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Original Paper

Participation and Inequality

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1. Introduction

There are some indications in the academic literature that economic or wealth inequalities tend to diminish people's political participation (hereafter abbreviated PPP). Why? Let us investigate.

One first needs to confront the geography of the issue. The link is contingent upon perceptions, interactions, memberships and other relationships at some level of "community" (or lack thereof). The relevant community could be defined at almost any level: Neighborhood, Municipality, County, State, National or International. The choice of level depends on socio-economic class. This turns on wealth, income, education and social status. Only high class or status individuals are likely to have relationships that extend beyond the local levels of neighborhood, municipality or county. Local will be the focus of this chapter. Thus, we will be ignoring Presidential elections and efforts to increase people's political participation (hereafter abbreviated PPP) through mass-media.

The latter choice is made because decades of studies of PPP have and social status. We already know that PPP increases with both and that it is lowest for the lower. What we don't know rests on research that more recent research has served to reveal: The influence of "context", "efficacy" and other factors affecting participatory behaviors. These are sensitive to the closeness of people in communities. Again, geography strikes first. Since one's self- and other-perceived efficacy is somewhat sensitive to context, we will focus primarily on the latter.

In or out of context, what do we mean by "Self" and "Other"? After all, selfhood is variable over our lifetimes. Self grows with our growing up to include a greater or lesser number of others. The more intimate the others, beginning with family others, the more we are influenced by them. How often have we heard: "How you remind me of your father" (or mother)? For nearly all of us, efficacy increases with age, education, and experience. But the distinction between self and other still prevails. As we age, it translates increasingly into a concomitant pair: "Individual and Social". This distinction is the basis of Szewczk's contextual study of PPP. (Note 1)

His set of factors at work—his "independent" variables—is not complete but nevertheless quite

appropriate:

Individual > Contacting Members of Congress or other officials;

- Posting political messages online;
- Signing political petitions online;
- Voting; and
- Political recruitment (at the local community level).

Social > Trying to persuade others politically;

- Being persuaded, politically;
- Discussing politics with others; and
- Signing a political petition in the presence of another.

These differ from those employed by Schlozman et al. (SVB) in their classic **UNHEAVENLY CHORUS**. They define one set of four grounded on political campaigns: "working in a campaign, giving money to a campaign, going to a campaign meeting or rally, and trying to influence how someone votes". (Note 2) Only one of these electoral indicators jibes with one among Szewczk's more generally political set of activities.

The set from SBV are scaled in order to compute a mean score for each SES quintile and the from these the ratio of the mean for the top quintile to that for the bottom. In each presidential election year, the ratios for each presidential year are higher than those for voting, indicating that even at times of high voter turnout, at least four important indicators of political engagement are iniquitous. SBV's graph of the ratio points show evidence that political "inequality actually decreased" during a 12-year period (1998-2008). We'll put this in perspective as we go along. Nevertheless (but in fact with much more), SBV covers "growing inequality" and its persistence along with the fall of unionism as essential components of "context" in helping to explain PPP.

The SBV treatment is long on individuals and short on groups. The importance of Szewczk's distinguishing "social" from "individual" political activities is shown in his statistical regression results. He finds that, in local context, higher inequality leads to lower social trust that then engenders lower PPP. This is consistent with findings of others that in a "heterogeneous" (higher inequality) social context, group membership is less (Alasina et al., n.d.). Group-wise PPP, however, raises social trust which then serves to increase PPP. Higher inequality at the community level (hereafter abbreviated C-Inequality), together with lower social trust, tends to lead to more conservative social policies. Higher community inequality supports lower personal efficacy, which leads to lower PPP. Do these define the Trump era?, Or will the higher PPP of those in the Resist Movement serve to offset the Trumpian counter trends?

Szewczk hypotheses that C-Inequality will affect individual and social forms of PPP differently. Note that "community" has psychological dimensions which implicate membership, influence, identity, need fulfillment and shared emotional connections. All essential elements of community are found in high-status contexts. Low-status folks may feel they do not belong and have little influence. These

feelings are adverse to a community that may be considered healthy in psychological terms. Volunteering is likely less as well as PPP (Otto, 2002). Altogether, these influences imply that community context has an affect on social PPP greater than that on individual PPP.

There is likely to be greater political diversity among high C-Inequality areas but social PPP may well be less. As C-Inequality rises, social PPP declines among both low- and high-status individuals. In addition, both voting and giving are affected by C-Inequality, but they are "ultimately private acts". As C-Inequality rises, voting and giving tend to occur at rates lower than social PPP. The literature points to individual social status as a mediator between C-Inequality and PPP. Individuals with higher education are more likely to identify more with high income folks even if their education has not put them into the high-income group.

