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# The policy consequences of unequal participation

William Walter Franko

*University of Iowa*

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THE POLICY CONSEQUENCES OF UNEQUAL PARTICIPATION

by

William Walter Franko

An Abstract

Of a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the Doctor of  
Philosophy degree in Political Science  
in the Graduate College of  
The University of Iowa

July 2012

Thesis Supervisor: Professor Caroline J. Tolbert

## ABSTRACT

As many political observers have pointed out, political participants in the United States are particularly unrepresentative of the population as a whole. Citizens who are politically active tend to be those on the upper end of the socioeconomic scale, for example, the wealthy and highly educated. This dissertation examines the ways in which inequalities in political participation lead to differences in the behavior of elected officials and their subsequent actions related to policy making. That is, politicians have the ability, and under certain circumstances the incentive, to vary how they govern and who they govern for, depending on how political influence is distributed throughout the citizenry.

I argue that considering the economic status of various groups in society is an important and often overlooked aspect of representation. Economic status is linked closely with economic need, which is especially important for the disadvantaged and may be difficult to measure by relying on issue positions or priorities gathered from opinion surveys. Income affects the types of government programs people are influenced by and rely on; for example, welfare, health care, and public housing policies are more likely to directly influence the poor while those with higher economic status are unlikely to encounter any of these programs. This suggests that different levels of political activity by various groups in society can have an influence on lawmakers' decisions regarding how to address certain issues.

To assess the influence of unequal participation on public policy I examine various stages of the policy process, including policy outcomes and issue agenda setting in the states. Few studies have assessed the effect of inequalities in participation on the public policy, and research assessing the link between inequality and policy has almost entirely overlooked the potential effects of unequal participation on agenda setting. This

research explores whether states with higher economic inequalities in political participation have policies that are less likely to be beneficial to disadvantaged groups. Both policy outcomes and issue agendas are examined to fully understand the consequences of political inequality in the American states.

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William Walter Franko

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
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Graduate College  
The University of Iowa  
Iowa City, Iowa

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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PH.D. THESIS

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This is to certify that the Ph.D. thesis of

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for the thesis requirement for the Doctor of Philosophy  
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Colin Gordon

To my parents and Lindsey

The blunt truth is that politicians and officials are under no compulsion to pay much heed to classes and groups of citizens that do not vote.

V. O. Key, Jr.  
Southern Politics

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## ABSTRACT

As many political observers have pointed out, political participants in the United States are particularly unrepresentative of the population as a whole. Citizens who are politically active tend to be those on the upper end of the socioeconomic scale, for example, the wealthy and highly educated. This dissertation examines the ways in which inequalities in political participation lead to differences in the behavior of elected officials and their subsequent actions related to policy making. That is, politicians have the ability, and under certain circumstances the incentive, to vary how they govern and who they govern for, depending on how political influence is distributed throughout the citizenry.

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## CHAPTER 1

### UNEQUAL PARTICIPATION AND PUBLIC POLICY IN THE STATES

As many observers have pointed out, political participants in the United States are particularly unrepresentative of the population as a whole. Citizens who are politically active tend to be those on the upper end of the socioeconomic scale; for example, the wealthy and educated (Piven and Cloward 1988; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980). This dissertation examines the ways in which inequalities in political participation lead to differences in the behavior of elected officials and their subsequent actions related to policy making. That is, politicians have the ability, and under certain circumstances the incentive, to vary how they govern and who they govern for, depending on how political influence is distributed throughout the citizenry.

Political participation, and voter turnout specifically, has traditionally been viewed as a vital aspect of democracy. Participation allows the public to reveal preferences and interests, with the goal of influencing the decision-making that takes place throughout the policy process. This particular effect of participation has been a common theme for a number of democratic theorists. E. E. Schattschneider (1960), for instance, viewed low rates of political participation as one of the primary failures of American politics because he believed it would produce a bias between the general population and those who are represented. If elected officials are more responsive to particular groups compared to others, unequal political participation may be an important factor in understanding differences in who government represents. As cited in Lijphart's (1997, 4) study of the consequences of unequal participation, "the old saw remains profoundly true: if you don't vote, you don't count (Burnham 1987, 99)," because

“politicians and officials are under no compulsion to pay much heed to classes and groups of citizens that do not vote (Key 1949, 527).”

To establish the consequences of inequalities in participation, this research examines how disparities in voter turnout of the rich and poor affect public policy. The American states are used to assess the extent to which participation inequality shapes a number of different policies, as well as various aspects of the policy process. I demonstrate that unequal participation has a substantial influence on decision making related to policies designed to assist and protect the disadvantaged. The effects of voter bias are observed when considering political agendas, policy adoption, and changes to state governance policy.

This dissertation makes two broad contributions to our understanding of participation inequality and public policy. First, it considers the fact that many government policies are designed to influence different economic segments of the population. Since inequalities in voter participation can lead to disproportionate access to the political process, I argue that considering the economic status of various groups in society is an important and often overlooked aspect of representation. Economic status is linked closely with economic need, which is especially important for the disadvantaged and may be difficult to measure by relying on issue positions or priorities gathered from opinion surveys. Income affects the types of government programs people are influenced by and rely on; for example, welfare, health care, and public housing policies are likely to directly influence the poor while those with higher economic status are unlikely to encounter any of these programs. This suggests that different levels of political activity by various groups in society can have an influence on lawmakers' decisions regarding how to address certain issues (Berinsky 2002; Soss and Jacobs 2009; Verba 2003; Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995). Unequal participation based on economic status is measured by differences between the rich and poor in voter turnout at the state level over time.

The second contribution made here is that I consider the influence of unequal political participation on various stages of the policy process across the American states. The different facets of the policy process examined here include agenda setting, policy adoption, and changes in governance policy. Figure 1.1 presents a basic schematic of the public policy process to provide a visual representation of different policy stages within the process. Although some scholars may disagree with the linear, stepwise characterization of the policy process seen in Figure 1.1 (e.g., see Kingdon 2003), at a minimum the diagram is helpful in describing the different aspects of policy development. The “Political Input” stage is where individuals, groups, and organizations attempt to influence policy, and is where unequal political participation is expected matter. The policy process can only be shaped by those that make an attempt to influence politics. This study explores how inequalities in participation (or political inputs) affect the process of setting the agenda (see “Policy Choices” in Figure 1.1) and the adoption of policy (see “Adoption” in Figure 1.1).

To date, few studies have assessed the influence of unequal participation on public policy. Those that have examined this relationship have been limited to the study of policy outcomes and specifically focus on state welfare policy (Avery and Peffley 2005; Fellowes and Rowe 2004; Hill and Leighley 1992; Hill, Leighley, and Hinton-Andersson 1995). Moreover, this research looks at a specific type of welfare policy, cash aid to low-income families (i.e., programs related to Aid to Families with Dependent Children and Temporary Aid to Needy Families). As I argue above, participation bias in favor of the affluent is expected to have an effect on policies most likely to influence the disadvantaged, policies that go well beyond one area of welfare spending. Government programs related to health care for the poor, public housing, education, and various methods of taxation are examples of policies that may be influenced by political inequalities.

Additionally, research assessing the link between inequality and public policy has overlooked the potential effects of bias on agenda setting. The issues that never enter the political arena can be as important to the policy process as voting on and passing legislation. Avoiding a debate or vote on an issue—also referred to as a “nondecision”—allows those in power to avoid taking a stance on a potentially polarizing issue, while also limiting the exposure of these issues to the public (Bachrach and Baratz 1962; Hero 1992; Schattschneider 1960). Perhaps most importantly, getting an issue onto the agenda is a necessary condition of policy change (Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Kingdon 2003). That is, if an issue is excluded from the political agenda it is not likely that the issue will be addressed by the government through public policy.

This research explores whether states with larger economic inequalities in participation have policies that are less likely to be beneficial to disadvantaged groups. This question is assessed by analyzing a broad range of policy areas that are designed to assist or protect those with few economic resources. Additionally, both policy outcomes and issue agendas are examined to fully understand the consequences of political inequality in the American states.

The next section considers the work of early democratic theorists who believed the study of unequal political influence was central to understanding the American political process. These scholars provide insight into the origins of political inequality and why some individuals have more influence than others. Then, I give an overview of the representation literature, which offers a mechanism by which political inequality affects policy outcomes. Finally, I discuss how this study moves the literature forward by focusing on the policy consequences of inequalities in political participation.

## **Democratic Theory and Unequal Political Influence**

Scholars have been increasingly concerned with the causes and consequences of inequality in the United States (APSA 2004; Jacobs and Skocpol 2005). As the richest Americans have seen their share of wealth grow faster than the rest of the country over the past several decades (Piketty and Saez 2003), some have questioned whether the political power of the affluent has also grown. Recent research has convincingly demonstrated that government policies help create or exacerbate economic inequalities (Hacker and Pierson 2010). This has potentially devastating implications for the democratic process, where the concept of “one person, one vote”—suggesting that all citizens are political equals—becomes a less attainable reality.

Those that study the relationship between money and politics have argued that activities such as contributing to campaigns (Green 2004; Stern 1988) and lobbying (Richter, Samphantharak, and Timmons 2009) can buy political influence. While having the available resources necessary to use personal finances in an attempt to shape political decision-making is certainly important, this is only one way that greater wealth produces inequalities in political influence. Making a campaign contribution or being part of an organization are specific types of political participation, and wealth is associated with a greater likelihood of taking part in a variety of political activities. I argue it is the combination of both wealth and greater levels of political participation that leads to inequalities in political influence. Voting, contacting elected officials, and signing petitions, for example, are all approaches used to attempt to influence politics, and are all done at higher rates by those who are economically advantaged (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995).

The existence of socioeconomic inequalities and class bias in democratic governments has not gone unnoticed. Some of the earliest political science literature emphasized that differences in characteristics such as income, education, and group

association have great consequences for political behavior and attitudes. Schattschneider (1960) discussed the differences between voters and nonvoters and shows that social divisions could easily approximate the two groups: “If the political distinction between voters and nonvoters corresponds to a social distinction between broadly the same segments [sic] of the community, it is the most important datum about the political system, much more important than the distinction between Republicans and Democrats,” and goes on to state, “The social system makes a substantial distinction between those who have relatively more and those who have relatively less. This is the bias of the system (1960, 107).”

In addition, the process of exclusion is often difficult to recognize, mainly because those with lower levels of resources become demoralized and frustrated. These frustrations are often ignored along with the needs of those who are at the bottom of the social strata. One view suggests the most important repercussions of being disconnected from the political process is evident in the “way in which the alternative in American politics are defined, the way in which issues get referred to the public, the scale of competition and organization, and above all by what issues are developed (Schattschneider 1960, 110).”

This does not necessarily mean that a majority of the public is completely removed from the political process, but instead the scope of the conflict between political powers is what will bring citizens into the political system. This is quite different than the popular conception of democracy, which is grounded in the general belief of rule by the people. Schattschneider argues the classic definition of democracy is for the most part unrealistic, and provides a functional description of what he believes is more useful for the study of democratic institutions. Democracy, he suggests, should be thought of as “a competitive political system in which competing leaders and organizations define the alternatives of public policy in such a way that the public can participate in the decision-making process (1960, 141).”

The view that particular groups in a society have more influence over the political process is not new, but it is quite different than the traditional pluralist view of all citizens having equal access to the political sphere (e.g., Dahl 1961). In the words of Schattschneider's famous critique, "The flaw in the pluralist heaven is that the heavenly chorus sings with a strong upper-class accent (1960, 35)." Similar to the arguments of Downs (1957) and Olson (1965), Schattschneider argues organization is necessary to influence politics and only certain groups in society have the required resources to organize their interests. The greater resources, and therefore greater mobilizing ability, of the upper class provides them with disproportionate representation in government.

The relationship between individuals' level of resources and their likelihood of participating in politics is well documented. In general, greater wealth has a positive association with rates of participation (e.g., see Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980). The link between economic resources and participation was initially explained through a rational choice approach (Riker and Ordeshook 1968) and later a socioeconomic status model (Verba and Nie 1972), both of which were expanded upon by Verba, Schlozman, and Brady's (1995) Civic Voluntarism Model (CVM). The CVM argues resources such as time, money, and civic skills are essential components of political participation. Those with higher economic status not only have more resources, but wealth is also strongly related to the likelihood of people being political engaged (or politically interested) and being mobilized (or asked to participate) by political organizations (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995).

Similar to Verba, Schlozman, and Brady's (1995) research, Dahl (2006) also argues that a primary obstruction to political equity is the unequal distribution of resources. Biases in money, knowledge, time, information, skills, and social standing (among other factors) all have consequences for how much influence one has over the political system. Economic inequalities in particular have been noted to create other inequalities, such as unequal distributions in education and access to the political process

(Dahl 2006). If inequalities in political resources continue to increase, it is conceivable that advantages in power, influence, and authority of even a small group of elites can become so dominant that citizens will become “unable, and perhaps even unwilling, to make the effort it would require to overcome the forces of inequality arrayed against them (Dahl 2006, 86).”

While this work suggests that political influence is not equal among all citizens, the consequences of unequal political influence are not completely obvious. The next section discusses the literature on democratic representation, which provides an important mechanism by which inequalities in political influence are likely to affect the political process.

### **Unequal Political Influence and Studies of Representation**

The concept of political inequality considered throughout this study is based on the premise that some groups have more influence and power over government than others, which is expected to affect how elected officials govern and attend to public interests. This section provides an explanation of why inequality is expected to affect the policy process. First, basic theories of representation are considered to highlight the connection between the public and elected officials, showing how different forms of representation may change the relationship between inequality and governance. The second part of this section discusses the empirical evidence related to whether elected officials respond to public interests to establish the presence of political inequalities in the US and to show how the current literature can be improved.

### *Representing Public Interests*

Scholars have found elected officials are motivated by two factors: reelection and attaining policy goals (Jacobs and Shapiro 2000; also see Bianco 1994). Fenno's (1978) seminal study of Congress member behavior argues these two factors—reelection and pursuing policy goals—are central to the decision-making process of any legislator. Reelection, however, is typically viewed as the primary goal since politicians can only exert influence if they remain in office. Mayhew (1974) suggests members of Congress behave in a manner that conforms closely to what would be expected if elected officials were only concerned with reelection. This is seen through the activities most common among legislators, which includes position taking, advertising, and credit claiming.

One of the more prevalent theories of how legislators make policy decisions is the median voter theorem (Downs 1957). This view suggests that in order to get reelected the most reliable strategy for a politician to take is to adopt the preferences of the median voter. Representing centrist opinion will allow politicians to garner the largest number of votes even though this approach also has the potential to alienate supporters holding more extreme opinions. This theory assumes both voters and candidates have high levels of information about each other. Voters must know what position the candidate supports, and the candidate must know the preferences of the electorate. This view implies a prospective evaluation of candidates in that voters are expected to make choices based on the decisions a candidate is anticipated to make if elected to office. It is likely that any given electorate will not have complete information about all policy positions taken by their representative, in which case individuals can use retrospective evaluations to determine whether a representative should be retained (Fiorina 1981).

The likelihood that voters and representatives will not always be certain about the actions and preferences of each other, however, provides elected officials the opportunity to pursue their own policy goals (Fenno 1978; Jacobs and Shapiro 2000). That is,

representatives will seek to enact their desired policies without straying so far from centrist opinion to the extent that they would jeopardize their position of power. Elected officials may choose to pursue their desired policy goals for several reasons. Some scholars argue one reason representatives will risk reelection is that they want to be responsible for making “good” public policy (Fenno 1978). While the definition of “good” is likely different for each legislator, representatives will at times stray from the interests of the public to adopt policies they believe will better government or society. Another reason representatives may pursue policies not aligned with centrist opinion is that particular groups of the electorate can be viewed as more important than others. For instance, loyal voting blocs or political action committees that regularly contribute to a candidate may have their interests more closely represented than others. Also, representatives may give more attention to interest groups that have the ability to mobilize large segments of the public than to groups or individuals without the ability to mobilize (Jacobs and Shapiro 2000).

Research originating from a political economy perspective gives some indication of when elected officials can safely stray from centrist opinion, or more precisely, who’s opinion should be considered when determining the median position on an issue. Downs’ (1957) view of the democratic process suggests political participation, specifically voting, can be thought of as having costs and benefits. If the costs of voting outweigh the benefits for a particular person that individual is not likely to participate. These costs primarily include—aside from the costs of physically casting a vote—one’s ability to obtain political information, process the information once obtained, and the capacity to use the information to make a decision. This process, of course, will produce differential costs depending on factors such as income and education (Downs 1957). Therefore, a politician need not worry about mobilizing a segment of the electorate that is unlikely to participate when making policy decisions. This group is not likely to have the resources

available to sufficiently monitor elected officials or obtain the information necessary to evaluate performance without some decrease in their costs to do so.

These studies of representation generally suggest that elected officials are constrained by the preferences of the public. In order to maintain their positions in public office, politicians will attempt to create policy that aligns with the preferences of their constituents. This rule is not necessarily true under all circumstances, however. Downs' (1957) median voter theorem, for instance, by definition argues that it is the median preferences of voters that matters most, not the median preference of all citizens. Certain segments of the public are also less able to obtain, process, and assess the political information needed to develop policy preferences or to monitor their elected officials. Again, those with fewer resources are less likely to be voters, and less likely to use any available resources in a politically effective manner.

Additionally, elected officials also have their own policy ideals that are not derived from public opinion. These ideals may simply be regarded as "good" policies that are in the best interest of the public regardless of citizen preferences. Elected officials are also expected to make policy decisions when the public does not have an opinion a particular issue. Some scholars argue legislators are often required to make policy choices without the help or consideration of public opinion (e.g., see Arnold 1990; Jewell 1982).

Together these theories of representation point to a conditional relationship between public interest and government responsiveness that is at least partially based on an individual's economic status and political activity. That is, elected officials are more likely to respond to the interests of citizens with a combination of wealth and high rates of political participation.

### *Evidence of Unequal Policy Representation*

Scholars are undoubtedly interested in testing these different theories of representation and who influences political decision-making. For the most part, research examining the link between public opinion and policy outcomes has supported the idea that representatives do act according to the preferences of their constituents. Although early studies of the public's issue attitudes and knowledge suggests individuals are not politically informed enough to lead policy decision-making (Converse 1964), subsequent analyses provide contrary evidence. The latter line of research is typically based on the belief that aggregate opinion gives a more consistent and accurate measure of public opinion (Page and Shapiro 1992).

Page and Shapiro (1983) look at the relationship between macro-level changes in opinion toward various political issues and the policy outcomes that most closely correspond to the issues. The results show directional changes in public opinion on particular issues tend to lead to changes in public policy. This is especially the case when changes in opinion are large and the issues being asked about are salient, or high profile. The public is likely to have less voice in the political process when issues are more complicated and less prominent. Using a different method of measuring public preferences, Snyder (1996) also finds evidence of representative responsiveness to the citizenry. By aggregating direct votes on ballot measures in the state of California, three components of electorate interests are identified. The issue dimensions determined by citizen voting behavior are highly predictive of state legislator roll-call votes.

An accumulation of evidence, however, supports claims that upper-class citizens may have a disproportionate influence over the policy making process—group-based biases in responsiveness have been found when comparing low- and high-income individuals, voters and nonvoters, and whites and minorities. Griffin and Newman (2005), for example, provide evidence supporting the common, but generally untested,

assumption that voters are better represented than nonvoters. Comparing the ideologies of voters and nonvoters to the roll-call votes of state senators, the authors demonstrate elected officials are responsive to voters but not nonvoters. They also test a number of hypotheses that link participation to representation, resulting in findings that indicate voters are better represented because “voters select like-minded Senators, voters are more likely to communicate their desires to their Senators, and only voters can reelect Senators (Griffin and Newman 2005, 1207).” Finally, the authors show voters and nonvoters differ in their ideological orientation, which has important implications for the bias of political outcomes.

Analyzing the responsiveness of elected officials to the public, Bartels (2008) finds US Senators from both the Republican and Democratic Parties are less likely to respond to the opinion of low-income constituents compared to those with higher income. Senate roll call votes on various issues such as minimum wage, civil rights, and abortion are more likely to reflect the opinion of the upper-income constituency. Additionally, these results hold when accounting for participation rates and degrees of political knowledge; that is, among those who vote and those with high levels of political knowledge, Senators are still more responsive to the rich.

As an alternative to analyzing legislative roll call votes, other scholars have examined whether policy outcomes are representative of various populations. Gilens (2005; 2009), for instance, shows those with higher incomes are more likely to have their policy preferences represented by policy outcomes. The author uses aggregate survey opinions on a wide variety of policy issues and compares the responses of upper- and lower-income groups to related federal policy outcomes. The influence of wealth is shown to be even stronger when opinion differences between the affluent and poor are greater; that is, when the wealthy have higher levels of support for a particular policy that policy is more likely to be adopted. Flavin (2010) explores the opinions of individuals across income groups and compares them to the outcomes of both social and economic

policies across the fifty states. Before Flavin (2010), all research in this vein had been limited to studies of political responsiveness at the national level, and thus sub-national variation was not examined.

Most closely related to this research, Hill and Leighley (1992) examine the direct relationship between voter turnout rates of upper- and lower-income groups and public policy outcomes. The authors argue that greater participation of the wealthy, relative to the poor, leads to redistributive policies that favor the rich at the expense of the poor. They demonstrate that American states with disproportionately low turnout of disadvantaged individuals produce less generous welfare policies using data from the 1984 and 1986 elections. In a follow-up study, Hill, Leighley, and Hinton-Andersson (1995) find similar results using a pooled analysis (1978-1990) that examines changes in state welfare spending over time. These important studies provide evidence that low levels of lower-class turnout lead to less state welfare spending. Inequalities in political voice, or disparities in participation of the rich and poor, lead to policy outcomes that are unfavorable to the poor. The poor, the group with less political voice, is more likely to benefit from state welfare policies but are unable to influence lawmakers to adopt more redistributive policies due to their disproportionate level of political power.

### *Limitations of the Current Literature*

Although the current research on inequalities in policy responsiveness has certainly led to a better understanding of political inequality, several limitations exist that are common to most of these studies. The first is that a specific type of representation is being examined, where public opinion is expected to directly influence legislator behavior. The belief that public opinion should directly shape public policy is considered a democratic ideal to many scholars (e.g., see Erikson, Wright, and McIver 1993). While

the importance of understanding how public opinion influences policy is not disputed here, I argue that citizen preferences can only explain certain aspects of representation.

As the representation literature discussed above suggests, the actions of elected officials are not always constrained by public preferences (Arnold 1990; Jacobs and Shapiro 2000; Mansbridge 2003; Verba and Nie 1972). Jewell's (1982) work on the nature of representation in state legislatures makes the argument that lawmakers typically use their own judgment when making policy choices. This is largely due to elected officials' perceptions that their constituents rarely have formed opinions on all issues. When the public does have an opinion on a particular issue, these opinions are often uninformed, incomplete, or not articulated well. In general, public demands and concerns usually address broad issues with the implied expectation that legislators need to work on a solution. As Lijphart (1997) argues, governments typically pursue broad policy goals that align with the general economic interests of their constituents. These circumstances often leave legislators with the task of determining what is the best way to approach a particular issue or problem.

A simple example can be used to illustrate how a broad problem may require elected officials to make choices about how to address the problem. Consider a public concerned about access to health insurance without much knowledge of how to solve this particular issue. Legislators are left to determine how to deal with this problem, which can involve a number of options. They may decide to offer a tax break to employers who provide workers with a health plan, expand the coverage of the state's existing Medicaid program, pursue both options, or avoid the health care problem altogether and focus on another issue. In any of these cases, various segments of the population will be influenced differently depending on their economic situation. This is an aspect of representation that is considered in this dissertation. Specifically, I assess the extent to which state legislators address the needs of disadvantaged populations by focusing on the policies most likely to influence less well off individuals. Regardless of the public's issue preferences or

priorities, low-income groups are likely to rely on and use different government programs than the affluent.

Examining policies most likely to directly influence the poor also avoids having to make assumptions related to the use of public opinion data. The first assumption made by studies linking public preferences to policy outcomes is that the public weights all of their preferences equally. That is, all individuals place equal importance on preferences toward welfare spending, education policy, gay rights, immigration policy, etc. Looking at voting behavior in the states, recent evidence suggests this is certainly not the case. Gelman et al. (2008) shows that people in wealthier states tend to place more importance on social issues while those in poorer states are more likely to emphasize economic issues, which is evident when examining presidential vote choice across income groups within the states.

Even if it is possible to appropriately weight individual preferences with how important they are to the public, it is not clear how helpful this information would be in helping to understand policy responsiveness. Recent work by Jones and Baumgartner (2004) and Jones, Larsen-Price, and Wilkerson (2009) examine how well the issue priorities of the public align with the issue priorities of the US Congress. These studies use survey questions asking respondents which political issues are most important to them to measure the public's issue priorities, and bills introduced by members of Congress to measure the issue priorities of lawmakers.

Although Jones and colleagues are able to capture the priorities of the public, the "most important problem" approach does have its own limitations. As the authors point out, the public's priorities tend to be unspecific, and a majority of respondents state that economic and national defense issues are most important to them in most years. The issues addressed by Congress, however, are much more extensive, covering a wide range of topics. These findings suggest that even if lawmakers follow the priorities of the public, these priorities are often vague and uninformed. Jewell (1982) similarly finds that

state legislators perceive their constituents' knowledge of policy issues to be quite limited. This leaves elected officials discretion in how they address the issues that are most important to their constituents.

Berinsky's (2002) research suggests another limitation of obtaining public preferences by way of opinion surveys, as well as evidence for the claim that lacking political resources can be a detriment to one's ability to influence politics. His analysis shows when asked about preferences toward social welfare policy, disadvantaged groups are more likely than any other group to abstain from giving an answer. Berinsky argues that not being able to answer these questions is due to the lack of politically relevant information available to those with few resources. This not only leads to a misrepresentation of support for welfare policy among the poor, but also limits the political voice of those who are most likely to support social welfare policies.

Whether elected officials attend to the policy issues most likely to influence the disadvantaged is expected to be dependent on the political participation of the poor when compared to the rich, and to vary across states. As discussed above, lawmakers are more likely to attend to the interests of politically active groups. This suggests that higher levels of class participation bias—that is, greater levels of participation among the wealthy compared to the activity of the poor—will lead to policy outcomes more favorable to disadvantaged groups. As I suggest in the introduction, however, the outcomes of public policy are only one particular stage of the policy process.

### **Unequal Participation and Public Policy**

Schattschneider's "realist" view of democracy provides one perspective of how America's representative democracy functions. While this is certainly not the only interpretation of the political decision-making process, Schattschneider's work captures the elements of the political process most important to this study: varying levels of

political resources and participation offer particular groups more influence over politics, and this political influence affects political outcomes, as well as the policy alternatives that enter the political arena. Not only do the wealthy have the potential to use their resources to gain access to the political process, but they are also more likely to attempt to influence public policy through political participation. I argue that the combination of both greater economic resources and higher levels of participation lead to vast differences in influence over the policy process, and that considering both of these factors will allow for a better understanding of inequalities in political influence.

Existing literature suggests that unequal participation does have consequences for public policy. Since the poor have fewer political resources (mainly income) and are less likely to be involved in the political process (mainly through voting), policy is expected to be more favorable to upper status groups when inequality is high. Under circumstances where the poor are much less likely than the rich to participate, elected officials will be less likely to identify and acknowledge the interests of politically inactive groups compared to those who are active. Additionally, participation provides information about the types of groups that are most likely to mobilize in the future, knowledge that can be important for developing strategies to remain in office. High levels of inequality will lead to policy outcomes that are less favorable to the disadvantaged, as well as issue agendas that are less likely to include policy alternatives that are beneficial to the poor.

This dissertation expands our knowledge of the consequences of participation inequality in several ways. First, I analyze the aggregate effects of inequality on policies most likely to influence the disadvantaged across the 50 states and over time. This is different from linking public opinion to policy outcomes, which only considers a specific type of representation, whereas examining the systematic effect of participation inequality on policy allows for a broader understanding of legislator decision-making. Second, I assess the influence of inequality on policies other than welfare cash aid programs that are important to disadvantaged groups. Although welfare policy tends to be

the focus of numerous studies related to political inequality, many other policies are designed to help the poor that do not necessarily fall under this specific definition of welfare.

Third, this research examines the effect of participation inequality on state agenda setting. Setting the agenda is a vital stage of the policy process that is almost always overlooked in inequality studies. This research shows how participation bias can shape the types of issues that make it into the political arena. Finally, the analyses presented here focus on state politics and policy. With few exceptions (see Flavin 2010; Hill and Leighley 1992; Hill, Leighley, and Hinton-Andersson 1995), all research in this vein had been limited to studies of political responsiveness at the national level. As I will show, studying inequality and policy from a subnational level is important, especially when considering the importance of the states in most of the policies being examined. The remainder of this section discusses each of these contributions and how they move the literature forward.

### *Unequal Participation and Setting the Agenda*

While studying the types of policies that are adopted and implemented by a government is undoubtedly vital to our understanding of inequality and public policy, this is only part of the story. What is largely missing from previous literature is the consideration that unequal participation not only drives policy outcomes across the states (Flavin 2010; Hill and Leighley 1992) and nationwide (Gilens 2005), but also shapes the policy agenda, preventing many policies from being discussed in the first place. To only study policy outcomes is to ignore an important phase of the policy process, agenda setting. As Schattschneider argues, “*the definition of the alternatives is the supreme instrument of power...* He who determines what politics is about runs the country,

because the definition of alternatives is the choice of conflicts, and the choice of conflicts allocates power (1960, 68, emphasis in original).”

This proposition runs somewhat counter to Dahl’s (1961) pluralist view of American democracy, which suggests that power is decentralized enough to allow many actors into the political process. Dahl suggests the political process is accessible to the public and decision-making was based in part on citizen desires because of this. His findings provide evidence of a democracy that was more aligned with the notion of a government run by the people, in comparison to the elite theorists who argued that the government was operated by a select few (e.g., Mills 1956). Even in his relatively optimistic view of American democracy, Dahl concedes that the apolitical (or those not regularly active in politics) can rarely influence the issues addressed by the government and that “a political issue can hardly be said to exist unless and until it commands the attention of a significant segment of the political stratum (1961, 92).”

Dahl’s supposition that an issue cannot exist unless it enters the political arena has been criticized by a number of scholars, however (Bachrach and Baratz 1962; 1970; Lukes 1974). Bachrach and Baratz (1962) suggest looking for evidence of influence over the political process by only studying issues that end up in the public sphere ignores other avenues of exerting political power. Their concept of the “second face of power” introduces the idea that “nondecisions,” or limiting the scope of conflict—ideas similar to those put forward by Schattschneider (1960)—is an equally effective way to influence the political process. That is, having a significant role in determining whether a policy is adopted is only one way to exert power (the first face of power). Influencing the alternatives the public debates over, or whether an issue is debated at all, is also a way to use one’s power.

Although the early work of Schattschneider (1960) and Bachrach and Baratz (1962) emphasized the importance of political agenda setting, few scholars have made agenda control a prominent component of understanding the policy process. Kingdon

(2003) and Baumgartner and Jones (2003) are certainly exceptions, and are noted for their consideration of agenda setting in their broad analyses of the policy process. Studies of unequal influence over control of political agendas, however, are rare, and only the work of Hill and Klarner (2002) has made a systematic attempt to understand agenda control. Examining the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century adoption of state direct democracy procedures, Hill and Klarner find greater concentrations of elite wealth made it less likely for states to include these reforms on their agendas and less likely to pass the same reforms. The findings support the claim that greater concentrations of power allow elites to avoid institutional changes that threaten their control over politics.

Building on the work of Hill and Leighley (1992) and Hill and Klarner (2002), I argue that economic inequalities in participation influence the composition of political agendas. As mentioned above, lawmakers are more likely to attend to the interests of politically active groups. This suggests that higher levels of class participation bias—that is, greater levels of participation among the wealthy compared to the activity of the poor—will lead to state legislative agendas that are less likely to consider policies largely associated with disadvantaged groups.

### *Moving Beyond AFDC and TANF*

The areas of public policy examined in this dissertation also go beyond the specific types of welfare policy that is typically studied—mainly, programs that provide cash aid to the poor such as Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) and Temporary Aid to Needy Families (TANF). While these welfare policies have a clear connection to political inequalities stemming from differences in economic status, other forms of policy may be influenced as well.<sup>1</sup> Inequalities in participation are likely to

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<sup>1</sup> See Hero (1998) for a comprehensive study of the effects of state minority diversity on various aspects of public policy.

influence numerous policies that are largely designed for low-income groups. This analysis improves upon previous studies by considering policy outcomes related to programs addressing public housing (anti-predatory lending laws), health care (Children's Health Insurance Programs), and income equity (minimum wage laws).

While examining a number of policies that mainly influence disadvantaged groups gives a broad view of how policymaking may be affected by participation inequalities, more specific and less apparent types of policymaking can also provide insights into the consequences of unequal influence over political outcomes. Participation inequality will allow elected officials to avoid policy changes that are politically unpredictable, especially when the risk of a given policy appears to be high. The uncertainty surrounding a policy includes any unexpected effects it may produce, or simply that the policy does not do what was intended. Elected officials view these unknowns as potential sources of discontent among their constituents, making their eventual bids for reelection more difficult. Avoiding change is expected to be more manageable when inequality is high since power is held among a small group of individuals.

Specifically, this study examines the influence of participation inequality on state election reforms. Election laws are a particular type of policy adoption (or non-adoption) referred to as governance policy (see Tolbert 2003). These are important policies that have not been considered by research addressing the consequences of inequality, but are the types of issues that elected officials would like to avoid. Changes to electoral rules and laws are likely to introduce a great amount of uncertainty. This is especially the case for laws with the potential to change the composition of the electorate by lowering the costs of voting, which is an expected effect of registration reform. This suggests that higher levels of participation bias will allow elected officials to avoid changes to the rules governing the political process.

*Inequality in the States*

Similar to the work by Flavin (2010) Hill and Leighley (1992), the states are used in a comparative context to analyze the relationship between participation inequality and public policy. For some time state politics scholars have taken advantage of the unique outcomes of state governments to help explain a variety of political outcomes (e.g., Gray 1973; Walker 1969). The states provide unique policy outcomes, as well as the ability to obtain measures of political inequality that vary over time and across space (i.e., states).

The American states are used in the following analyses for two main reasons. The first is that most of the policies and issues under consideration here are largely shaped by state governments. This is particularly the case when examining policies most likely to influence the disadvantaged, such as welfare, Medicaid, and housing. The states typically have a large amount of authority over the types of policies that are implemented related to these issues. The same is true for the governance policies, or institutional reforms, which are often addressed at the states level. For instance, a variety of voting and registration reforms have been adopted by different states and at different times. This variation across the states allows me to test various hypotheses related to inequality and public policy.

The variation observed across the states provides the second main reason for examining inequality and policy at the state level. While the federal government does affect the policies being used in this study, only variations over time can be analyzed when examining federal policy. This can be particularly problematic when the main explanatory variable is participation bias, which is not expected to change much over time at the national level (see Leighley and Nagler 1992). As I demonstrate in the next chapter, variation in inequality over time is much greater at the state level than at the national level. Regardless of this fact, simply being able to use the variation in participation bias across the states allows for a robust test of the expectations discussed to

this point. Using the differences in inequality and policy across the states and over time provides me with the ability to fully understand the relationship between participation bias and policy process.

