

THE **UN**HEAVENLY CHORUS

**UNEQUAL POLITICAL VOICE
AND THE BROKEN PROMISE
OF AMERICAN DEMOCRACY**

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THE UNHEAVENLY CHORUS

Unequal Political Voice and
the Broken Promise
of American Democracy

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THE UNHEAVENLY CHORUS

To our many students, then and now—
with whom we feel a deep connection;
to whom we hope we have given a richer understanding
of democratic equality;
from whom we know we have learned.

The flaw in the pluralist heaven is that the heavenly chorus sings with a strong upper-class accent.

E. E. Schattschneider, *The Semisovereign People*

No government is legitimate if it does not show equal concern for the fate of those citizens over whom it claims dominion.

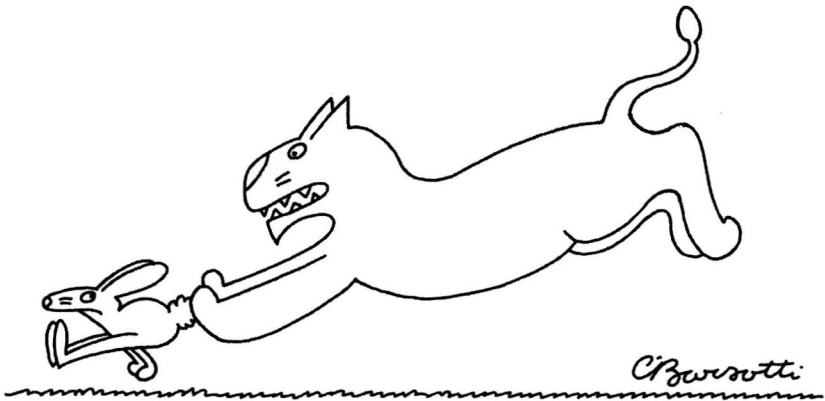
Ronald Dworkin, *Sovereign Virtue:
The Theory and Practice of Equality*

When you are in the legislature, it can be hard to distinguish the loud from the many.

Maggie Wood Hassan, former state senator, New Hampshire

If you're not at the table, you're on the menu.

Washington adage



"What are you complaining about? It's a level playing field."

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PREFACE

Just as we were in the late stages of finishing a draft of the manuscript for this volume, the satirical newspaper, *The Onion*, announced that the American people had hired Jack Weldon, a heavy-hitting Washington lobbyist from Patton Boggs, to help to represent their concerns before Congress:

Known among Beltway insiders for his ability to sway public policy on behalf of massive corporations such as Johnson & Johnson, Monsanto, and AT&T, Weldon, 53, is expected to use his vast network of political connections to give his new client a voice in the legislative process.

Weldon is reportedly charging the American people \$795 an hour.

“Unlike R. J. Reynolds, Pfizer, or Bank of America, the U.S. populace lacks the access to public officials required to further its legislative goals,” a statement from the nation read in part. “Jack Weldon gives us that access.”

“His daily presence in the Capitol will ensure the American people finally get a seat at the table,” the statement continued. “And it will allow him to advance our message that everyone, including Americans, deserves to be represented in Washington.” . . .

The 310-million-member group said it will rely on Weldon’s considerable clout to ensure its concerns are taken into account when Congress addresses issues such as education, immigration, national security, health care, transportation, the economy, affordable college tuition, infrastructure, jobs, equal rights, taxes, Social Security, the environment, housing, the national debt, agriculture, energy, alter-

native energy, nutrition, imports, exports, foreign relations, the arts, and crime.¹

The deeply troubling issue underlying this humorous spoof—a concern about whether ordinary Americans have a voice in the politics of their democracy—is the same one that brought us to write this book. For some time, economists have been using systematic data to demonstrate convincingly the extent of the inequalities of income and wealth in the United States—most recently in an authoritative study by the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office.² We have undertaken a parallel project for the political arena: to use systematic evidence of several kinds to measure and analyze inequalities of political voice or, to echo our title, to listen carefully to the chorus of American political activists to determine whether it sings with an upper-class accent.

In September 2011, some months after this unsettling satire appeared, we were putting the final touches on the manuscript when concern about inequality—which, despite increasing attention and debate among elites, had gained little political traction within the public—was suddenly dramatized by populist protest on the left. The unstructured and leaderless Occupy movement spread quickly from Wall Street not just to San Francisco and Seattle but to Omaha, Dallas, Miami, and Cheyenne. Although its objectives seem somewhat inchoate, a dominant theme in its anticorporate, egalitarian rhetoric is the gap between rich and poor. However, a subsidiary goal, achieving political voice for the politically silent, is expressed in hand-lettered signs with the following messages: “You have the right to remain silent, but I wouldn’t recommend it.” “I can’t afford a lobbyist. I am in the 99%.” “I am so angry, I made a sign.” At this point, we cannot predict whether the Occupy protest will be sustained after the first blizzard of 2011, much less whether it will have a political impact. Still, like the Tea Party—in many respects its counterpart on the opposite side of the political spectrum—Occupy Wall Street demonstrates the frustrations of ordinary people who think that nobody in a position of power is listening.

1. *The Onion*, October 6, 2010. Reprinted with permission of THE ONION. Copyright © 2011, by ONION, INC. www.theonion.com.

2. Congress of the United States, Congressional Budget Office, “Trends in the Distribution of Household Income between 1979 and 2007” (October 2011), <http://www.cbo.gov/ftpdocs/124xx/doc12485/10-25-HouseholdIncome.pdf> (accessed November 9, 2011).

Why Another Book?

A decade and a half ago, the three of us published a hefty tome on the subject of inequalities in political activity.³ *Voice and Equality* described the extent to which the preferences and interests of citizens are represented unequally through the political activity of individuals and analyzed the origins of participatory inequalities. The core of *Voice and Equality* was a series of statistical analyses explaining why some people get involved in politics and others remain quiescent. A subsidiary theme was to delineate the consequences of what we had found for political voice: that is, to explore the implications for the cacophony of political expression from citizens of the way that the process of political participation works and to assess the extent to which political input is representative of the citizenry as a whole.

Why, one might ask, have we now written another book on inequalities of political voice? In publishing *Voice and Equality*, we exhausted ourselves—and probably our readers—but not the subject, one we found endlessly fascinating and considered to be critical to democratic governance in the United States. We recognized that, while we had written a lot, we had not said our last word.

Jointly and severally, we continued to work on aspects of citizen participation, eventually deciding that *Voice and Equality* needed a sequel, one that would not be *V and E Redux* in either substance or form. We knew from the outset that we wanted to extend our earlier analysis of the problem of inequalities in political voice in several directions: to investigate inequalities of political voice that result not only from the participation of individuals but also from the multiple activities of the organizations that are involved in politics; to understand whether inequalities of political voice persist over time and, if so, to discover the origins of that persistence; to assess whether it is possible to break the pattern by which inequalities of political voice are associated with inequalities in education and income; and to investigate how the possibilities for political participation on the Internet fit into the picture.

Furthermore, the follow-up volume would be very different from *Voice and Equality* in terms of its sources. Rather than taking a single rich data set and analyzing it to a fare-thee-well, we would explore more widely in a variety of topics and sources, drawing from existing literatures and data as well as archival materials. Moreover, we took an oath: “Read our lips. No new data.”

3. Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Henry E. Brady, *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism and American Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).