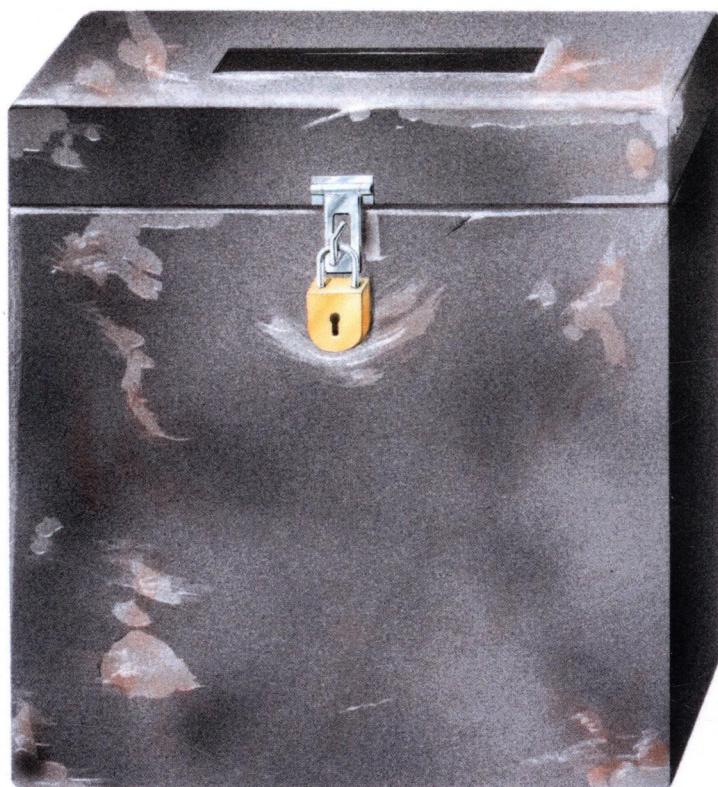


EXCLUSION BY ELECTIONS

Inequality, Ethnic Identity, and Democracy

JOHN D. HUBER



Exclusion by Elections develops a theory about the circumstances under which 'class identities' as opposed to 'ethnic identities' become salient in democratic politics, and links this theory to issues of inequality and the propensity of governments to address it. The book argues that in societies with even modest levels of ethnic diversity, inequality invites ethnic politics, and ethnic politics results in less redistribution than class politics. Thus, contrary to existing workhorse models in social science, where democracies are expected to respond to inequality by increasing redistribution, the argument here is that inequality interacts with ethnic diversity to discourage redistribution. As a result, inequality often becomes reinforced by inequality itself. The author explores the argument empirically by examining cross-national patterns of voting behaviour, redistribution and democratic transitions, and he discusses the argument's implications for identifying strategies that can be used to address rising inequality in the world today.

JOHN D. HUBER's research focuses on understanding how the social, political and institutional context affects the outcomes of democratic processes. Along with numerous articles, he is the author of two previous Cambridge University Press books, *Rationalizing Parliament, Legislative Institutions and Party Politics in France* (1996), and *Deliberate Discretion? Institutional Foundations of Bureaucratic Autonomy* (2002, with Charles Shipan).

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Inequality, Ethnic Identity, and Democracy

JOHN D. HUBER

Columbia University



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[continued after Index]

Acknowledgments

This book project grew from a narrow initial ambition, which was to develop an argument about how different identities emerge in electoral competition. But the project grew and developed in unanticipated directions, and ended with a rather sobering theme, which is that through its role in shaping identity politics, inequality itself often constrains the extent to which democracies can be expected to address inequality. I hope that by sketching the logic of how inequality can impede redistribution in democracies we can think in new ways about how to address growing inequality in the world today.