### **Dissertation Outline**

The remainder of this dissertation proceeds as follows. To understand the policy consequences of state inequalities in participation, a reliable measure of participation inequality across the states and over time is needed. Chapter 2 provides a discussion of the concept of participation bias and how inequalities in participation have been operationalized in previous studies. The measure of participation inequality used throughout this research is detailed in this chapter, and the benefits of this measure are considered. I then demonstrate that the participation inequality measure used here is a unique characteristic of the states by comparing the measure of bias to other common indicators of state inequality and political influence. Finally, a detailed examination of participation bias within the states over time shows how inequality has changed over the past three decades. The results not only suggest that the states are ideal for studying the relationship between inequality and policy, but also that participation inequality has generally increased over time.

The purpose of Chapters 3-5 is to demonstrate the vast policy consequences of participation inequality. The state inequality measure discussed in Chapter 2 is used to better understand how this bias influences public policy. It is argued that inequalities in participation will affect all aspects of the policy process, but evidence supporting this claim is rare and is almost exclusively focused on AFDC and TANF programs. This research only provides a narrow view of how participation bias affects policy. Chapter 3 looks to move the literature forward by showing that participation inequalities shape the policy agendas of state legislatures. Agenda setting is an important but typically

overlooked feature of the policy process that plays a vital role in determining what public issues are considered in the political arena. Control over agenda setting is an important form of political power that affects the types of issues that are debated, or perhaps more importantly the issues not debated. The influence of inequality on state agendas is measured using unique data on all legislative bills introduced in all lower state houses from 2001-2008. These data allow me to measure the size of each state's agenda (using the total count of bill introductions) related to issues most likely to be important to the disadvantaged that are considered by lawmakers.

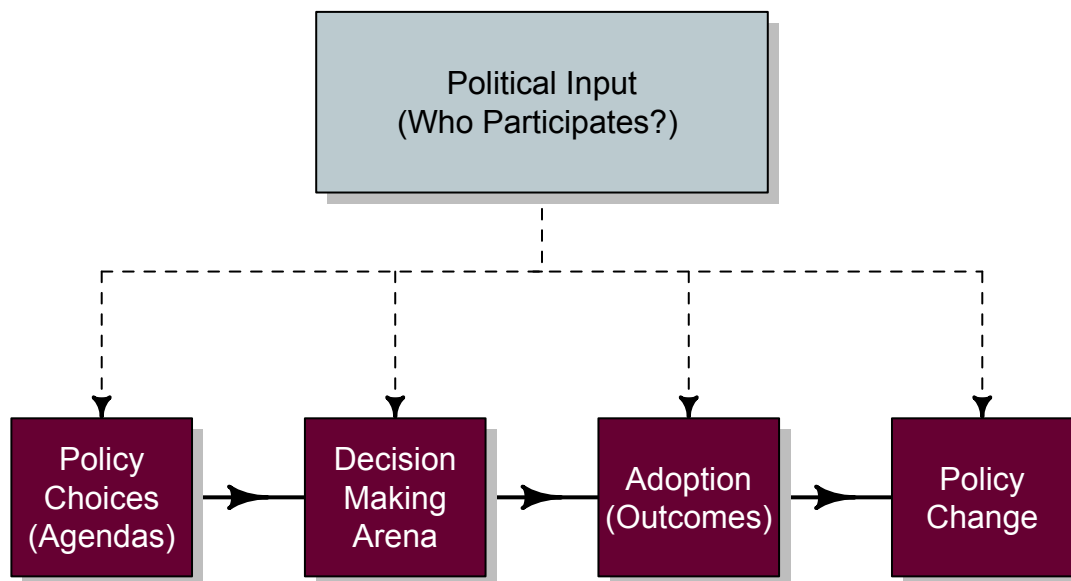
Chapter 4 examines how participation inequality influences a number of policy areas most likely to be beneficial to low-income groups. The objective of this chapter is to show the wide-ranging policy consequences of inequality. Since the importance of participation inequality on policy is mainly demonstrated by focusing on AFDC and TANF policy outcomes, I explore three state policies outside of these particular welfare programs that are also designed to help disadvantaged groups. The policies include anti-predatory lending laws (housing policy), the composition of State Children's Health Insurance Programs (health care), and minimum wage laws (income equity). Separate analyses of state adoption of all three policies over time are used to demonstrate the effect of participation bias on policy making by considering this broad scope of policy areas.

A specific type of policy that has not been examined by scholars of inequality and public policy is governance policy. Governance policies are the rules and laws that manage individual action within the political process. These types of policies can provide insight into the conditions under which institutional change is expected to occur. A particular kind of governance policy, election process reforms, is designed to influence the ways that citizens participate in elections. Additionally, the differences in the design of registration and voting process reforms (two general types of election reform) lead to different changes in the public's voting behavior. Chapter 5 expands our understanding of the consequences of participation bias by examining how inequality affects the adoption

of these election reforms. I analyze the adoption of registration and voting reforms in the states over a period of more than 30 years.

The results of this research have implications for the way we view political and economic inequality, the policy process, and the general state of American democracy. Chapter 6 revisits the findings from this dissertation and assesses the degree to which inequalities in political participation influence governance in the American states. The chapter ends with a discussion of the policy implications of this study and the potential for future research based on my findings.

Figure 1.1: The Policy Process



## CHAPTER 2

### THE COMPOSITION OF AMERICAN STATE ELECTORATES

In American politics the relationship between income and participation is well documented (e.g., see Campbell et al. 1960; Lewis-Beck et al. 2008; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980). Those with higher economic status not only have more resources, but wealth is also strongly related to the likelihood of people being political engaged (or politically interested) and being mobilized (or asked to participate) by political organizations (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). The main objective of this study is to determine whether disparities in political participation between the affluent and the poor affect public policy in the American states. The combination of economic resources and participation results in unequal influence over the political system. Not only do the wealthy have the potential to use their resources to gain access to the political process, but they are also more likely to attempt to influence public policy through political participation.

Since the focus of this research is to assess the effects of unequal participation on state policy, a reliable measure of inequality must be developed. This chapter first discusses the approach that is taken to measure participation inequality in the states, a measure that is used throughout the remainder of this study. Second, I show that unequal participation is a unique feature of American state politics by demonstrating that it is distinct from other measures of state inequality and political influence. Finally, a brief analysis of the inequality measure shows participation inequality varies across states, as well as within states over time. Trends in participation inequality reveal that bias in voter turnout among the affluent and the poor has increased for many states over the past three decades.

### **Measuring State Participation Inequality**

To properly analyze unequal participation it is important to use a measure of inequality that captures the relationship between economic resources and participation within the American states. A number of scholars have developed measures of inequalities in political participation by examining levels of voter turnout by categories of income, which have also been referred to as electoral inequality, class bias, participation bias, or political inequality (Avery and Peffley 2005; Hill and Leighley 1992; Hill and Leighley 1994; Leighley and Nagler 1992; Rigby and Springer 2011; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980).

The approach to measuring the concept of economic-based political inequalities has been generally consistent across these studies with the exception some subtle differences. In general, this research has measured participation bias by comparing the voter turnout rates of the rich and poor. In its most basic form, this measure is essentially a ratio of a ratio. That is, state inequality has typically been measured by calculating the ratio of the voter turnout rate of the affluent to the rate of the poor for each state. This measure can then be used to assess the degree to which these two economic groups differ in their rates of political participation. When the turnout rate of the rich is divided by the rate of the poor, larger values indicate a greater bias in favor of the wealthy and values close to one suggests high- and low-income groups are equally active.

The measure of political inequality used in this study is in some ways similar to those used in prior research addressing participation bias. Inequality is evaluated by developing an absolute measure of inequality for each state (Blakely, Kennedy and Kawachi 2001; Mackenbach and Kunst 1997; Wichowsky 2011). Like previous studies, the primary explanatory variable measures the disproportionate participation rates of individuals from upper and lower status groups, which assesses the degree to which income levels influence voter turnout. The participation inequality measure used here,

however, improves upon previous analyses of class bias in two ways. First, unequal participation in each state is quantified using individuals from all income groups in the calculation. This is done to create a more robust measure of inequality that considers the participation rates of the entire distribution of income in a state, not just the top and bottom portions of the distribution.

Second, and most importantly, the absolute measure of inequality is based on an income distribution that is relative to the wealth of each state.<sup>2</sup> The studies cited above all use a single income threshold to determine which group is wealthy and which is poor.<sup>3</sup> For instance, previous measures of inequality consider all individuals with family incomes below 150% of the federal poverty level as poor and those falling within the 80th percentile of income are considered rich. This strategy, however, ignores the fact that earning \$30,000 in Oklahoma is quite different than an income of \$30,000 in Connecticut. This variation in the cost of living from state to state is accounted for in the measure of participation bias used here. This is accomplished by using the observed income distribution for each state to calculate economic biases in participation, which is described in more detail below.

Economic biases in turnout are measured using the Current Population Survey (CPS) voting supplements, both presidential and non-presidential election years, that coincide with the state policies analyzed in the following chapters. This required using all CPS voting supplements from 1972-2008.<sup>4</sup> The CPS has several properties that are, for

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<sup>2</sup> To clarify, the measure of inequality used here is an absolute measure in that it accounts for the absolute difference between the turnout rates of high- and low-income groups. I use the term “relative” only to describe the process used to determine incomes within each state.

<sup>3</sup> Wichowsky (2011) is an exception.

<sup>4</sup> The 1974 and 1976 CPS data files do not contain individual state identifiers, which prevented the use of these particular election surveys. The estimate of participation bias for 1972 is imputed as the bias measure for 1973-1977. For odd years (i.e., years when no national elections take place), the prior year’s bias measure is used. To account for any dramatic differences in inequality measures between presidential and non-presidential elections, a four-year moving average (lagged) is applied to the initial participation bias estimates. All CPS

the most part, unmatched by other sources. First, the survey asks questions about voting behavior and turnout and includes very large samples of Americans (over 100,000 respondents). Second, the CPS interviews thousands of individuals in every state allowing for representative estimation of turnout rates in each state, even in small population states. Finally, questions about voting have been consistently asked for each presidential and midterm election for several decades. For these reasons, the CPS data are used to construct the voter bias measures reported here.<sup>5</sup>

The participation inequality variable is created by first assigning all CPS respondents to a cumulative proportion distribution based on their family income when compared to the family incomes of all other respondents in their state. For instance, consider an individual that reports a family income of \$50,000 to \$59,999. If this income category consists of 10% of the state's residents and 50% of the population falls below this income level, then this individual is assigned a midpoint of 0.55 on the state's cumulative income distribution ( $0.50 + [0.10/2]$ ). This income scale is then used as a determinant of voter turnout in the following OLS regression model:

$$vote = b_0 + b_1(income) + e$$

where *vote* is coded as 1 if the individual reported voting and 0 if the person did not vote, and *income* indicates each individual's position on their state's cumulative income

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datasets were obtained from the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research website (<http://www.icpsr.umich.edu/icpsrweb/ICPSR/>).

<sup>5</sup> It should be noted that studies have found evidence of over-reporting voting in survey data. Bernstein, Chadha, and Montjoy (2003) find that voter over-reporting in the CPS can be systematically explained to some extent. One relationship between non-voters reporting that they have voted is education; specifically, individuals with higher education are more likely to report that they have voted when they did not (according to validated turnout data). While this over-reporting may inflate measures of bias in participation, measures of participation bias developed using CPS data is still appropriate for two reasons. First, there is no evidence suggesting that high education individuals are more likely to over-report voting at a higher rate in some states compared to others. Therefore, the ability to compare participation bias across states should not be compromised. Second, Bernstein et al. find over-reporting is consistent over time. This information allows for the examination of state changes in bias without being concerned about measurement issues over time due to over-reporting.

distribution. A unique regression modeled is specified for each state and each election year under analysis. Since both variables (*vote* and *income*) are bounded between 0 and 1, the resulting coefficient ( $b_1$ ) on the cumulative income scale is interpreted as the absolute difference in the probability of voting for the poorest and richest income group in each state.

Hence, the participation bias measure ranges from -1 to 1, with negative values indicating low-income individuals are more likely to vote than the rich, 0 meaning the rich and poor have an equal probability of voting, and positive values meaning the rich vote at a higher rate than the poor. A value of 0.33 (the average of the measure across all years and states), for example, indicates the rich are 33% more likely to vote than the poor. Figure 2.1 displays the inequality measure (averaged over time), sorted from the states with the highest participation bias to the lowest. Perhaps unsurprisingly, no state has a bias measure at or below 0, which would indicate that the lower class participates at a higher rate than the upper class. Additionally, the states with the highest bias levels have values around 0.40, meaning these states have wealthy citizens participating at a rate near double the level of low-income citizens (the average turnout rate for the lowest income group is just over 40%).

This inequality index is used throughout this dissertation to assess the degree to which economic biases in participation affect state public policy. The remainder of this chapter demonstrates that the American states are ideal for studying the consequences of participation bias. Since the political and economic characteristics of the states can shape inequalities in participation (discussed below), participation bias is expected to be different across states and over time. This variation in inequality, as well as the ability of the states to design many of their own policies, provides an opportune context to study the relationship between inequality and policy. The next section provides empirical evidence that demonstrates participation bias is quite different across the states and over

time using the inequality index described above. Then, I examine the extent to which income inequality varies across the states and over time.

### **Comparing Unequal Participation with Other Measures of Political Influence**

This section provides a summary overview of how the participation inequality measure used in this study is related to other common measures of inequality and political influence. Table 2.1 presents the Pearson correlation coefficients for participation inequality, aggregate state voter turnout, per capita income, a measure of income inequality (i.e., state Gini coefficients), the percentage of the state that is white, the percentage of the state that belongs to a union, and the state poverty rate of each state. As other scholars have observed (e.g., Rosenstone and Hansen 1993), overall turnout rates and participation bias have a negative relationship. That is, higher levels of overall turnout are generally related to lower levels of participation inequality. While participation bias and turnout are associated, this connection is certainly not a one-to-one relationship ( $r = -0.34$ ). This indicates turnout should not be used as a proxy for economic participation bias, and scholars should be cautious when interpreting the effects of overall turnout rates on political outcomes.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, states with higher per capita incomes do not necessarily have higher levels of participation bias ( $r = 0.17$ ). State wealth is largely accounted for when measuring participation inequality by placing individuals on an income distribution that is relative to the overall income of their state (see the detailed discussion above).

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<sup>6</sup> For example, Hajnal's (2010) study of how participation influences political decision making at the local level argues that overall turnout rates can be used to make inferences about economic inequalities in participation. This is mainly done out of necessity, since voting and income data are difficult to obtain at the local level. In any case, it shown here that overall turnout rates and participation bias at the state levels are not equal to one another.

Another state characteristic that is potentially related to participation bias is income inequality (e.g., Langer 1999). Some have argued that increases in income inequality can lead to lower levels of political engagement and interest (e.g., see Solt 2008). This suggests the possibility that lower income groups may be disproportionately influenced by larger levels of income inequality, which leads to higher levels of participation bias.<sup>7</sup> While the two variables have a positive association ( $r = 0.28$ ), they appear to be measuring two different phenomena. Another important aspect of state political inequality is the racial and ethnic composition of a state (Hero 1998; Hero and Tolbert 1996). State racial diversity is measured as the percentage of the state that identifies as being white and non-Hispanic. Once again, while participation bias and percent white are related, the relatively modest correlation ( $r = -0.17$ ) suggests racial diversity is not necessarily equal to levels of participation inequality in a state.

Since low-income individuals in some states may have stronger mobilizing groups associated with them, it is important to show that participation bias is different from groups that favor low-income priorities. One way that the disadvantaged may gain access to the policy process is through organized labor. Labor unions are organizations that have been shown to provide lower class citizens with political power and influence over public policy decisions (Kelly and Witko 2010; Radcliff and Saiz 1998; Witko and Newmark 2005). A negative relationship does exist between participation inequality and state union membership ( $r = -0.28$ )—which suggests higher union membership does lead to less participation bias—but these two variables certainly measure different concepts. Finally, the relationship between participation inequality and state poverty rates is examined. It is possible that states with higher rates of poverty may be driving the economic biases in participation that are observed. Once again, participation inequality is somewhat related

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<sup>7</sup> Alternatively, participation bias may affect income inequality. As will become evident in the following chapters, participation bias can lead to less redistributive policy outcomes, which can create larger gaps between the incomes of the rich and poor.

to poverty rates ( $r = 0.12$ ), but the bias and poverty measures are seemingly two unique state characteristics.

### **Trends in Participation Bias**

Explaining variation in voter biases has proven to be difficult, even with more information known about the unequal influences of class representation in Congress (Bartels 2008; Griffin and Newman 2005; 2008). Many scholars have found that simply increasing turnout rates may not reduce the gap between upper and lower class voter turnout rates. Hill and Leighley's (1994) work suggests greater mobilization efforts by political elites does not create a more representative electorate, rather state socioeconomic conditions drive political inequality. But the current literature leaves many unanswered questions. For instance, if class bias varies by state does it also vary over time? If it does, do distinguishable trends exist and are these trends the same for all states?

Leighley and Nagler's (1992) study of class bias in turnout from the 1960s to 1980s suggests that economic inequalities in turnout have changed very little over time in the US. This aggregate view of participation bias does not, however, consider the possibility that the composition of the electorate has been changing at the state level. This apparent contradiction—that US participation bias is constant over time while bias in the states has changed—could easily be explained if some states experience increases in bias over time while others experience decreases in inequality. Aggregating participation bias to the national level would then average out the increasing and decreasing trends observed at the state level. In order to examine variation in voter biases across the fifty states and over time, several characteristics of the participation inequality index (discussed above) are examined. To begin, Figure 2.2 shows that when averaging the inequality index for all states, income bias falls around 0.3 to 0.35 over the period of time

being examined. The plot shows that economic inequalities in participation have slowly increased over time, with a relatively large spike in the late 1990s. The most recent estimates suggests that the wealthiest Americans are about 35% more likely to vote than the poorest income group.

Examining average levels of inequality over time, however, can potentially hide trends across states and within states over time. Figure 2.3 demonstrates the variation of participation bias over time for each of the fifty states. Again, the inequality index for all states and years is consistently biased toward the upper status group. Without exception, then, the composition of American electorate has favored the wealthy and this trend of inequality is consistent over the past few decades. For the most part, each state panel shows that bias varies significantly across the American states with inequality increasing, decreasing, and remaining constant in some cases.

For instance, states such as Connecticut, North Dakota, and West Virginia have relatively consistent increasing trends in participation bias, while Alabama and New Mexico appear to be trending downward. California, Iowa, and Washington have more constant levels of inequality, and Colorado and New Hampshire have more non-monotonic patterns of participation bias.

While Figure 2.3 provides a general overview of trends in participation bias in the states over time, it is still difficult to determine whether any particular pattern exists across the states. To place a more definitive estimate of which states are experiencing larger or smaller gaps in participation inequality over the past several decades, Figure 2.4 present the correlation coefficients of the inequality measure with time for each state. What is immediately evident from Figure 2.4 is that the states vary substantially in how much bias in their electorates have changed since the 1970s. The relationship of participation bias with time is strong and increasing for a number of states, weak in a few states, and decreasing for others. In general, a majority of the states appear to have seen an increase in participation inequality over time. Approximately 30 states have an evident

positive correlation with time with almost 20 states that have a correlation coefficient over 0.5. About 13 states have a clear decreasing trend over time ( $r < -0.1$ ), but only Delaware and Tennessee have a correlation coefficient with time that is less than -0.5. A handful of states do not have a discernable linear association with time.

Although correlations of the participation bias index and time give a general view of how participation bias is changing in the states, this summary statistic does not provide a sense of how much change is occurring. To get a better understanding of the magnitude of change in voter turnout bias over the time period under analysis, Figure 2.5 presents the net change in inequality from 1972 to 2008 for each state. The plot suggests that changes in participation inequality since the 1970s varies significantly across the states. While the average net change over this period of time is only 0.03, some states have had net positive changes and others net negative trends in inequality. The standard deviation in net change in participation bias is approximately 0.11, which is relatively large when considering the interpretation of this number. A state with an inequality score of 0.30—the approximate average level of participation bias—would experience a 37% increase in bias if the state's participation bias grew by 0.11. A single standard deviation increase is equivalent to an 11% change in the difference of the probability of the rich voting compared to the poor.

Similar to the trend in the relationship of inequality and time (see Figure 2.4), most states (just over half) have experienced net increases in bias over time. Participation inequality increased by over 0.10 for about a quarter of the states, and six states have seen a net increase in bias over 0.20. Again, these are relatively large increases in participation bias—this is especially the case for those states with increases equal to or above 20%. A number of states, conversely, have decreased their net participation bias. Most of the states with negative net changes, however, have experienced differences in the -0.1 to 0 range. Overall, the net changes in participation inequality over time are largely in the positive direction. Once again, these results suggest the gap between the participation of

the rich and poor has increased in the states over time, a finding that is quite different than the national level evidence indicating bias has remained constant.

This state view of participation inequality shows important variations in economic bias over time and across states. An important question related to these differences is whether these changes have had a substantive influence on the composition of state electorates. That is, have the states with the highest levels of participation inequality in the 1970s experienced larger increases in bias over time? If this is the case, high inequality states three decades ago will likely be the high inequality state today. Alternatively, if some states with lower levels of participation inequality in the 70s have had faster growth in participation bias than other states over time, then the high inequality states today may look different from the high bias states 25 years ago. One way to assess how variations in participation inequality have shaped the current state of bias is to examine levels of inequality from early in the time period in the study to a more recent period. Table 2.2 presents a comparison of state inequality rankings in 1980 and 2004.

This comparison of relative state inequality shows that changes in participation bias are varied across the states. West Virginia and Kansas, for example, rank much higher (i.e., they have larger economic inequalities) on inequality in 2004 than in 1980, while states like Oregon and Arkansas have decreased their levels of participation bias during the 25 year period. In contrast, states like Virginia, Vermont, Illinois, and New Hampshire change their relative levels of inequality over time. Virginia and Vermont have high levels of bias in 1980 and 2004, while Illinois and New Hampshire maintain their low levels of bias during the same time period. To demonstrate how much change occurred in the state rankings over the time period, Figure 2.6 plots the 2004 state inequality rankings against the 1980 rankings. While the state rankings do have a positive relationship ( $r = 0.11$ )—that is, rankings in 1980 are somewhat correlated to the rankings in 2004—the figure shows many states changing from high to low levels of inequality and vice versa. States in the top left corner of the plot are those that had high inequality

rankings in 1980 but relatively low levels in 2004. Conversely, states in the bottom right portion of the plot are those that had low levels of inequality in 1980 but high participation bias in 2004.

## **Conclusions**

Although the determinants of voter turnout in the United States have been examined extensively, we still know relatively little about how the composition of the American electorate affects public policy. Research has shown that those with more political resources are more likely to be active in politics. This combination of wealth and political participation is expected to have a significant influence on political outcomes. Not only do the advantaged have more resources available to access political decision makers, but they are also more likely to attempt to influence the political process. This close connection between income and participation is likely to result in a political system where the interests and priorities of the rich drive political decisions, while the interests of the poor are unheard or even ignored. The consequences of a political process that favors the wealthy are expected to be seen when observing the types of policies that are debated and enacted. From the perspective of the American states, greater levels of economic participation bias in a state will lead to fewer policy outcomes that are beneficial to the disadvantaged.

Since the focus of this dissertation is to assess the effects of participation bias on state policy, a reliable measure of inequality was developed in this chapter. Using the biannual Current Population Survey election supplements, an index of participation inequality is created to measure the degree of participation bias in each state from 1972-2008. This measure of participation inequality is similar to measures of bias that have been used in past studies of economic biases in participation, but has two desirable qualities that improve upon previous measures of inequality. First, economic bias in

participation is estimated using individuals from every income group in each state, not only those at the top and bottom of the income distribution. Previous research has typically relied on measures of participation bias that focus only on whether various designations of rich and poor vote at differential rates. The regression-based approach used here takes all income groups into account when determining the level of participation inequality for each state.

Second, the measure used in this study estimates economic biases in participation when accounting for the relative wealth of each state. Scholars examining participation bias in the past have generally used universal income thresholds to identify rich and poor groups regardless of where individuals live. This can be problematic since the purchasing power of a dollar is not necessarily equal across the states. The inequality measure developed here accounts for differences in cost of living by adjusting individual incomes according to the relative wealth of their state.

After describing the measure of participation bias used throughout this study, I showed that participation bias is a unique state characteristic after comparing the measure to other potentially related state characteristics. For instance, state attributes such as income inequality and racial diversity—while possibly having similar influences on policy outcomes—are somewhat related to participation bias but also appear to be measuring different concepts (see Table 2.1). The following chapters use this measure of participation bias to assess whether this form of inequality shapes political outcomes, an important step in understanding how the composition of the electorate affects the policy process.

Finally, the differences in participation inequality across the states and over time demonstrate the American states are ideal for studying how inequalities influence policy. Contrary to evidence found at the national level (Leighley and Nagler 1992), a descriptive analysis of participation bias from 1972-2008 shows that many states have experienced unique trends in inequality. Not only is inequality quite different from state

to state, participation bias has changed over time in different ways across the states. Some states have experienced increases in participation inequality, others have actually seen decreases, and a number of states have had relatively constant rates of bias over time. The analysis shows, however, that inequalities in participation have increased in a majority of the states over the past three decades. This general trend not only suggests that it is important to study the effects of inequality over time, but that influence over the political process is growing in favor of the wealthy. This state variation in economic participation bias allows for a better understanding of how inequalities influence public policy.

Table 2.1: Participation Inequality Correlations with Other State Characteristics

	Participation Inequality	Overall Turnout	Income	Gini	% White	% Union	Poverty Rate
Participation Inequality	1.00						
Overall Turnout	-0.34	1.00					
Income	0.17	0.09	1.00				
Gini	0.28	-0.24	0.74	1.00			
% White	-0.17	0.53	-0.21	-0.40	1.00		
% Union	-0.28	0.10	-0.09	-0.31	-0.05	1.00	
Poverty Rate	0.12	-0.28	-0.35	0.31	-0.19	-0.25	1.00

Table 2.2: State Participation Inequality Rankings in 1980 and 2004

State	1980 Participation Inequality		2004 Participation Inequality	
	Rank	Ineq. Estimate	Rank	Ineq. Estimate
Tennessee	1	0.439	19	0.362
Alabama	2	0.437	30	0.321
Virginia	3	0.397	2	0.472
South Carolina	4	0.388	23	0.356
New Mexico	5	0.388	22	0.357
Oregon	6	0.374	36	0.304
Texas	7	0.371	15	0.374
Vermont	8	0.363	11	0.387
Arizona	9	0.349	13	0.381
Arkansas	10	0.347	42	0.266
Hawaii	11	0.344	16	0.373
Delaware	12	0.343	28	0.324
Nevada	13	0.333	12	0.387
Maryland	14	0.332	9	0.395
Mississippi	15	0.331	49	0.229
Oklahoma	16	0.331	1	0.478
Georgia	17	0.329	31	0.314
Nebraska	18	0.321	41	0.279
California	19	0.313	29	0.323
Iowa	20	0.311	21	0.359
Maine	21	0.310	32	0.310
Florida	22	0.302	35	0.307
Missouri	23	0.300	37	0.303
Washington	24	0.293	33	0.307
Alaska	25	0.293	39	0.295
New York	26	0.289	46	0.246
Ohio	27	0.281	24	0.354
New Jersey	28	0.280	44	0.262
Wisconsin	29	0.279	27	0.326
Colorado	30	0.276	20	0.362

Table 2.2: Continued

North Carolina	31	0.271	3	0.436
Pennsylvania	32	0.267	34	0.307
Massachusetts	33	0.266	47	0.240
Kentucky	34	0.266	4	0.424
Michigan	35	0.261	25	0.334
Rhode Island	36	0.245	10	0.393
Wyoming	37	0.233	7	0.407
Idaho	38	0.224	17	0.365
Louisiana	39	0.219	40	0.285
Utah	40	0.208	45	0.260
Montana	41	0.206	14	0.376
West Virginia	42	0.204	5	0.419
Minnesota	43	0.204	38	0.301
Illinois	44	0.193	48	0.230
Indiana	45	0.191	50	0.196
South Dakota	46	0.181	8	0.397
North Dakota	47	0.173	18	0.365
Kansas	48	0.140	6	0.410
Connecticut	49	0.139	26	0.329
New Hampshire	50	0.126	43	0.265

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Figure 2.1: Average State Participation Inequality, 1972-2008

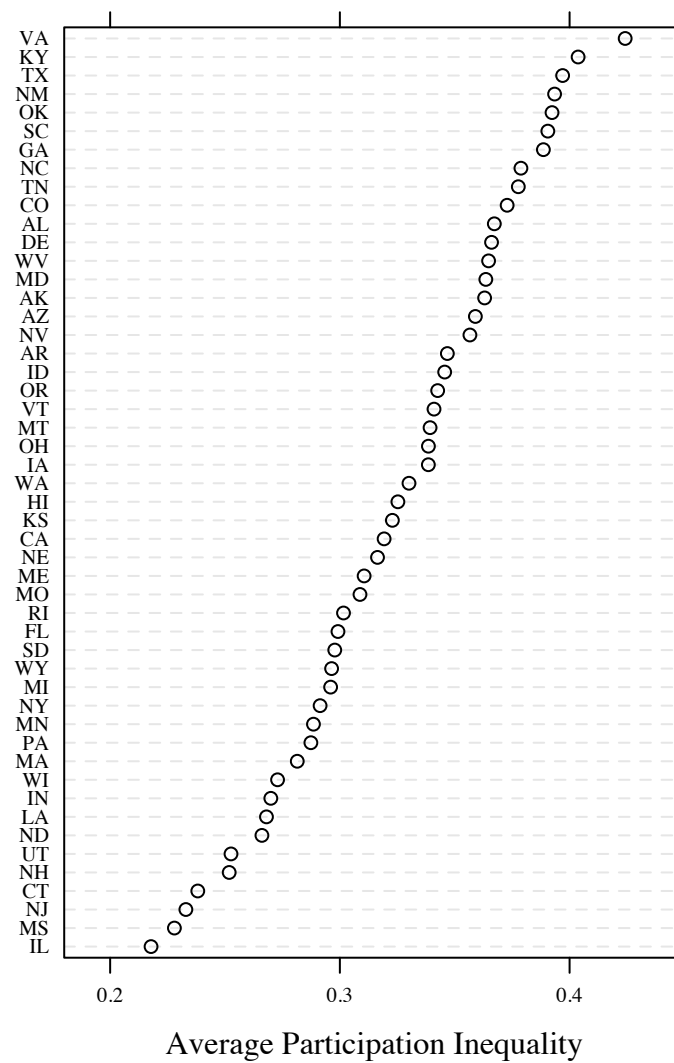


Figure 2.2: Participation Inequality Over Time (Average of All States), 1972-2008

