

Not all citizens' votes created equal, and study says it shows in funding

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Political science professor Tiberiu Dragu says some votes count for more than others in many democracies, and a multi-nation study he co-authored shows that some states benefit significantly in federal funding as a result. Credit: Photo by L. Brian Stauffer, U. of I. News Bureau

"One person, one vote" is often the rallying cry for democratic reform, suggesting everyone should get an equal say in their government.

Yet in some of the oldest and largest democracies, some votes are worth far more than others by design. A Wyoming voter, for instance, is significantly over-represented compared with a California voter. Each state has two U.S. senators, but California has 66 times more people.

How much does it matter? According to a recent study of decades of data, from the U.S. and eight other countries, it matters a lot when it comes to money.

"Other things being equal, the most over-represented states or provinces can expect to receive more than twice the federal funding per capita as the most under-represented states or provinces," according to Tiberiu Dragu (Tih-BAIR-ee-oo DRAH-goo), co-author of the study with Jonathan Rodden. In some examples from South America, they found a funding difference of five to one.

Dragu is a professor of political science at the University of Illinois; Rodden is a professor of [political science](#) at Stanford University. Their study, "Representation and Redistribution in Federations," one of the few to examine the issue over multiple countries, was published online this month in the [Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences](#).

The authors made use of three decades of data from Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, Germany, Mexico, Spain, Switzerland and the U.S. All are democracies structured as federations, in which partially self-governing states or provinces are united under a central government.

In coming to their conclusions, they account for numerous other factors that have been suggested as contributing to the imbalances in federal funding – among them population density, poverty, economic development, location and past political power (such as a state might derive from being part of the nation's founding).

The relationship between representation and per-capita funding, however, "cannot be explained away," Dragu said. In all nine countries, "the story remains the same: Representatives of over-represented provinces are able to bargain for a disproportionate share of the budget," he said.

Or as the authors write in their paper: "Our analysis indicates that the rules of representation are indeed highly consequential. Controlling for a variety of country- and province-level factors and using a variety of

estimation techniques, we show that overrepresented provinces in political unions around the world are rather dramatically favored in the distribution of resources."

The study focused on established federations because they almost always involve some form of unequal representation, often resulting from the political bargain struck at the nation's founding, Dragu said. The imbalance therefore is accepted by the citizens, "shrugged off as a quirky and perhaps inconsequential legacy of a proud history," he said.

The study's results, however, "might have important implications in a wide range of settings where the foundational bargain is neither old nor widely revered," Dragu said. They also could challenge assumptions that such unequal representation is necessary as a "pathway to peace and stability," such as in Afghanistan and Iraq, or the European Union, he said.

"An important open question is whether the stability of such federations is threatened if citizens of under-represented regions – or ethnic groups, or countries – must provide large, permanent subsidies to those with greater representation."

Provided by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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