

Scholar explores limited electoral power of low-income Americans

September 11 2017, by Milenko Martinovich

Representative democracies, ideally, are meant to give all citizens, no matter their economic status, equal voice.

But the collective voice of low-income voters has been mostly silent in the United States, leaving a large majority of Americans feeling underrepresented by the country's major political parties.

[Who Speaks for the Poor? Electoral Geography, Party Entry, and Representation](#), a new book by Karen Jusko, an assistant professor of political science at Stanford, examines why political parties represent some groups, and not others, with a special focus on the representation of low-income citizens. Drawing on historical evidence and cross-national analysis, she argues that the key to understanding the limited political and partisan representation of low-income voters lies in American electoral geography.

Stanford News Service interviewed Jusko about her new book:

Are U.S. political leaders receptive to low-income voters? If not, why?

While the policy-making process is often quite responsive to the preferences of high-income Americans, the interests of low-income Americans are rarely considered. Indeed, this inequality is reflected in the relatively generous benefits for middle- and high-income households

(e.g., home mortgage interest deduction and other tax subsidies), and the quite limited American response to poverty, particularly compared to other postindustrial countries.

How might we account for this inequality? Earlier work emphasizes different tastes for redistribution or, alternatively, the roles of class-based organizations, like labor unions or social democratic parties, in advocating for more generous social policy.

In my book, I suggest that inequality ultimately results from the variance in the electoral power of income groups. Specifically, because of how income groups are distributed across electoral districts – and because of the way in which seats are allocated within districts – an income group's ability to cast decisive votes varies. "Electoral geography," therefore, can create (or undermine) parties and candidates' incentives to mobilize different income groups, and may be the critical factor in understanding the representation of low-income citizens and responses to poverty.

What prevents the poor from having effective political representation?

Low-income Americans have very limited electoral power. That is, if all low-income voters (those living in households earning incomes in the first third of the national income distribution) turned out to vote, and they all voted for the same [party](#), they would elect no more than about 8 percent of the seats in the House of Representatives.

Two features of American electoral geography contribute to this result: First, elections are contested in single-member districts, which means that in order to be pivotal, a group must comprise about half of a [district](#)'s electorate. Second, congressional districts are very large (currently, about 711,000 people, about the same size as the city of Seattle) and

tend to be economically diverse. As a consequence, low-income voters only rarely form the pivotal majority of a district's electorate. What all of this means is that very few representatives have incentives to be responsive to the interests of the low-income voters living in their districts, or to a low-income constituency, more generally.

In other countries, even those with similar single-member district electoral systems, district boundaries tend to be drawn in ways that contribute to more equitable distributions of electoral power. For example, low income voters in the UK – again, about 33 percent of the population – are pivotal in approximately 23 percent of the seats elected to the House of Commons. In France, low-income voters are pivotal in about 31 percent of single-member electoral districts.

What accounts for the absence of social democratic and workers' parties in the U.S.? These parties usually represent the interests of low-income citizens and are mainstays in other developed democracies. Can we attribute the absence of a low-income or worker's party to America's electoral geography?

Certainly, current American electoral geography would present a significant challenge to any new party that might hope to mobilize a low-income constituency: it would win very few seats.

The challenges for an American labor party have deep historical roots. Specifically, opportunities for new party entry result from changes in local distributions of electoral power that favor one group across a substantial number of districts. When a group is excluded from party networks either explicitly, or because its members are new arrivals (i.e., migrants or immigrants), it may be especially ripe for mobilization.

Importantly, in the U.S., changes in electoral geography have typically favored agricultural constituencies. The People's Party, for example, which entered electoral competition in the 1890s, recruited candidates in those districts where migration and immigration enhanced the electoral power of low-income farmers. The People's Party then tailored its appeals to mobilize these newly pivotal agricultural workers, rather than responding to the interests of an urban working class.

Also, the slowing rates of migration and immigration in the 1930s, which introduced greater stability to local partisan networks, and the dramatic increase of the size of congressional districts from over the past 100 years limited the success of a social democratic or labor party. While districts are becoming more diverse, larger changes in local populations are needed to create opportunities for new party entry.

Could the populist wave that swept President Trump into office be attributed to the limited electoral power of low-income voters?

Support for President Trump was especially high among white voters without college education, who expressed discontent with their economic circumstances long before he emerged as the likely Republican candidate. While political scientists continue their work to understand the origins of support for President Trump, and especially the roles of racial animosity and identity politics, notice that in those (relatively few) districts where white low-income voters form the numerical majority, votes for President Trump exceeded votes for Hillary Clinton by an average margin of about 41 percent. In each of these districts, the Trump-Clinton margin exceeded former Republican candidate Mitt Romney's vote margin over incumbent President Barack Obama by an average of 10 percentage points. What this suggests to me, at least, is that President Trump's anti-establishment appeals possibly mobilized these low-income

voters who may have limited experience with democratic responsiveness—an empirical claim that warrants further investigation.

What remedies to help low-income citizens gain a political voice does your book offer?

The best way to amplify the voice of low-income Americans would be to increase their electoral power. If the size of the House of Representatives was increased, so that low-income voters were more frequently pivotal in congressional elections, more legislators would have incentives to mobilize their support, and to be responsive to their interests.

As I suggest in the conclusion of *Who Speaks for the Poor?*, from the perspective offered by electoral geography, American legislators' limited responsiveness to low-income voters is not a puzzling feature of contemporary American politics. Rather, the absence of a low-income people's party and the generally poor quality of representation for low-income Americans reflects the incentive structures created by the current and historical distributions of electoral power.

Provided by Stanford University

Citation: Scholar explores limited electoral power of low-income Americans (2017, September 11) retrieved 20 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2017-09-scholar-explores-limited-electoral-power.html>

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