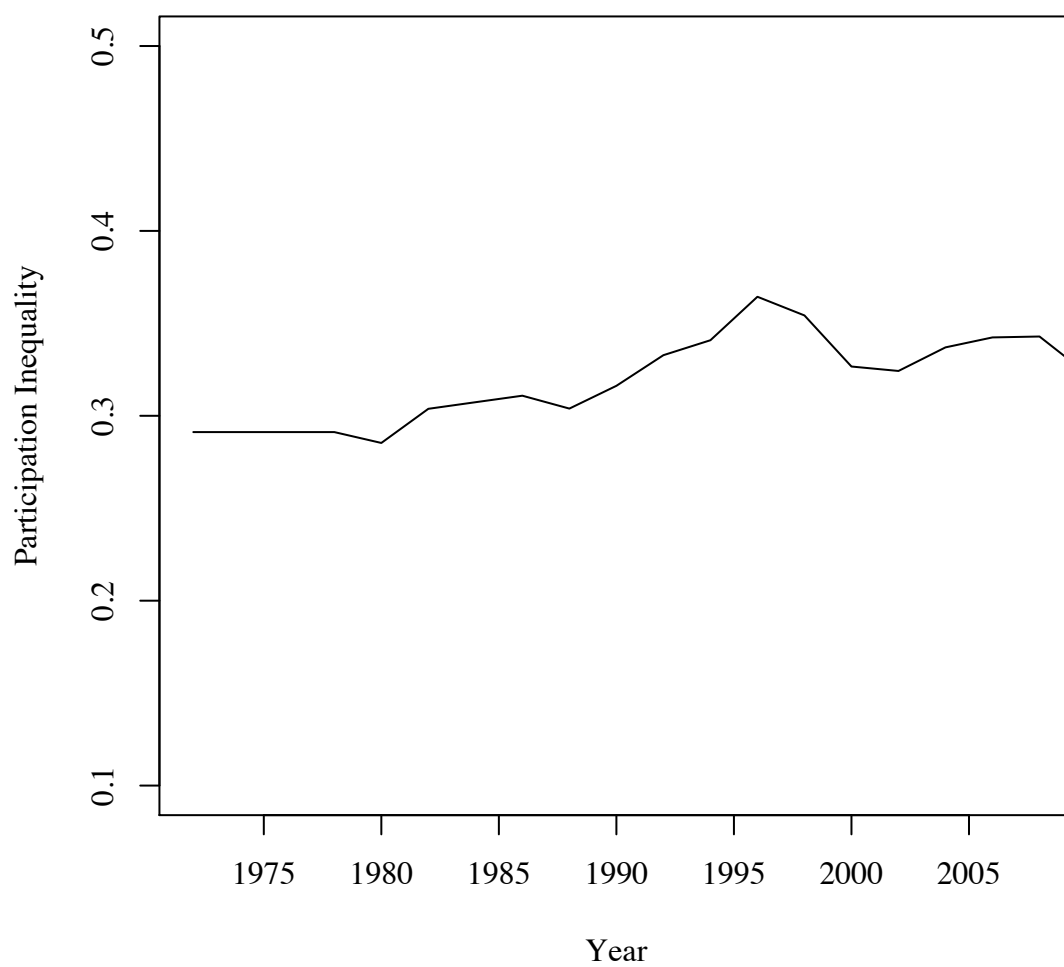


Figure 2.3: Participation Inequality Over Time for All States, 1972-2008

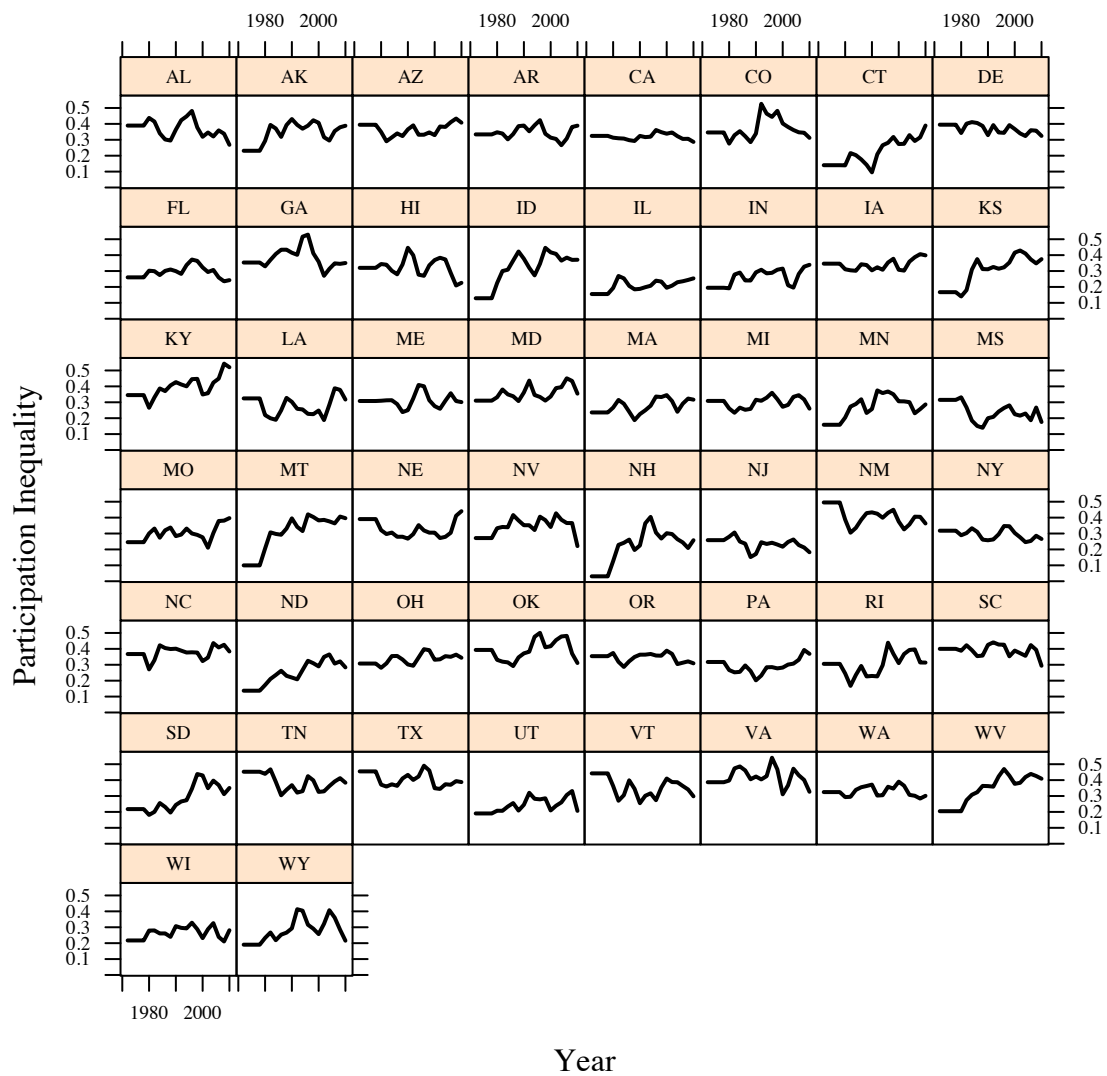
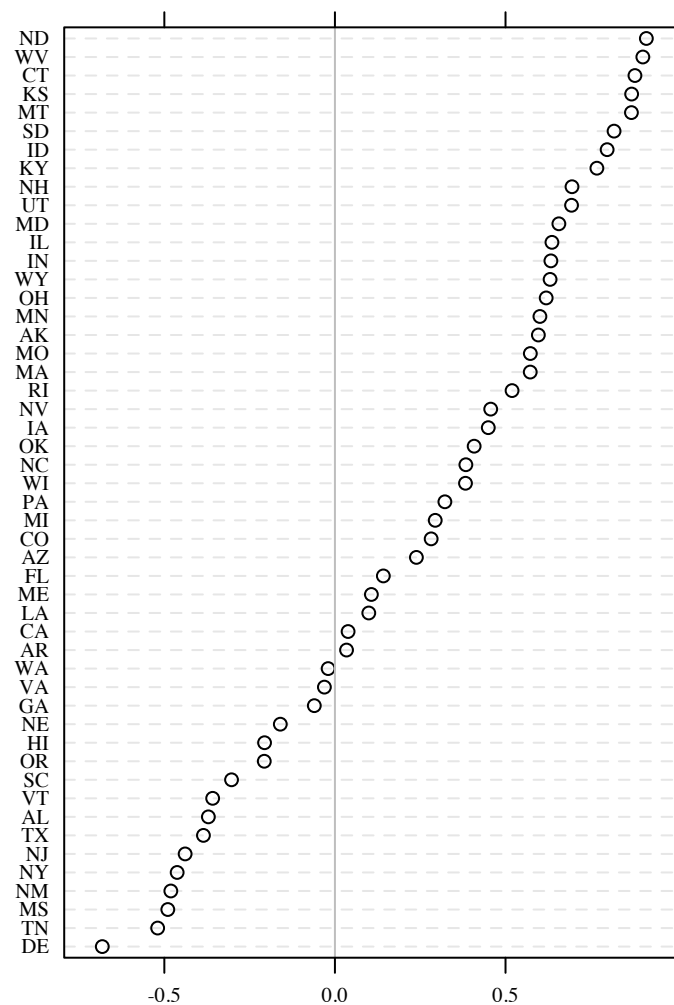


Figure 2.4: Correlation of Participation Inequality and Time for All States, 1972-2008



Correlation of Participation Inequality &amp; Time (1972-2008)

Figure 2.5: Net Change in Participation Inequality Over Time for All States, 1972-2008

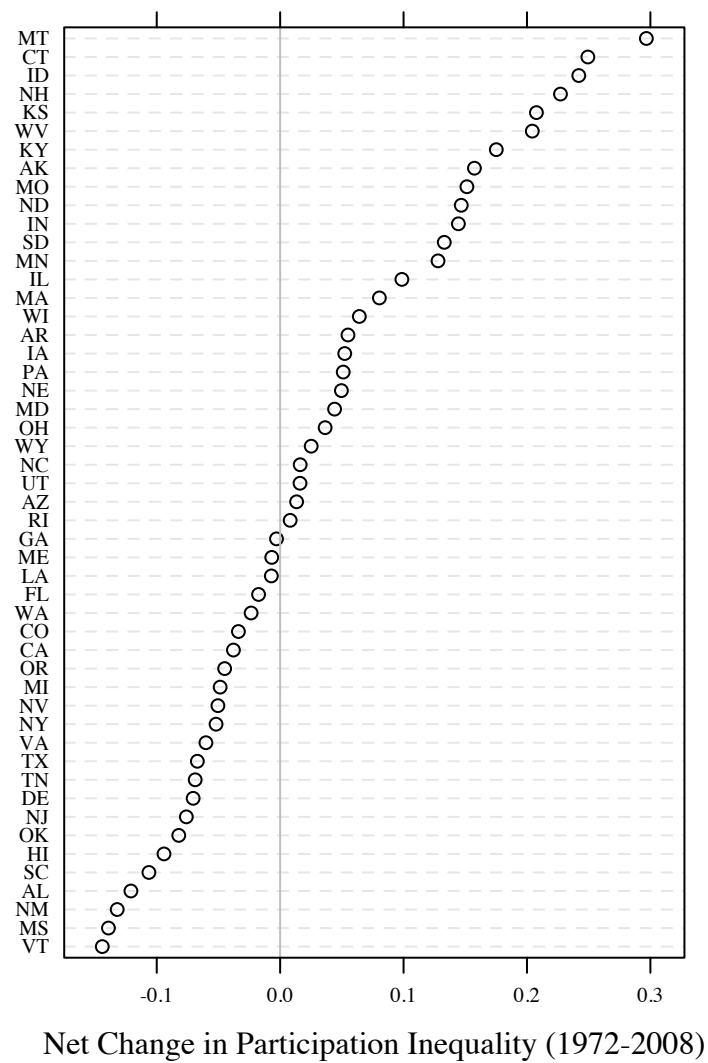
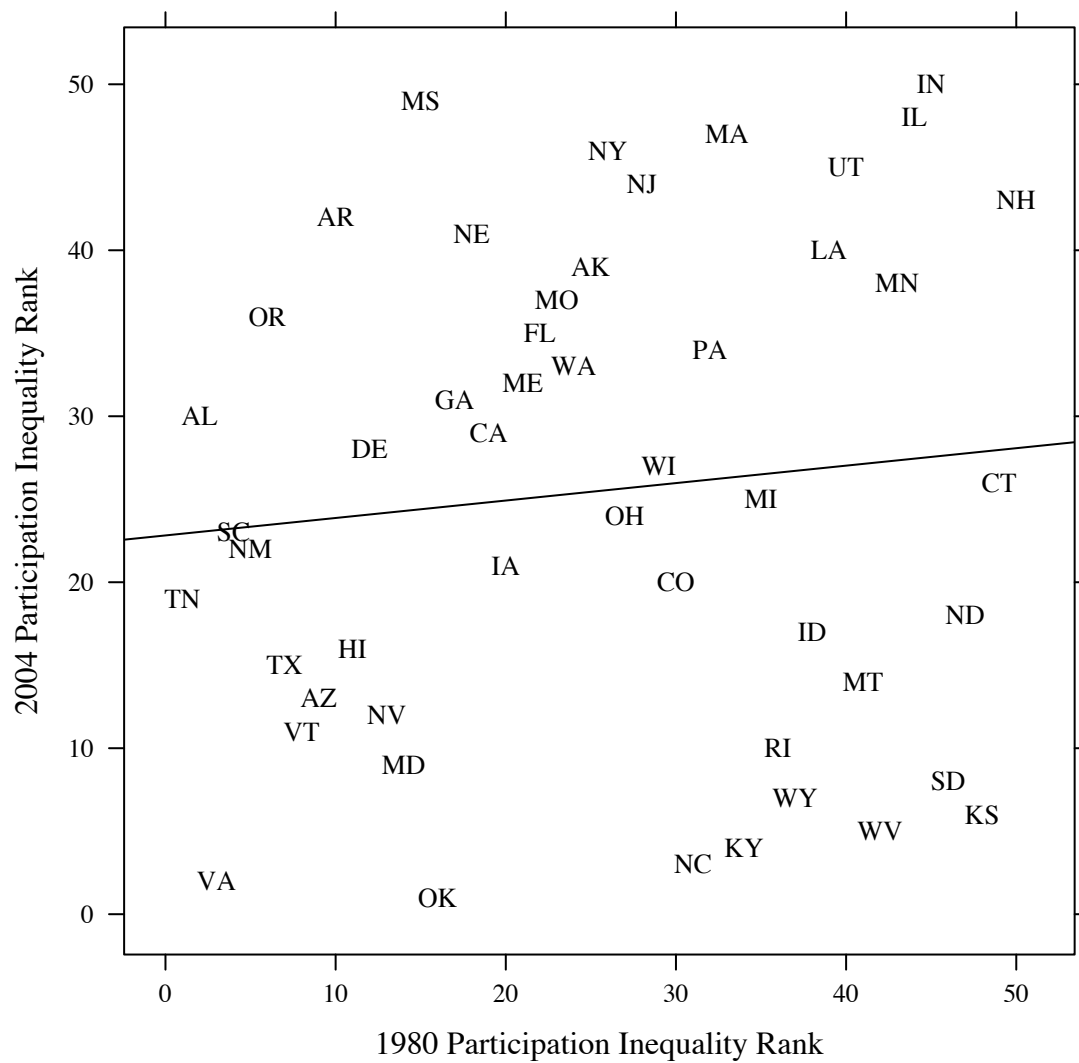


Figure 2.6: State Participation Inequality Rankings in 2004 and 1980



### CHAPTER 3

#### UNEQUAL PARTICIPATION, POLICY AGENDAS, AND NON- DECISION MAKING IN THE STATES

Although many scholars have addressed the question of who participates and why, we know much less about how the composition of the electorate affects politics and policy. Understanding the relationship between who participates and public policy is a seemingly important task, especially when considering the vast disparities in participation between the rich and poor. As detailed in Chapter 1, economic inequalities in participation are expected to shape political decision-making in the American states for a variety of reasons. The economic status of various groups in society is an important and often overlooked aspect of representation. Income is linked closely with economic need, which is especially important for disadvantaged groups. Income affects the types of government programs people are influenced by and rely on; for example, public housing policies are more likely to directly influence the poor while those with higher economic status may never interact with these programs. This suggests that different levels of political activity by various groups in society affect lawmakers' decisions regarding how to address certain issues. This aspect of citizen influence over government action is examined by measuring differences between the rich and poor in voter turnout, referred to as participation inequality, at the state level over time (see Chapter 2).

From this perspective, the types of policies most likely to be influenced by income inequalities in participation are those designed to influence particular economic groups. In environments of high participation inequality, the disadvantaged not only have fewer resources available to affect policy outcomes, but they also make less of an effort than the rich to shape policy by way of participation. This combination of few resources and relatively muted attempts to influence the political system make it less likely that

policies designed specifically to address the needs of low-income groups will be implemented. When the poor participate at much lower rates than the rich, elected officials have less incentive and motivation to address the interests of the disadvantaged. In many cases, politicians may not be aware of or understand the problems and needs of the poor under conditions of high participation inequality.

The argument that political and economic inequalities have consequences for public policy is not an entirely new concept. Many scholars have suggested that wealth and participation are important factors in shaping political decision-making. Studies showing certain segments of the population are indeed more likely to be responded to by elected officials tend to fall into two broad categories of research. The first group is those that analyze the link between the preferences of economic groups of the population and the response of elected officials to those constituent opinions (Bartels, 2008; Bartels et al., 2005; Griffin and Newman, 2005, 2007). The second group is those that analyze the link between the preferences of economic groups of the population and policy outcomes (Flavin, 2010; Gilens, 2005, 2009). The first type of analysis generally examines the relationship between public opinion on various political issues and how closely this opinion aligns with legislator roll call votes. The second type of research looks at the next logical step of the representation process and is concerned with uncovering unequal representation in the form of policy outcomes.

These studies, however, are mainly concerned with the correspondence or agreement between public opinion and government action. That is, they are not particularly concerned with the types of policies that are adopted, only how close actual public policy is to the public's (and subgroups of the public) preferences for those policies (see Gilens 2005 for an exception). As discussed earlier, this can be problematic for a number of reasons (see Chapter 1). More closely related to the argument of this study, a number of scholars have assessed the influence of inequality in participation on political outcomes in the states (Avery and Peffley 2005; Fellowes and Rowe 2004; Hill

and Leighley 1992; Hill, Leighley, and Hinton-Andersson 1995). This literature focuses exclusively on how participation bias influences policy outcomes—that is, those policies that are enacted and implemented. Additionally, this research primarily looks at a specific type of policy outcome in the states, welfare policy. While policy outcomes are certainly an important characteristic of the political process, they are only one aspect of public policy.

A particularly important, and often overlooked, phase of policy development is agenda setting. Agenda setting is not typically addressed by studies examining inequality and policy, yet it plays a vital role in determining which political issues are debated, the way that issues are discussed, and eventually which issues are addressed by government with policy enactment (Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Kingdon 2003). Agenda setting determines the issues that will receive attention from the government, meaning that some problems are deemed important while others are not. In fact, some political theorists suggest one of the most important political powers is having the ability to determine which issues are considered in the political arena (Bachrach and Baratz 1962; Lukes 1974; Schattschneider 1960).

This chapter explores whether states with higher inequality in political participation among the rich and poor have state policy agendas less likely to address issues that would benefit the poor. Elected officials may be less likely to identify and acknowledge the interests of politically inactive groups compared to those who are active. Additionally, participation provides information about the types of groups that are most likely to mobilize in the future, knowledge that can be important for developing strategies to remain in office. To better understand how participation inequality affects agenda setting, state legislative agendas are analyzed by using data collected on all bills introduced in the 50 states over an eight-year period. The results of this study have implications for the importance of political participation and how biases in the electorate affect the agenda-setting phase of the policy process.

### **Unequal Participation and State Policy Agendas**

Whether examining roll call votes or policy outcomes, the general theme of existing research on inequality and policy is an emphasis on policies that have made it on to lawmakers' agendas. While the unresponsiveness of elected officials to low socioeconomic segments of the population is undoubtedly vital to our understanding of inequality and public policy, this is only half of the story. A number of scholars suggest an important aspect of political power is the ability to shape the types of policies considered by lawmakers. A major critique of Dahl's (1961) seminal study of the policy process in New Haven is that he only examines a few salient issues when assessing who has influence over political outcomes. Dahl argues, "A political issue can hardly be said to exist unless and until it commands the attention of a significant segment of the political stratum (1961, 92)." The issues that never enter the political arena, however, can be as important to the policy process as voting on and passing legislation. Avoiding a debate or vote on an issue—also referred to as a "nondecision" or the second face of power—allows those in power to avoid taking a stance on a potentially dividing policy, while also limiting exposure of these issues to the public (Bachrach and Baratz, 1962; Hero, 1992; Schattschneider, 1960).

As already discussed, limiting the scope of conflict, or making "nondecisions," can be an equally effective way of influencing the political process. The ability to shape the political agenda allows political elites to determine which issues are debated, the way that issues are discussed, and eventually which issues become public policy. The issues that are a part of the political agenda are those considered to be public problems that the government can and should address. Issues kept off of the agenda are often considered private problems that are outside the scope of government intervention, or they are issues that are simply not important enough to be addressed. For an issue to become important enough to emerge onto the agenda it is often the perception of the problem that has to

change rather than a change in the problem itself. For example, Baumgartner and Jones (1993) show that poverty was a relatively minor public issue in the 1950s, but became a central public problem in the 1960s. The reason for the change of importance had little to do with actual changes in poverty. Instead, the shift of focus was due to the change in perception of poverty as being a structural issue that should be addressed by the government (also see Gaventa 1980).

The particular instance of the political importance of poverty not only illustrates the importance of agenda setting, but also suggests that the identification of public problems is vital in determining what issues make it onto the policy agenda. As argued above, the distribution of political participation across groups may limit the types of issues that enter the political arena in a number of ways. In environments of high inequality, elected officials have less incentive and motivation to address the interests of the disadvantaged. In many cases, politicians may not be aware of or understand the problems and needs of the poor under conditions of high participation inequality. Therefore, the problems of the poor are less likely to be identified, which indicates it is unlikely that these issues end up on the political agenda. In Schattschneider's words, "The root of the problem of nonvoting is to be found in the way in which the alternative in American politics are defined, the way in which issues get referred to the public, the scale of competition and organization, and above all by what issues are developed (1960, 110)."

Our knowledge of issue identification and policy agendas is also hindered by much of the current literature's focus on the issue positions of the public as a main explanatory variable (see Bartels, 2008; Bartels et al., 2005; Gilens 2005; Griffin and Newman, 2005; 2007). This approach assumes issue stances on various policies are of equal importance. For instance, positions on funding education are given the same importance as positions on environmental policies. It is more probable that individuals

weight certain issues with greater importance than others, something that cannot be uncovered by basic measures of issue stances.

Recent research has begun to address these particular gaps in the literature. Jones and Baumgartner (2004) and Jones, Larsen-Price, and Wilkerson (2009) examine how well the issue priorities of the public align with the issue priorities of the US Congress. These studies use survey questions asking respondents which political issues are most important to them to measure the public's issue priorities, and bills introduced by members of Congress to measure the issue priorities of lawmakers. With some exceptions, the authors find that the issue priorities of the public tend to match those of Congress. While these studies certainly add to our knowledge of representation and policy agendas, they do not address the possibility of unequal responsiveness to any population subgroups.<sup>8</sup> The analyses focus on the issue agendas of the entire US population over time, an approach similar to the representation studies by Erikson, Mackuen, and Stimson (2002) and Erikson, Wright, and McIver (1993), rather than disaggregating by groups or across subnational governments.

Although Jones and colleagues are able to capture the priorities of the public, the “most important problem” approach does have its own limitations. As the authors point out, the public's priorities tend to be general, and a majority of respondents state that economic and national defense issues are most important to them in most years. The issues addressed by Congress, however, are much more extensive, covering a wide range of topics. These findings suggest that even if lawmakers follow the priorities of the public, these priorities are often vague and uninformed. Jewell (1982) similarly finds that state legislators perceive their constituents' knowledge of policy issues to be quite

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<sup>8</sup> Interestingly, Jones, Larsen-Price, and Wilkerson (2009) find that legislators are not responsive to issues related to welfare and housing, two policy areas that are typically important to disadvantaged groups.

limited. This leaves elected officials discretion in how they address the issues that are most important to their constituents.

Jewell's (1982) work on the nature of representation in state legislatures makes the argument that lawmakers typically use their own judgment when making policy choices. This is largely due to elected officials' perceptions that their constituents rarely have formed opinions on all issues. When the public does have an opinion on a particular issue, these opinions are often uninformed, incomplete, or not articulated well (also see Rosenthal 2004). In general, public demands and concerns usually address broad issues with the implied expectation that legislators need to work on a solution. These circumstances often leave legislators with the task of determining what is the best way to approach a particular issue or problem.

A simple example can be used to illustrate how a broad problem may require elected officials to make choices about how to address the problem. Consider a public concerned about access to health insurance without much knowledge of how to solve this particular issue. Legislators are left to determine how to deal with this problem, which can involve a number of options. They may decide to offer a tax break to employers who provide workers with a health plan, expand the coverage of the state's existing Medicaid program, pursue both options, or avoid the health care problem altogether and focus on another issue. In any of these cases, various segments of the population will be influenced differently depending on their economic situation. This is an aspect of representation that is considered in this paper. Specifically, I assess the extent to which state legislators address the needs of disadvantaged populations by focusing on the policies most likely to influence less well off individuals. Regardless of the public's issue preferences or priorities, low-income groups are likely to rely on and use different government programs than the affluent.

To understand variation in the agenda setting ability of elected officials under varying levels of inequality in political participation, data on the types of bills introduced

in state legislatures are used. Examining bill introductions in Congress is a common way to assess the agendas of US lawmakers (e.g., Baumgartner and Jones 1993). Studying the agenda of the Congress, however, only provides variation in agendas and participation inequality over time. This can be problematic since participation bias is expected to remain relatively constant over time at the national level (see Leighley and Nagler 1992), with the exception of some particularly idiosyncratic elections. Additionally, the issues of main interest for this paper include policy areas (welfare, Medicaid, and housing) that are largely managed by the states. For these reasons, the American states have been chosen as the unit of analysis when testing the proposed hypothesis.

Whether elected officials attend to the policy issues of the disadvantaged is expected to be dependent on the political participation of the poor when compared to the rich, and to vary across states. Higher political participation by the less affluent should increase the likelihood that elected officials will consider policies favorable to the poor. Alternatively, higher levels of class participation bias—that is, greater levels of participation among the wealthy compared to the activity of the poor—will lead to state legislative agendas that are less likely to consider policies largely associated with disadvantaged groups. How elected officials address an issue may depend on the needs of those associated with the problem being addressed and the relative amount of political voice various groups have in the political process.

### **Data and Measures**

Data on all bills introduced in the lower house of all state legislatures from 2001-2008 are used to create a unique dataset collected by the author. Although some scholars have used the introduction of bills to examine state legislative agendas, these studies typically use a subset of states or bills in their analyses (e.g., Bratton 2002; Bratton and

Haynie 1999).<sup>9</sup> A searchable database maintained by LexisNexis State Capital, however, provides a consistent collection of all state legislative bills introduced in the fifty states. This information is used to assess the portion of each state's legislative agenda that was devoted to issues associated with disadvantaged groups. A similar approach has been used to measure the size of state agendas devoted to particular issue areas (Benz et al. 2011; Gray et al. 2005; Lowery et al. 2004). The three agenda issues analyzed here are welfare, Medicaid, and housing issues. These are policies targeted specifically at low-income groups, and are programs used disproportionately by the economically disadvantaged (see Mettler and Stonecash 2008).

Bills identified as addressing welfare issues are any bills directly dealing with welfare topics related to unemployment insurance, food stamps (or the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program), poverty, or the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program; these are programs that generally provide cash assistance to low-income families. Medicaid bills are identified as those simply addressing the issue of state Medicaid programs, which provide basic health coverage to the poor. Housing issues are those bills attending to public or low-income housing needs; these programs generally focus on providing affordable housing to the poor and infrastructure projects in low-income neighborhoods.<sup>10</sup> These data are used to examine whether states with higher participation bias are less likely to introduce bills related to policies aimed at poorer segments of the population, a first step in determining how certain issues can go unaddressed by the political process in environments of unequal participation.

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<sup>9</sup> The main reason for not including bill introductions for all states is that this has been a relatively impractical endeavor for researchers. The individual states have different management and consistency in regard to the availability of data on bill introductions. Also, when combining all bill introductions across the 50 states, the average number of introductions per year approaches 100,000 bills. This makes it difficult to analyze what each bill is about for purposes of understanding legislative agendas.

<sup>10</sup> Most bills address multiple subject areas, meaning these categories are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

A summary of the agenda space taken up by each issue area in each state, as well as the average total number of bills introduced in each state, is provided in Table 3.1. Two important points can be made by examining the average agenda space occupied by each of these issue areas. First, the agenda priorities of state legislators appear to generally not focus on the three issue areas being examined here. The average percentage of bills introduced addressing the issues of welfare, Medicaid, and housing are 0.7%, 1.8%, and 0.4%, respectively. As a reference point, the issues of taxation and education each make up approximately one-sixth of all state legislative agendas (around 30% when the two areas are combined). Second, a considerable amount of variation exists across states and across issue areas. That is, within a particular issue area the states vary in the amount of attention given to the issue, and the amount of attention a particular state gives to each issue area varies as well. Table 3.2 demonstrates that while the amount of agenda space given to each issue area is somewhat correlated, the strength of these relationships do not suggest states give equal attention to these three areas.

The primary explanatory variable in this analysis is the disproportionate participation rates of individuals from upper and lower status groups. The measure of participation inequality discussed in Chapter 2 is used, which assesses the degree to which income levels influence voter turnout in each state. The participation bias measure ranges from -1 to 1, with negative values indicating low-income individuals are more likely to vote than the rich, 0 meaning the rich and poor have an equal probability of voting, and positive values meaning the rich vote at a higher rate than the poor. A value of 0.33 (the average of the measure across all years and states), for example, indicates the rich are 33% more likely to vote than the poor. Perhaps unsurprisingly, no state has a bias measure at or below 0, which would indicate that the lower class participates at a higher rate than the upper class.

Figures 3.1-3.3 present a first look at the relationship between state agendas and participation inequality. To summarize the main argument, states with high levels of

participation bias are expected to be less likely to address policy issues addressing the needs of the disadvantaged (i.e., welfare, Medicaid, and housing). Figure 3.1 shows the association between the size of state welfare agendas (in percentages averaged over time) and average political inequality across the states (also averaged over time). Although the relationship is negative, as expected, the correlation is modest ( $r = -0.14$ ,  $p = 0.003$ ). The association between participation bias and Medicaid (Figure 3.2), however, is negative and larger ( $r = -0.23$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) than the relationship observed with the welfare agenda. With an even stronger relationship than that between participation bias and Medicaid, the housing agenda (Figure 3.3) also tends to be smaller in those states with high levels of participation bias ( $r = -0.35$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

Overall, the bivariate relationships between participation inequality and the issue agendas examined here are negative, suggesting higher levels of participation bias results in less attention to the issues of welfare, Medicaid, and public housing across state legislatures. The average percentages of issues addressed by state legislatures were used to graphically summarize these relationships, but is not as precise as measuring the actual number of bills. A more appropriate modeling strategy for the introduction of state bills is a count model (controlling for the log of the total number of bills introduced in each state), which is used in the following analyses. In the next section, the effect of participation bias on state agendas is examined when conditioned on other state factors that may affect the types of issues state legislatures address.

## **Analysis and Results**

The structure of the dependent variables used in the following analyses represents traditional count processes. Therefore, the introduction of state bills addressing issues related to welfare, Medicaid, and housing are modeled as count variables. The most common estimators for count data are the Poisson and negative binomial regression

models. The results discussed below are all estimated using the negative binomial regression models in order to account for overdispersion in the dependent variables, which was found to be significant for all three variables. Since each observation represents a state-session (50 states from 2001-2008), session dummy variables are included in the estimations and clustered robust standard errors were used to account for any heteroskedasticity and error dependence across state units.<sup>11</sup>

In addition to the main dependent and independent variables used in this analysis, a number of additional variables are used account for other factors that may influence state agendas. An important possibility that must be taken into consideration is different states have different problems that need to be addressed. It is likely that some states have a greater need to focus on the programs being analyzed here. To account for this, variables are included in each of the three models that are intended to capture the need for states to address issues related to welfare, Medicaid, and housing. For the welfare model, the state unemployment rate is included (% unemployed); for Medicaid, the percentage of uninsured individuals is used; and the housing model includes a variable indicating the median housing price (logged) for each state. The last variable is intended to capture the cost of housing to account for the possibility that states with more expensive housing markets will have a greater need to address housing needs for low-income groups. A variable measuring each state's poverty rate is also included in each of the three models,

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<sup>11</sup> Alternative modeling strategies would include estimating fixed effect models using state dummies or estimating random fixed effects models. The estimation of these models proved difficult with the data used here since only four legislative sessions (8 years) are being considered and most of the independent variables included in the models vary little or not at all. In any case, the use of clustered robust standard errors are expected to preform as well as these other methods under most circumstances (see Arceneaux and Nickerson, 2009). While it would be ideal to also consider the dynamic properties of state agendas over time, the relatively short time period being examined limits the types of modeling techniques that can be estimated. For a detailed discussion of issues related to the typical time series cross sectional data used in political science research, see Wilson and Butler (2007).

which is intended to capture the general need for states to address issues related to welfare, Medicaid, and housing.

While this study argues political participation is related to how much political influence various groups have in the US, another way that low-income individuals may gain access to the policy process is through organization. Labor unions are particularly significant organizations that have been shown to provide lower class citizens with political power and influence over public policy decisions (Kelly and Witko 2010; Radcliff and Saiz 1998; Witko and Newmark 2005). The variable union membership is included in the analyses to account for the presence of labor organization in each state, which is measured as the percentage of the workforce that belongs to a union.

Other variables included in the analysis of state agendas are state per capita income (income); state ideology, with larger values indicating a more liberal citizenry (Berry et al., 1998); the percentage of the population that is white non-Hispanic (% white) to account for state racial diversity; the ideology of the state government (Berry et al. 1998); competition among each state's political parties (Ranney 1976); legislative professionalism (legislative prof.); a dummy variable that is equal to 1 if the state is located in the Deep South; a variable to account for regional diffusion of bill introductions, which measures the average number of bills introduced in bordering states; and a variable indicating the number of total bills introduced (logged) in each state legislature (total bills). Holding the total number of bills introduced in each state constant ensures the results are not confounded by the possibility that states with large numbers of bill introductions are likely to introduce more bills in all issue areas (see the appendix for more detail on variable coding and sources).

The results for each negative binomial regression model are presented in Table 3.3. The main variable of interest, participation bias, shows results similar to those found when examining the bivariate relationships among each agenda issue and average participation bias. The coefficient for the welfare model is negative and statistically

different from zero, the coefficient estimates for the Medicaid is negative but not significant at the 0.05 level, and the housing model is both negative and significantly different from zero. These results suggest that higher levels of state participation bias lead to a lower likelihood of states addressing issues focused on assisting the disadvantaged, specifically issues related to welfare and housing policy.

Looking to other variables used in the analyses, higher rates of unemployment appear, unexpectedly, to decrease the number of bills a state introduces related to welfare policy but this coefficient is not statistically significant ( $p = 0.137$ ). Covariates other than participation bias that influence the size of the welfare agendas in states are citizen ideology ( $p = 0.055$ ), government ideology ( $p = 0.050$ ), and party competition. These results suggest a more liberal citizenry and government lead to more bills related to the issue of welfare, as does more competition between the state parties. For the issue of Medicaid, the most important factor in increasing bills introduced related to health care for low-income individuals is being outside of the Deep South ( $p = 0.036$ ). The percentage of the population that is uninsured does not appear to influence the size of a state's Medicare agenda ( $p = 0.250$ ). States that give more attention to low-income and public housing are those where high housing costs ( $p = 0.008$ ) may lead to affordability issues for those at the bottom of the income distribution.

One potential issue with analyzing all bills introduced in state legislatures to measure issue agendas is that all bills are not necessarily given equal attention. This must be the case for states like New York, which on average introduces over 10,000 bills each year. It seems highly unlikely that each of these bills is debated or even read by members of the state legislature. This suggests that although states are introducing bills related to welfare, Medicaid, and housing, it is difficult to know whether these bills gain the attention of elected officials. One potentially common situation is that a legislator introduces a bill he or she views as a priority, but other members think otherwise. Another possibility is that state elected officials simply introduce bills to appease their

constituents or interest groups, but do not have a genuine interest in moving the legislation forward.

One way that these types of bills can be accounted for is to analyze the action taken on each bill, which is recorded in the LexisNexis bill summaries. Since the action described in the data is not typically very detailed, a count of the number of actions taken on each bill is used to indicate whether the bill was given consideration. After recoding those bills that appear to have not been acted on—that is, they were introduced but not given additional consideration—each of the three models was re-estimated. A summary description of this subset of agenda space for each issue and state is shown in Table 3.4. The results of the negative binomial regression of “acted on” bills related to welfare, Medicaid, and housing are presented in Table 3.5. The coefficients on participation bias are still consistent with what is expected when using this alternative modeling strategy. One difference is that participation bias is significant at the 0.10 level ( $p = 0.078$ ) in the Medicaid model when only considering those bills that are acted on. These results suggest that when considering those bills given at least some degree of legislator attention, issues most beneficial to the disadvantaged are more likely to be on state agendas when levels of participation between the rich and poor are more equal.

To provide a clearer understanding of the substantive effect of participation bias on state agendas, Figures 3.4-3.6 show the predicted number of introduced bills in the average state legislature for the three issue areas at various levels of bias. Predicted counts from the both models are included with solid lines representing the all bills models (from Table 3.3) and dashed lines representing the acted on models (from Table 3.5). Class bias ranges from 0.10 (nearly equal participation of low- and high-income groups) to 0.50, which is approximately two standard deviations above and below the mean of participation bias. All three figures demonstrate the negative effect of increases in participation bias on welfare, Medicaid, and housing agendas (though the influence of bias on Medicaid is not significant). To show the degree to which changes in

participation bias influence state agendas in the three issue areas being examined, Figure 3.7 shows the percentage change in agenda size for a two standard deviation increase in inequality. For the issue of welfare, an increase in participation bias leads to a decrease in the number of bills introduced by %15-%20, depending on the model specification. The change in state housing agendas is even larger, with the same increase in inequality producing a %22-%28 decrease in introductions.

### **Conclusions**

This study seeks to understand the policy consequences of class biases in political participation; it focuses on economic biases in participation across the states, and links these biases to the priorities of state legislators. It provides an empirical test of the arguments articulated by E. E. Schattschneider in the *Semisovereign People*. As many democratic theorists have pointed out, political participation is essential for a properly functioning and legitimate democratic state. When political activists disproportionately represent affluent and economic interests, these overrepresented groups will likely experience favorable public policies. Participation is a form of communication that allows the public to voice issues and concerns, and inequality in participation can influence the voices that are heard the loudest.

Measuring policy preferences or priorities through public opinion polls overlooks an aspect of political representation that involves legislators making decisions about how to address issues and deciding which issues should be addressed. The public rarely has fully developed ideas about how a given issue should be solved. Rather, public officials are often required to decide how issues should be addressed and design policy they believe will resolve these problems. This is an important facet of representation in regard to the interests and needs of economically disadvantaged groups who are likely to rely on specific government programs designed to assist these needs. When economic biases in

political participation are high, the needs of lower-class groups may be dismissed or overshadowed by the needs of the politically active groups.

