



# Perspectives on Unequal Democracy: The Political Economy of the New Gilded Age.

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Should and Can the United States “Spread the Wealth”?  
Reflections on *Unequal Democracy: The Political Economy of the New Gilded Age*, by Larry Bartels (Russell Sage Foundation and Princeton University Press, 2008).

Jennifer Hochschild  
Harvard University  
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In a pre-election debate in October 2008, Senator McCain pointed out several times that Senator Obama had once said that he intended to “spread the wealth” through his proposed tax policies. McCain clearly did not mean this observation to be a compliment or an incentive for voters to prefer his rival; his repetition of the phrase and sarcastic tone of voice conveyed McCain’s conviction that “spreading the wealth” is a goal that most Americans abhor. That conviction is especially striking given that it came during a period of several weeks in which the stock market plummeted, housing foreclosures and the unemployment rate rose, banks denied credit to small businesses, the ex-CEO of the bankrupt Lehman Brothers firm defended being paid hundreds of millions of dollars in recent years, and a story in the AARP newsletter featured several middle class women sleeping in their cars before going to work each day. So, do Americans oppose spreading the wealth? If so why -- do they think that they would lose some of their own wealth, or that those other people whose wealth would be spread around really deserve to keep it, or what?

The outcome of the presidential election in November 2008 suggests that a majority of American voters do not oppose the idea of spreading the wealth, or at least do not oppose it so much that they will vote against a candidate who purportedly endorses such a policy. But it’s hard to find evidence that they support it. Larry Bartels’ stunning new book, *Unequal Democracy*, helps us to

understand the complexities of Americans' views and practices with regard to economic redistribution through its exposition of essential evidence, its historical perspective, and his telling observations and analyses. The book is exemplary throughout in its transparency with regard to the data and Bartels' analytic strategy for using them, in its attention to alternative explanations for a given outcome, and in its balance between not over-reaching and asserting a clear, controversial, important thesis.

Bartels begins by documenting rising income inequality and static or declining class mobility in the United States over the past few decades. He shows that, contrary to most economic analyses of rising inequality, "the most important single influence on the changing U.S. income distribution over the past half century ["may be"] the contrasting policy choices of Democratic and Republican presidents" (p. 30). Since World War II, periods with Democratic presidents have seen less unemployment, more overall economic growth, and greater income growth for the middle class and especially the working poor, than have periods with Republican presidents. And yet, a Republican has won the presidency more often than has a Democrat since 1970, when the rise in income inequality began.

After refuting the claim that this anomaly results from poor voters' preference for conservative social policies over liberal economic policies, Bartels explains it in several ways. The explanations include the fact that voters are myopic and strangely blinkered, that Republican presidents – by luck or skill—are better situated to take advantage of voters' poor eyesight, and campaign spending by the wealthy skews electoral contests. Voters hold egalitarian views in general, many perceive rising inequality and think it is unfair – but nevertheless "genuine allegiance to the ideal of equality may comfortably coexist with fervent support for policies that exacerbate inequality" (pp. 129-30). *Unequal Democracy* shows

why; I propose to leave it to readers to discover the reasons on their own.

Finally, Bartels provides detailed case studies of the huge upwardly redistributive tax cuts of 2001 and 2003, the (temporary) abolition of the estate tax, and the continuing erosion of the minimum wage. Each case analyzes the policy, shows how the public viewed it and why, describes how political elites acted, and ties all of the evidence into broad arguments about the United States' unequal democracy. Each case study is full of evidence, insights, and surprises.

In addition to these important specific analyses, *Unequal Democracy* implicitly or explicitly challenges a wide array of assumptions or assertions within and outside the academy. Bartels argues that:

- Economic inequality matters (compare Richard Fuld and Barbara Harvey, resident of her car [[http://bulletin.aarp.org/yourmoney/personalfinance/articles/no\\_place\\_to\\_call\\_home.html](http://bulletin.aarp.org/yourmoney/personalfinance/articles/no_place_to_call_home.html)]). Political scientists should pay more attention to it; more generally, even the most elite scholars can and should engage with substantive topics and policies that affect peoples' lives. The study of processes or institutions, and the production of more rigorous causal models or more sophisticated methodological innovations need not be our highest academic priority.
- Economic inequality is partly caused by governmental actions. That point may not surprise political scientists but it is largely ignored by economists and sociologists, who frequently speak to each other's disciplines but seldom engage with politics.

- The details of policy choices matter, and they can be analyzed rigorously and theoretically. That point too might seem self-evident to many people, but political scientists have largely eschewed the focused study of substantive policies in favor of more “important,” “generalizable,” or “theoretical” subjects.
- Whether Democrats or Republicans control the federal government affects the level and trajectory of economic inequality. That point will not surprise party loyalists, but it is disputed by radicals of all types, proponents of third parties, and (implicitly) citizens who eschew voting because they think it makes no difference which party wins.
- Low-income Americans have not given up class voting for the sake of culture wars; arguably the well-off are less likely to vote their economic interests than are the badly-off. That point will not surprise party operatives, but it is not well recognized by many elites who fear that working-class whites are snookered into supporting the Republican party because of racism, nativism, or religious conservatism.
- The median voter theorem is wrong, at least for important economic policies of the past decade. That point directly challenges a lot of literature within political science that is arguably too complacent about the workings of the United States’ supposed democracy. Public opinion does little to shape economic or tax policies, even when the policies involve trillions of dollars and affect almost all Americans’ lives. (I would add the same point with regard to other issues – the public is more conservative than American policies on immigration and teaching creationism, but more liberal than policies on gun control and some forms of regulation).

