Unequal representation and the role of the context and political elites

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Structure of the Presentation

1. Documenting unequal representation
2. Explaining unequal representation
3. Research frontiers
Citizens with lower and moderate incomes speak with a whisper that is lost on the ears of inattentive government officials, while the advantaged roar with a clarity and consistency that policy-makers readily hear and routinely follow.

(APSA Task Force Inequality 2004: 1)
Unequal representation

- APSA Task Force as starting point for renewed interest in unequal representation in the USA
- Literature covers now a wider range of countries, notably Europe
- Studies employ different conceptualizations of representation which makes comparison difficult:
  - **Congruence focus**: Giger et al. 2012; Rosset 2013; Lehmann et al. 2014
- but in general same conclusion:
  preferences of wealthier citizens tend to weigh more in political process
- **Caveat**: only when preferences between rich and poor differ! (for other critical voices see Soroka and Wlezien 2008, Ura and Ellis 2008, Enns and Wlezien 2011)
An example from the US

Questions where Preferences of the 50th and 90th Income Percentiles Diverge

(Source: Gilens 2005/2015)
An example from Europe

(Note: The figure depicts the size of the underrepresentation of the poor per country in terms of country-specific random slopes. Grey bars indicate that the differences are not statistically significant. Source: Giger Rosset Bernauer 2012)
Explanations

1. Documenting unequal representation

2. Explaining unequal representation

3. Research frontiers
Explanations for unequal representation

1. Individual level factors
2. (Direct) Influence of money
3. Political and structural factors
4. Descriptive representation / behavior of elites
2. Influence of money

- Politics is costly...
- US presidential campaigns are estimated to cost between 3 and 5 billion dollar...
- Likely that investment of donors is somehow rewarded
- Exact mechanisms difficult to disentangle
  - Individual donors / rewards to individual politicians
  - Party financing
  - Influence of (economic) interest groups
2. Influence of money

Party financing

- Political parties might have incentives to cater for the demands of their, richer than average, potential donors
- Correction factor: public subsidies for parties and/or strict regulation of party financing
- This factor is little studied so far, exceptions include:
  - Flavin 2015 studying variation in campaign restriction in the US states
  - Rosset 2015 on Swiss Cantons
2. Influence of money

Ties to interest groups

- Interest groups seek to influence policy outcomes, also by means of money
- Interest group influence not per se bad (see Giger and Klüver 2016)
- but economic interest groups have more resources than others (e.g. NGOs)
- Result "biased pluralism" (Gilens and Page 2014)?
Example

- **Research question:** Who has influence on policy outcomes in the US?
- **Sets of actors:** average citizen, economic elites, all interest groups, mass interest groups, business interest groups
- **Data:**
  - 1,779 policy proposals with public opinion survey
  - Time frame: 1981-2002
  - Formula: Policy outcome = preferences average citizen + preferences economic elites (90th income percentile) + interest-group alignment (# in favor - # against)
Example

(Source: Gilens and Page 2014)
3. Political and structural factors

- Cross-national focus allow testing institutional and structural factors (and setting US case in perspective)
- Findings so far:
  - **Electoral system** moderating factor: In proportional electoral systems less inequality in representation (of the poor) (Bernauer et al. 2015)
  - Equally does the context of **macro-economic inequality** moderate the degree of underrepresentation (Rosset et al. 2013)
- Prominent idea in the literature: **Vicious cycle** of reinforcing political and economic inequalities (Bartels 2008)
Example

- **Research question:** Does the electoral system moderate the unequal representation of poor (and women)?
- **Main hypothesis:** the more proportional the electoral rules, the lower the under-representation of (female) poor citizens
- **Data:**
  - CSES data 1996-2006, 24 countries
  - **Congruence measure:** Difference left-right position of citizens and closest party position
  - **Electoral system measure:** log median legislator district magnitude (Cox 1997)
Example

(Source: Bernauer Giger Rosset 2015)
4. Descriptive representation and behavior of elites