An aspect of power that is typically ignored is the ability to keep certain issues from being debated entirely (Bachrach and Baratz, 1962, 1970; Lukes, 1974). Keeping items off of the agenda allows those in power to avoid taking a stance on a potentially dividing policy, while also limiting exposure of these issues to the public. The results of this study show inequality in participation influences the priorities of state legislators. Scholars measuring inequality and public policy have not previously analyzed state legislative agendas. The results show in the cases of Medicaid and housing, state legislators are more likely to address these issues when inequality in political participation is low (i.e., the likelihood of the poor voting is closer to the likelihood of the rich voting). This evidence suggests the disadvantaged are better able to have their economic circumstances addressed by lawmakers when their level of political participation is close to the level of the affluent. In other words, a more equally distributed electorate appears to expand the scope of conflict (Schattschneider, 1960), at least when considering the agendas of state legislators.

While this study moves us toward a better understanding of the consequences of political inequality, this understanding is far from complete. For instance, it is also important to know how much the agendas of state lawmakers matter. Are the issues addressed by legislators more likely to be passed or, at a minimum, more likely to be debated? It is possible that some legislators introduce certain bills with the intention of providing constituents with some evidence that their interests are being taken into consideration, but the proposed bills are never taken seriously by the legislative body as a whole. Future studies should certainly attempt to show whether these issues are being acted upon—beyond being introduced—and how often these bills are passed into law.

A limitation of this research is it only considers the issue areas of the bills being introduced by legislators. That is, the ideological nature of the bills being examined is not

taken into account. It is possible that while elected officials are considering issues that are relied upon by the disadvantaged, they may be proposing legislation that intends to prohibit or diminish these programs. Although this is certainly an area of research that should be explored, this study is only concerned with the ability of elected officials to keep certain issues off of the political agenda. Again, this analysis focuses only on the influence of participation bias on the power of lawmakers to address or choose not to address particular issues.

The results of this research have broader implications for the policy process and political participation in the US. This study builds on our understanding of how socioeconomic status influences politics and government action, and provides insight into the importance of political participation in a democratic society. Many have asked whether poor rates of political involvement influence the quality of a democratic political system. This chapter suggests the composition of the politically active can significantly affect the policy process and demonstrates that political voice does matter, giving us even more reason to care about participation from a normative perspective.

Table 3.1: Average State Bill Introductions, 2001-2008

State	Welfare (%)	Medicaid (%)	Housing (%)	Total Bills (Ave.)
AL	0.53	0.69	0.15	1938.25
AK	0.64	1.99	0.57	508.75
AZ	0.95	1.88	0.29	1507.75
AR	0.39	0.90	0.19	1893.25
CA	0.97	3.09	1.33	3182.75
CO	0.96	3.36	0.26	849.00
CT	0.81	2.88	1.02	2880.00
DE	0.62	1.20	0.36	565.50
FL	0.57	2.33	0.61	2163.50
GA	0.45	0.89	0.33	1732.50
HI	0.98	1.84	1.13	3144.00
ID	0.53	1.50	0.61	777.00
IL	0.98	2.13	0.46	6571.75
IN	0.78	2.79	0.60	1405.75
IA	0.52	2.94	0.30	1499.50
KS	0.40	1.14	0.10	1007.00
KY	0.56	2.37	0.10	1292.00
LA	0.59	1.05	0.33	2880.25
ME	1.10	3.41	0.70	1488.00
MD	0.46	1.79	0.36	3024.75
MA	0.53	1.26	1.20	5238.00
MI	0.63	1.03	0.30	2602.75
MN	0.40	2.31	0.34	3922.50
MS	0.68	1.87	0.31	3544.50
MO	0.60	1.77	0.17	2181.75
MT	1.45	1.43	0.07	783.00
NE	0.75	1.37	0.24	1277.25
NV	0.26	2.20	0.37	650.25
NH	0.58	1.82	0.23	1205.25
NJ	0.77	1.95	0.52	4302.50
NM	0.55	1.81	0.26	1852.25

Table 3.1: Continued

NY	0.66	1.56	0.85	11581.50
NC	0.46	1.59	0.32	2340.75
ND	1.58	1.66	0.18	502.00
OH	0.48	2.45	0.50	659.50
OK	0.23	1.12	0.20	2127.25
OR	1.05	1.83	0.69	1820.50
PA	0.90	1.68	0.45	3035.00
RI	0.74	1.86	0.72	2919.25
SC	0.40	0.71	0.19	2052.50
SD	0.83	1.22	0.04	594.00
TN	0.43	1.84	0.29	3874.75
TX	0.50	1.88	0.38	3952.25
UT	0.82	1.71	0.35	845.50
VT	0.98	2.70	0.37	834.75
VA	0.74	1.17	0.51	2989.00
WA	0.78	1.59	0.52	2254.75
WV	0.75	1.11	0.31	2725.25
WI	0.27	2.07	0.13	1039.75
WY	0.71	2.04	0.09	529.50

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Table 3.2: Correlations Among Agenda Issues

	Welfare	Medicaid	Housing
Welfare	1.00		
Medicaid	0.26	1.00	
Housing	0.19	0.33	1.00

Table 3.3: Unequal Participation and Bill Introductions, Negative Binomial Regression Results

	Welfare		Medicaid		Housing	
	<i>b/(rcse)</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>b/(rcse)</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>b/(rcse)</i>	<i>p</i>
Participation Inequality	-1.419 (0.583)	0.015	-0.947 (0.664)	0.154	-1.927 (0.893)	0.031
% Unemployed	-0.099 (0.066)	0.137				
% Uninsured			0.018 (0.016)	0.250		
Housing Prices					0.823 (0.312)	0.008
% Union Member	-0.001 (0.011)	0.949	0.004 (0.013)	0.777	0.006 (0.014)	0.693
Poverty Rate	0.004 (0.021)	0.839	-0.000 (0.026)	0.987	0.027 (0.028)	0.336
Income	0.014 (0.011)	0.206	0.011 (0.016)	0.512	-0.006 (0.019)	0.758
Ideology	0.009 (0.005)	0.055	0.003 (0.004)	0.523	0.006 (0.007)	0.375
% White	0.003 (0.004)	0.540	0.003 (0.006)	0.581	0.003 (0.005)	0.549
Turnout	-0.003 (0.010)	0.738	0.008 (0.008)	0.343	<0.001 (0.012)	0.994
Gov. Ideology	0.006 (0.003)	0.050	<0.001 (0.003)	0.860	-0.005 (0.004)	0.166
Competition	1.458 (0.563)	0.010	-0.559 (0.654)	0.393	-1.106 (0.904)	0.221
Legislative Prof.	-0.233 (0.351)	0.507	0.331 (0.500)	0.509	0.647 (0.754)	0.391
Deep South	0.239 (0.212)	0.260	-0.519 (0.247)	0.036	-0.367 (0.234)	0.116
Regional Diffusion	-0.022	0.001	<0.001	0.912	0.009	0.197

Table 3.3: Continued

	(0.007)		(0.003)		(0.007)	
Total Bills (logged)	0.879	0.000	0.907	<0.001	1.087	<0.001
	(0.098)		(0.071)		(0.143)	
Constant	-5.979	0.000	-4.207	<0.001	-9.670	0.001
	(0.951)		(0.960)		(2.892)	
N	200		200		200	
Log-Likelihood	-538.782		-767.961		-502.787	

Note: Session fixed effects dummy estimates not included in table; robust clustered standard errors by state in parentheses.

Table 3.4: Average State Bill Introductions Acted On, 2001-2008

State	Welfare Acted On (%)	Medicaid Acted On (%)	Housing Acted On (%)	Total Bills Acted On (Ave.)
AL	0.46	0.39	0.09	1336
AK	0.52	1.17	0.38	331.25
AZ	0.52	1.09	0.23	817.25
AR	0.22	0.50	0.11	896
CA	0.77	2.57	1.07	2530.25
CO	0.72	2.48	0.20	603.5
CT	0.43	1.31	0.60	1107
DE	0.35	0.64	0.31	372.75
FL	0.27	1.65	0.39	1419.25
GA	0.23	0.37	0.18	1011.25
HI	0.53	1.52	0.71	1689.75
ID	0.14	0.66	0.44	312.25
IL	0.44	1.10	0.28	2888.75
IN	0.28	1.30	0.32	533.5
IA	0.30	1.51	0.13	744.5
KS	0.22	0.50	0.05	443.5
KY	0.35	1.80	0.08	900.5
LA	0.41	0.61	0.27	1735
ME	0.56	1.98	0.52	798.25
MD	0.24	1.11	0.27	1814.25
MA	0.29	0.64	0.47	2594.25
MI	0.19	0.40	0.17	1000.25
MN	0.21	0.83	0.09	1190.5
MS	0.22	1.02	0.16	1593.25
MO	0.32	0.92	0.05	1081
MT	1.01	0.95	0.00	530.75
NE	0.46	0.59	0.14	565.75
NV	0.22	1.76	0.33	459.75
NH	0.37	1.23	0.06	588.5
NJ	0.30	0.51	0.17	1080.25
NM	0.32	1.06	0.21	833

Table 3.4: Continued

NY	0.28	0.82	0.30	5099.5
NC	0.24	0.64	0.12	873.5
ND	1.26	1.54	0.18	404
OH	0.11	0.64	0.16	255.5
OK	0.11	0.54	0.15	1134
OR	0.62	0.83	0.44	862.25
PA	0.29	0.56	0.18	884.5
RI	0.29	0.71	0.27	1300.75
SC	0.19	0.36	0.12	1036
SD	0.58	0.73	0.04	444.75
TN	0.27	0.79	0.18	2038
TX	0.32	0.68	0.21	1999.5
UT	0.28	0.56	0.12	227
VT	0.39	0.82	0.06	227.25
VA	0.56	0.89	0.37	2070.75
WA	0.49	0.87	0.34	1183.5
WV	0.13	0.34	0.05	761
WI	0.17	0.68	0.08	562.5
WY	0.42	1.23	0.09	345.75

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Table 3.5: Unequal Participation and Only Bills Acted On, Negative Binomial Regression Results

	Welfare		Medicaid		Housing	
	<i>b/(rcse)</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>b/(rcse)</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>b/(rcse)</i>	<i>p</i>
Participation Inequality	-1.630 (0.776)	0.036	-1.453 (0.826)	0.078	-2.423 (0.994)	0.015
% Unemployed	-0.072 (0.089)	0.415				
% Uninsured			0.011 (0.018)	0.519		
Housing Prices					0.774 (0.370)	0.036
% Union Member	-0.014 (0.014)	0.325	0.010 (0.015)	0.482	-0.010 (0.017)	0.573
Poverty Rate	0.025 (0.026)	0.346	0.002 (0.034)	0.955	0.022 (0.041)	0.588
Income	0.028 (0.015)	0.059	0.015 (0.020)	0.468	-0.001 (0.032)	0.981
Ideology	0.005 (0.005)	0.373	0.002 (0.005)	0.670	0.005 (0.009)	0.584
% White	0.000 (0.005)	0.984	0.003 (0.007)	0.691	-0.002 (0.007)	0.756
Turnout	0.008 (0.009)	0.357	0.001 (0.011)	0.947	-0.001 (0.016)	0.953
Gov. Ideology	0.011 (0.004)	0.008	0.001 (0.003)	0.624	-0.001 (0.005)	0.866
Competition	2.069 (0.685)	0.003	-0.740 (0.761)	0.331	0.398 (0.990)	0.688
Legislative Prof.	-1.040 (0.573)	0.070	-0.135 (0.666)	0.840	0.093 (0.764)	0.903
Deep South	0.071 (0.233)	0.761	-0.629 (0.292)	0.031	-0.325 (0.203)	0.109
Regional Diffusion	-0.043	0.001	-0.002	0.800	0.019	0.375

Table 3.5: Continued

	(0.013)		(0.006)		(0.021)	
Total Bills (logged)	0.944	0.000	0.938	<0.001	1.126	<0.001
	(0.104)		(0.085)		(0.145)	
Constant	-7.653	0.000	-3.724	<0.001	-10.064	0.002
	(1.106)		(1.065)		(3.179)	
N	200		200		200	
Log-Likelihood	-452.655		-669.186		-417.363	

Note: Session fixed effects dummy estimates not included in table; robust clustered standard errors by state in parentheses.

Figure 3.1: Welfare Agenda &amp; Participation Inequality

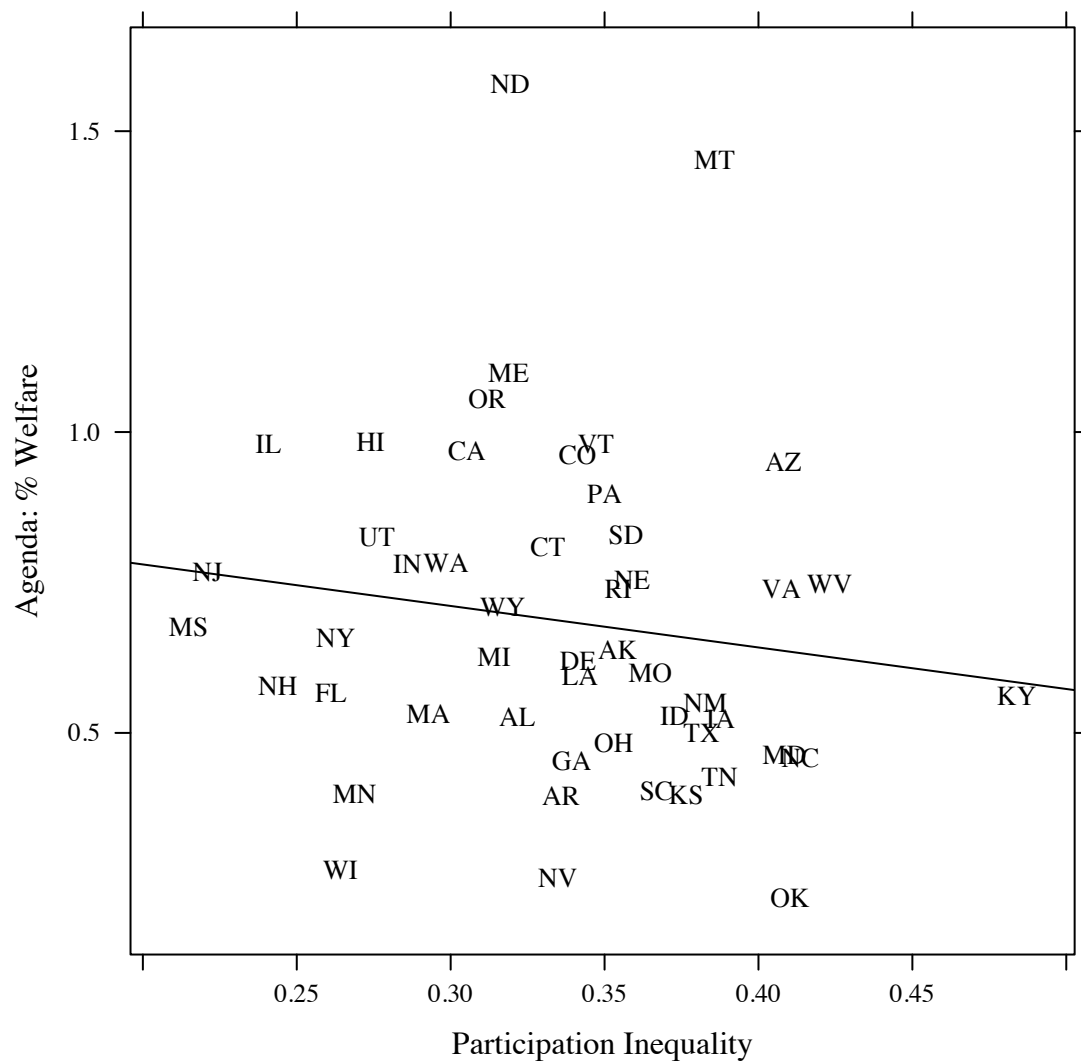


Figure 3.2: Medicaid Agenda &amp; Participation Inequality

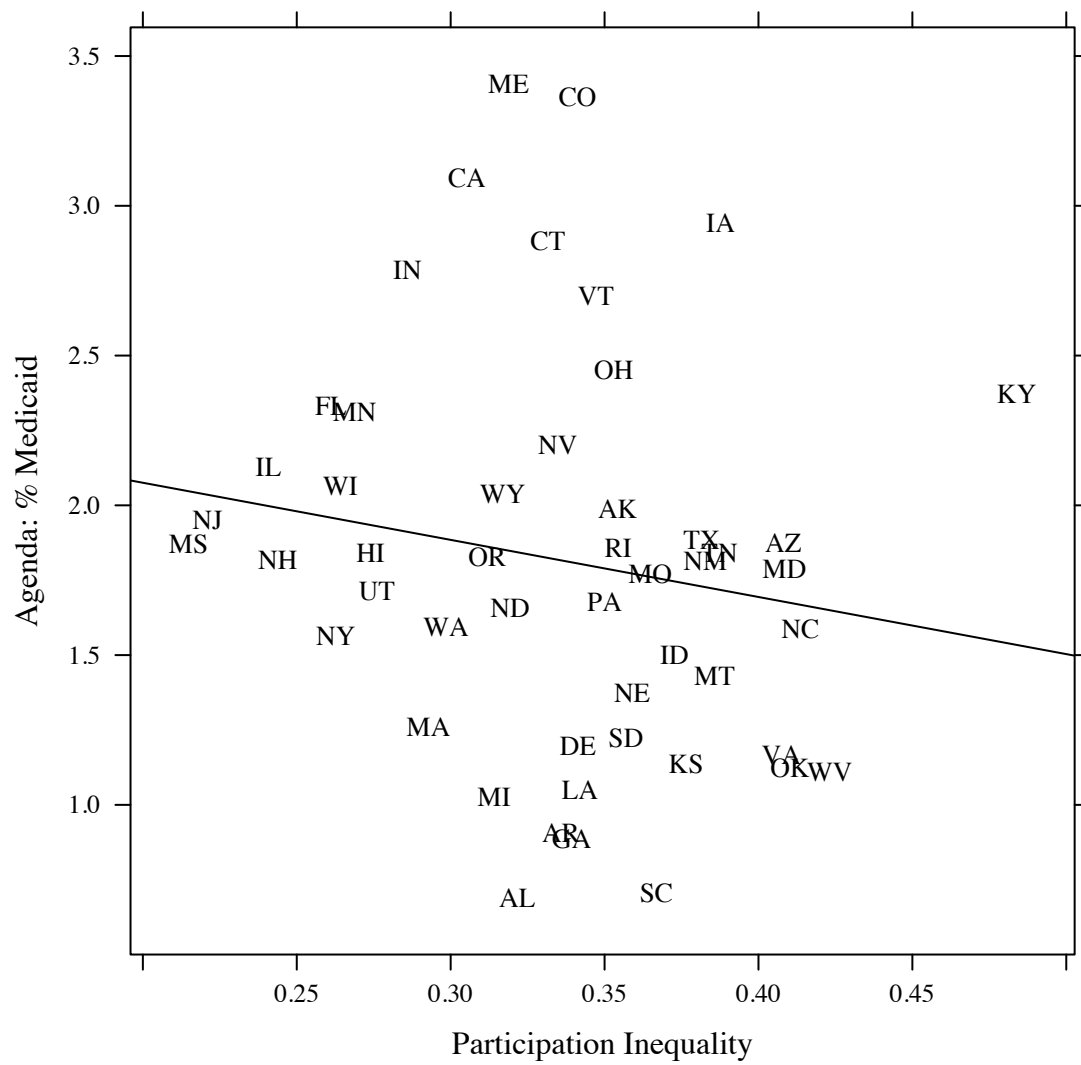


Figure 3.3: Housing Agenda &amp; Participation Inequality

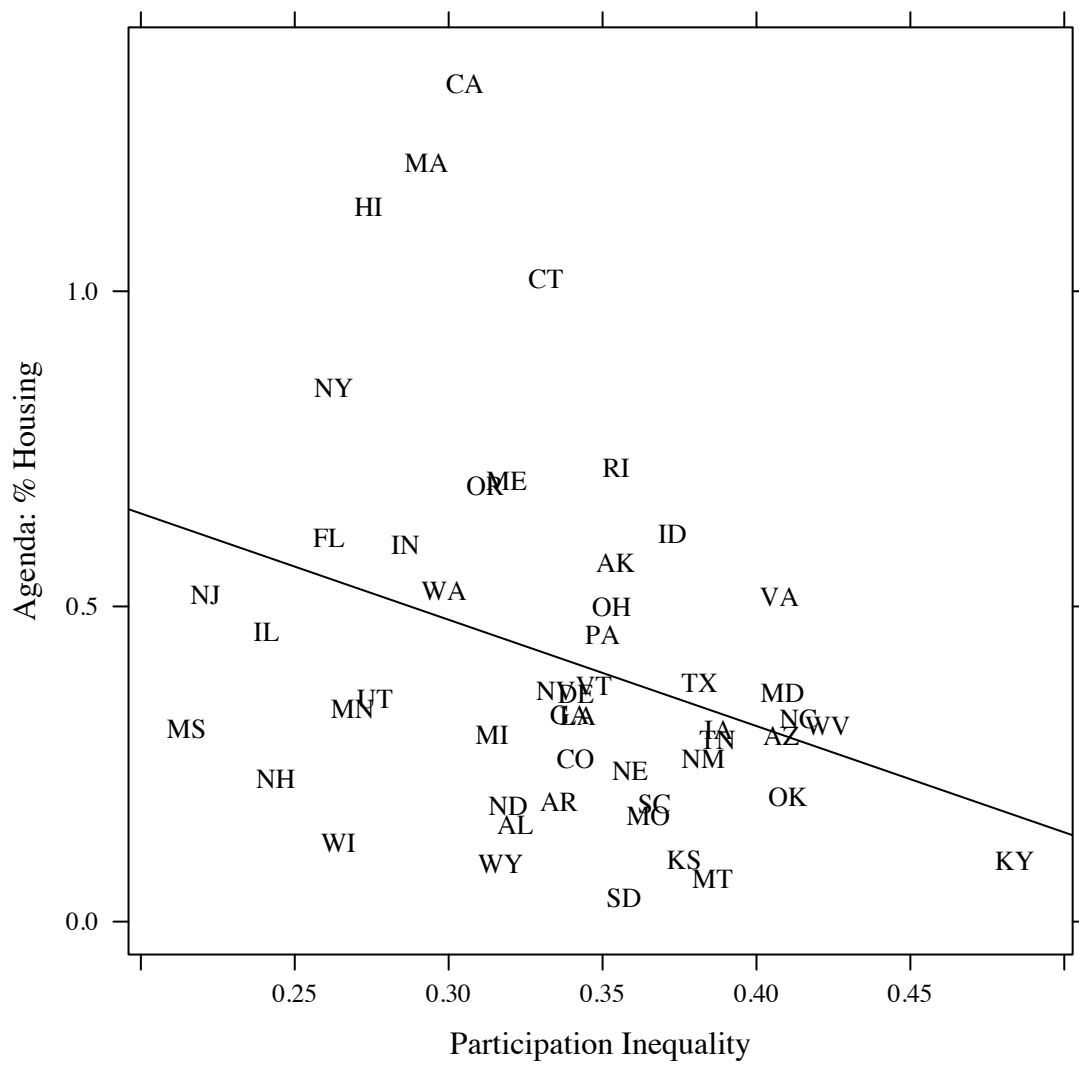
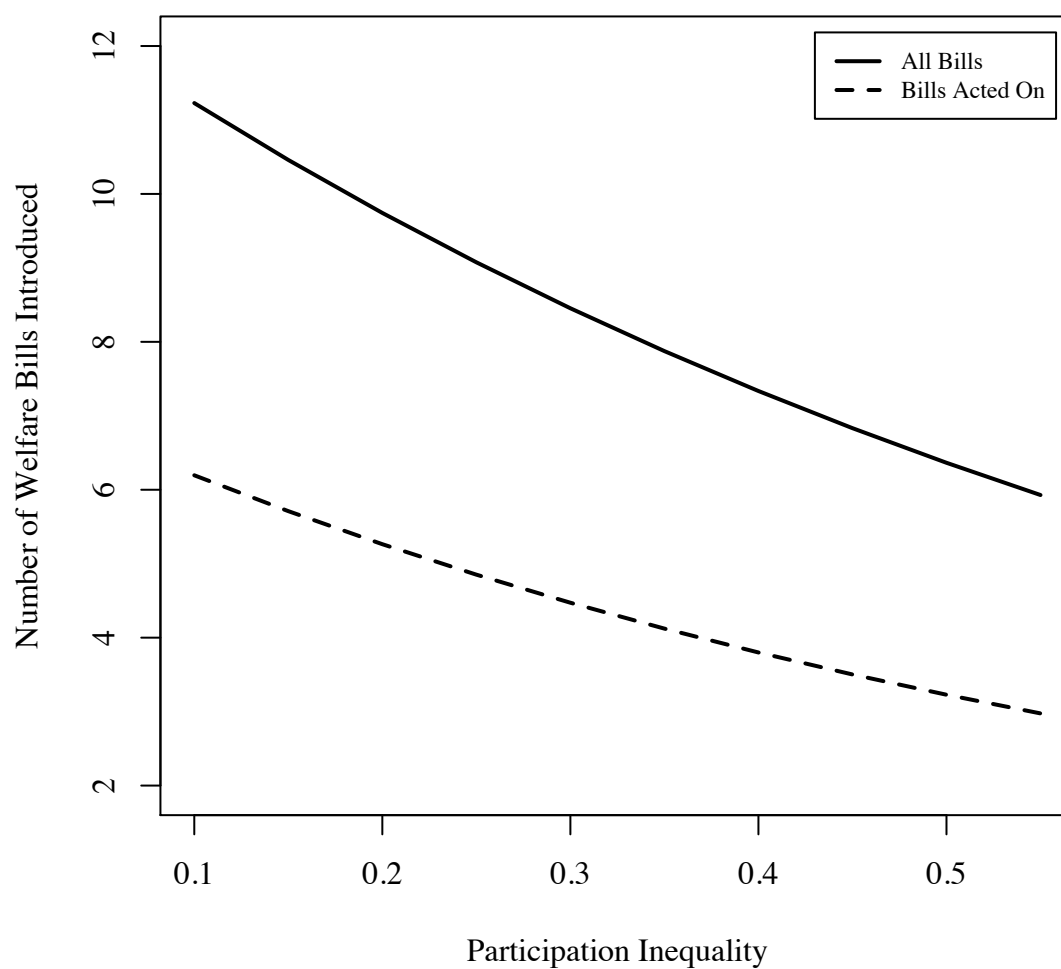


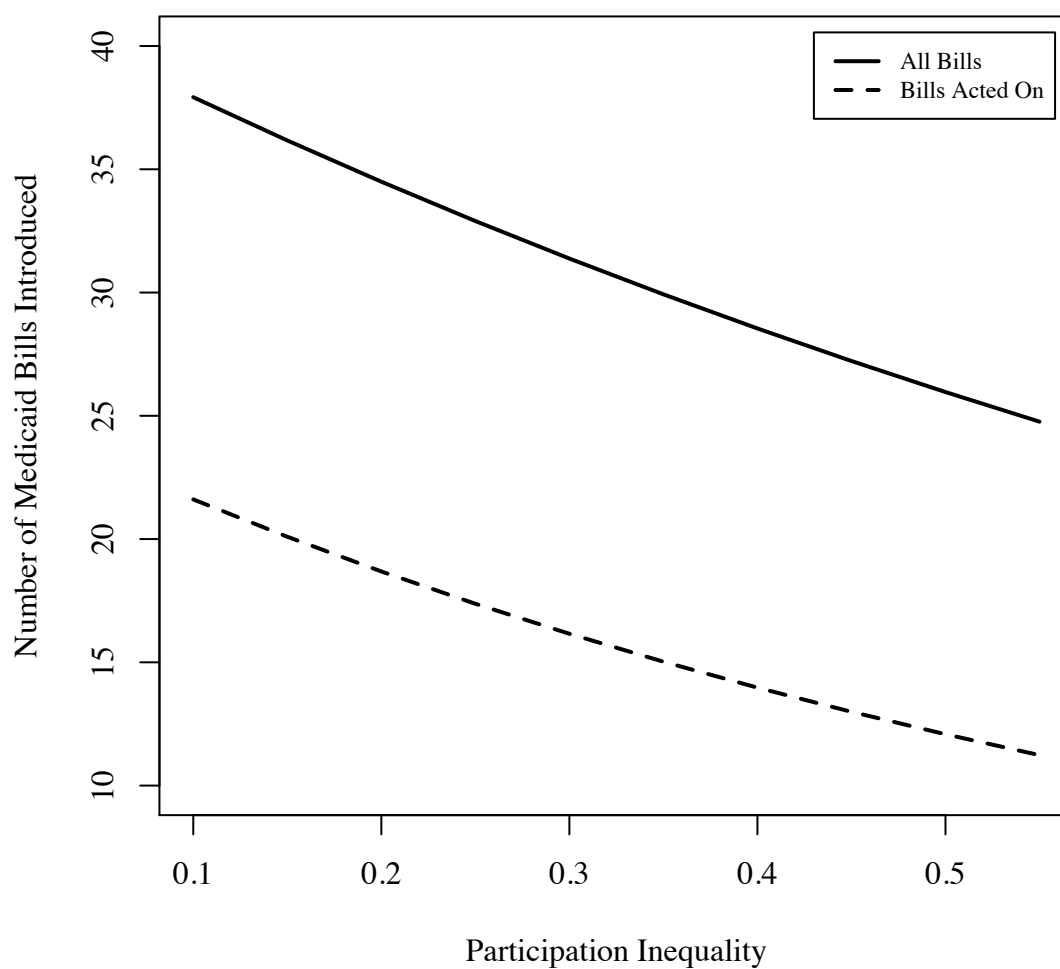
Figure 3.4: Effect of Participation Inequality on Estimated Number of Bill Introductions Related to Welfare



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Note: Estimates are based on the results from the “Welfare” model found in Table 3.3; count estimates were calculated with all other variables held constant.

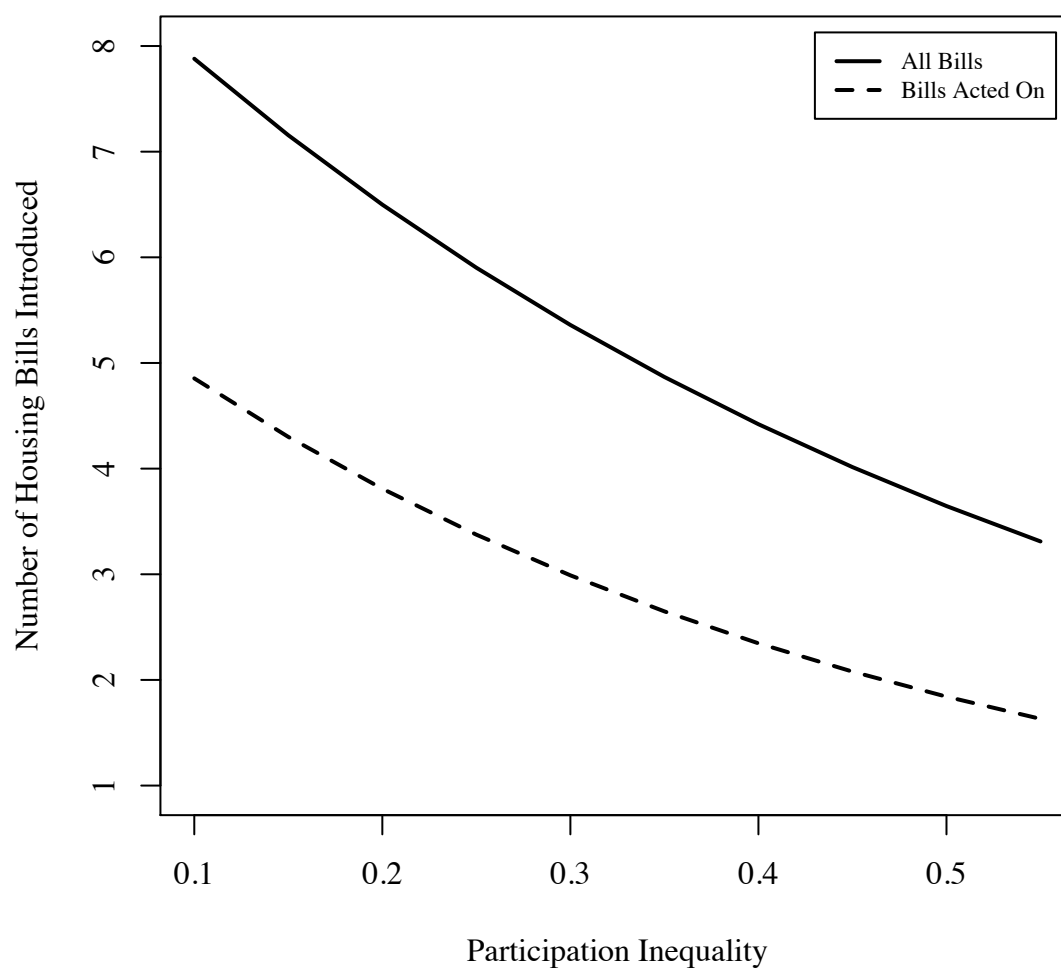
Figure 3.5: Effect of Participation Inequality on Estimated Number of Bill Introductions Related to Medicaid



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Note: Estimates are based on the results from the “Medicaid” model found in Table 3.3; count estimates were calculated with all other variables held constant.

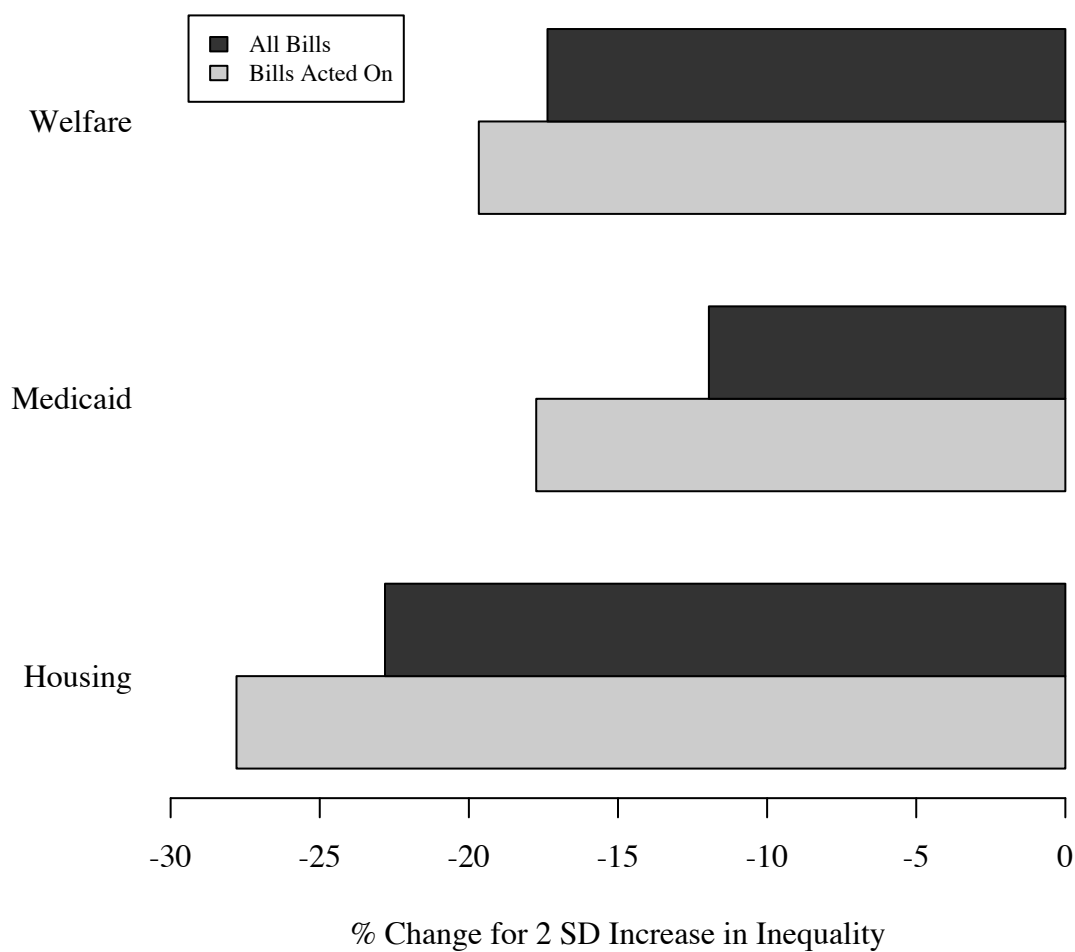
Figure 3.6: Effect of Participation Inequality on Estimated Number of Bill Introductions Related to Housing



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Note: Estimates are based on the results from the “Housing” model found in Table 3.3; count estimates were calculated with all other variables held constant.