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Contents

<i>List of Figures</i>	page viii
<i>List of Tables</i>	x
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xi
1 Introduction	1
1.1 The Argument	3
<i>Party Competition and Social Structure</i>	7
<i>Empirical Implications</i>	8
1.2 Some Illustrative Observations and Examples	10
<i>Voting and Naturalization by Immigrants in</i>	
<i>Nineteenth-Century American Cities</i>	11
<i>The Bumiputera in Malaysia</i>	13
1.3 Organization of the Book	15
2 Why Worry about Inequality and Ethnic Politics?	17
2.1 Problems with Inequality	17
2.2 Problems with Ethnic Diversity	21
2.3 Ethnic Identities and Ethnic Politics	24
2.4 Redistributive Politics	27
2.5 Next Steps	31
PART I THE THEORETICAL ARGUMENT	33
3 Group Identity and the Politics of Exclusion	35
3.1 Elections with Appeals to Atomistic Voters	36

3.2	Group Identity and Electoral Competition	39
3.3	Social Structure and Electoral Politics	42
3.4	From Social Structure to Party Systems	47
4	A Theory of Social Structure, Electoral Identities, and Party Systems	49
4.1	Some Puzzles about Party Competition with Identity Politics	49
4.2	Party Competition under Plurality Rule	51
4.3	Theoretical Robustness	55
	<i>Proportional Representation</i>	55
	<i>Government Revenues from Income Taxes on the Rich</i>	59
	<i>More than Two Ethnic Groups</i>	61
4.4	Conclusion	62
4.5	Appendix	64
	<i>Agent Utility Functions</i>	66
	<i>Definition of an Equilibrium</i>	67
	<i>Analysis of the Plurality Rule Case</i>	69
	<i>The Model under Proportional Representation</i>	74
	<i>The Model When Government Revenues Come from Taxes on the Rich</i>	78
5	Inequality, Ethnic Divisions, and the Democratic Process	81
5.1	Why Can't the Government Simply Determine n_{NR} ?	82
5.2	The Gini Coefficient of Inequality and the Number of Nonrich	84
5.3	The Number in the Majority Group, n_A	91
5.4	Inequality, Ethnic Diversity, and Identity Politics	95
5.5	Summary	98
	PART II EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE FOR THE ARGUMENT	99
6	Theory and Causal Identification	101
6.1	The Bias of Identification-Driven Research against Studies Like the One in This Book	102
6.2	Theory and Causal Inference	107
6.3	Conclusion	113

7	Income and Voting Behavior	114
7.1	The Data	115
7.2	Income and Voting Behavior	118
	<i>Attitudes Toward Inequality</i>	127
	<i>Inequality and the Income–Vote Relationship at Different Levels of Ethnic Diversity</i>	132
7.3	Endogeneity and Electoral Behavior in Old and New Democracies	138
7.4	Conclusion	142
8	Inequality, Ethnic Diversity, and the Ethnification of Party Systems	144
8.1	Measuring Ethnic Voting Behavior	144
8.2	Gini, EP, and Party System Ethnification	147
8.3	Old and New Democracies	155
8.4	Conclusion	158
9	Social Structure, Redistribution, and Democratic Transitions	160
9.1	Inequality, Ethnic Diversity, and Redistribution in Democratic Systems	161
	<i>Ethnic Voting and Redistribution</i>	172
	<i>Education as a Gini Measure of “Redistribution”</i>	173
9.2	Inequality and Democratic Transitions	178
9.3	Summary	182
10	Conclusion: Inequality and the Politics of Exclusion	183
	<i>References</i>	193
	<i>Index</i>	201

Figures

1.1	The number of nonrich voters and incentives for class politics	<i>page 6</i>
1.2	Inequality and ethnic voting in Africa	12
3.1	Which smallest majority?	38
3.2	Class and ethnic identity in a population of 100 voters	43
3.3	Societies in which individuals have a class and ethnic identity	44
3.4	A society with three incomes and three ethnic groups	45
4.1	Elections under PR	57
4.2	Three ethnic groups	62
5.1	The number of nonrich voters and the Gini	86
5.2	Income distributions in Brazil and Bulgaria	89
7.1	Scatterplot of the income–vote relationship at different levels of inequality	120
7.2	The relationship between income and the vote at different levels of inequality	125
7.3	The relationship between income and the vote after removing regional effects	128
7.4	The relationship between income and attitudes at different levels of inequality	131
7.5	Inequality and the income–vote relationship at different levels of ethnic polarization	137

7.6	Gini and the income–vote relationship in older and newer democracies	142
8.1	PVP at different levels of inequality and ethnic polarization	148
8.2	The estimated coefficients for Gini (or EP) at different levels of EP (or Gini)	153
8.3	The estimated coefficients for Gini at different levels of EP in new and old democracies	157
9.1	The distribution of <i>Redistribution</i>	162
9.2	The estimated marginal effect of <i>Gini</i> at different levels of ethnic polarization	166
9.3	The distribution of primary and secondary enrollment across democracies	174
9.4	The marginal effect of Gini on secondary enrollment at different levels of ethnic diversity	178
9.5	The estimated marginal effect of <i>Gini</i> on transitions to democracy at different levels of ethnic polarization	181