- Social background of elected politicians at center of attention
- Large socio-economic discrepancy between electorates and legislators
  ⇒ Does it matter?
- Arguments in the literature:
  1. Social background influences perception of problems
  2. Material self-interest of legislators
  3. Knowledge and information matters as it makes it less costly to engage in topics
4. Descriptive representation and behavior of elites

Two aspects relevant:

- **Preference gaps** between citizens and political elites due to unequal descriptive representation
  - They exist, especially regarding redistribution (see e.g. Lloren et al. 2015, Hakhverdian 2015, Carnes 2013, Carnes and Lupu 2015)

- **Effects of unequal descriptive representation on legislative behavior**
  - Disagreement in the literature; e.g. Carnes (2013) yes, Wüest and Lloren (2014) no
1. Documenting unequal representation

2. Explaining unequal representation

3. Research frontiers
Unsolved issues or stuff to tackle in the future

1. "Relevance" or substance of inequalities in representation
2. What do structural or political changes bring? Getting closer at the causal mechanisms
3. What determines unequal descriptive representation?
4. When does social background or material self-interest of MPs matter? What influence do institutional incentives have?
"Relevance" or substance of inequalities in representation

1. Complete equality exists only as normative ideal
2. Crucial question: are the reported inequalities substantial?
3. In other words: Is unequal representation also perceived by citizens/underrepresented groups?
4. ⇒ ESS Round 6 data can tell us more...
Example

- **Research question:** Do poor and rich individuals differ in their expectations on and their evaluation of democratic attainment in their country?

- **Main hypothesis:** Poor prefer more social equality and perceive a lower quality of democracy

- **Data:**
  - European Social Survey 2012 (18 countries)
  - 16 Questions on Importance and Evaluation of Democracy Dimensions
    - Importance and relevance of social equality (poverty reduction and income equality)
    - Importance and relevance of responsiveness (governments change plans in response to what people want)

- **Reference:** Rosset Giger Bernauer (2014) *ECPR Conference Paper*
Example

(Source: Rosset Giger Bernauer 2014)
Example

(Source: Rosset Giger Bernauer 2014)
Unsolved issues or stuff to tackle in the future

2. What do structural or political changes bring? Getting closer at the causal mechanisms...
   - E.g. more minority MPs in parliament?
   - More restrictive laws on lobbying, influence of money?
   - Potential ways forward 1: Over-time designs, exploiting structural or policy changes
   - Potential ways forward 2: Look at career paths of minority MPs
     - New paper project on Germany: Bailer, Breunig, Giger, Wüest (2016)
     - Parliamentary activities of MPs from different minority groups (poor/low social class, migrants etc.)
     - Hypotheses: Minority representation particularly important at the beginning of legislative career
What determines unequal descriptive representation?

- Role of parties, party organization?
- Role of citizens (electoral advantage for upper-class candidates?)
- Interesting (future) work: Survey experiments with individuals to probe decision-making criteria for candidate choice (project idea by Wüst/Pontusson)
- In general: Fruitful to look at similar debates (female candidates, candidates with migration background)
When does social background or material self-interest of MPs matter? What influence do institutional incentives have?

- Field experiments with public officials as promising way forward
- Broockman (2013) or Butler (2014) uncover racial discrimination of US politicians, Carnes and Holbein (2013) focus directly on social class/income groups
  - Potential to uncover unequal responsiveness by candidate/institutional characteristics, and/or putative constituents sending the emails
- Giger, Lanz, de Vries (2016) with first field experiment on Swiss candidates for the elections 2015
Experimental set-up

- 736 candidates to the Swiss National Council included
- Real-voters sent email with short question about lobbying in German/French
- 86 volunteers recruited (mostly University students) for this purpose
- Experiment conducted between 2.-4. October 2015
  - Answers until Election Day (18.10.) considered
Binary answer by canton

(Source: Giger Lanz 2016)
Binary answer by candidate characteristics

(Source: Giger Lanz 2016)
Conclusion

- Inequalities in representation are reality
  - Open question how substantive and consequential they are...
- Reasons for unequal representation not fully understood yet:
  
  *While much work has explored whether economic bias in representation exist, less attention has been paid to why they exist (Ellis 2013: 773)*

- More research with good causal research design needed to tackle these questions in the future


Thank you for your attention!