Figure 3.7: Predicted Percentage Change in Bill Introductions for Increase in Participation Inequality



Note: Estimates are based on the results found in Table 3.3; all other variables were held constant.

## CHAPTER 4

### UNEQUAL PARTICIPATION AND STATE PUBLIC POLICY: PREDATORY LENDING, CHILDREN'S HEALTH CARE, AND MINIMUM WAGE

With very few resources and relatively low levels of political participation, the poor are expected to have minimal influence over policy making. When economic inequality in participation is high, elected officials have little incentive and motivation to give attention to those at the bottom of the income distribution. In many cases, politicians have little knowledge of the problems, needs, and interests of the poor when income gaps in participation are large.

To better understand the policy consequences of participation inequality in the states, Chapter 3 assessed the link between unequal participation and state legislative agendas. Few studies have considered the influence of inequality on political agendas even though the literature suggests inequalities in participation are expected to affect all aspects of the policy making process. The previous chapter found that larger income differences in turnout are related to state policy agendas that are less likely to address issues favorable to low-income groups. This provides evidence that inequalities in participation have effects that reach beyond those found in previous studies. While some research has established an association between participation bias and policy outcomes—that is, policies that are adopted and implemented by the states—these studies have specifically focused on state welfare policy (Avery and Peffley 2005; Fellowes and Rowe 2004; Hill and Leighley 1992; Hill, Leighley, and Hinton-Andersson 1995).

This chapter expands on this line of research by demonstrating the broad policy consequences of participation inequality. As suggested above, participation bias in favor of the affluent is expected to have an effect on policies most likely to influence the

disadvantaged, policies that go well beyond welfare spending. Government programs related to health care for the poor, housing, and methods of producing more equal economic outcomes are all examples of policies that may be influenced by political inequalities. Determining the extent to which participation inequality affects these types of policies is the purpose of this chapter.

### **Unequal Participation and Welfare Policy**

Discussed in detail in Chapter 1, a large body of research on the behavior of politicians gives insight into the ways that electorates shape political action. The prominent median voter theorem (Downs 1957) argues that it is the median preferences of voters that matters most, not the median preference of all citizens. Additionally, certain segments of the public are less able to obtain, process, and assess the political information needed to develop policy preferences or to monitor their elected officials. Again, those with fewer resources are less likely to be voters and less likely to use any available resources in a politically effective manner. This suggests that the composition of the electorate can have important effects on policy outcomes. Elected officials are likely to have the incentive and ability to create policy that is beneficial to those who participate and those that have disposable resources.

Even for those citizens that do participate and have more wealth than others, it is unlikely for voters and candidates to have high levels of information about each other. This suggests politicians rarely need to worry about mobilizing segments of the electorate that are unlikely to participate when making policy decisions. This is an important point, since the actions of elected officials are not always motivated by public preferences (Arnold 1990; Jacobs and Shapiro 2000; Jewell 1982; Mansbridge 2003; Verba and Nie 1972). Legislators are often required to use their own judgment when making policy choices, mainly because public preferences are typically uninformed, incomplete, or not

articulated well. In general, public demands and concerns usually address broad issues with the implied expectation that legislators need to work on a solution. These circumstances often leave legislators with the task of determining what is the best way to approach a particular issue or problem.

This overview indicates economic inequalities in participation have broad consequences for public policy. Since the poor have fewer political resources (mainly income) and are less likely to be involved in the political process (mainly through participation), policy is expected to be less favorable to lower status groups when inequality is high. Under circumstances where the poor are much less likely than the rich to participate, elected officials will be less likely to identify and acknowledge the interests of politically inactive groups compared to those who are active. Additionally, participation provides information about the types of groups that are most likely to mobilize in the future, knowledge that can be important for developing strategies to remain in office. High levels of participation inequality are expected to produce policy outcomes that are less favorable to the disadvantaged.

Several studies have provided evidence that inequalities in participation do lead to policy outcomes that are less beneficial to the poor. For instance, Hill and Leighley (1992) find that American states with disproportionately low levels of turnout among poor individuals have lower levels of spending on welfare than those states less participation bias. In a rigorous study of various components of state Temporary Aid to Needy Families programs, Fellowes and Rowe (2004) show that greater disparity in the turnout rates of the rich and poor leads to more restrictive state welfare policies in terms of eligibility and flexibility of the programs (also see Avery and Peffley 2005; Hill, Leighley, and Hinton-Andersson 1995).

Although a number of state policies designed to assist the disadvantaged are likely to be affected by participation inequalities, these studies only examine welfare policy. Furthermore, this research focuses almost exclusively on a specific type of welfare

policy, cash aid to the poor—that is, either Temporary Aid to Needy Families (TANF) or Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC).<sup>12</sup> While this emphasis on welfare policy does limit our understanding of how inequality influences policy outcomes, TANF and AFDC are undoubtedly important programs for the disadvantaged and should be expected to have a connection with political inequality.

The specific focus on welfare policy by inequality scholars partially stems from attempts to better explain decisions surrounding one of the most controversial issues in American politics. Some have argued the strong political cleavages found when examining welfare policy are largely due to the competing values that divide preferences related to welfare. Support for welfare policy is often related to ideas of equality and egalitarianism, while opponents stress the ideals of the free market and individualism (Feldman and Zaller 1992; McClosky and Zaller 1984). In addition to the importance of these core values associated with welfare policy, a great deal of evidence supports the notion that race plays an important role in the politics of welfare. Some research even suggests negative attitudes toward racial minorities are stronger predictors of opposition to welfare policies (Gilens 1995; 1996; Kluegel and Smith 1986). Studies focusing on the geography of race and inequality have provided strong evidence for the idea that a location's racial composition affects policy; for instance, environments with large

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<sup>12</sup> In addition to analyzing state AFDC spending, Hill and Leighley (1992) also look at aggregate measures of state welfare spending (although it is unclear exactly which programs are included in this measure). Several shortcomings exist, however when examining variations in state spending. As explained by Hanson (1984) and Kousser (2002), it is typically a difficult task to make sense of state spending measures. One issue is that these measures do not provide information about what aspects of the programs are getting more or less funding. Also, spending measures often include both mandatory and discretionary funding, which prevents researchers from knowing what portion of a program's budget was actually determined by the state. Finally, and related to the last point, spending on means-tested programs (which includes many welfare programs) can also vary depending on the economy of a state. For instance, a sudden economic downturn can potentially make a large number of people eligible for a program, which could increase spending beyond initial estimates.

minority populations are found to have more stringent welfare policies (e.g., Fording 2003; Hero 1998; Keiser, Mueser, and Choi 2004; Soss et al. 2001).

Since the literature on the core values of equality and attitudes toward race have largely emphasized welfare policy as an important political outcome in understanding these power relationships, it seems natural that studies interested in economic biases in political participation have also looked to welfare policy to understand the consequences of participation inequalities. A specific focus on AFDC and TANF programs, however, provides a limited view of how participation bias influences public policy. Disadvantaged groups rely on a number of government policies beyond programs that provide cash assistance. The general concept of welfare has a much broader meaning that includes any policy intended to protect individuals who are economically vulnerable. In the American case, welfare policy is composed of programs such as retirement insurance (Social Security), disability insurance (Social Security Disability Insurance), unemployment insurance (Unemployment Insurance Program), food stamps (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program), public housing (e.g., Community Development Block Grant), minimum wage laws, and health insurance (Medicare, Medicaid, and SCHIP) (Donovan, Mooney, and Smith 2011).

If the main effects of participation inequality are to be found in the differences in policies most favorable to the poor, this influence should be apparent when examining programs other than AFDC and TANF. This chapter expands our understanding of inequality and policy by exploring whether public programs related to housing, health care, and income equity laws are affected by participation bias.

### **State Policy Addressing Low-Income Needs**

To capture the broad policy consequences of participation bias for those at the bottom of the income distribution, I examine state policies related to housing (anti-

predatory lending laws), health care (children's health insurance programs), and income equity (state minimum wage policy), policy areas that are disproportionately relied upon by low-income groups. The remainder of this section will provide a brief overview of the three policies being analyzed. While the discussion of these policies is not exhaustive, the following summaries will demonstrate that these programs provide crucial support to low-income individuals and that the states are instrumental in the design and implementation of the policies.

### *Anti-Predatory Lending Laws*

The 2008 housing market crash led to an economic recession that is still felt by most Americans several years later. Millions of people lost their homes, many of which are low-income families who had high-risk, unaffordable home loans that led to foreclosure (Bocian et al. 2011). The hazardous lending practices of many financial institutions were at least partially to blame for the collapse of the market, which resulted in the passage of the Dodd–Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act in 2010.

This suspect lending behavior, however, was a problem that was recognized long before 2008. For instance, in 2002 a landmark settlement was made between Household International Inc. and a group representing all 50 states and the District of Columbia. Household agreed to pay \$484 million nationally to compensate customers who were victims of the company's predatory lending practices. The lending company was accused of overcharging on origination fees and interest rates, as well as using deceitful tactics when making home mortgage loans (Office of New York State Attorney General 2003). Prior to and following the Household settlement, a number of groups—ranging from government (e.g., the Department of Housing and Urban Development) to nonprofit (e.g.,

the Center for Responsible Lending) organizations—called for lawmakers to pass legislation that would attempt to hinder what is often referred to as predatory lending.

In general, predatory lending is the process of granting loans to individuals at high-costs, despite the status of the borrower's credit. Although financial institutions are required to provide equal service to all people, some sectors of the lending industry use disparities in information and the precarious financial situation of disadvantaged groups as a way to increase profits. The expansion of lending to low-income Americans (or subprime lending) has gained the attention of many who believe that some groups, regardless of credit history, are taken advantage of when receiving home loans. Low-income individuals have been identified as groups that are disproportionately affected by these predatory lending tactics. Victims of predatory lending are often deceived or unaware of how harmful these types of loans can be until it is too late. This particular group of subprime lenders tend to prey on individuals who they believe can be manipulated into taking a loan that will eliminate equity by charging high fees and interest rates, mainly through refinancing that has no benefit to the borrower (Stein 2001).

While federal lawmakers have done relatively little to address the issue of predatory lending, some protections do exist at the national level. Specifically, the Home Ownership and Equity Protection Act of 1994 (HOEPA) offers protection against extreme cases of deceptive and unfair lending. Loans covered by HOEPA include first mortgages with annual percentage rates that exceed eight points above the Treasury security rate, second mortgages with annual percentage rates that exceed ten points, and loans with closing fees that exceed the larger of an annually adjusted figure or eight percent of the total loan amount. If a loan meets any of the preceding standards, the lender must provide certain disclosures before the loan is completed. HOEPA also

prohibits specific features of high-cost loans such as balloon payments, negative amortization, and some prepayment penalties.<sup>13</sup>

Although HOEPA has attempted to offer greater protection from high-cost loans, the policy is insufficient for several reasons. First, these standards are considered by most as being relatively lenient. Second, many people receiving high-cost loans will often not understand the terms of the loan or will not understand the disclosure statements that go along with the loan. Having standards in place is a start, but they are not very effective when consumers are not aware of the unfair practices. Finally, the leniency of the restrictions still allow for systematic predatory practices. Under HOEPA, as long as lenders disclose the nature of the high-cost loan they are still able to make the loan. This does not prevent any type of systematic lending that would affect particular groups (Rivlin 2010).

Immergluck and Wiles (1999) conducted one of the first studies demonstrating that predatory lending was particularly a problem for low-income neighborhoods. The study finds that a “dual mortgage market” exists where major lending institutions attended to upper-class whites, which leaves neighborhoods mostly consisting of poor minorities to have no other choice than to do business with unregulated lenders (also see Blank et al. 2005; Boehm, Thistle, and Schlottmann 2006). Even though subprime lending was initially viewed as a means to expand homeownership to low-income families, the lending industry developed in a way that created more harm than good for disadvantaged groups. Making high cost loans available to those with low incomes has certainly provided greater access to homeownership for many people. The problem created by the lending industry, as Squires argues, “is that many borrowers who should

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<sup>13</sup> For more detailed information on the Home Ownership and Equity Protection Act of 1994, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) provides information on the types of loans covered, disclosure requirements, prohibited loan features, and actions that can be taken when a lender violates the law. The FTC website can be found at: <http://www.ftc.gov>.

qualify for conventional loans are steered to higher-cost predatory loans, which charge excessive fees relative to the risk involved (2008, 4).” The targets of predatory lending are often those with little knowledge of the buying process and often do not understand the terms of their loans. The consequences of these overpriced loans are typically defaults and foreclosures (Squires 2008).

With Congress taking little legislative action to prevent predatory practices prior to the 2008 economic collapse, a number of states developed policies designed to protect citizens from deceitful lending practices. The state adoptions that will be considered in the present study are those that provide borrower protections beyond the limited regulations of HOEPA. The subsequent analysis looks to understand why certain states have adopted anti-predatory lending policies while others chose not to implement stronger lending regulations. Specifically, the adoption of these policies are used to determine whether states with high levels of participation bias were less likely to establish protective home lending policy.

### *State Children’s Health Insurance Program*

Although the United States consistently spends more on health care than most countries, health outcomes in the US have continued to decline over time (Carey, Herring, and Lenain 2009). Since 1960, for instance, life expectancy in the US has increased at a rate below that of the average advanced democracy and the US has one of the highest infant mortality rates among the same group of countries. A common explanation for this disconnect between health care expenditures and health outcomes is the large number of individuals that do not have access to health insurance coverage, largely due to the lack of public insurance programs (Anderson and Poullier 1999). The estimated percentage of Americans with health care coverage in 2009 (81%) is comparable to the insured rates of Turkey, Mexico, and Chile. By large margins the US

has the lowest level of government health coverage among advanced democracies with only 26% of the population having some form of public health insurance. Chile and Mexico, the countries closest to American levels on the same measure, cover 74% of their citizens with government health care (OECD 2011).

Appeals for universal health care coverage were at least partially answered in 2010 with the passage of the Affordable Care Act. Many viewed the passage of this legislation as a major success for President Obama, even when considering that the final version of the bill is not as comprehensive as the Obama administration first envisioned (Hacker 2010). Obama's health care achievement is typically discussed in the context of Bill Clinton's prominent attempt, and eventual failure, to overhaul the US health care system during his first term as president. While it is certainly true that Clinton's major health care reform goals were not fully realized, his administration is largely responsible for expanding health care coverage to millions of children.

Only two years after Clinton's health care policy was defeated in 1994, a bill that would become the State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP) was introduced in the US Senate. The development and subsequent passage of SCHIP in 1997 created little controversy when compared to the political debate surrounding Clinton's initial plan to reshape government health care. The main reasons for the manageable SCHIP compromise were that the reform was much less ambitious than establishing a completely new public health insurance system, and the group being targeted by SCHIP was uninsured, low-income children (Oberlander and Lyons 2009). Although SCHIP covers a limited segment of the population, it has substantially decreased the number of children without health care coverage. The rate of disadvantaged children without health insurance was cut by one-third in a span of eight years following the enactment of SCHIP (Oberlander and Lyons 2009).

Perhaps more important (for the purposes of the current study) than demonstrating the ability of Congress to pass health care reform or giving insight into the effectiveness

of the policies once in place, the adoption of SCHIP offers an opportunity to better understand how the states prioritized the interests of this particular low-income group. Even though SCHIP was created and enacted by the federal government, the policy is designed to give the states considerable flexibility when determining how the insurance program should be implemented (Grogan and Rigby 2009; Volden 2006). While states are not required to provide the additional health care coverage made available by SCHIP, all states have voluntarily used SCHIP funding to create some form of an extended insurance program for low-income children. The resulting insurance programs across the states, however, are quite different when considering the extent of eligibility requirements and restrictions of the application process (Volden 2006).

The passage of SCHIP created a block grant system where states are able to apply for matching funds from the federal government to extend health insurance coverage to economically disadvantaged children. The states could implement the new insurance programs in one of three ways: by expanding their already existing Medicaid programs, by designing a separate state program, or using a combination of both approaches (Grogan and Rigby 2009). As stated above, all states decided to use the SCHIP funding to expand health care coverage, but the states varied in the extent to which eligibility was expanded, the flexibility of the program, and how difficult it was for parents to enroll their children in SCHIP to receive benefits. This variation in state programs is used to determine whether states with high levels of participation bias are more likely to create SCHIP policies that are restrictive in nature.

### *State Minimum Wage Laws*

The first two policies discussed in this section address issues related to housing (anti-predatory lending) and health care (SCHIP), which are disproportionately relied upon by disadvantaged groups. The third policy analyzed in this study, state minimum

wage law, is unique in that it has the potential to directly influence the economic circumstances of low-income individuals. In fact, recent research has pointed to stagnant minimum wage policy as one main causes of overall income disparities in the US (Bartels 2008; Card and Krueger 1995; Lee 1999; Morris and Western 1999).

While the minimum wage and the level of income for those at the bottom of the income distribution are clearly related in some way, scholars have long debated the effect of minimum wage policy on incomes and the economy in general. Of course, workers at the bottom of the income distribution will experience wage increases when the minimum wage is raised. Economists have mostly questioned whether increasing the minimum wage decreases overall employment for “unskilled” workers, which would also decrease average wages for these types of workers overall (Bartels 2008). In other words, some worry that raising the minimum wage decreases the total number of low paying jobs available as a result of businesses having to increase spending on wages. A growing literature, however, suggests minimum wage laws play an important role for low-income families, and that the laws do not have a discernible effect on employment (Card and Krueger 1995; Lee 1999; Morris and Western 1999). Some research even argues that minimum wage policy can stimulate economic growth and produce technical innovations (Prasch 1996).

Studies examining increases in the federal minimum wage in 1990 and 1991 show that those individuals directly influenced by the minimum wage are often the sole income providers for their families (Card and Krueger 1995; Morris and Western 1999). This suggests that minimum wage policy is consequential for the overall well being of many families, and not simply increasing wages for secondary sources of income. In terms of wage equity, this same research estimates that the minimum wage expansion in 1990 decreased the rate of growing income inequality observed in the 1980s by 30%. The overall effect of the federal government’s stagnant minimum wage policy has been to

reduce the real earnings of low-income individuals (Bartels 2008; Morris and Western 1999).

Although the federal minimum wage has increased a number of times in the past several decades, the real value of the minimum wage has decreased over time. As reported by Bartels (2008, 226), “By 2006, the real value of the minimum wage had declined by 45% from its peak in 1968 (from \$9.30 to \$5.15 in 2006 dollars)...” This dramatic reduction in the value of the minimum wage occurred mainly because the modest increases in the minimum wage approved by Congress have not kept up with growing inflation. To prevent this inevitable trend, lawmakers have introduced legislation on several occasions to index the minimum wage to inflation, but these attempts have garnered limited support (Bartels 2008).

Since the federal minimum wage has remained rather stagnant in recent years, many states have passed legislation that sets the minimum wage above that of the federal level. Similar to the studies showing that increases in the federal minimum wage has a significant influence on those at the bottom of the income distribution, research has also found that states with minimum wage levels set above the federal standard have lower levels of income inequality (Lee 1999). These findings suggest states that pass legislation to increase the minimum wage above the federal level are concerned about the declining incomes of the disadvantaged. Similar to the approach used to analyze anti-predatory lending policy and SCHIP, differences in state minimum wage law is assessed to determine why some states adopt policies aimed at improving wage equity while others do not. Again, states with higher levels of participation bias are expected to have their minimum wage set at the level of the federal government, while those with lower levels of inequality are expected to have minimum wages above the federal level.

## **Data and Methods**

The influence of economic participation bias on the three policy areas discussed above is assessed by examining three state policy adoptions. The dependent variable used to analyze the adoption of anti-predatory lending (APL) policy is whether a state has adopted an APL policy that provides protections beyond federal regulations. States that fall under this category were identified using data collected by Ding et al. (2011). This study developed state-level measures of APL policy that compare each state's lending legislation to HOEPA regulations since, as discussed previously, the lenient regulations set by the federal HOEPA policy are minimum standards for borrower protection. From 2000 to 2007, 20 states are identified as passing policies that exceed federal regulations (see Table 4.1). This time period is used to examine APL adoptions since 2000 is the first year a state passed an extension to HOEPA and 2007 is the year prior to the housing market collapse. States having strong APL policies are coded 1 for the year the policy was adopted and 0 otherwise.

To assess state health insurance policy for children, the number of SCHIP eligibility expansion and simplification policies adopted by the states is analyzed. This approach considers the fact that some states have developed SCHIP policies that cover more low-income children, provide more flexibility, and offer easier access to the program than other states. More specifically, the components of SCHIP examined here include each state's income eligibility threshold, which measures whether the states offer health coverage to children at or above 200%, 250%, and 300% of the federal poverty level (FPL). These eligibility levels are used since a main objective of SCHIP at the time of its passage—from the perspective of federal lawmakers—was to cover those that did not qualify for insurance under Medicaid but were below 200% FPL (Grogan and Rigby 2009; Volden 2006). Therefore, 200% is used as a baseline and state's with eligibility levels over 200% FPL are considered as having more generous SCHIP policies.

Additional components analyzed are whether the states allow presumptive eligibility, 12-month continuous eligibility, a family application mechanism, and the unborn child option.<sup>14</sup> The time period under examination is 2000-2010, which begins just after the passage of SCHIP. Data for all years were collected from reports conducted by the Kaiser Commission on Medicaid and the Uninsured and Center on Budget and Policy Priorities.<sup>15</sup> Table 4.1 provides a list of each state and the number of SCHIP policies adopted. All SCHIP policy components are analyzed simultaneously by including a state-year observation for each component (see Boehmke 2009). For each SCHIP component, policies are coded 1 for the year the policy was adopted and 0 otherwise.

Finally, the analysis of state minimum wage policy is relatively straightforward; each state's minimum wage law is examined from 1998 to 2007. This time frame is used since the federal minimum wage was unchanged at \$5.15 during this period. Those states with laws below the federal minimum and those without a state minimum wage law were set to the federal level.<sup>16</sup> Table 4.1 (column 4) presents the highest minimum wage in each state during the 1998-2007 period, which shows that 29 states had their minimum wage set above the federal level.

Since the three policies being analyzed are all beneficial to disadvantaged groups, higher levels of state participation bias are expected to decrease the likelihood that a state

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<sup>14</sup> The definitions of these program components are as follows: (1) presumptive eligibility allows children to receive health care benefits, if they appear to be eligible, while the formal application procedure takes place; (2) 12-month continuous eligibility provides insurance benefits to children for an entire 12-month period even if their family income increases to a level above the eligibility threshold during that period; (3) the family application allows parents and children to apply for health care benefits using one application; and (4) the unborn child option allows pregnant women to receive SCHIP benefits.

<sup>15</sup> These reports can be found at: <http://www.kff.org/medicaid/50StateSurvey.cfm>.

<sup>16</sup> State minimum wage laws can be found at: <http://www.dol.gov/whd/state/stateMinWageHis.htm>.

adopts any of the policies. To assess the relationship between participation bias and the three state policies, time-series cross-sectional (TSCS) techniques are used. Using TSCS methods is appropriate when analyzing grouped observations over time. In the case of the current study, all three policies are modeled at the state level (the groups) and over a period of years (time), as discussed above. When analyzing state minimum wage (a continuous variable) as the outcome, OLS regression is used along with common adjustments due to the nature of TSCS data.<sup>17</sup> When modeling APL and SCHIP adoptions the approach is slightly different since only the presence (or absence) of these policies is measured, which is often referred to as binary TSCS (BTSCS) data. For these policies event history analysis is used to determine the relationship between participation bias and the adoption of these two policies. Policy adoption is modeled using logistic regression, again, with common adjustments for the design of BTSCS data.<sup>18</sup>

While the analysis of APL policy adoption follows a standard event history approach, examining SCHIP adoption is more complex due to the fact that each state can potentially adopt multiple SCHIP policy components. Since all of the SCHIP components being considered are expected to expand health insurance for low-income children, the adoption of all components are modeled simultaneously. For this modeling strategy the data are pooled to represent each potential SCHIP component, state, and year (see

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<sup>17</sup> These adjustments include using lagged minimum wage as a covariate, fixed effects for states, and panel corrected standard errors (see Beck and Katz 1995).

<sup>18</sup> Event history analysis is a commonly used technique in state policy diffusion analyses (e.g., Balla 2001; Berry and Berry 1990; Box-Steffensmeier and Jones 2004) where the researcher is interested in risk. The so-called “risk” in these instances is the adoption of a particular policy under analysis. While the understanding of duration analysis has grown in past years, Beck, Katz, and Tucker (1998) have shown that using adapted logit/probit methods with BTSCS data is “identical to grouped duration data (1264).” The advantage to using typical logit or probit models to estimate BTSCS data is that the analyses can be implemented and interpreted in ways that are familiar to the researcher and readers. Since the dependent variables in this study are of the BTSCS type, logistic regression is employed while accounting for duration dependence and adjusting standard error estimates by state clusters.

Boehmke 2009).<sup>19</sup> This pooled event history analysis is also consistent with the idea that these different components, when implemented together, provide a more expansive and flexible SCHIP program.

As discussed in Chapter 2, the primary explanatory variable used in the analyses is the disproportionate participation rates across income groups, or participation inequality. This variable is a measure of class bias in participation that assesses the degree to which income levels influence voter turnout in each state. The participation inequality measure ranges from -1 to 1, with negative values indicating low-income individuals are more likely to vote than the rich, 0 meaning the rich and poor have an equal probability of voting, and positive values meaning the rich vote at a higher rate than the poor. A value of 0.33 (the average of the measure across all years and states), for example, indicates the rich are 33% more likely to vote than the poor. No state has a bias measure at or below 0, which would indicate that the lower class participates at a higher rate than the upper class.

In addition to the main dependent and independent variables used in this analysis, a number of additional variables are used account for other factors that may influence state policy outcomes that are influential to disadvantaged groups. These variables include state per capita income, citizen ideology, the percentage of the state population that is white, poverty rate, the percentage of the state population that belong to a union, overall state turnout, government ideology, legislative professionalism, party competition, party competition, the ability of citizens to access the initiative process, and regional diffusion. These variables are discussed in detail in earlier chapters and a summary description of each can be found in the appendix. The models also include

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<sup>19</sup> This modification to traditional event history analysis simply stacks the data from each component into one data set. The dependent variable,  $Y_{ikt}$ , indicates whether state  $i$  has adopted policy component  $k$  at time  $t$ . This set up allows a state that adopts one policy component to remain in the analysis until it adopts the remaining components.

variables controlling for duration dependence over time (for the APL and SCHIP models) and for over time policy trends that may be present (for the minimum wage model).<sup>20</sup>

In addition to accounting for common state characteristics thought to influence policy adoption, a number of variables specific to the policies being analyzed are included in the models. When assessing the state adoption of APL policy, a measure of median home prices (logged) is used to account for the size of the housing market in each state. States with larger housing markets, all else equal, may be under more pressure from the housing industry to avoid greater restrictions on lending practices. For the SCHIP model estimation, a variable indicating each state's Medicaid income eligibility level in 1997 is included. Since SCHIP was partially designed to extend health care to children who did not qualify for Medicaid (Grogan and Rigby 2009), this pre-SCHIP eligibility threshold is included to account for the fact that some SCHIP programs started at a higher eligibility threshold than others. The percentage of uninsured children in each state is also included in the model to consider the possibility that some states may have a greater need to insure low-income children. Controls are also included for each policy component to allow the estimated constant to vary across SCHIP components (see Boehmke 2009). Finally, the minimum wage models include lagged minimum wage as an explanatory variable to remove autocorrelation in the residuals, which is significant when not lagging the dependent variable.

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<sup>20</sup> The model specification used to account for duration dependence and trending was determined by considering the statistical significance of the variables used to account for time, as well as the Akaike information criterion (AIC) and Bayesian information criterion (BIC) model fit statistics. To account for time, a simple linear function of time, second and third order polynomials, and year time dummies were considered.

## **Findings**

Before discussing the results of the multiple regression models, Figures 4.1-4.3 present a descriptive look at the relationship between the state policies and participation bias. To reiterate the main argument, states with high levels of participation bias are expected to be less likely to have policies that are favorable to low-income groups. For the purposes of this study, the particular policies being analyzed are APL policy adoptions, SCHIP policy adoptions, and state minimum wages. Figure 4.1 shows the percentage of states that have adopted APL policies at different levels of participation bias. The states are grouped by quartiles of participation bias with lower quartiles indicating lower levels of inequality. The plot demonstrates that, in general, states with lower levels of participation bias are more likely to adopt an APL policy. States with the highest levels of bias (those in the fourth quartile) do somewhat deviate from this trend, but the overall relationship does align with the expectations detailed above.

The association between state SCHIP policy and participation inequality is shown in Figure 4.2. The states are again grouped by participation bias quartiles, the same grouping used in the APL adoption plot (Figure 4.1), but the vertical axis of Figure 4.2 indicates the average number of SCHIP policy adoptions for each quartile. Similar to APL policy adoptions, states with lower levels of inequality are likely to adopt more eligibility expansion and simplification policies than those with higher levels of participation bias. In other words, states with lower inequality tend to have SCHIP policies that cover a more expansive range of low-income children and have more simplified application procedures as part of their children's health coverage program. Finally, the bivariate relationship between state minimum wage levels and participation bias is shown in Figure 4.3. This descriptive comparison suggests, once again, that increases in inequality lead to more unfavorable outcomes for those at the lower end of

the income distribution. In this case, states with higher levels of bias tend to have lower state minimum wages.

While Figures 4.1-4.3 provide preliminary evidence demonstrating the relationship between state policy and participation inequality, the effect of participation bias on state agendas will now be examined when considering other state factors that may affect policy adoption. The results from the three multiple regression models (discussed in the previous section) are presented in Table 4.2. The second column of Table 4.2 shows the estimates from the event history analysis of state APL policy adoptions. The estimated coefficient for the main variable of interest, participation bias, is significant and is shown to influence the adoption of APL policies in the expected direction. States with larger gaps between the participation rates of the rich and poor are less likely to adopt strong laws protecting home buyers from predatory lending practices. A similar result is found for the SCHIP adoption model (Table 4.2, column 3). Increases in participation bias lead to a significant decrease in the likelihood of a state adopting an expansive health care program for low-income children. Finally, the results for the minimum wage model are presented in column 4 (Table 4.2). Again, the higher levels of economic bias in participation are associated with state policies that are less beneficial to the poor. In the case of minimum wage, increases in participation bias lead to significantly lower state minimum wage levels.

The magnitude of the influence of state participation bias on the three policies is demonstrated in Figures 4.4-4.6. The plots show the estimated changes for each state policy when changing from two standard deviations above to two standard deviations below the mean of participation bias. Analyzing standard changes in participation bias is used for consistency since the time period in each study is slightly different and, therefore, the levels of bias are also slightly different. Figure 4.4 shows that the average probability of a state adopting an APL policy increases by over 0.25 when comparing states at the highest end of participation bias to those with the lowest levels of bias. For

SCHIP adoption, Figure 4.5 suggests that the difference in the probability of adopting any additional policy component increases by approximately 0.10 when changing from a high inequality state environment to a low bias state. Figure 4.6 shows that, on average, states with low levels of economic participation bias have a minimum wage policy that is around \$0.20 higher than high bias states.

To ensure the robustness of the findings presented in Table 4.2, a similar analysis is conducted using an alternative measure of state government policy preferences. Since all three policies examined here have potentially strong partisan differences related to support for the adoption of the policies, the effect of the partisan composition of state legislatures on the policies is also considered. Additionally, the few studies that have looked at the same policy areas assessed here have argued that party control of the government should shape these policy outcomes. For instance, Grogan and Rigby (2009) find that higher proportions of Democratic legislators over time led to higher income eligibility levels, and Levin-Waldman's (1998) analysis of federal minimum wage politics is largely driven by partisan politics. Table 4.3 shows the results for the models that include dummy variables indicating whether a state has a unified Democratic or Republican government (with divided government as the reference category).<sup>21</sup> These indicators are used as an alternative to the Berry et al. (1998) government ideology variable used in the initial estimates.

The results show little difference in the effect of unified party governments when compared to the government ideology estimates in Table 4.2. Government ideology appears to produce more consistent estimates when considering the party government variables are only significant in one instance (i.e., the unified Democratic government variable in the minimum wage model). Most importantly, the estimated influence of

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<sup>21</sup> Due to Nebraska's nonpartisan legislature it is coded as divided in all years.

participation bias on the three policies changes very little when comparing the results to the findings in Table 4.2.

### **Conclusions**

This study set out to examine how economic inequalities in political participation affect public policy in the states. While many scholars have studied who participates in American politics and why, few have assessed the influence of inequalities in participation on state policy. Those that have examined this relationship have been limited to the study of policy outcomes and specifically focus on state welfare policy (Fellowes and Rowe 2004; Hill and Leighley 1992; Hill, Leighley, and Hinton-Andersson 1995). Yet participation bias has the potential to shape many different political outcomes, especially those aimed at addressing problems experienced by disadvantaged groups in society.

Since the poor have fewer political resources and are less likely to be involved in the political process, policy is expected to be less favorable to lower status groups when inequality is high. Under circumstances where the poor are less politically active than the rich, elected officials will be less likely to identify and acknowledge the interests of politically inactive groups compared to those who are active. In an environment of high participation bias, lawmakers will have a lower capacity and less incentive to address public problems by considering policies that are mostly beneficial to low-income citizens. Additionally, participation provides information about the types of groups that are most likely to mobilize in the future, knowledge that can be important for developing strategies to remain in office. High levels of inequality will lead to policy outcomes that are less favorable to the disadvantaged, as well as issue agendas that are less likely to include policy alternatives that are beneficial to the poor.

