The study suggests that socioeconomic status and economic inequality are key determinants of political participation in democratic forms. Citizen involvement tends to be greater where income, education, social resources, and political confidence are higher, and poorer, unemployed, less-educated, or less economically secure citizens, as well as less politically confident citizens, have fewer opportunities to become involved. The impact of inequality is not consistent. However, an economic disadvantage can decrease voting, campaigning, and other normal means of participation, but at times it can trigger protest and collective action, especially when perceived as injustice. These differences have significant implications for political equality and democratic representation. Advantaged groups will have unequal political influence if they are more regular in their participation, as their preferences might be given more weightage by political parties, representatives and the political system. Reducing these participation gaps can be achieved through institutional arrangements, electoral rules, civil society and inclusive mobilization. Wealth inequality, digital political participation, life-course disadvantage and the perceptions of fairness should be included in future research. More studies on a longitudinal and comparative basis are also necessary to better understand the interaction between socioeconomic conditions and political institutions over time. In conclusion, the importance of closing socioeconomic inequalities in democratic participation for democratic equality, democratic responsiveness, and the legitimacy of democratic institutions cannot be overstated.

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