Tables

7.1	The WVS sample of countries	<i>page</i> 117
7.2	Income and party choice	122
7.3	Income and attitudes toward inequality	130
7.4	The income-vote relationship at different levels of ethnic polarization	134
7.5	Random effects models of vote choice in old and new democracies	141
8.1	Inequality, ethnic diversity, and the ethnic bases of parties	149
8.2	The ethnification of party systems in older and newer democracies	156
9.1	Inequality, ethnic diversity, and redistribution I	164
9.2	Inequality, ethnic diversity and redistribution II	168
9.3	Ethnic parties and redistribution	175
9.4	Secondary school enrollment	176
9.5	Inequality, ethnic diversity and transitions to democracy	180

Introduction

Since the mid-1980s there has been a marked increase in inequality across most democratic countries around the world. The super-rich now earn a much greater proportion of income and hold a much greater proportion of wealth than they did in the 1970s. The well-known Gini coefficient has steadily increased. The wages of rich individuals have increased much more quickly than those of poorer individuals, and the middle class has been hit hard, with the relative wage of the median earner steadily declining. Measured in any of a number of ways, the distribution of income across societies has become increasingly skewed toward the rich.

One might expect the competitive electoral process to create incentives for parties and candidates to adopt policies that redress economic inequalities: if economic advantage is concentrated in the hands of a few, the disadvantaged masses should elect parties committed to redistributive policies. This dynamic does occur in varying degrees across many democracies, but it is often striking how weak the democratic response is to inequality. As income and wealth in the United States become increasingly concentrated among the very rich in the United States, for example, so has the prominence of right-wing policies that call for a sharply limited role of government. Similar dynamics unfold in other countries, rich and poor. This frequently tepid response to the concentration of wealth presents a puzzle: Why do voters, faced with rising income disparities, often elect parties that oppose policies that could address these disparities? Or, put differently, why does it often seem so challenging for “class politics” – where an important element of electoral

politics concerns the role of government in aiding the nonrich – to emerge in democratic polities?

An important part of the answer to this question can be found by considering a second puzzle, one that is typically treated as unrelated to concerns about inequality. In many countries, an “ethnic identity” with which one is born – by which I mean not only ethnic identities, but also racial, religious, linguistic, or tribal identities, depending on the context – becomes a salient element of electoral competition. When this happens, parties explicitly or implicitly try to win votes by competing for support from specific groups, and voters view their relevant electoral identity more in terms of their ethnicity than their class. In US elections, for example, there is considerable emphasis on the role of race. In Bangladesh there are electoral divisions between Hindus and Muslims. In India there are electoral divisions based on religion and caste. In Nigeria, Hausa, Yoruba, and Ibo often support different parties. At times, things can go badly awry when group identity becomes central to electoral politics. Iraq, for example, descended into chaos after the American invasion in large part due to sectarian divisions between Shias and Sunnis. And civil conflict in Ukraine has been centered on tensions between Russians and Ukrainians.

But there is substantial variation across countries in the extent to which ethnic identities become central to electoral politics. The salience of “Catholic” and “Protestant” identities, for example, is much different in Northern Ireland than in Germany. The salience of racial identity is much more central to electoral politics in the United States than in Brazil. When Georgia has had democratic elections, “identity politics” has been much less salient than in Ukraine, even though these countries have similar levels of ethnic diversity. In Estonia, ethnic divisions in voting are more apparent than they are in Latvia, even though ethnic diversity is greater in Latvia. India and Indonesia have similar levels of ethnic diversity, but the salience of identity in elections is much greater in India. These examples suggest a second puzzle: Why does ethnicity become more important to electoral politics in some contexts than in others?

We can gain insights into these two puzzles by developing a theory of how various identities become salient in electoral competition. Individuals typically have multiple identities. One identity that is ubiquitous in all societies is economic “class” – a term used narrowly in this book to refer to an individual’s level of economic well-being. Individuals also have at least one “ethnic identity” that is inherited at birth. Ethnic and class identities frequently become salient in democratic politics because they create an efficient means for politicians to organize the quest for