To show the different aspects of policy that are influenced by inequalities in participation, I examine a broad range of state government programs that go beyond simply analyzing welfare benefits. The effect of participation bias on various political outcomes are assessed by looking at state policies related to housing, health care, and income equity. First, with the importance of housing policy in creating more equitable wealth outcomes in the US, the adoption state protections against predatory home lending practices is the first policy examined. Second, state children's health care program (SCHIP) generosity and flexibility is used to assess which states provide greater health protection to low-income children. Finally, minimum wage laws in the states are analyzed to determine whether participation bias influences state attempts to increase the wages of those at the bottom of the income distribution.

The results of this study are clear. States with wide gaps between the participation rates of the rich and poor are less likely to adopt policies that are beneficial to the disadvantaged. For each of the three policy areas—housing, health care, and wage equity—states with lower levels of participation bias are more likely to have government policies aimed at producing better outcomes for low-income groups. These findings suggest that political participation matters, and that the composition of the electorate can shape who becomes a political winner and loser.

Table 4.1: Summary of State Policy Adoptions

State	APL	SCHIP	Minimum Wage
	State Passed HOEPA Extension?	Number of Expansion Policies Adopted:	Highest State Min. Wage Over Period:
Alabama	No	5	5.15
Alaska	No	3	7.15
Arizona	No	3	6.75
Arkansas	Yes	3	6.25
California	Yes	5	7.50
Colorado	Yes	5	6.85
Connecticut	Yes	6	7.65
Delaware	No	3	6.65
Florida	No	3	6.67
Georgia	Yes	2	5.15
Hawaii	No	4	7.25
Idaho	No	1	5.15
Illinois	Yes	7	6.50
Indiana	Yes	3	5.15
Iowa	No	5	5.15
Kansas	No	4	5.15
Kentucky	No	2	5.15
Louisiana	No	6	5.15
Maine	No	3	6.75
Maryland	Yes	4	6.15
Massachusetts	Yes	6	7.50
Michigan	Yes	4	6.95
Minnesota	Yes	4	6.15
Mississippi	No	4	5.15
Missouri	No	6	6.50
Montana	No	5	6.15
Nebraska	No	4	5.15
Nevada	No	2	6.15
New Hampshire	No	4	5.15
New Jersey	Yes	6	7.15

Table 4.1: Continued

New Mexico	Yes	4	5.15
New York	Yes	6	7.15
North Carolina	Yes	2	6.15
North Dakota	No	2	5.15
Ohio	No	4	6.85
Oklahoma	No	2	5.15
Oregon	No	6	7.80
Pennsylvania	No	5	6.25
Rhode Island	Yes	4	7.40
South Carolina	Yes	2	5.15
South Dakota	No	2	5.15
Tennessee	No	5	5.15
Texas	Yes	4	5.15
Utah	No	3	5.15
Vermont	No	4	7.53
Virginia	No	2	5.15
Washington	No	5	7.93
West Virginia	Yes	3	5.85
Wisconsin	Yes	6	6.50
Wyoming	No	3	5.15
<hr/>			
Adoption Summary:	Yes = 20	Ave. = 3.	Above \$5.15 = 29
Time Period:	2000-2006	2000-2010	1998-2007

Table 4.2: Unequal Participation and State APL, SCHIP, and Minimum Wage

	Anti-Predatory Lending <sup>1</sup>		SCHIP <sup>2</sup>		Minimum Wage <sup>3</sup>	
	<i>b/(rcse)</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>b/(rcse)</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>b/(pcse)</i>	<i>p</i>
Participation Inequality	-8.291 (3.549)	0.020	-3.222 (1.388)	0.020	-0.787 (0.290)	0.007
Per Capita Income	0.181 (0.103)	0.079	0.066 (0.028)	0.019	0.021 (0.015)	0.159
Citizen Ideology	0.052 (0.024)	0.032	-0.008 (0.007)	0.290	-0.003 (0.002)	0.166
% White	0.063 (0.028)	0.023	0.008 (0.008)	0.323	-0.021 (0.019)	0.281
Poverty Rate	-0.042 (0.110)	0.700	0.042 (0.050)	0.404	0.003 (0.007)	0.712
% Union Member	-0.038 (0.093)	0.686	0.022 (0.019)	0.252	0.008 (0.013)	0.536
Turnout	-0.194 (0.070)	0.006	-0.029 (0.018)	0.106	-0.005 (0.008)	0.529
Gov. Ideology	0.001 (0.031)	0.972	0.024 (0.007)	0.001	0.004 (0.002)	0.016
Legislative Prof.	8.359 (2.439)	0.001	1.372 (0.706)	0.052	-0.768 (0.676)	0.256
Competition	0.066 (0.030)	0.026	-0.008 (0.007)	0.225	-0.002 (0.010)	0.873
Initiative Index	-0.297 (0.180)	0.099	-0.029 (0.040)	0.464	0.119 (0.073)	0.102
Regional Diffusion	-1.189 (1.438)	0.408	1.508 (0.404)	<0.001	0.417 (0.099)	<0.001
Housing Prices	-2.585 (1.958)	0.187				
1997 FPL			0.004 (0.003)	0.159		
% Uninsured Child			-0.011	0.787		

Table 4.2: Continued

			(0.042)			
Previous Adoptions			-0.329	0.006		
			(0.119)			
Min. Wage <sub>t-1</sub>					0.752	<0.001
					(0.083)	
Time	0.622	0.025	-1.508	<0.001	-0.062	0.027
	(0.278)		(0.328)		(0.028)	
Time <sup>2</sup>			0.255	<0.001	0.006	0.033
			(0.065)		(0.003)	
Time <sup>3</sup>			-0.013	0.001		
			(0.004)			
Constant	5.583	0.550	-2.759	0.140	2.714	0.110
	(9.341)		(1.868)		(1.699)	
N	290		2489		500	
Wald Chi <sup>2</sup>	44.045		619.807		2190.564	

Note 1: Results from logistic regression; robust clustered standard errors by state in parentheses.

Note 2: Results from pooled logistic regression; robust clustered standard errors by state in parentheses; the seven policy components analyzed are (1) eligibility FPL  $\geq 200\%$ , (2) eligibility FPL  $\geq 250\%$ , (3) eligibility FPL  $\geq 300\%$ , (4) presumptive eligibility, (5) 12-month continuous eligibility, (6) family application mechanism, and (7) the unborn child option; dummy variables for each policy component are included in the model estimation but not reported.

Note 3: Results from OLS regression; state panel corrected standard errors in parentheses; state fixed effects included in the model estimation but not reported.

Table 4.3: Unequal Participation and State APL, SCHIP, and Minimum Wage  
(Alternative Party Control Models)

	Anti-Predatory Lending <sup>1</sup>		SCHIP <sup>2</sup>		Minimum Wage <sup>3</sup>	
	<i>b/(rcse)</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>b/(rcse)</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>b/(pcse)</i>	<i>p</i>
Participation Inequality	-8.722 (3.579)	0.015	-2.948 (1.390)	0.034	-0.726 (0.294)	0.013
Per Capita Income	0.220 (0.110)	0.047	0.063 (0.027)	0.021	0.023 (0.016)	0.134
Citizen Ideology	0.064 (0.024)	0.007	-0.002 (0.007)	0.760	-0.003 (0.002)	0.178
% White	0.078 (0.030)	0.009	0.005 (0.009)	0.546	-0.021 (0.019)	0.270
Poverty Rate	0.004 (0.131)	0.975	0.034 (0.050)	0.496	0.003 (0.007)	0.649
% Union Member	-0.026 (0.093)	0.780	0.016 (0.019)	0.409	0.009 (0.014)	0.503
Turnout	-0.206 (0.073)	0.005	-0.023 (0.018)	0.211	-0.005 (0.008)	0.531
Unified Dem.	1.193 (0.656)	0.069	0.355 (0.274)	0.194	0.101 (0.028)	0.000
Unified Rep.	0.904 (1.134)	0.426	-0.388 (0.229)	0.090	-0.036 (0.056)	0.521
Legislative Prof.	8.368 (2.652)	0.002	1.368 (0.669)	0.041	-0.713 (0.763)	0.350
Competition	0.074 (0.030)	0.014	-0.009 (0.007)	0.187	-0.000 (0.011)	0.984
Initiative Index	-0.368 (0.223)	0.099	-0.025 (0.042)	0.554	0.132 (0.075)	0.080
Regional Diffusion	-1.106 (1.475)	0.453	1.503 (0.410)	0.000	0.429 (0.096)	0.000
Time	0.658 (0.291)	0.024	-1.536 (0.328)	0.000	-0.061 (0.027)	0.026

Table 4.3: Continued

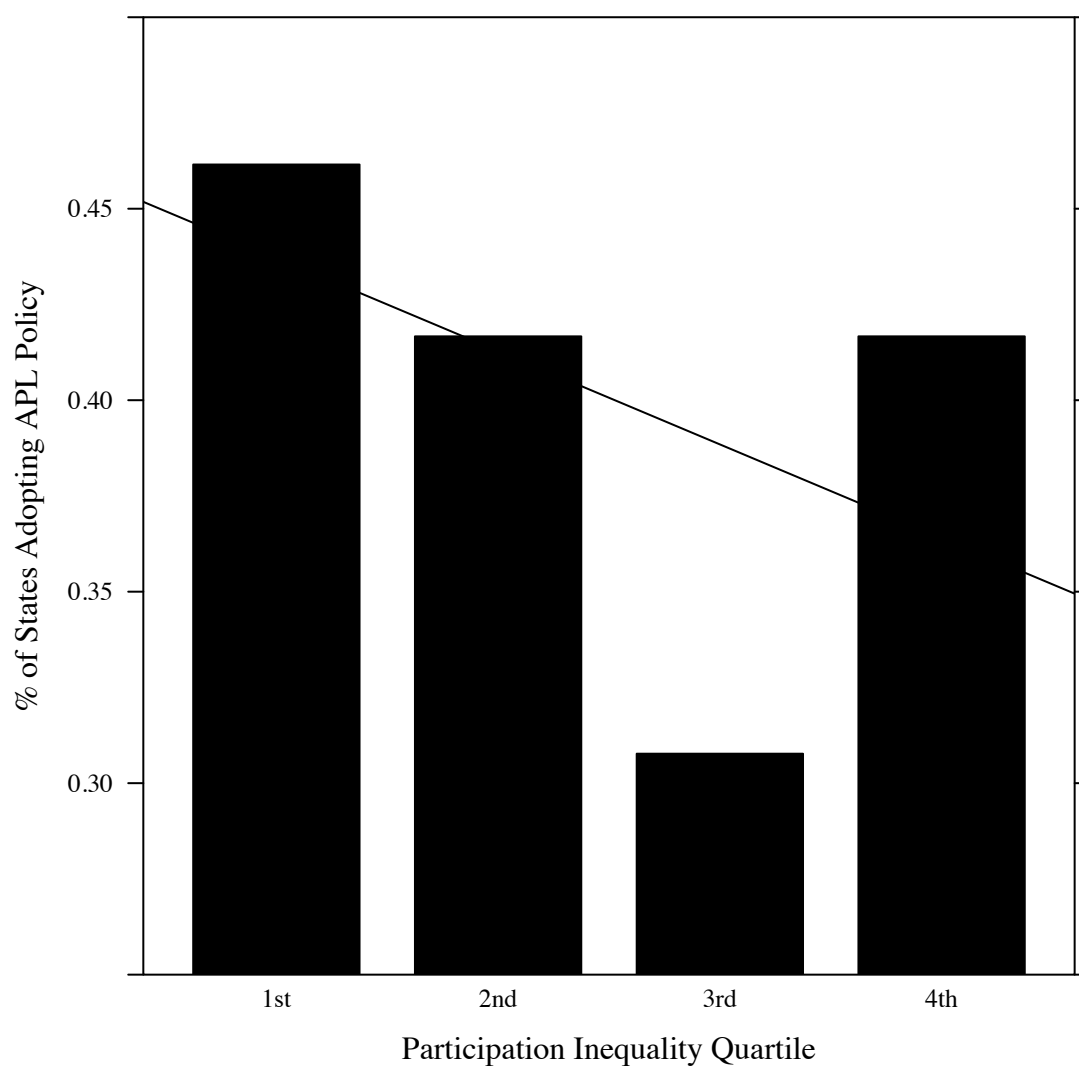
Time <sup>2</sup>			0.255 (0.065)	0.000	0.006 (0.003)	0.041
Time <sup>3</sup>			-0.012 (0.004)	0.001		
Housing Prices	-2.990 (1.862)	0.108				
1997 FPL			0.004 (0.003)	0.160		
% Uninsured Child			-0.018 (0.044)	0.682		
Previous Adoptions			-0.324 (0.115)	0.005		
Min. Wage <sub>t-1</sub>					0.739 (0.084)	0.000
Constant	3.888 (10.467)	0.710	-1.666 (1.954)	0.394	2.816 (1.759)	0.109
N	290		2489		500	
Wald Chi <sup>2</sup>	45.273		791.753		2234.808	

Note 1: Results from logistic regression; robust clustered standard errors by state in parentheses.

Note 2: Results from pooled logistic regression; robust clustered standard errors by state in parentheses; the seven policy components analyzed are (1) eligibility FPL  $\geq 200\%$ , (2) eligibility FPL  $\geq 250\%$ , (3) eligibility FPL  $\geq 300\%$ , (4) presumptive eligibility, (5) 12-month continuous eligibility, (6) family application mechanism, and (7) the unborn child option; dummy variables for each policy component are included in the model estimation but not reported.

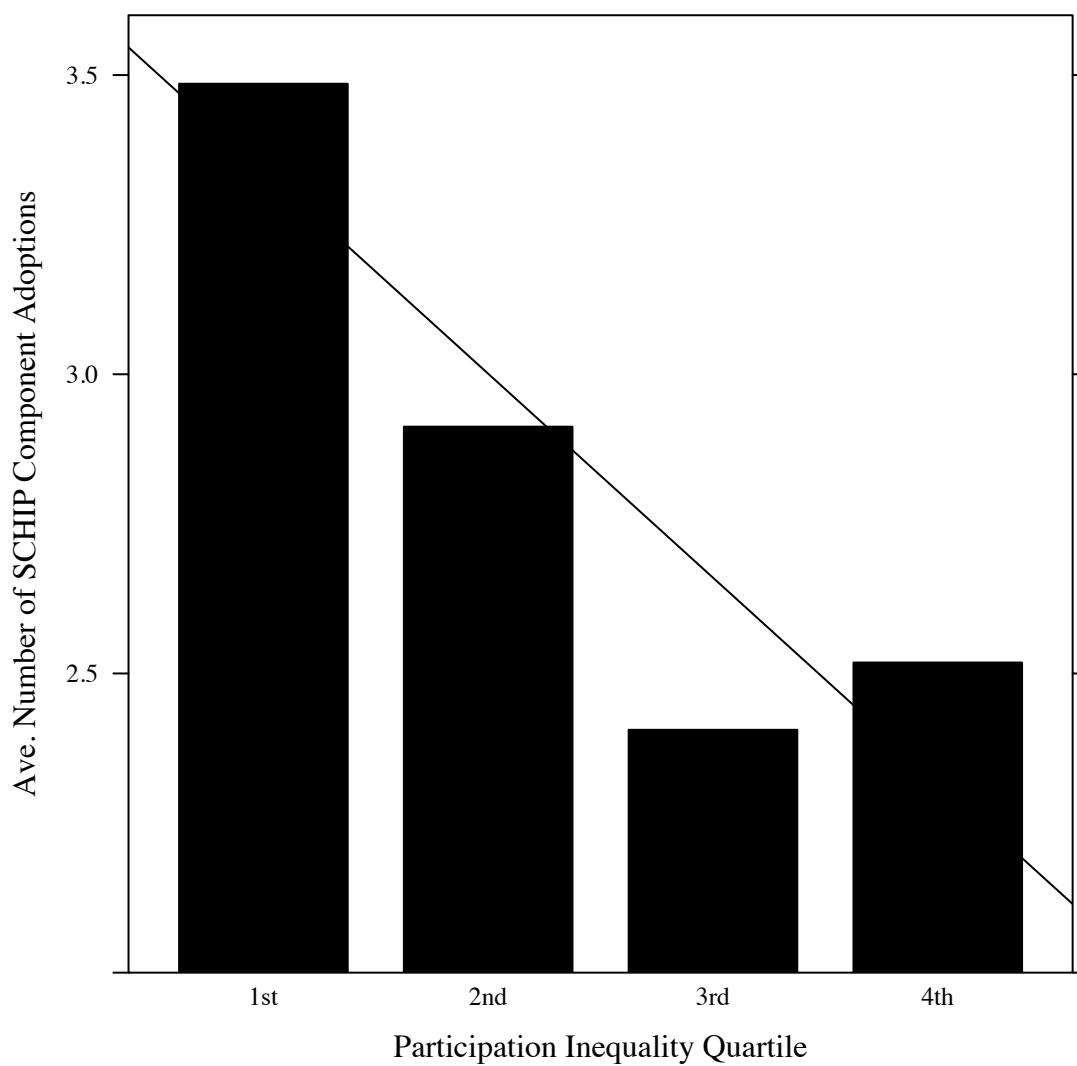
Note 3: Results from OLS regression; state panel corrected standard errors in parentheses; state fixed effects included in the model estimation but not reported.

Figure 4.1: Anti-Predatory Lending Policy Adoptions by Participation Inequality Quartiles



Note: Lower quartiles indicate lower levels of participation bias; solid line represents the fitted regression estimate.

Figure 4.2: Average Number of SCHIP Policy Components Adopted by Participation Inequality Quartiles



Note: Lower quartiles indicate lower levels of participation bias; solid line represents the fitted regression estimate.

Figure 4.3: State Minimum Wage by Participation Inequality

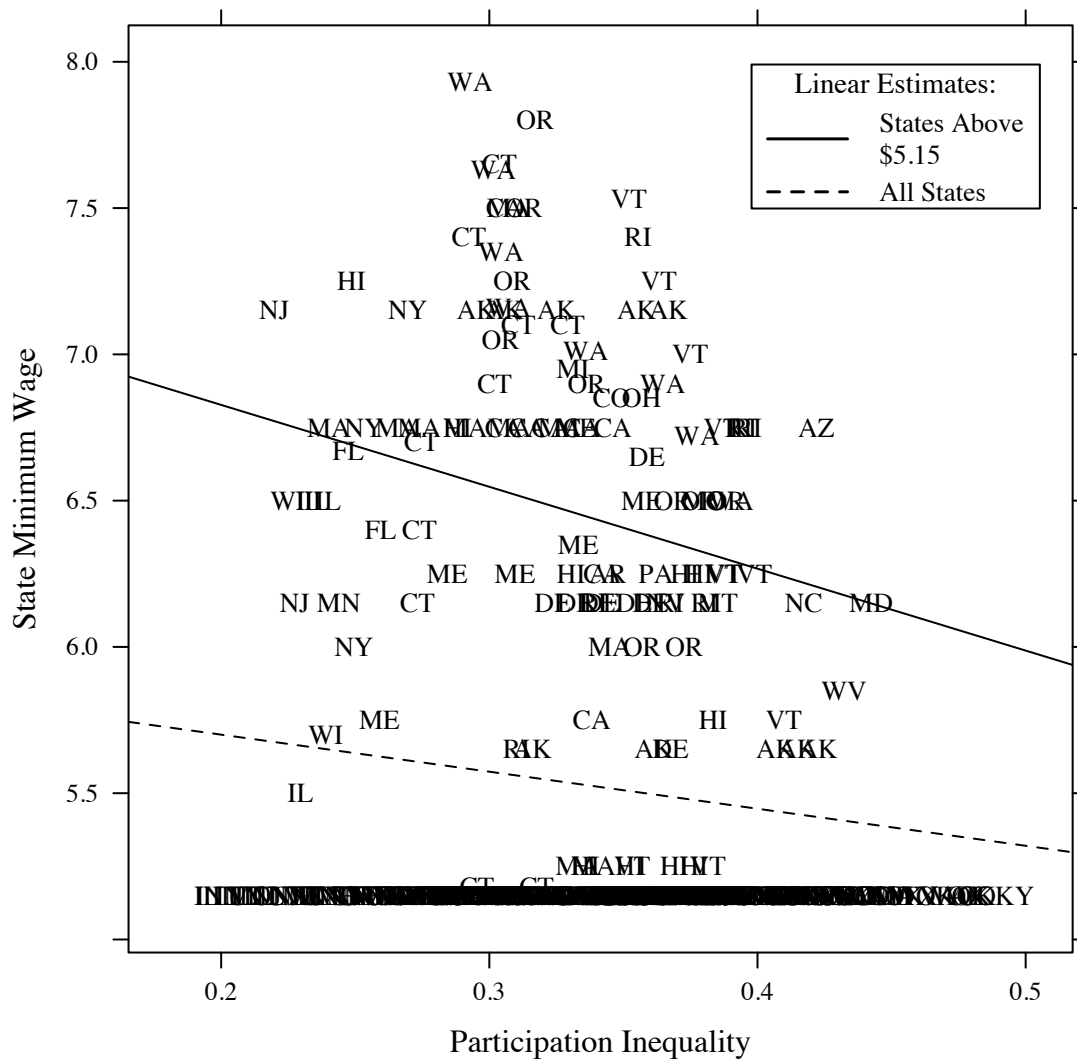
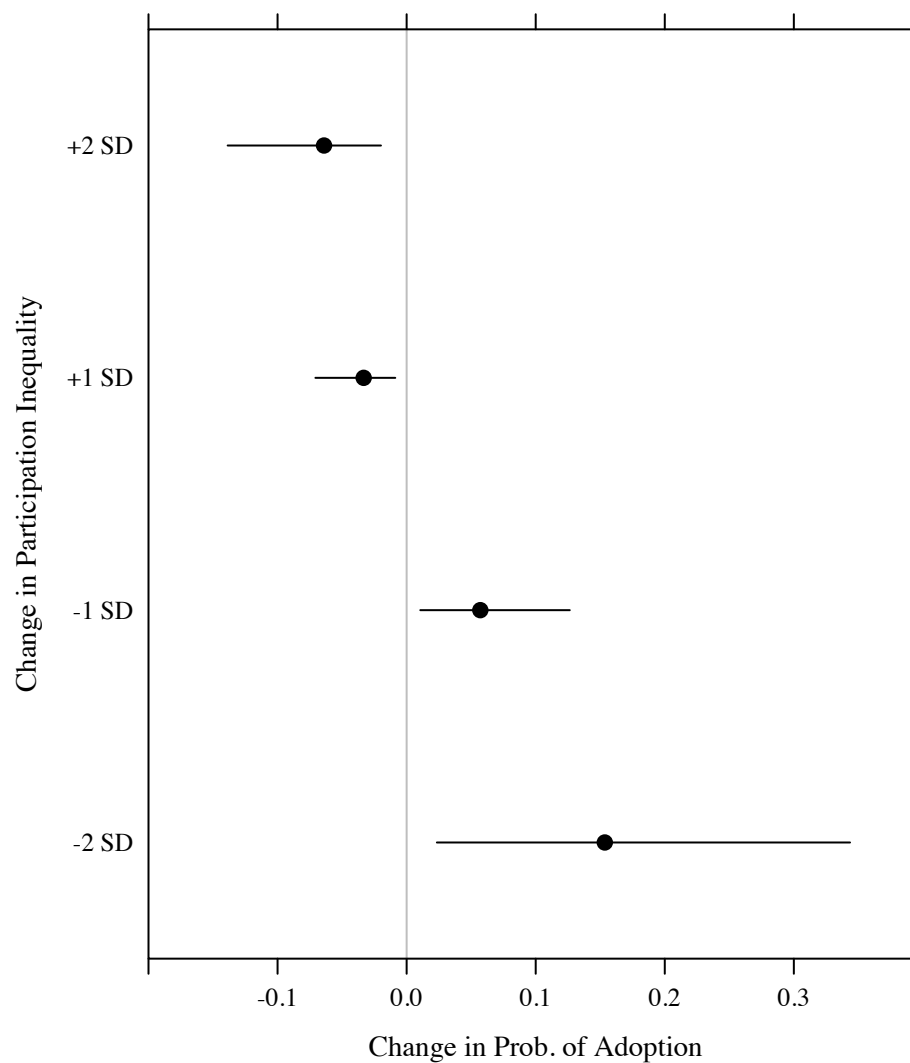
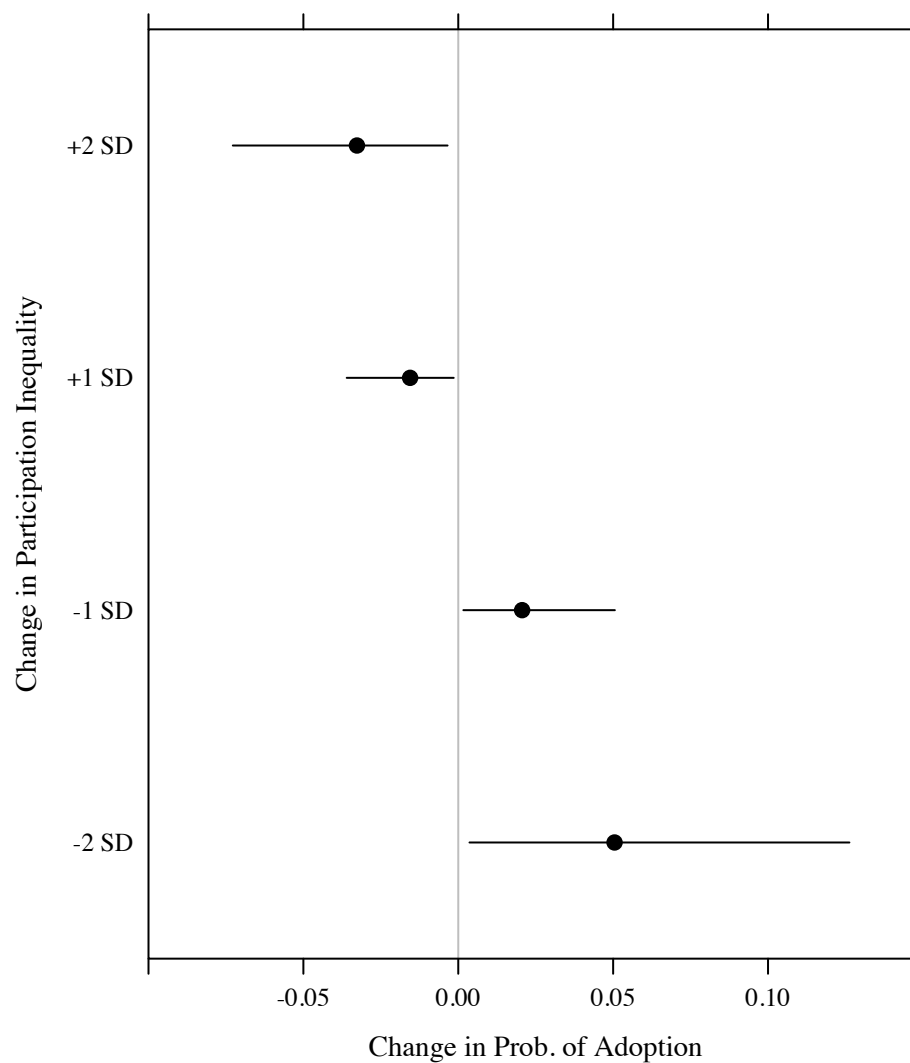


Figure 4.4: Effect of Participation Inequality on Anti-Predatory Lending Policy Adoption



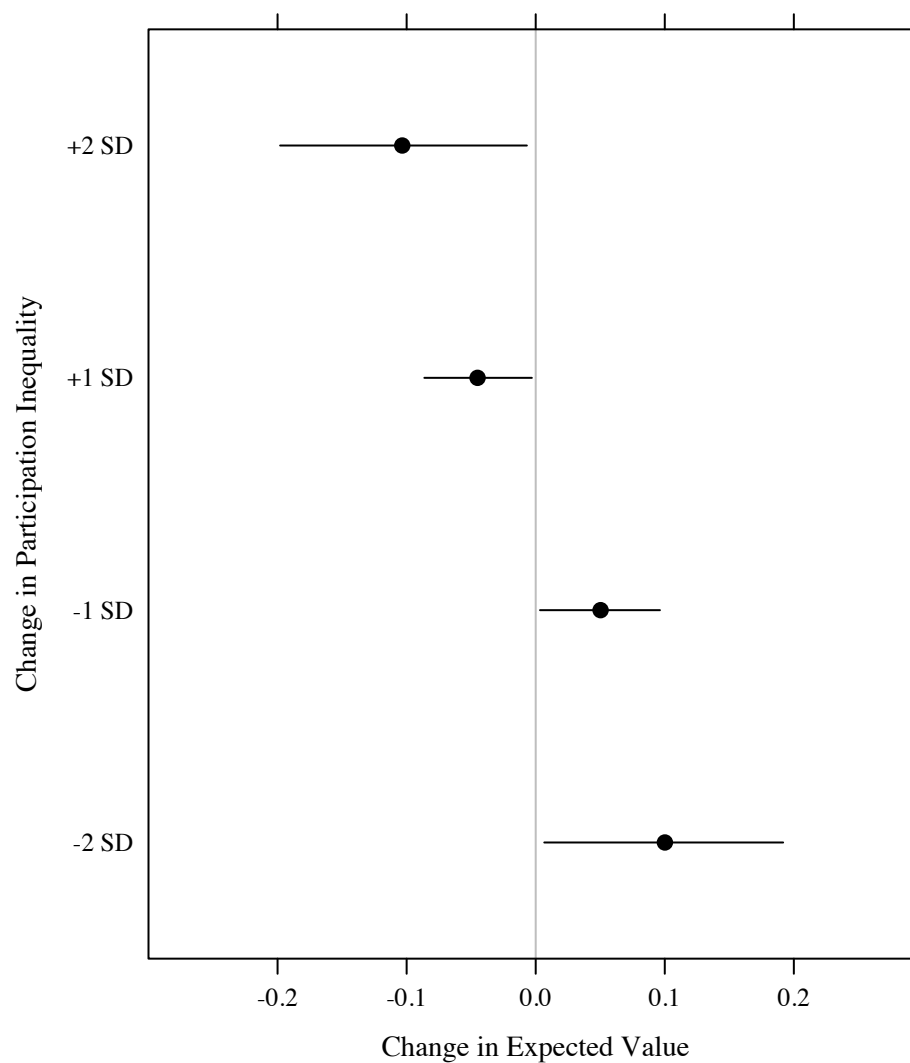
Note: Estimates are based on the results of the “Anti-Predatory Lending” model found in Table 4.2; probabilities were calculated with all other variables held constant; lines represent 95% confidence intervals.

Figure 4.5: Effect of Participation Inequality on SCHIP Adoption



Note: Estimates are based on the results of the “SCHIP” model found in Table 4.2; probabilities were calculated with all other variables held constant; lines represent 95% confidence intervals.

Figure 4.6: Effect of Participation Inequality on Minimum Wage Law



Note: Estimates are based on the results of the “Minimum Wage” model found in Table 4.2; probabilities were calculated with all other variables held constant; lines represent 95% confidence intervals.

## CHAPTER 5

### UNEQUAL PARTICIPATION AND GOVERNANCE POLICY: THE ADOPTION OF STATE ALTERNATIVE VOTING AND REGISTRATION METHODS

Chapters 3 and 4 have demonstrated the policy consequences of participation bias by showing that states with higher levels of inequality are less likely to consider issues and adopt laws that are favorable to disadvantaged groups. Looking at different aspects of the policy process I have found that policies related to welfare, housing, health care, and income equity are typically absent from state agendas and not likely to be adopted by states when inequality is high. This chapter advances the literature on the policy significance of political inequality by examining how political institutions are influenced by biases in state electorates. Specifically, aggregate state-level data is used to explore how inequalities in political participation have affected the adoption of more lenient voting and registration laws.

Equality of participation in American politics has typically been studied by examining voting behavior. Schattschneider (1960) has argued low political participation creates biases between the general population and those who are represented and is one of the primary failures of American politics. The act of voting has been viewed as essential to the survival of democracy, and many have demonstrated that electoral rules can have an effect on voter turnout (e.g., Highton 1997; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980). For some time the states have attempted to lower the costs of voting by passing legislation that makes registration and voting more convenient and accessible to more citizens, such as registration by mail, motor vehicle registration (or motor voter), no excuse absentee voting, election day registration, and early voting. Although a number of studies have

examined the influence of these laws on participation, few have asked why certain states choose to adopt these laws.

Political environments where influence over decision-making is concentrated among relatively few can create circumstances where those with power have a significant interest at stake when it comes to potentially disturbing the distribution of power. Giving more political influence to those with initially limited power or providing those who are disenfranchised with access to the political process will likely reduce the effectiveness of those with disproportionate influence. Therefore, attempts to disrupt the current political environment are expected to be highly undesirable to those that have a strong influence over political decision making.

Governance policies, or the rules and laws that regulate the political process, are a unique type of policy that have the potential to change the way individuals and organizations function within a political system. Those in positions of power are generally thought of as being averse to new governance policies since these changes can alter the rules that brought these individuals into their advantageous political positions. This chapter assess whether economic inequalities in participation have an influence on whether states are more or less likely to adopt governance policies. The adoption of state registration and voting process reforms provide an ideal test of the effects political inequality can have on government decision-making. These reforms—laws intended to make participation easier by reducing the barriers to registration and voting—represent clear instances of electoral uncertainty.

This uncertainty, however, is also expected to vary depending on the type of electoral reform being assessed. Important differences in how registration and voting process reforms are designed to influence citizen participation are considered to better understand how participation inequalities influence the adoption of these reforms. In general, registration reforms are expected to stimulate new voters while voting reforms are expected to retain those already likely to vote (Berinsky 2005; Burden et al. 2012;

Rigby and Springer 2011). This distinction suggests that elected officials will be more cautious of registration process reforms, which have a greater potential of changing the composition of the electorate. Voting process reforms will be less threatening to politicians when considering they are mainly designed to make voting more convenient for existing voters.

Additionally, registration and voting reforms are likely to benefit different socioeconomic groups in different ways. Since the effect of registration reform is to stimulate new voters, these types of reforms will mostly favor disadvantaged groups—that is, those least likely to participate. Voting reforms, conversely, will mainly benefit those with higher incomes by providing more convenient methods of participation. This suggests elected officials in states with high inequality should be better able to avoid registration process reforms, thereby avoiding the uncertainty corresponding to changes in the composition of the electorate. Voting process reforms, however, will create less uncertainty related to changes in the electorate, and will be more likely to be adopted in states with high inequality where the wealthy benefit from these convenience reforms. The state electoral reforms examined here include mail registration, motor voter, no excuse absentee voting, and in-person early voting from 1972-2008.

### **Unequal Participation, Governance Policy, and Election Reform in the States**

Similar to the analyses conducted in Chapters 3 and 4, the main goal of this study is to demonstrate the policy consequences of participation inequality. Considering biases in participation allows for an examination of how economic status and attempts to influence public policy via political participation shapes government decision-making. This is especially true for policies that may not be salient to the public or proposals that are difficult for individuals to understand, which lead to situations where lawmakers are

expected to use their own judgment to come to a decision (Arnold 1990; Jacobs and Shapiro 2000; Jewell 1982; Mansbridge 2003; Verba and Nie 1972). Income affects the types of government policies people are influenced by, which suggests that different levels of political activity by various groups in society can have an influence on lawmakers' decisions regarding how to address certain issues (Berinsky 2002; Soss and Jacobs 2009; Verba 2003; Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995). In the case of the current study, registration process reforms are policies that are more likely to directly influence the poor while those with higher economic status are likely to be unaffected by these reforms. Voting process reforms, conversely, are likely to favor the wealthy by providing more convenient forms of voting while doing little to stimulate new voters.

