THE UNHEAVENLY CHORUS
UNEQUAL POLITICAL VOICE AND THE BROKEN PROMISE OF AMERICAN DEMOCRACY

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Princeton University Press
Princeton and Oxford
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American politicians have long claimed to speak for those who have no voice. Sounding a theme with an enduring pedigree in American politics, Richard Nixon famously appealed to “the great silent majority of my fellow Americans”—whom he contrasted with the “vocal minority” protesting the war in Vietnam. More than a century before, Andrew Jackson had lamented a situation in which “the laws undertake to add . . . artificial distinctions, to grant titles, gratuities, and exclusive privileges, to make the rich richer and the potent more powerful” and justified his veto of Bank of the United States in the name of “the humble members of society—the farmers, mechanics, and laborers—who have neither the time nor the means of securing like favors to themselves.” Similarly, William Jennings Bryan exalted “the farmer who goes forth in the morning and toils all day, begins in the spring and toils all summer, and the miners who go a thousand feet into the earth” and claimed that “We come to speak for this broader class.” Later on, in a time of “grave emergency,” candidate Franklin D. Roosevelt urged the nation not to neglect “the forgotten, the unorganized.”

The (Ambivalent) Tradition of Equality in America

All men are created equal.
Declaration of Independence, 1776

All men are born free and equal.
Constitution of Massachusetts, 1780

I believe in the equality of man.
Thomas Paine, The Age of Reason, 1794

During my stay in the United States, nothing struck me more forcibly
than the general equality of condition among the people. I readily
discovered the prodigious influence which this primary fact exercises on
the whole course of society.
Alexis de Tocqueville, Democracy in America, 1835

All men and women are created equal.
Declaration of Sentiments, Seneca Falls, 1848

... a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition
that all men are created equal.
Abraham Lincoln, Gettysburg Address, 1863

In respect of civil rights, all citizens are equal before the law. The humblest
is the peer of the most powerful.
John Marshall Harlan, Dissenting opinion, Plessy v. Ferguson, 1896

Although many Americans attribute them to the Constitution, the ringing
words of the Declaration of Independence, “All men are created equal,” occupy
a singular place in our collective heritage. Since the colonists chafed under the
rule of the British king, a commitment to equality has formed a thread in
American political discourse. One student of American exceptionalism under-
lines the significance of egalitarianism in the American ethos clearly:

There have been many attempts to distill the essence of American polit-
ical thought into a list of themes. Huntington, for instance, says that
The context in which contemporary political inequalities are embedded includes two significant trends over the past generation: increasing economic inequality and decreasing labor union membership and strength. These two trends are probably related to one another, although there are different interpretations as to just how. While both tendencies are evident in other developed democracies, they are especially pronounced in the United States. Both have consequences not only for economic outcomes but also for inequalities of political voice. While their economic implications surely outweigh their political ones, they constitute an essential part of the backdrop for our consideration of political voice. In this chapter we draw on scholarship in several fields to present a brief overview of the growth in economic inequality and the erosion in union strength. Throughout, we anchor our understanding of contemporary circumstances in longitudinal and cross-national data in order to make comparisons across time and space.

In two fundamental ways, class inequalities underlie our inquiry into both the roots and the consequences of inequalities of political voice. First, inequalities of political participation are grounded in disparities in income, occupation, and especially education. As we shall demonstrate over and over, social class has multiple consequences for differences in individual and collective political participation. Second, inequalities on the basis of class shape the content of political conflict. That is, class differences are an important source of political division. Although the list of contentious political issues in contemporary America is long and varied, there can be no doubt that matters
Underlying our analysis of inequalities of political voice is the premise that equal consideration of the interests and preferences of all citizens is an important component of democratic governance. Equal consideration depends on equal political voice. Those who express political voice—by voting or otherwise taking part in politics—are able to inform the government of their needs and preferences and to pressure public officials to pay attention; they are therefore in a better position to protect their interests. As we shall demonstrate over and over, the United States deviates from the ideal of equal voice. But is equal political voice—or, more realistically, more nearly equal voice than is currently the case—a desirable goal?

Before we begin our long journey into an empirical analysis of equal voice, we need to pause for a brief consideration of whether it is a goal worth pursuing.¹ One of the frustrations of democratic governance is how frequently

Beginning with this chapter, we switch gears and begin a multifaceted empirical exploration of the meaning of inequalities of political voice in American democracy. We tackle the problem of what the government hears from a variety of perspectives—considering, for example, the political voice of individuals and organizations, political voice offline and via the Internet, and the implications for political voice of processes of political mobilization and procedural reforms. In the context of growing inequality in the economic sphere, we consider whether inequalities of political voice have been increasing in a parallel fashion, as well as whether they are handed on across generations and whether they are transformed over the life cycle. As we proceed, we shall refer to the many issues we have already discussed.

Our data about inequalities of political voice focus on the input side. While we concentrate on one side of the equation only, our intellectual project acquires greater significance to the extent that messages sent have some impact and policy makers heed the voices emanating from the public. In this chapter we address the issue of governmental response in order to reassure readers, as well as ourselves, that our journey is worthwhile. We draw on previous research—including research we conducted ourselves—in order to assess whether inequalities of political voice make a difference; that is, we examine not whether the loudest voices always prevail but whether the messages expressed by citizens and organizations are noted and given serious consideration.

To introduce our discussion of whether political voice matters, we can suggest three conditions under which inequalities of political voice would
If inequality of political voice violates the democratic ideal of equal consideration of the needs and preferences of all citizens, inequality that continues over time would pose an even greater challenge to that democratic ideal. Persistently loud political voice from some politically significant categories of citizens coupled with the persistent quiescence of others is a deeper transgression. Policy makers inclined to listen to the messages they receive would be especially likely to pay attention not simply to the voices they hear but to the voices they hear now and expect to hear in the future. To the extent that they are attentive to voters, contributors, or other activists whose assistance they seek, they would have particular incentives to heed the communications from those whose support they might solicit in the future.

In this chapter and those that follow, we use several sources of data to investigate these matters, paying particular attention to the differential voice of the advantaged and the disadvantaged. We begin by considering whether the participatory advantage of those who are high in socio-economic status (SES)—documented by cross-sectional data in Chapter 5—persists over time and, in particular, whether the widely noted increase in economic inequality since the late 1970s has been matched by increasing socio-economic stratification of political voice.

Then we use three-wave panel surveys to ask whether ongoing inequalities of political voice reflect not just continuing activity by the same kinds of people but persistent activity by the same individuals. We show not only that

1. The literature on the persistence of political engagement has focused more on continuities of partisanship than on continuities in activity. See, for example, M. Kent Jennings and