Political recruiters search among those most likely to be politically active. As indicated earlier, the search targets are also more likely to be high-status individuals. The probability of contacts made by political parties rises with status (Schlozman et al., 2012). Yet low-income folks contacted are likely to engage in PPP at a higher rate. For example, in battleground states in the 2016 mid-term elections, contacts did little to raise PPP among the affluent but accomplished a lot to raise it among low-income strata even though there were lower levels of recruitment activity in so-called "areas of exclusion" (mainly low-income). No surprise: Szewczek hypothesized that recruitment declines as C-Inequality rises.

Previous studies had shown that neighborhood status affects PPP among low-status individuals. Szewczk's hypotheses are more precisely formulated. His regression analysis provided the following results for the social PPP activities he specified:

- If an individual tried to convince family or friends to vote for someone;
  - Among low-status individuals: As C-Inequality goes up, the percentage of those engaged in PPP declines.
  - Among high-status folks: As C-Inequality rises, the percentage of doing PPP rises, too.
- Political discussions with family or friends;
  - As C-Inequality increases, PPP among low-status individuals rises, too, but that among high-status people rises even more.
- Signing a petition in person (not online).
  - The percentages across C-Inequality categories for are similar for low-status individuals but they rise significantly for those of high-status.

If numerical results for these were reported, one could see a gap increasing between the low- and high-status sets. Recall that individual social status is a mediator between C-Inequality and PPP. Decreases in social forms of PPP correlates with increases in efficacy while the latter decreases with social status. Higher C-Inequality implies lower group membership, which increases with social status.

Are lower-status people shut out from social forms of PPP in higher C-Inequality contexts? Yes. Look again at voting and contributing. People often participate politically to gain some of the benefits of

social solidarity. Individuals are more likely to vote if there is social pressure to do so. Low status folks have higher voter turnouts in higher C-Inequality districts because of pressure from high-status neighbors. Indeed, the turnout of low-status individuals is greater in high C-Inequality districts than if they lived in low C-Inequality communities. Among high-status people, turnouts decrease as C-Inequality rises.

As for the gap noted earlier, low C-Inequality zip-code areas show a 0.281 voting score. This is significantly less than the score for high C-Inequality areas. But as C-Inequality rises, low-status folks voting goes up, too, while high-status voting declines. This implies that social forms of PPP decline among the low-status even as voting goes up. Effects are opposite among high-status people.

Here, however, Szewczk apparently ignores people's availability and utilization of time as a factor in the low-status sets' lesser social PPP. Most such people work at least two jobs at lower pay, leaving little or no time for social PPP along with other "social" activities. Thus, one of his observations, that "in high C-Inequality areas, low status people are excluded from social forms of PPP", while it may be true in areas that suffer excessive racial discrimination, should be deemed false overall.

It may seem surprising that there is no significant statistical relationship between C-Inequality and recruitment for areas distinguished by zip codes, yet there is a relationship if the areal definition is larger—at the level of counties and congressional districts. At these levels we see recruitment among the low-status set declines as C-Inequality rises. The effect could be a result of recruiting techniques, of focusing on more homogeneous (low C-Inequality) areas. Recruitment by family and friends is influenced more because the influence circle is more compact.

2. Conclusions

Szeczyk: C-Inequality has no effect on individual forms of PPP except for voting. Voting goes up among the low-status and down for those of high-status. We have noted some contrasts with Schlozman et al., at the individual level.

Schlozman et al.: The most striking contrasts owe to the authors greater attention to the real-life consequences of being "low-status", including participation in means-tested programs in relation to PPP.

"Individuals... receiving means tested benefits have reasons to be politically active… Nevertheless, the beneficiaries of programs…not means tested were more active…" (Note 3).

Those receiving means tested benefits were more likely to discuss issues of basic human need such as matters involving poverty, jobs, health, housing (&c).—"much more likely to be discussing issues…germane to their own lives rather than abstract matters" (Note 4). Nevertheless, they were much less politically active, notwithstanding their "incentives" from lacking health coverage, living in dilapidated wellings or otherwise suffering the disabilities of poverty. Schlozman et al., define precisely what "low status" means and its consequences for PPP.

So, we now see the consequences of the many political vicious circles we have observed. We have

noted some contrasts with Schlozman et al., at the individual level. Those who have get more in large part because it is they who are politically active, contribute big money, and are more likely to contact their representatives and unelected government officials. Conversely, the low status folks participate less and get less. This conclusion may appear to blame the victim. No so. What we have learned is that our socio-economically biased political/governmental system is to blame and that it is up to US to fix it lest the U.S. we love is lost. Our system is polarized, corrupt and dysfunctional. Only "We the People" can save it.

PETER BEARSE, Ph.D., Author and Economist, January 29, 2019.

Notes

Note 1. Szewczk, Jimmy (2015), "The Effect of Income Inequality on Political Participation: A Contextural Analysis, Honors Thesis POLS 450.

Note 2. Schlozman, Kay Lehman, S. Verba and H. E. Brady (2012), *THE UNHEAVENLY CHORUS: Unequal Political Voice and the Broken Promise of American Democracy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, p. 157.

Note 3. Schlozman et al., p. 131.

Note 4. Schlozman et al., p. 132.