The combination of having few political resources and not making attempts to influence the political process through participation means disadvantaged portions of the population are less influential over political outcomes. The problems and concerns of those at the bottom of the income distribution become easier to ignore as the magnitude of their presence shrinks with their available resources. At the same time, the increasing resources and power of individuals belonging to the upper-stratum allows them to dominate the political agenda with their own interests (Bachrach and Baratz 1962). As demonstrated in earlier chapters, evidence of this has been provided by a number of studies (e.g., Bartels 2008; Key 1949; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). For instance, Solt's (2008) examination of the effect of income inequality on political participation across democratic nations suggests how inequalities in participation may influence public policy. The author suggests that as inequality continues to rise and the participation of less affluent individuals continues to decline it is less likely that issues mostly agreed upon by the poor will even be discussed.

Scholars have often looked to redistributive policies to better understand the influence of inequality on the policy process. While redistribution undoubtedly warrants attention from studies of inequalities based on economic status (see Chapters 3 and 4),

governance policy is another potentially important kind of policy that may be shaped by participation inequality. In general terms, governance policies make up the rules and laws that regulate political processes (Tolbert 2003). Examining governance policy provides a way to understand how and why institutional change occurs. Inequality in political influence can be a significant factor in shaping institutional reform, particularly when a reform has the potential to disproportionately affect different economic segments of the population. Election process reforms in the American states are specific types of governance policy that can provide insight into the influence of inequality on institutional reform. Electoral reforms are intended to make participation easier for citizens by relaxing the restrictions related to the process of registration and voting. As discussed in more detail below, differences in design exist between registration and voting reforms, which reduce the costs of voting in different ways for those at the top and bottom of the income distribution.

An abundance of research addresses registration and voting laws that affect participation in the states (Highton and Wolfinger 1998; Nagler 1991; Rosenstone and Hansen 2003; Squire, Wolfinger, and Glass 1987; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980). Most of these studies have specifically focused on how electoral rules shape the size and composition of the voting public. The motivation behind much of this scholarship is that elections are fundamental to democracy in that they give citizens some amount of control over political processes, serving as a way to ensure that members of government are held accountable for their actions. The important implications of voting and elections have many scholars questioning the dismal turnout rates in the United States. One common explanation of low turnout—among many—is the restrictive nature of election laws governing voter registration and how and when voters can cast their ballots. Over the past several decades many states have changed the rules that govern voting and registration with the intention of making political participation less difficult for their citizens.

Despite these changes to election processes, evidence that reducing the costs of voting increases turnout has been mixed with an accumulation of findings suggesting institutional reform does not have the intended influence on turnout (Ansolabehere and Konisky 2006; Berinsky 2005; Brians and Grofman 2001; Cain, Donovan, and Tolbert 2008; Fitzgerald 2005; Highton 1997; Highton and Wolfinger 1998; Knack 1995; Knack and White 2000; Primo, Jacobsmeier, and Milyo 2007; Rosenstone and Wolfinger 1978; Wolfinger, Highton, and Mullin 2005). Studies assessing how electoral reforms affect the composition of the electorate (mainly differences in turnout by income groups) have reached more consistent conclusions. In a comprehensive analysis of state participation bias and election reform, Rigby and Springer (2011) provide evidence suggesting that reducing barriers to registration increases the likelihood of voting for those not already a part of the electoral system (also see Jackson, Brown, and Wright 1998). Motor vehicle registration has a small but significant effect on reducing voter biases, while election day registration (which essentially removes the registration step of the voting process) has a relatively strong influence on turning out lower income voters (also see Hanmer 2009).

Conversely, in-person early voting, a convenience voting reform, is shown to lead to greater biases in turnout (Berinsky 2005). Scholars suggest the opposite effects of registration and voting reforms on the composition of the electorate are due to the design of these particular policies. For the most part, registration reforms are designed to stimulate new voters while voting reforms are expected to retain those already likely to vote (Berinsky 2005; Burden et al. 2012; Rigby and Springer 2012). Registration reforms are aimed at mobilizing those who are the least likely to vote, mainly those with fewer resources. Alternatively, voting reforms reinforce the voting behavior of those already likely to participate by making the act of voting more convenient. Burden et al. (2012) extend this argument by showing voting process reforms not only make voting easier, but they can also increase participation biases indirectly. The authors suggest convenience voting reduces the intensity of political campaigns because voting takes place over a

longer period of time rather than on a single day. The less concentrated campaigns, as a result of convenience voting, can decrease mobilization effects, which are often important for lower income groups.

An important aspect of this research that is rarely addressed, however, is why some states have adopted measures to ease voting restrictions while others have not (but see Smith 2008; Tolbert 2003). While some uncertainty surrounds the question of whether relaxing registration and voting laws increase political participation, state and national governments appear to believe that electoral reforms make a difference (e.g., Ansolabehere and Konisky 2006; Fitzgerald 2005). Rosenstone and Wolfinger (1978) discuss how interest groups and some members of Congress in the 1960s and 1970s lobbied for more lenient election laws. Even President Carter thought that relaxing registration laws would allow greater access to the political system when he ineffectively proposed election day registration in 1977 (Rosenstone and Wolfinger 1978).

Since low-income individuals are more likely to be influenced by registration process reforms, states with higher levels of participation bias are expected to adopt fewer election reforms. Political elites in environments with larger inequalities will be better able to avoid reforms that would make voting easier for the electorate. Avoiding these reforms is ideal for politicians who get elected to office under a set of rules and laws and want to maintain these institutions to have the best chance of holding on to their positions of power, which is why changes to political institutions are relatively rare (Tolbert, Smith, and Green 2009).

A number of scholars have examined the circumstances under which elected officials support changes in electoral laws. A common conclusion is that political elites are accustomed to the rules already in place, and a great deal of uncertainty exists about how changes in a particular system will affect politicians' chances of staying in office (Andrews and Jackman 2005; North 1990). Using a survey of political candidates from several countries, Bowler, Donovan, and Karp (2006) find that electoral self-interest

plays a large role in opinions on election reform. The authors conclude, “...winners become invested in, or at least attached to, the rules that made them winners. Winners are committed to the status quo (Bowler et al. 2006, 444).”

The unwillingness of politicians to support changes that would influence the composition of the electorate is discussed in Piven and Cloward’s (1988; 2000) account of voter mobilization efforts in the 1980s, an effort that eventually led to the National Voter Registration Act in 1993. Even though most evidence suggested the Democratic Party would disproportionately benefit from enrolling new voters—many unregistered citizens were low income, poorly educated minorities—very few members from either party favored making changes that would increase registration. The authors show elected officials were concerned that “New voters could put party incumbents at risk, and masses of new low-income voters would also threaten existing party coalitions and policy agendas (Piven and Cloward 2000, 171).”

The central argument presented in this chapter is that higher levels of class bias will give political elites the means to avoid the uncertainty related to changes in the composition of the electorate. Political inequities allow elites to ensure that changes intended to stimulate new voters—mainly to those already removed from the political process for a variety of reasons—are not enacted by giving elected officials strong control over the political agenda. The ability of politicians to avoid the uncertainty of increasing access to the political system is more likely when political inequality is high and the influence of the poor is minimal. States with higher levels of bias in the composition of their electorates, or high political inequality, should be less likely to adopt electoral reforms thought to stimulate new voters.

An extension to the argument discussed above is that higher levels of inequality will allow the wealthy to more freely advance their own interests and priorities. Some scholars have recently argued that the growing influence of the rich over the political process has perpetuated social and economic inequalities. That is, the disproportionate

influence of advantaged groups and individuals has led to public policies that largely benefit the wealthy and are often unfavorable to the majority of Americans (Hacker and Pierson 2010; Mettler 2010).<sup>22</sup> As shown above, voting process reforms are designed to make voting more convenient for those already likely to participate. These reforms are not expected to stimulate new voters, but instead reinforce the voting habits of regular voters. This suggests elected officials will be less concerned about voting reforms since less uncertainty is associated with them, and higher income groups will likely favor the greater convenience provided by the reforms. Therefore, it is possible that states with higher levels of inequality will be more likely to adopt voting process reforms.

With the idea that state governments generally believe lifting restrictions on registration and voting make it easier to vote, the decision of a state to adopt or not adopt an electoral reform is an interesting puzzle. What factors help us understand which states have chosen to reform the rules that govern registration and voting? The main thesis of this study is that participation bias plays an important role in state election reform. While many have recognized the political and economic inequities that exist in the U.S. and how they affect public policy, this has not been extended to institutional reform. The argument here is that political bias in the electorate not only influences which political voices are heard but also allows political elites to have greater control over policies related to their own self-interests, in addition to the interests of those with political voice.

### **Data and Methods**

This first step in analyzing the adoption of electoral reforms is to identify the types of reforms that have been implemented, as well as when they were enacted. Simply

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<sup>22</sup> Although this aspect of inequality is not the focus of this dissertation, it is difficult to address the adoption of registration process reforms without including an assessment of voting process reforms.

knowing whether a state adopted a particular policy without consideration of the timing of the enacted policy does not give a complete understanding of policy adoption. That is, information on both space and time should be analyzed to fully account for variation in state election reform. The adoption of four common election reforms accompanied by the year of adoption for each state is obtained from Rigby and Springer (2011). The reforms include registration by mail, motor vehicle registration, unrestricted absentee voting, and in-person early voting.<sup>23</sup> These registration and voting process reforms are examined from 1972-2008. Table 5.1 provides information on the year each reform policy was adopted and the states that adopted them. Blank entries indicate that the state did not adopt that particular electoral reform. Additionally, the total cumulative state adoptions for each policy are summarized in Figure 5.1.

Similar to the modeling approach taken in Chapter 4, the relationship between participation bias and the electoral process reforms are assessed using event history analysis. Event history analysis is a common technique used when the researcher is interested in understanding the occurrence of a particular event over time. Since only the presence of these policies is measured, event history analysis is used to determine the relationship between participation bias and the adoption of state electoral reforms. Policy adoption is modeled using logistic regression with common adjustments for the design of binary time-series cross-sectional data.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Election day registration—a unique and important electoral reform—is also included in the Rigby and Springer (2011) study, but estimation issues prevented a thorough analysis of this particular reform, which is discussed in more detail below.

<sup>24</sup> Event history analysis is a commonly used technique in state policy diffusion analyses (e.g., Balla 2001; Berry and Berry 1990; Box-Steffensmeier and Jones 2004) where the researcher is interested in risk. The so-called “risk” in these instances is the adoption of a particular policy under analysis. While the understanding of duration analysis has grown in past years, Beck, Katz, and Tucker (1998) have shown that using adapted logit/probit methods with binary time-series cross-sectional (BTSCS) data is “identical to grouped duration data (1264).” The advantage to using typical logit or probit models to estimate BTSCS data is that the analyses can be implemented and interpreted in ways that are familiar to the researcher and readers. Since the dependent variables in this study are of the BTSCS type, logistic regression is employed while accounting for duration dependence and adjusting standard error estimates by state clusters.

Modeling state election reform also brings up the issue of how to treat each of the four reforms. While each policy may be considered somewhat different from the others, the focus on class bias does not necessarily have to differentiate among each reform. That is, participation inequality is expected to affect the adoption of these reforms in a somewhat uniform manner. Registration by mail and motor vehicle registration are considered to be registration process reforms, while unrestricted absentee voting and in-person early voting are considered voting process reforms. Registration by mail and motor voter policies are viewed as ways by which new voters are mobilized, or as components of the larger registration process reform policy type. Unrestricted absentee voting and in-person early voting are classified as voting process reforms, which are designed to make voting more convenient.

To model the analysis of the four policy adoptions parsimoniously, the data are pooled to represent each state, reform component—i.e., registration process or voting process—and year (Boehmke 2009). This modification to traditional event history analysis simply stacks the data from each component into one data set. The dependent variable,  $Y_{ikt}$ , indicates whether state  $i$  has adopted policy component  $k$  at time  $t$ . This set up allows a state that adopts one policy component to remain in the analysis until it adopts the second component. Use of this method results in two separate analyses, each consisting of two different reforms.

The main advantage of using the pooled technique in the context of electoral reform is that only two models are needed to analyze all four components, as opposed to four separate models. While modeling four separate models would not be particularly burdensome, using the pooled method directly models the assumptions made about registration and voting reforms. That is, states are expected to adopt the two components of each reform for the same reasons. In other words, the adoption process is expected to be similar for each component within each group across the states, which is explicitly modeled by combining the components into two different analyses.

Both dependent variables, voting process reform and registration process reform, are coded as zero until a policy is adopted and is then coded as one for that year. The remaining state-policy-year observations are dropped after policy adoption. The result is data for 50 states and 4 policy components (two in each analysis).<sup>25</sup> Since the data being analyzed consists of repeated measures of the 50 states, robust standard error estimates are used in the models in order to correct for any over-time dependence within states (Box-Steffensmeier and Jones 2004).

Consistent with the previous chapters examining policy processes in the states, the primary explanatory variable used in the analyses is participation inequality (see Chapter 2). Once again, this variable is a measure of economic bias in participation that assesses the degree to which income levels influence voter turnout in each state. The participation inequality measure ranges from -1 to 1, with negative values indicating low-income individuals are more likely to vote than the rich, 0 meaning the rich and poor have an equal probability of voting, and positive values meaning the rich vote at a higher rate than the poor. A value of 0.33 (the average of the measure across all years and states), for example, indicates the rich are 33% more likely to vote than the poor. No state has a bias measure at or below 0, which would indicate that the lower class participates at a higher rate than the upper class. Again, inequality is expected to have a negative influence on the adoption of registration process reforms, while the likelihood of adopting voting reforms is expected to be higher in states with more participation inequality.

While the adoption of registration and voting reforms will likely be influenced by many of the same state characteristics (see below), the analysis of the registration reforms is modeled somewhat differently than voting reforms. This is due to the passage of the National Voter Registration Act of 1993 (NVRA), which stipulated that all states were to

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<sup>25</sup> North Dakota is not included in the registration reform analysis since it does not have any voter registration requirements.

adopt more lenient registration policies (Piven and Cloward 1988). The federal act required states to loosen registration laws by 1995, which suggests that the process of registration reform might be different before and after the passage of NVRA. In fact, a large jump in the number of state registration reform adoptions can be seen around 1994 when examining the cumulative adoption rates of each policy in Figure 5.1. For this reason, the implementation of NVRA is accounted for in the registration reform model. This is accomplished by including a variable (Pre-NVRA) that is equal to one prior to the adoption of NVRA and zero after its implementation. Additionally, the possibility that the requirements of NVRA (once implemented) limited the influence of participation inequality on registration is accounted for by including an interaction term between inequality and the NVRA dummy in a separate model.

Another factor that is expected to play an important role in the adoption of state election reforms is a state's overall wealth. State per capita income is used to proxy the state's resources, which may have an influence on whether the state has the financial ability to implement new policies. This variable is expected to have a positive relationship with the dependent variable. Also included in the models of electoral reform are variables measuring the ideology of each state's government and citizenry (Berry et al. 1998). The previous discussion of electoral reform suggests that the partisanship of the elected officials in office should not matter. In the case of registration reform most political elites will avoid potential changes to the status quo regardless of party. For voting process reforms, legislators from both parties will have few worries about the reforms since they are not likely to change who turns out to vote. To be sure, government ideology is included to test this proposition.

A measure of each state's citizen ideology is used to control for the possibility that the ideological make-up of the states might influence the adoption of alternative voting methods. The common perception that conservatives desire less government intervention suggests that more liberal states will be more likely to adopt election

reforms. For both ideology variables (government and citizen) low values indicate more conservatism and high values indicate more liberalism. This suggests that we can expect the citizen ideology variable to have a positive influence on the dependent variable.

A number of scholars believe that racial diversity has a strong influence on politics and public policy. Racial and ethnic minority groups have systematically been found to have unequal access to the political system the U.S., creating environments with less favorable social policies in states with large minority populations (e.g., Hero 1998; Hero and Tolbert 1996; Key 1949; Verba Schlozman and Brady 1995). In terms of electoral institutions, Hill and Leighley (1999) find that states with higher levels of racial diversity are more likely to have more stringent registration policies. In the present study, the variable % White is used to account for each state's level of diversity. This measure is simply the percentage of the state population that is white.<sup>26</sup> This variable is expected to have a positive influence on the adoption of alternative voting policies—that is, less diversity (or a more homogeneous white population) will lead to a higher probability of adopting more lenient voting laws.

The variable Legislative Professionalism is derived from Squire (2007). Legislative professionalism is a scale based on the salary, time demand, staff, and resources of the state's legislators measured on a scale from 0-1.<sup>27</sup> States with more professional legislatures generally consist of lawmakers that are able to focus on their legislative careers rather than splitting time with another job, and are better informed about policies, issues, and their state's legislative system (Squire 2007). It is expected that greater levels of resources provided by more professional legislatures will allow

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<sup>26</sup> While a variety of alternative measures of diversity exist, the percentage of the population that is white was the most accessible data for the time period being analyzed.

<sup>27</sup> Squire (2007) provides four estimates of state legislative professionalism scores for 1979, 1986, 1996, and 2003. Since a measure is needed for each year of the analysis, the scores were used as they correspond to their respective decade (1970-1979 = 1979 score; 1980-1989 = 1986 score; 1990-1999 = 1996 score; 2000-2003 = 2003 score).

greater control over the law-making process. Additionally, those political elites who hold seats in more professional legislatures will have more to lose by taking risks on changing the structure of the election system. Higher values indicate more professional legislatures, which are expected to have a negative association with policy adoption.

Party Competition is a measure of state party competition that can take on values ranging from 1 to 50, with higher values indicating higher competition in the state (Ranney 1976). Key (1949), among others, has suggested that higher levels of political competition give those with fewer resources greater access to the political arena. He argued that party competition is necessary for the economically disadvantaged to have a political voice (Key 1949). At the highest levels of competition, legislators may not have the ability to control the political agenda and legislative process in a manner that allows them to avoid electoral reform. It is expected that higher levels of party competition will make states more likely to adopt election reform policy.

Another possible explanation for why a state might adopt a reform policy is that legislators simply want to create “good policy” that will benefit the public. In this sense, greater access to voting might be a higher priority for states with relatively low turnout. To control for this, the variable Turnout is included in the analysis. This variable measures a two-year average of the voting age population turnout for each state. For example, the turnout measure for states in 1981 is the average turnout rate in the 1980 and 1976 elections. This variable is expected to have a negative effect on the adoption of election reforms.

Smith (2008) and Tolbert (2003) have shown that the initiative process has played an important role in circumventing the legislative process and passing election process reforms that are in opposition to the interests of elected officials. For this reason, a measure of each state’s initiative process is included in the analysis. Since states with the initiative have a variety a different requirements in order to get a proposal on the ballot, Bowler and Donovan’s (2004) initiative qualification difficulty index is used. This

variable is reverse coded from 0-7 so that lower numbers indicate that the state has more difficult qualification requirements and higher numbers indicate initiatives are easier to qualify. States without the initiative process are coded as 0. States higher on the initiative qualification index are expected to be more likely to adopt election reforms.

The percentage of each state's population that is 60 years of age or older is also included to account for the possibility that states with generally older populations may be persuaded to implement voting laws that make it easier to vote. Scholars of policy diffusion have argued that a state is more likely to adopt a policy if nearby states have already implemented a similar policy (Berry and Berry 1990; Mintrom 1997). The idea is that states learn from each other and want to be competitive with their surrounding neighbors. To control for regional diffusion, included is a variable that is the percentage of bordering states that have already adopted a policy of the same type (Balla 2001). Since this measure requires that the state have neighboring states to compete with and learn from, the regional diffusion variable for Alaska and Hawaii is set to zero in the analysis. We should see an increase in policy adoption for those states with higher percentages of bordering state adoptions.

Also included, for theoretical and methodological reasons, is a set of variables used to control for time influences. A benefit from using event history analysis is that it is able to allow for duration dependence in model estimations. Not accounting for duration dependence when it does exist will lead to inefficient standard errors, and potentially may produce biased parameter estimates (Beck, Katz, and Tucker 1998). While no a priori assumptions are made about the influence of time on the policy adoptions, the policy diffusion literature does suggest that political learning may occur nationally—opposed to only regionally (Berry 1994). While time dependency is not a completely adequate measure of the so-called “national interaction model,” it may provide a sound

substitute.<sup>28</sup> Finally, a dichotomous variable is included in each model to account for the possibility that each specific policy type has a somewhat different hazard rate (see the appendix for more detail on variable coding and sources).

## Findings

Table 5.2 presents the estimates from the logistic regression models of registration process and voting process reforms. Looking to the first registration reform model (column 2), the participation bias coefficient suggests greater levels of inequality lead to states being less likely to adopt registration reforms, but this estimate cannot be statistically differentiated from zero ( $p = 0.173$ ). As argued above, the process of registration reform may have been altered by the NVRA, which required states to ease their voter registration procedures. The pre-NVRA variable included in the model shows that, on average, states were less likely to adopt registration reforms prior to the passage of the NVRA.

Another possibility, also discussed above, is that the effect of participation bias on registration reform adoptions is conditional on the timing of the NVRA enactment. That is, inequalities in participation affected registration policy adoption before NVRA was put into place, but was not an important factor once states were required to make voter registration easier for their residents. This alternative explanation is explored in column 3 of Table 5.2.

The conditional registration reform model provides evidence that participation bias did have an influence on the adoption of registration policy prior to the NVRA. The estimated coefficient on the interaction of participation bias and the pre-NVRA dummy

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<sup>28</sup> While the original national interaction model hypothesis argued that all state governments interact with each other when developing policy, this is not the claim here. It is only being suggested that states might be inclined to follow national policy trends that may be captured by measures of duration dependence.

variable is negative and statistically significant ( $p = 0.041$ ). This shows that states with higher levels of bias were less likely to adopt registration reforms prior to the NVRA enactment. The coefficient on the participation inequality base term shows that inequality does not have a statistically significant influence on reform adoption after NVRA went into effect. These results demonstrate that large gaps in the participation rates of the rich and poor allowed elected officials to avoid enacting reforms that had the potential to mobilize lower-income groups.

The results of the voting process reforms model are presented in the last column of Table 5.2. The estimated influence of participation inequality on reform adoption is both positive and significantly different from zero. This result shows that higher levels of inequality lead to a higher likelihood of adopting a voting process reform. As discussed in the current chapter and throughout this study, high levels of participation bias are expected to lead to outcomes that are less favorable to disadvantaged groups. A related expectation is that higher levels of inequality will also create better political outcomes for those at the top of the income distribution. The findings presented here suggest political elites recognized that voting reforms would mainly benefit those already likely to vote, a common finding among those who have analyzed the effect of voting reforms on the composition of the electorate (Berinsky 2005; Rigby and Springer 2011). This explanation suggests an understanding by political elites that these voting reforms largely make it more convenient to vote for those already expected to participate in elections, which could lead to a situation where elected officials are ambivalent about or perhaps more likely to support these particular reforms.

The magnitude of the influence of state participation inequality on registration and voting process reforms is demonstrated in Figures 5.2 and 5.3. The plots show the estimated changes for each state policy when changing from two standard deviations above to two standard deviations below the mean of participation bias. Figure 5.2 shows that the average probability of a state adopting a registration reform policy increases by

over 0.25 when comparing states at the highest end of participation bias to those with the lowest levels of bias. These probabilities are conditional estimates based on the effect of bias during the pre-NVRA period. For voting reform adoptions, Figure 5.3 shows that the difference in the probability of adopting a voting process reform increases by around 0.25 when changing from a low inequality state environment to a high bias state.

Looking at other state characteristics that influence the adoption of electoral process reforms, the most consistent variable across all models is the initiative index. For both types of policy, states with lower initiative qualification requirements have a higher likelihood of adopting reforms. This is consistent with Smith's (2008) analysis that shows initiative states are generally more likely to adopt policies that change state political institutions. More liberal state governments are shown to be more likely to adopt registration reforms. This finding suggests politicians to some extent believed reforming registration laws would benefit Democrats more than the Republicans in terms of the types of voters that would be mobilized by changes to registration policy.

Examining the influence of average turnout rates on policy reform, the registration reform model indicates higher levels of overall voter participation makes it less likely for a state to adopt a reform. This suggests that states with above average turnout rates did not see election reform to be necessary. The regional diffusion of policy adoptions also appears to be important for registration reform, where having more neighboring states adopting changes to registration policy increases the likelihood of a state adopting a reform.

One important electoral process reform that is not included in the above analyses is election day registration (EDR). As discussed above, EDR is a unique type of reform because it eliminates the two-stage process that is typically experienced by American voters by allowing citizens to register and vote at the same time. Research has found this particular policy to have a strong effect on closing the gap between rich and poor voters (Hanmer 2009; Rigby and Springer 2011). Unfortunately, because of the relatively low

adoption rate of this policy (only eight states have adopted EDR during the time period analyzed), estimating the influence of participation bias on the adoption of EDR was not possible.<sup>29</sup>

As an alternative, Figure 5.4 presents a descriptive look at the relationship between EDR adoption and participation bias. The plot shows the percentage of states that have adopted EDR policies at different levels of participation bias. The states are grouped by quartiles of participation bias with lower quartiles indicated lower levels of inequality. The plot shows that, in general, states with the lowest levels of participation bias are more likely to adopt EDR, and none of those states with the highest level of inequality have adopted EDR. States in the third quartile do somewhat deviate from this trend, but the overall relationship does align with the expectations detailed above. This is not meant to be conclusive evidence of the relationship between EDR and participation bias, and is only intended to provide readers with a basic analysis of the two variables.

## **Conclusions**

The purpose of this research is not to examine the merit of election reform as so many have already addressed and continue to study (e.g., see Cain, Donovan, and Tolbert 2008). Instead, the question asked here was why we see variation in the adoption of electoral reforms aimed at increasing access to the political process. The effects of economic and political inequalities on public policy have been demonstrated by a number of scholars. This analysis set out to show that electoral inequality has consequences for

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<sup>29</sup> More specifically, a full model could not be estimated as a result of the perfect prediction of several independent variables. That is, unique coefficients for a number of variables could not be estimated. An alternative approach is to include EDR as a third component of registration process reform, which produces results substantively similar to those found in columns 2 and 3 of Table 5.2. The decision not to include EDR along with the other registration reforms was based on the general consensus in the literature that EDR is substantively different from the traditional registration process reforms. Again, this is mainly due to the fact that EDR eliminates the two-stage process common to most American voters.

public policy—specifically, policies designed to reshape the way citizens participate in elections. In addition to this study providing a better understanding of the development of electoral reform in the states, the findings also suggest that political inequality can pose barriers to institutional change. Research showing that participation inequality has an influence on redistributive policy, for instance, typically attributes the negative effect of inequality to disproportionate representation of the upper-class (e.g., Hill and Leighley 1992).

This study suggests the negative effect of participation bias on electoral reform is also driven by the increased power given to elected officials. It is more likely that the lack of attention to registration reform from the wealthy, rather than strong policy preferences, allowed politicians to maintain the status quo and avoid the uncertainty of a transformed electorate. The ability of elected officials in states with high levels of participation inequality to avoid registration reforms was, however, only possible until the federal government implemented its own changes to voter registration. The passage of the National Voting Rights Act in 1993 removed certain aspects of the states' policy control over electoral processes, which forced all state governments to adopt more lenient registration policies.

Despite the evidence that unequal participation allowed politicians to avoid registration reforms, this is certainly not the case with the adoption of voting process reforms. In fact, the effect of participation bias appears to have had a positive influence on the adoption of state voting reforms. This finding is consistent with a logical extension to the theory outlined in this dissertation, which suggests that increases in participation inequality will lead to policies that are more beneficial to the wealthy. The inherent design of voting reforms—that is, to make voting more convenient—reinforces the participatory behavior of existing voters rather than stimulating new voters. Voting process reforms can perhaps be further examined in future research that assesses the influence of participation bias on policy outcomes favorable to the wealthy.

While the focus of this paper was not on the efficacy of voting reform, those who study the influence of these reforms on the composition of the electorate may find the results presented here to be important. The findings demonstrate that certain state characteristics lead to a higher (or lower) likelihood of electoral reform, which leaves open the possibility that the effects of the reforms are conditional upon these state characteristics. In Berinsky's (2005) review of the influence of voting reforms on the electorate, the author contends that recent state reforms have unintentionally increased class bias. This has occurred by the reforms making it easier for upper-class voters to remain in the electorate and not significantly stimulating potential lower-class voters. But these results are based on those states that have adopted voting reforms, not necessarily taking into consideration the systematic adoption of these new voting procedures. This form of selection bias may have implications for the influence of voting reforms on the composition of the electorate, suggesting Berinsky's statement that "...institutional reforms have taken us as far as they can toward a democratic electorate (2005, 485)" might be somewhat premature.

The influence of class bias on the adoption of electoral reform is also well suited to demonstrate the implications of this study for political equality and institutional reform in general. The results from this analysis suggest electoral class bias may create a political environment that not only allows the overrepresented upper-class to maintain their influence over government, but also allows elected officials to more easily maintain the certainty of the status quo. This influence may go beyond the adoption of registration process reforms; that is, any reforms aimed at changing electoral institutions—such as campaign finance reform, legislative term limits, etc.—are conceivably less likely to be adopted in states with high levels of inequality. The effectiveness of these reforms, once implemented, is certainly debatable. Understanding which factors determine whether a particular state adopts one of these reforms, however, is a different question. This study implies that state officials can more easily avoid change when substantial political

inequality exists. This can only be confirmed by future research and greater attention to the political consequences of inequalities in participation.

Table 5.1: State Registration and Voting Reform Adoptions

State	Mail Registration	Motor Voter Registration	Absentee Voting	Early Voting
Alabama	1994	1996		
Alaska	1976	1994	1996	1996
Arizona	1992	1984	1992	1994
Arkansas	1996	1996		1996
California	1976	1996	1978	1998
Colorado	1996	1986	1992	1992
Connecticut	1988	1992		
Delaware	1982	1994		
Florida	1996	1996	2002	2002
Georgia	1996	1996	2006	2004
Hawaii	1988	1990	1994	1994
Idaho	1996	1992	1994	1994
Illinois	1996	1996		2006
Indiana	1996	1996		2004
Iowa	1976	1990		
Kansas	1976	1994	1996	1996
Kentucky	1972	1996		
Louisiana	1996	1990		2006
Maine	1984	1996	2000	2000
Maryland	1974	1988		
Massachusetts	1994	1994		
Michigan	1996	1976		
Minnesota	1974	1978		
Mississippi	1992	1992		
Missouri	1996	1996		
Montana	1972	1992	2000	2000
Nebraska	1986	1994	2000	2000
Nevada	1992	1988	1992	1994
New Hampshire				
New Jersey	1974	1996		
New Mexico	1994	1992	1990	2000

Table 5.1: Continued

New York	1976	1996		
North Carolina	1996	1984	2000	2000
North Dakota	(n/a)	(n/a)	1998	2004
Ohio	1978	1984	2006	2006
Oklahoma	1996	1996	1992	1992
Oregon	1976	1992	1980	
Pennsylvania	1976	1996		
Rhode Island	1996	1996		
South Carolina	1986	1996		
South Dakota	1996	1996	2004	2006
Tennessee	1972	1996		1994
Texas	1972	1996		1988
Utah	1976	1996	2004	2006
Vermont	1998	1998	2002	2002
Virginia	1996	1996		
Washington	1994	1990	1974	
West Virginia	1984	1992		2002
Wisconsin	1976		2000	2000
Wyoming			1992	2006

Note: North Dakota does not have registration requirements.

Source: Rigby, Elizabeth, and Melanie J Springer. 2011. "Does Electoral Reform Increase (or Decrease) Political Equality?" *Political Research Quarterly* 64 (2): 420–434.

