Representing the rich

*Economic and political inequality in established democracies*

Schakel, W.

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Does money buy power? There has always been a tension between the economic inequality produced by capitalism and the political equality that is central to the idea of democracy. Though it is commonly assumed – or hoped for – that all citizens are roughly equal in the influence they can exert in the political sphere, such ideals are rather brittle when some citizens can use large amounts of money to amplify their political voice. Recent years have seen a surge of empirical research investigating this link between economic and political inequality. While this research has provided many answers, it has also left us with questions about the scope and causes of inequality in representation.

This dissertation takes up these questions by investigating whether and why government policy in established democracies is biased towards the preferences of the rich. Through a range of empirical studies, which combine comparative and single-country analysis, as well as quantitative and qualitative methods, a clear picture of unequal representation emerges. Across advanced democracies, policy is more responsive to the rich than to middle- and low-income citizens. Furthermore, the available evidence suggests that the causes of this unequal representation are multiple, with biases in organized interests, political participation, party politics, and dominant ideologies all likely to play a role in its creation.

In short, Representing the Rich expands on our knowledge of where and why economic inequality produces political inequality. It shows that, contrary to popular ideals, the political system is an important part of the process through which economic inequality reproduces and, in some cases, magnifies itself. To all those who care about political equality, this should provide an impetus to further understand how this value is currently undermined and what can be done to level the playing field.
REPRESENTING THE RICH

Economic and Political Inequality in Established Democracies

Wouter Schakel
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REPRESENTING THE RICH
Economic and Political Inequality in Established Democracies

ACADEMISCH PROEFSCHRIFT

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aan de Universiteit van Amsterdam
op gezag van de Rector Magnificus
prof. dr. ir. K.I.J. Maex

ten overstaan van een door het College voor Promoties ingestelde commissie,
in het openbaar te verdedigen
op dinsdag 2 juni 2020, te 16:00 uur

door

Wouter Schakel
geboren te Graafstroom
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Chapter 2 is based on a co-authored article with Brian Burgoon and Armen Hakhverdian which has been published in Politics & Society (Schakel, W., Burgoon, B. and Hakhverdian, A. (2020) ‘Real but Unequal Representation in Welfare State Reform’, Politics & Society, 48(1), pp. 131-163). I had the idea for the article, prepared and analyzed the data, and wrote much of the text. Brian Burgoon assisted in the data analysis, and both Brian Burgoon and Armen Hakhverdian contributed to the text.


Chapter 4 is based on a co-authored article with Brian Burgoon. I had the idea for the article, prepared and analyzed the data, and wrote much of the text. Brian Burgoon contributed to the text.

Chapter 5 is based on a single-authored article.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

This dissertation contains a brief appendix after the main text. Many additional analyses are presented in online appendices. These appendices can be found at Harvard Dataverse, along with replication materials for the quantitative studies (https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/D7ZOG0).
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We have a tendency to see social life through an individualistic lens. In this lens, any achievement is interpreted as owing mostly to the effort of single individuals, while the institutions and communities behind it disappear from view. As is true in general, however, it would be completely misleading to interpret this dissertation in this way. This study is as much a reflection of my environment during my time at the University of Amsterdam as it is of myself, if it is even possible to separate the two. As a result, it seems inadequate to thank people for what was really a collective effort, though I will happily do so here.

My largest debt is of course owed to my supervisors – Brian Burgoon, Armen Hakhverdian and Daphne van der Pas – without whom this dissertation would not have existed at all. First and foremost, I want to thank Brian Burgoon. Brian, you have inspired and supported me immensely with your extraordinary intellect, your profound curiosity and openness, your methodological and econometric expertise and, above all, your kindness and generosity. I am fortunate to call you my mentor and friend, and I hope I will be able to continue doing so.

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For the funding of this dissertation, I am indebted to the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO). This organization has come under criticism – rightly, I believe – for its own individualistic lens in the allocation of research funding, but I was lucky enough to benefit from it. This dissertation was financed through a research talent grant from the NWO, which gave me a lot of freedom to shape my project. It deserves mentioning that the grant proposal promised to answer two questions: how the effect of economic inequality on policy representation is moderated by political institutions, and how this effect is moderated by different forms of economic inequality (income versus wealth). I can now report that I have failed to answer either of these questions. Nevertheless, I hope and believe that we have produced a relevant piece of scholarship, one with a slightly different and more realistic ambition, such that this has not been a waste of tax money.

In November of 2019, I co-organized a workshop on the topic of unequal representation, which proved a fitting end to my PhD trajectory. I want to thank the Amsterdam Centre for Inequality Studies (AMCIS) for sponsoring this workshop. I also want to extend my gratitude to Jonas Pontusson, Noam Lupu and Brian Burgoon for organizing it with me, as well as to the people who participated in it.

For chapter 5 of this dissertation, I interviewed several people with expertise and experience of pension reform in the Netherlands. I thank Peter Gortzak, Jurre de Haan, Agnes Jongerius, Frank Vandenbroucke and Roos Vermeij for graciously giving me some of their time, and I thank Klara Boonstra for her help in arranging several of the interviews.

On a personal level, I am grateful to my family for providing a very different kind of community, away from academia and politics. To my nephews and nieces, Thijs, Sven, Lasse,
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Wouter Schakel