Table 5.2: Unequal Participation and Registration and Voting Reform

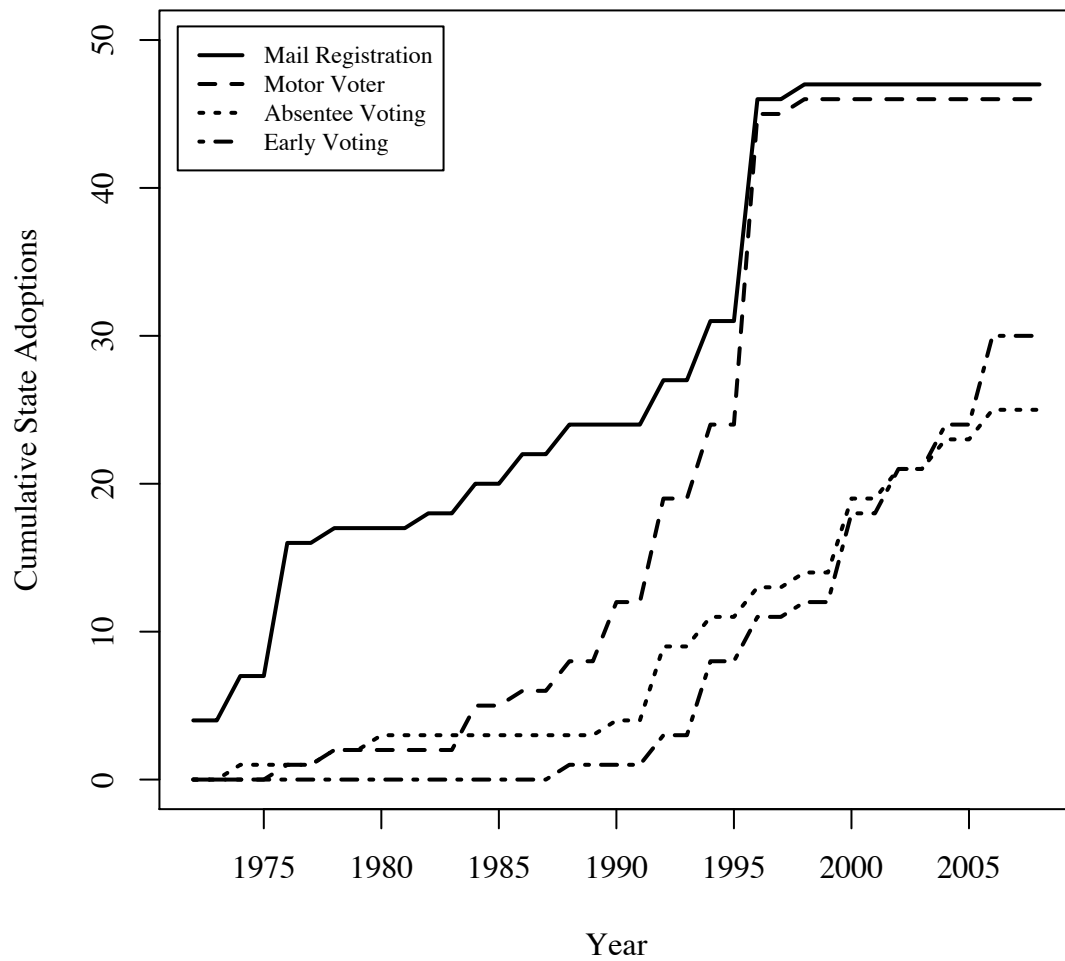
	Registration Reforms (Additive Model)		Registration Reforms (Conditional Model)		Voting Reforms	
	<i>b/(rcse)</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>b/(rcse)</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>b/(rcse)</i>	<i>p</i>
Participation Inequality	-2.411 (1.769)	0.173	1.054 (2.200)	0.632	5.958 (2.507)	0.017
Per Capita Income	-0.067 (0.112)	0.547	-0.075 (0.108)	0.490	-0.039 (0.066)	0.555
Citizen Ideology	0.025 (0.015)	0.098	0.025 (0.015)	0.105	-0.010 (0.026)	0.685
% White	-0.028 (0.013)	0.034	-0.030 (0.013)	0.027	-0.007 (0.039)	0.855
Gov. Ideology	0.031 (0.013)	0.022	0.029 (0.013)	0.030	0.003 (0.019)	0.866
Turnout	-0.074 (0.029)	0.012	-0.079 (0.031)	0.010	0.011 (0.034)	0.747
Legislative Prof.	-2.178 (1.145)	0.057	-2.189 (1.138)	0.054	0.022 (2.220)	0.992
Competition	-0.027 (0.013)	0.045	-0.029 (0.014)	0.042	-0.017 (0.014)	0.240
Initiative Index	0.184 (0.076)	0.015	0.184 (0.077)	0.016	0.181 (0.091)	0.047
% Age 60+	-0.012 (0.064)	0.849	-0.013 (0.064)	0.840	-0.077 (0.074)	0.300
Regional Diffusion	1.928 (0.746)	0.010	1.876 (0.760)	0.014	1.312 (0.799)	0.100
Previous Adoptions	0.384 (0.300)	0.201	0.387 (0.302)	0.201	-0.143 (0.585)	0.807
Pre-NVRA	-1.774 (0.476)	<0.001	0.516 (1.253)	0.681		
Inequality x Pre- NVRA			-6.372 (3.121)	0.041		

Table 5.2: Continued

Time	-0.528 (0.174)	0.002	-0.527 (0.179)	0.003	-0.255 (0.218)	0.242
Time <sup>2</sup>	0.042 (0.010)	<0.001	0.043 (0.011)	<0.001	0.026 (0.013)	0.045
Time <sup>3</sup>	-0.001 (<0.001)	0.000	-0.001 (<0.001)	<0.001	<0.001 (<0.001)	0.031
Constant	4.617 (2.646)	0.081	3.852 (2.662)	0.148	-5.885 (3.757)	0.117
N	1800		1800		3126	
Wald Chi <sup>2</sup>	225.948		223.191		97.683	

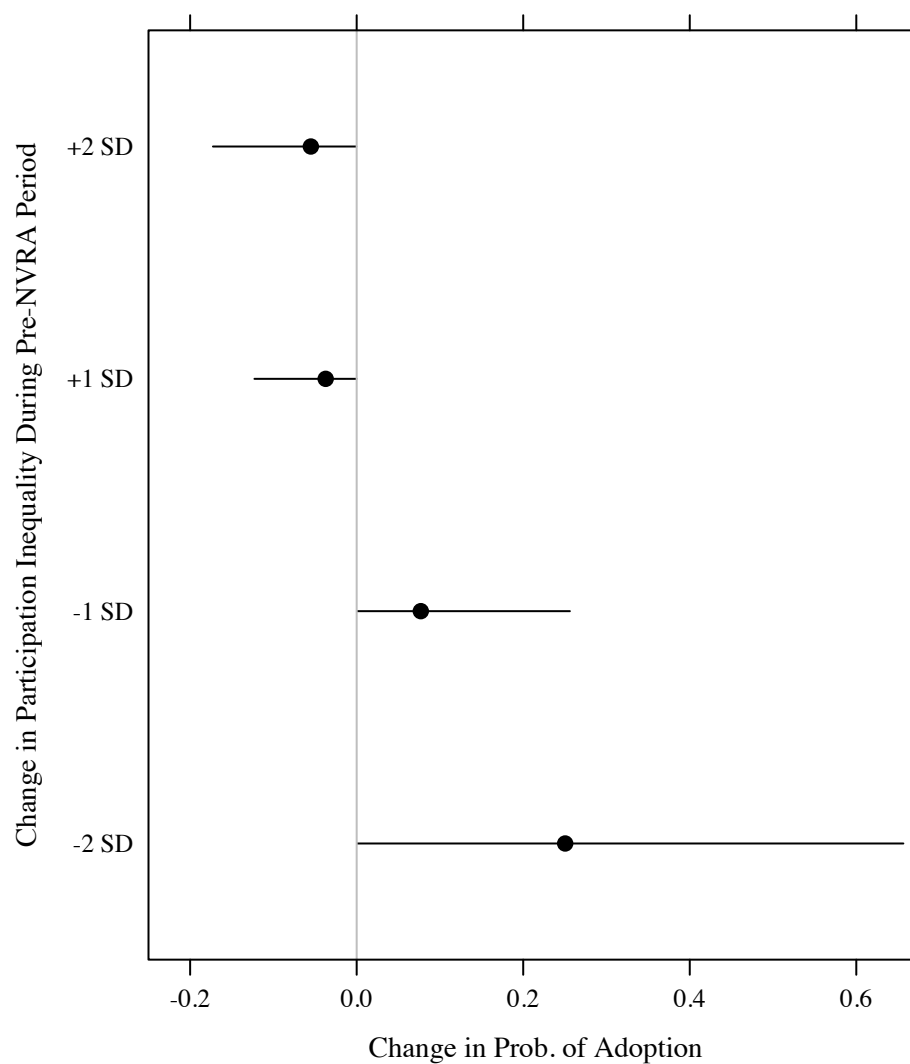
Note: Results from pooled logistic regression; robust clustered standard errors by state in parentheses; the Registration Reforms models analyze the adoption of mail registration and motor voter registration laws, and the Voter Registration model analyzes the adoption of no excuse absentee voting and in-person early voting laws; dummy variables for specific policies are included in all model estimations but are not reported.

Figure 5.1: Cumulative State Adoption of Registration and Voting Reforms Over Time, 1972-2008



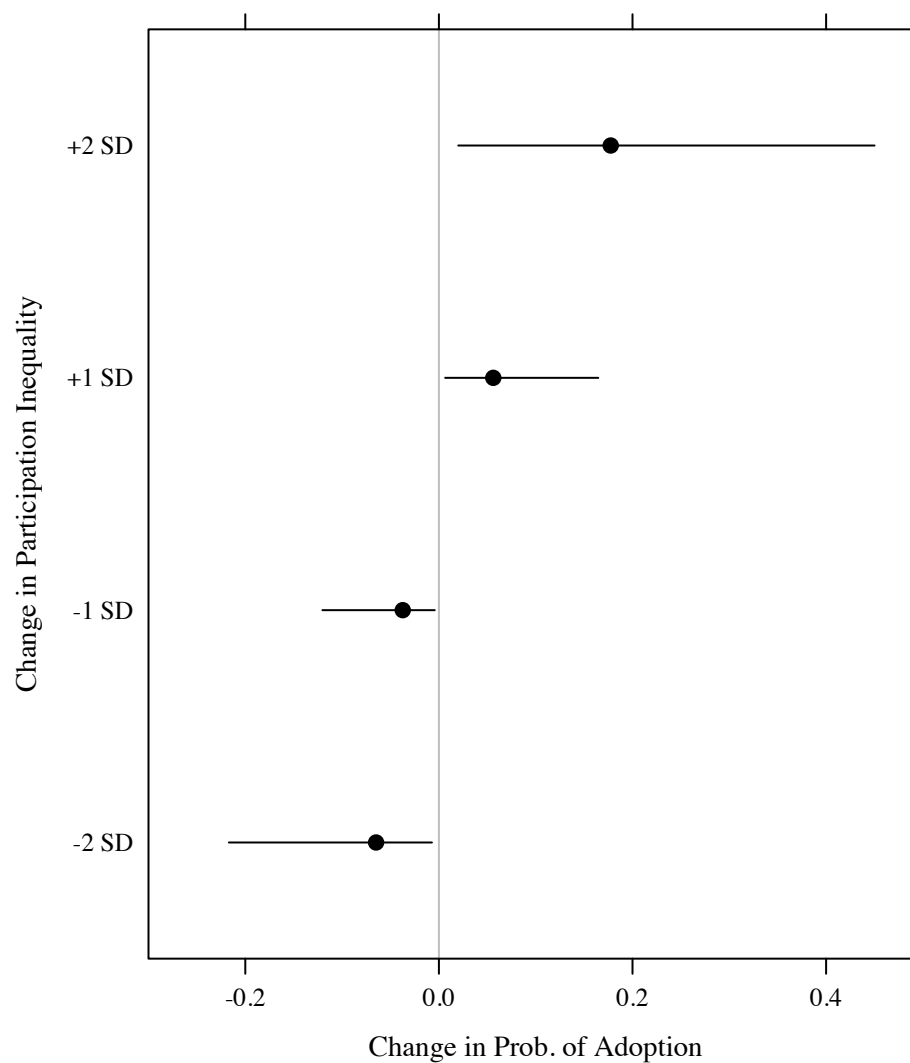
Source: Rigby, Elizabeth, and Melanie J Springer. 2011. "Does Electoral Reform Increase (or Decrease) Political Equality?" *Political Research Quarterly* 64 (2): 420–434.

Figure 5.2: Effect of Participation Inequality (During Pre-NVRA Period) on Registration Reform Adoptions



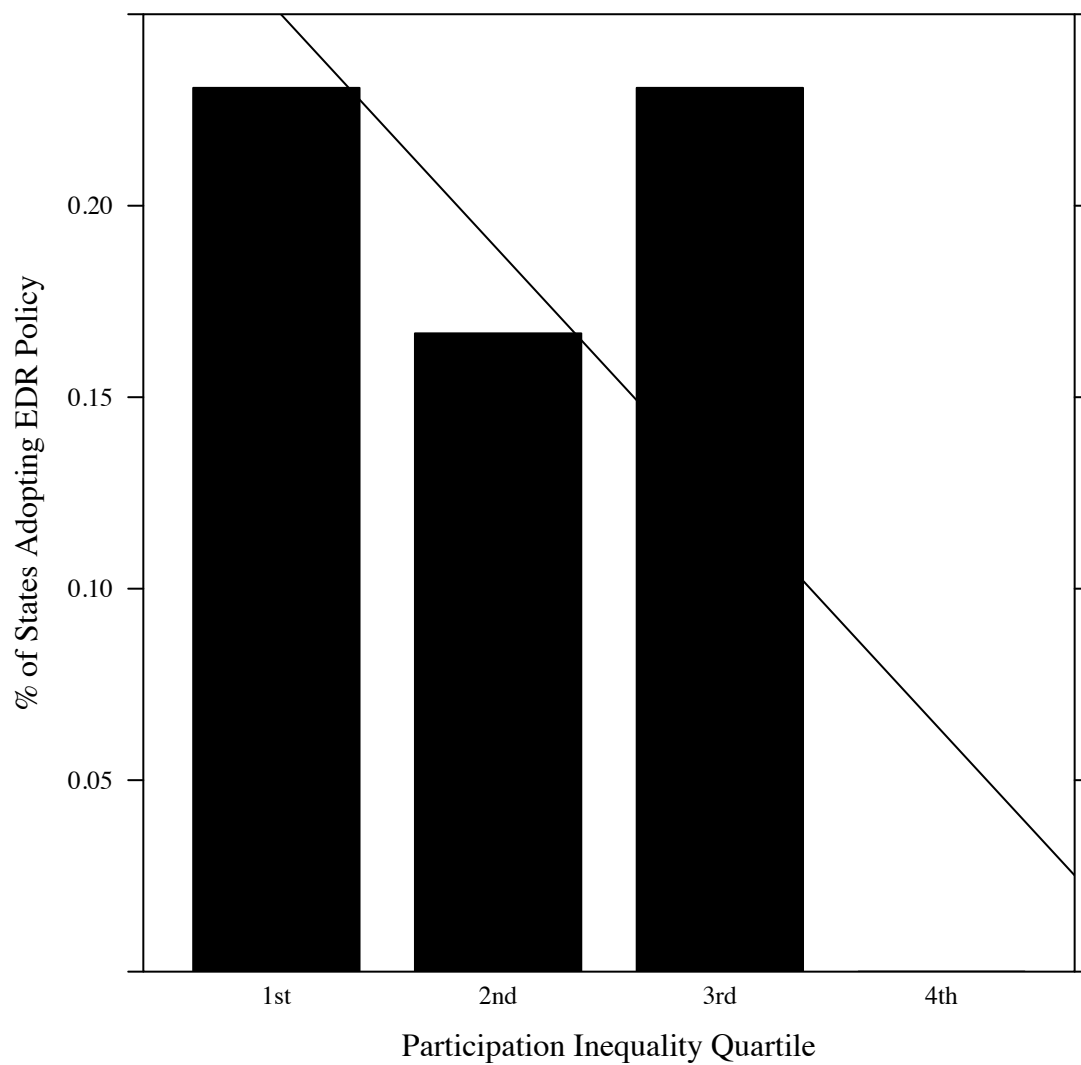
Note: Estimates are based on the results of the “Registration Reforms (Conditional Model)” found in Table 5.2; probabilities were calculated with all other variables held constant; lines represent 95% confidence intervals.

Figure 5.3: Effect of Participation Inequality on Voting Reform Adoptions



Note: Estimates are based on the results of the “Voting Reforms” model found in Table 5.2; probabilities were calculated with all other variables held constant; lines represent 95% confidence intervals.

Figure 5.4: Election Day Registration Adoptions by Participation Inequality Quartiles



## CHAPTER 6

### UNEQUAL PARTICIPATION, STATE POLICYMAKING, AND THE FUTURE OF AMERICAN DEMOCRACY

This dissertation has shown that the composition of the electorate matters. Who participates in American politics has consequences for the political process, particularly when the cleavages between voters and nonvoters are determined by economic status. This specific kind of electoral bias, or participation inequality, is shown to have a substantial influence on public policy in the states. The importance of participation inequality is demonstrated by exploring various aspects of the policy process, as well as a number of policy issues. I show that the effects of inequality on political outcomes are observable not only when looking at the policies adopted in the states, but also when considering the types of issues that are debated among state lawmakers. This agenda setting aspect of policy development—which is typically overlooked by scholars who study inequality—is a central part of the political process. In most cases, an issue must be considered a public problem before it even has a chance to be addressed with policy. Knowing which issues are on the political agenda (and which are left off) provides important information about the priorities of society and government. Measuring the size of state legislative agendas related to issues of low-income individuals, Chapter 3 provided evidence that states with higher levels of participation inequality are less likely to consider policies associated with welfare, Medicaid, and public housing. In other words, policies designed to benefit the disadvantaged compose a much smaller portion of state agendas when the participation rate gap between the rich and poor is large.

Chapters 4 and 5 demonstrated that the kinds of policies adopted by state governments are also shaped by participation inequality. Since greater differences between the turnout rates of high- and low-income groups are expected to affect policies

that are favorable to the poor, Chapter 4 examined the specific state policy adoptions of anti-predatory lending laws (housing), Children's Health Insurance Programs (health care), and minimum wage laws (income equity). These three policies are all designed to protect or benefit the disadvantaged, yet the states vary considerably in the extent to which these policies are implemented (if at all). The analysis, ranging from 1998 to 2010, provides more evidence that participation inequality leads to policy outcomes that are less favorable to the more vulnerable groups in society. Laws designed to protect low-income borrowers from deceptive home lending practices, programs providing health insurance for disadvantaged children, and laws that increase the minimum wage when the value of the federal minimum has decreased to half of what it was in the 1960s are all weaker or not found at all in states with large economic gaps in voter participation.

The previous chapter examined the influence of inequalities in participation on governance policy in the states. Governance policy consists of the rules and laws that regulate political processes. Studying governance policy allows for a better understanding of how and when political institutions are likely to change. This is an important question especially when considering the generally negative view held by elected officials when it comes to changing political institutions. Politicians are often comfortable with the institutional rules in place because they achieve their positions of political power under a set of rules they know and understand. Changing these rules has the potential to change political outcomes, which can create uncertainty for those currently holding political office. Election reforms, a specific type of governance policy, are analyzed in Chapter 5. Registration process reforms provide a particularly interesting reform for studying participation inequalities because they are designed to stimulate new voters. Those with few economic resources are the least likely to vote and the most likely group to be affected by registration reforms. Once again, I find this state policy that is largely beneficial to the disadvantaged is less likely to be adopted in states with high levels of participation inequality.

Overall, the findings of this research show that the economic distinction between voters and nonvoters plays an important role in state politics. As the difference in participation between the wealthy and disadvantaged grows, policies designed to assist those at the lower end of the income distribution are less likely to be discussed and adopted in the states. This not only suggests that participation matters but that, perhaps more importantly, who participates matters. It is the combination of both economic resources and participation that allows greater political voice and access to the political process.

This dissertation is an important addition to the literature on political participation, economic inequality, and public policy. Although many scholars have shown concern for low voter turnout and the differences between voters and nonvoters (e.g., Key 1949; Lijphart 1997; Schattschneider 1960; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995), few have provided direct evidence of the political consequences of participation inequality. In fact, some of the most widely read studies of political participation argue that demographic biases in voter turnout are not likely to create significant policy ramifications (Teixeira 1992; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980). Contrary to these claims, those that have examined how participation bias affects policy outcomes do find that the poor are worse off when economic gaps in voting are large (Avery and Peffley 2005; Fellowes and Rowe 2004; Hill and Leighley 1992; Hill, Leighley, and Hinton-Andersson 1995). All of these studies, however, focus specifically on the influence of participation inequality on cash aid to the poor (i.e., AFDC and TANF programs). While these programs are undoubtedly important for disadvantaged Americans, limiting studies to a single policy only allows for a narrow view of how participation inequality shapes politics. My research is unique in that it explores various facets of the policy process and numerous types of policy that address the needs of the disadvantaged. It expands our understanding of how inequalities in participation influences welfare politics, as well as how inequality shapes state issue agendas and governance policy.

This study not only demonstrates the vast policy consequences of participation inequality, but it also has broad implications for the democratic process. The composition of the electorate matters because the combination of wealth and participation provides access to the political process. Verba, Schlozman, and Brady's (1995) argument that participation is a form of communication between citizens and their elected officials is especially relevant here. When the poor do not participate it is unlikely that their problems, concerns, and priorities are known or understood by lawmakers. In addition to the disadvantaged providing less information to political elites via participation, elected officials have little incentive to pay attention to those that are not politically active. Nonvoters in one election are likely to be nonvoters in future elections, and those who do not take part in elections have little influence over electoral outcomes. As one prominent scholar suggests, "Politicians are not fools; they know who their customers are (Wattenberg 1998, 14)."

This is not a particularly heartening story for those who believe political and economic inequality are important issues. As the results show, participation inequality influences how government addresses issues related society's most vulnerable citizens. Moreover, trends in voter bias suggest most states have experienced growth in participation inequalities over time. The analysis of inequalities in participation presented in Chapter 2 shows the states have seen various trends in participation bias, but a majority of states over a period of three decades have growing disparities in the turnout rates of the rich and poor. This indicates that the poor are likely to become less politically visible if this trend continues, which will potentially lead to even fewer policies in the states designed to assist the disadvantaged.

It is also important to recognize that while this dissertation certainly provides a broader view of the policy consequences of participation bias, a number of other policies not examined here provide protection or assistance to low-income groups. Education and tax policy are just two examples of government programs that are important for

disadvantaged groups and should be studied in the future. Additionally, as I touched on in Chapter 5, economic differences in voter turnout are also likely to influence government policy that is beneficial to the wealthy. A growing body of research suggests the disproportionate influence of economically powerful individuals and organizations has led to public policies that largely benefit the wealthy and are often unfavorable to a majority of Americans (Hacker and Pierson 2010; Mettler 2010). For instance, tax cuts for the rich and stripping power from labor unions are just two policy outcomes related to the unequal influence of the affluent. The American states would be ideal for studying policies largely favorable to the rich, and participation inequality is one factor that can help explain differences in the extent to which these policies are adopted.

Although the implications of this research are somewhat bleak, one promising aspect of the findings presented here is that a number of states are debating and adopting policies that are more favorable to those with fewer economic resources. States with smaller differences in the voter turnout rates of the rich and poor generally have larger portions of their policy agendas devoted to issues related to welfare, Medicaid, and public housing, and are also more likely to adopt policies favorable to the disadvantaged. While the trends in participation inequality are increasing over time for most states, a number of states have experienced constant levels of inequality or even decreasing trends in participation bias. How, then, have some states managed to decrease inequalities in participation or at least prevent inequality from growing?

To understand what factors shape participation inequality, many studies have given attention to registration and voting process reforms. This emphasis on election reform largely stems from research that recognizes the importance of contextual influences on overall rates of voter turnout (e.g., Brown, Jackson, and Wright 1999; Cain, Donovan and Tolbert 1998; Caldeira and Patterson 1982; Cox and Munger 1989; Franklin 1996; Hill and Leighley 1993; Patterson and Caldeira 1983; Powell 1986), which led scholars to ask whether these same influences can increase or decrease class

bias in the electorate. The generally positive relationship between more lenient voting regulations and higher turnout suggested these reforms are also promoting greater participation among the less well off.

Voter registration laws, for example, have been widely studied and found to effect turnout (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980). Given the two-step process of participating in elections (registration followed by voting), the American states and their registration and voting laws have dramatically affected political participation over the past century (e.g. Highton and Wolfinger 1998; Squire, Wolfinger and Glass 1987). Direct evidence of the connection between voting process reforms and the social composition of the electorate, however, has proven to be complicated. In fact, some studies have shown less restrictive voting laws may increase class bias in the electorate. Karp and Banducci (2000) use data from six special elections in Oregon findings that voting by mail increased voter turnout, but only among those groups already pre-disposed to vote. Berinsky, Burns, and Traugott (2001) find results similar to those of Karp and Banducci (2000), concluding that voting by mail reinforces the stratification of higher turnout among the upper class, and nonvoting among the lower class.

Berinsky (2005) provides an explanation for these seemingly contradictory findings by suggesting convenience voting reforms (e.g., voting by mail, early voting, and absentee voting) simply reinforce the behavior of those most likely to vote. These reforms do not lower the costs of voting enough to engage those with few political resources, but instead lower the costs enough for the upper class to vote more consistently. Even registration reforms (e.g., motor vehicle registration) may pose problems similar to those related to voting reforms, in that they do not significantly increase overall turnout (Hanmer 2009). Removing barriers to registration will not lower the costs of voting to the extent necessary to increase the participation of those with fewer political resources (also see Donovan 2007).

This claim, however, has been challenged by several studies suggesting reforms aimed at lowering the restrictiveness of registration laws can create a more representative electorate. Registration reforms differ from convenience voting reforms in that it focuses on the first stage of the voting process (becoming eligible to vote) instead of the last stage (casting a ballot). Jackson, Brown, and Wright (1998) explicitly model the stages concept into their analysis of participation. The authors show registration closing dates closer to the election produce an indirect, positive effect on the representativeness of a state's electorate. More lenient registration laws lead to higher rates of registration, which increases overall levels of turnout and decreases voter biases based on income, education, and age.

In a comprehensive analysis of state participation bias and election reform, Rigby and Springer (2011) provide evidence suggesting a conditional effect may be at play. The study uses both presidential and midterm election data spanning from 1978 to 2008, and examines the influence of both registration and voting convenience-based reforms on class bias (based on wealth) of electorates in all 50 states. The results of the analysis are consistent with the idea that reducing barriers to registration can increase the likelihood of voting for those not already a part of the electoral system (also see Hanmer 2009; Jackson, Brown and Wright 1998). Motor voter registration has a small but significant effect on reducing voter biases, while election day registration (which essentially removes the registration step of the voting process) has a relatively strong influence on turning out lower income voters. Conversely, in-person early voting, a convenience voting reform, led to greater biases in turnout (also see Berinsky 2005). Additionally, these results are dependent on the levels of voter bias prior to the adoption of the reforms. That is, registration reforms are most influential in states that had high electoral bias when the reform was adopted.

It is important to note that most of the research examining the influence of election reforms on participation inequality does not consider the possibility that

participation bias may affect whether the states adopt reforms at all (Rigby and Springer 2011 is the exception). As I show in Chapter 5, participation inequality does have an effect on the adoption of state election reform. This suggests that we should be cautious when interpreting the findings of this previous research. For example, if states with low levels of participation inequality are more likely to adopt registration reforms, then estimates of how much the reforms change turnout inequality are likely to be biased downward. Larger effects of registration reform may be observed if those states with high levels of turnout inequality were to adopt the policies. Rigby and Springer's (2011) finding that registration reform is most effective in states that initially have high levels of participation inequality suggests this is a reasonable concern.

Research examining the causes of voter or participation bias outside the realm of election reform is sparse. One notable study is Hill and Leighley's (1994) analysis of variations in class bias (also defined by turnout rates of the poor versus affluent) across the states in the 1986 midterm election. While the authors do consider the restrictiveness of voter registration laws, their primary concern is uncovering a broader understanding of class bias in the electorate. The study also considers the influence of party competition, party ideology, and aggregate measures of state socioeconomic characteristics on differences in turnout based on income. The findings show state per capita income and ethnic heterogeneity have greater effects on class bias than the observed effects of the elite mobilization variables (also see Hill and Leighley 1996). The results challenge the assumption that factors influencing overall turnout will have similar consequences for the biases found in participation rates. Leighley and Nagler (2007) examine on- and off- year elections to assess the effect of declines in union membership on electoral class bias from 1964 to 2004. The findings suggest that if union membership was as high in 2004 as in 1964, turnout of low and middle income groups would have benefited more than those at the top of the income distribution.

Other scholars have focused on the extent to which political competition influences participation inequality. This research has found that lower income citizens are mobilized to vote when residing in battleground states in presidential elections compared to low-income citizens residing in non-battleground states (Gimpel, Kaufmann, and Pearson-Merkowitz 2007; Lipsitz 2009; Pacheco 2008). Gimpel, Kaufmann, and Pearson-Merkowitz (2007) reveal low income voters residing in battleground states in 2004 are more interested in politics, more likely to be contacted by a political party, and more likely to participate in politics beyond voting than low income voters residing in non-battleground states. Even when controlling for party contacting, lower income voters in battleground states participated in politics more, meaning there is an independent effect of exposure to electoral competition.

If one is convinced that participation inequality is a detriment to democracy, the current literature does provide some direction for alleviating this particular issue. The potential of election reforms to significantly change the composition of the electorate, however, appears to be limited—this seems to be the case even when considering the methodological difficulties associated with these studies. Even if registration reform does decrease participation bias the influence is often found to be modest, which suggests these reforms are not likely to be the answer to voter inequality. It is also important to recognize that voting process reforms have occurred along with the loosening of registration requirements, and nearly all studies have found that voting reforms increase levels of participation inequality.

The Gimpel et al. (2007) study potentially provides the most promising path to reducing participation bias. Finding that political competition is one answer to creating a more equally participatory electorate aligns with a large body of literature that demonstrates the negative effects of uncompetitive elections on citizen participation. Scholars have consistently found that competition, campaigns, and political parties play vital roles in mobilizing voters. For instance, Powell (1986) argues that lack of electoral

competition and weak ties between the parties and citizens are two of the most influential causes of low US turnout. Cox and Munger (1989) show that closer House elections led to higher levels of participation, which the authors attribute to two factors. The first is that more competitive elections created greater elite responses in the form of campaign expenditures. The second is that voters believed their votes were more important because of the closeness of the race. Jackson (1997) finds support for the claim that electoral competition increases the intensity of campaigns, which in turn mobilizes voters. He finds that in mid-term election years, high information environments and excitement from challenger campaigns increases aggregate turnout.

Closely related to political campaigns and competition, lack of party mobilization has also been suspected of decreasing participation. Party identification has been a primary predictor of turnout in virtually every study of voter participation (e.g., Campbell et al. 1960; Lewis-Beck et al. 2008). Stronger partisans are generally more likely to vote than nonpartisans. Rosenstone and Hansen (1993) argue that part of the reason for declines in turnout is the decline in party mobilization. They believe that party mobilization efforts to directly contact citizens declined as campaigns began to focus more on media strategies. This has led to more candidate-centered approaches to campaigning and weaker partisan ties since the 1960s.

While these studies do not directly consider inequalities in participation, they do provide insight into the issue of citizen mobilization and Gimpel et al.'s work suggests these insights should be further examined. It is somewhat surprising that recent research has not taken more interest in political parties and competition when attempting to explain participation bias. Written over 50 years ago, Schattschneider's *Semi-Sovereign People* (1960) argues the most important deficiency of American politics is the overly narrowed scope of conflict where only the socioeconomic elite play the game of politics and define the choices made by the mass public. He suggests expanding the scope of conflict is the only way to create a more inclusive political system that allows those with

fewer resources to influence political outcomes. Schattschneider blames the two major political parties for not overcoming the economic interests that dominate American politics, and calls on the traditional two-party system to expand conflict and provide choices for the American public. Perhaps calls for a more responsible party system should be renewed.

In addition to the need for more research on the causes of unequal participation, our knowledge of the relationship between participation inequality and public policy is still far from complete. While the current dissertation has expanded our understanding of the consequences of unequal participation, a number of opportunities exist for future studies to uncover the complex relationship between participation inequality and policymaking. As discussed above, I have demonstrated that unequal participation affects various aspects of the policy process and different types policy related to the interests of the disadvantaged. More work is needed, however, to learn whether participation inequality influences policymaking that is mostly advantageous to the rich.

If a relationship does exist between unequal participation and policies that benefit the rich, and greater levels of inequality lead to better policies for the wealthy as expected, this finding would have at least two important implications for American politics. First, evidence of this relationship would suggest the effects of participation inequality on policy demonstrated in the previous chapters are modest estimates of how the combination of economic resources and participation influence the political process. Not only does unequal participation make it less likely for states to adopt or even consider policies beneficial to the poor, but unequal participation also leads to policies that reward the affluent. This twofold effect of participation inequality would magnify the significance of unequal participation in shaping public policy.

Following from this first point, demonstrating that unequal participation leads to policies more favorable to the wealthy would also help in explaining the recent growth in income inequality in the United States. Although participation inequality and income

inequality are different concepts and measures of these two concepts are quite different (see Chapter 2), recent research suggests unequal participation may influence income inequality through its effects on public policy (Bartels 2008; Hacker and Pierson 2010). This work argues that a main cause of rising income inequality in recent decades is changes to government policy. If high levels of participation inequality, for instance, make governments less likely to adopt effective minimum wage policy (policy aimed at the disadvantaged) and more likely to cut taxes on capital gains (policy aimed at the advantaged), then it is reasonable to expect that unequal participation also has a role in shaping American income inequality.

Another area of study that future research should address is whether interest group activity moderates the effects of unequal participation on policymaking. Specifically, labor unions are a type of interest group that plays a seemingly important role in advancing policies for lower- and middle-income groups in the US. The analyses presented throughout this dissertation, however, did not provide evidence that state union membership counteracted the negative effects of unequal participation. One potential explanation for these null findings related to union strength is that the policies considered in this dissertation are examined during a relatively recent time period. This is relevant since the composition of labor unions has changed in recent decades, with a large shift from private to public membership and an overall decline in union strength. These changes may have led to less effective labor organizations when considering their ability to influence policy in recent years, which is why the effect of union strength is generally not a significant factor in my analyses. Despite these findings, examining policymaking in earlier years may uncover the importance of union membership in shaping policy for lower-income individuals prior to this change.

Although this study has made a valuable contribution to the measurement of participation inequality, more can certainly be done to improve how we quantify political inequality and expand on the types of participation that are considered when studying

unequal participation. For example, one way to advance the way we think about participation inequality is to explore nonlinearities in the connection between economic status and participation. Similar to recent research on income inequality, scholars may find that important changes in the participation of different economic groups are occurring at the extremes of the income distribution with little changing in participation for those at the middle of the distribution (or vice versa). Additionally, more can be done to determine whether different types of political participation shape policies in different ways. The wealthy, for instance, may have a stronger influence over policymaking than suggested by only measuring unequal voter turnout when considering inequalities in making campaign contributions. Conversely, the negative effects of low levels of turnout by the poor may be attenuated when low-income individuals have strong ties to local community organizations.

Overall, this dissertation has broad implications for inequality, the policy process, and political participation in the American states. It builds on our understanding of how economic and social class influences politics and government action. The study demonstrates that the composition of the politically active significantly affects the policy process. My work also provides insight into the importance of political participation in a democratic society. Many have asked if poor rates of political involvement in elections influence the quality of a democratic political system. This research suggests participation matters, giving us even more reason to care about inequality in voter turnout and the policy process.

## APPENDIX

Table A.1: Variable Description and Coding

Variable Name	Description	Coding	Source
Participation Inequality	Absolute difference in the probability of the rich voting compared to the poor voting	-1 to 1; Higher values indicate more inequality	Current Population Survey voting supplements <sup>a</sup>
% Unemployed	Percentage of population (16 years and older) that is unemployed	0 to 100	Bureau of Labor Statistics <sup>b</sup>
% Uninsured	Percentage of population that does not have health insurance coverage	0 to 100	US Census <sup>c</sup>
Housing Prices	Median house prices (logged)	US dollars	Federal Housing Finance Agency <sup>d</sup>
% Union Membership	Percentage of population that belongs to a labor union	0 to 100	Union Membership and Coverage Database <sup>e</sup>
Poverty Rate	Percentage of population that falls below poverty line	0 to 100	US Census <sup>f</sup>
Income	Per capita income	US dollars	Bureau of Economic Analysis <sup>g</sup>
Ideology	Citizen ideology	Higher values indicate a more liberal citizenry	Berry et al. (1998) <sup>h</sup>
% White	Percentage of population that is white, non-Hispanic	0 to 100	US Census <sup>i</sup>
Turnout	Presidential election turnout rate	0 to 100	Statistical Abstracts <sup>j</sup>

Table A.1: Continued

Gov. Ideology	Government ideology (nominate version)	Higher values indicate a more liberal government	Berry et al. (1998) <sup>h</sup>
Competition	Party competition	Higher values indicate more competition	Ranney (1976)
Legislative Prof.	Legislative professionalism index	Higher values indicate more professional legislatures	Squire (2007)
Initiative Index	Initiative qualification index (reverse coded)	0-7; Higher values indicate initiatives are easier to qualify	Bowler and Donovan (2004)
% Age 60+	Percentage of the population that is 60 years of age or older	0 to 100	US Census <sup>i</sup>
% Uninsured Child	Percentage of children that do not have health insurance coverage	0 to 100	Kids Count <sup>k</sup>

<sup>a</sup> See Chapter 2.

<sup>b</sup> <http://www.bls.gov/cps/>

<sup>c</sup> [http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/hlthins/data/historical/HIB\\_tables.html](http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/hlthins/data/historical/HIB_tables.html)

<sup>d</sup> <http://www.fhfa.gov/Default.aspx?Page=87>

<sup>e</sup> <http://www.unionstats.com/>

<sup>f</sup> <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/poverty/data/historical/people.html>

<sup>g</sup> <http://www.bea.gov/regional/index.htm>

<sup>h</sup> <http://www.bama.ua.edu/~rcfording/stateideology.html>

<sup>i</sup> <http://factfinder2.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/index.xhtml>

<sup>j</sup> <http://www.census.gov/compendia/statab/>

Table A.1: Continued

<sup>k</sup> <http://datacenter.kidscount.org/>

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