- The divide between behavioralism and institutionalism within the Americanist wing of political science is silly and unproductive (my words, not Bartels'). The impact of public opinion depends largely on its relationship to institutional practice and change; the value of institutions in a purported democracy depends largely on their responsiveness to public preferences.
- On average, citizens with more political knowledge do not have more coherent or sensible policy views, given their expressed interests, than do citizens with less political knowledge. Extrapolating, one might argue that having a more generally knowledgeable citizenry or teaching people more about policy choices that confront the nation will not generate better or more responsive outcomes. That conclusion violates a key assumption of democratic theory and the rhetoric of most news media and politicians – as well as challenging the bedrock motivation of those of us who teach politics for a living.
- Interest groups have little demonstrable impact on at least some important policies, including tax policy. That conclusion will surprise the author of *The Politics of Gucci Gulch*, and the many writers who have claimed to trace the financial and informational influence of interest groups on particular members of Congress. Members of Congress may be gratified by this argument, but not by the one that immediately follows it: the real driver of many policy choices is “elite ideology.”

In short, Bartels is not only making a substantive argument about nothing less than the nature of the American polity and economy, but he is also challenging political scientists on a number of fronts that are more parochial but just as important within the discipline. He may not always succeed – if public opinion doesn't matter, why

does he devote several chapters to it? Would the analysis be different if Bartels or another author had chosen three different cases to examine? Just how do campaign contributions create lopsided electoral outcomes? – but the book is never less than provocative and is often revelatory.

Let me return to the substantive issues in *Unequal Democracy* with which this essay started. Does this book – in conjunction with other recent works such as Jacob Hacker’s *The Great Risk Shift*, Lawrence Jacobs and Theda Skocpol’s edited *Inequality and American Democracy*, Nolan McCarty et al.’s *Polarized America*, and Pablo Beramendi and Christopher Anderson’s *Democracy, Inequality, and Representation*, among others – signal a shift in scholars’ attention to the central axes of inequality? In several social sciences, concerns about race and gender have totally swamped concerns about class over the past few decades. (That has been less evident in political science, if only because most members of the most prominent departments have generally ignored all elements of what some have called the “holy trinity” of race, class, and gender.) But the wheel of the issue attention cycle may be turning; as Wall Street melts and Main Street loses its home, perhaps students will once again want to read Theodore Roosevelt’s denunciation of “malefactors of great wealth” and faculty will once again teach Karl Marx and John Gaventa.

Bartels is an unlikely guide back to the study of class politics; he has been an “unusually apolitical political scientist. (The last time I voted was in 1984, ... for Ronald Reagan.)” (p. ix). But whether lured by funding from the Russell Sage Foundation or simple concern about the trajectory of American politics in the 1990s, Bartels took up the vexed question of the relationships between presumed political equality and demonstrable economic

inequality.\* If he and the authors mentioned above are bellwethers, we may now be in the promising situation of increasing attention by political scientists to the politics of economic inequality just when American voters are turning away from economic conservatism and toward greater political liberalism and economic redistribution (“spreading the wealth”).

It seems to be easier to focus on only one axis of the holy trinity of race, class, and gender rather than several. Bartels never mentions gender and discusses race only once, briefly. Verba, Schlozman, and Brady found race to be unimportant as an explanation for unequal political influence in *Voice and Equality*, and gender mattered relatively little (although they went on to write a book on gender and politics, with Nancy Burns). Hacker pays some attention to gender but almost none to race; McCarty et al. focus some on race and a lot of immigration, but give little notice to gender. Conversely, most scholars of racial politics in the United States argue that class matters little in identity or vote choice; few attend to gender concerns. And scholars of gender or sexuality engage in furious internecine debates about how much attention they do and should pay to racial divides, with an occasional glance at economic divisions.

Perhaps analysts’ newly revived focus on class should do more to address the intersection of two or more axes of inequality rather than allowing one to predominate. This is hardly a new point. Alberto Alesina and Edward Glaeser point to racial division as a key explanation for the United States’ anemic welfare state in *Fighting Poverty in the US and Europe*; Ira Katznelson, Suzanne Mettler, Claudine Gay, Ange-Marie Hancock, and Rodney Hero all make the interaction of race or gender and class the centerpiece of their work. In a year in which a woman almost became a

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\* Truth in advertising: while I was on RSF’s Board of Trustees, I voted several times to support Bartels and his colleagues in the Social Dimensions of Inequality project.



presidential candidate, and at a moment when a man understood to be black has just been elected president, it becomes all the more urgent for political scientists to analyze the multiple dimensions along which our democracy is becoming more, or less, unequal. For example, I predict that the divide between working class and affluent blacks (especially women) on the one hand, and deeply poor blacks (especially men) on the other hand, will grow worse, even as racial inequality overall is lessening. We can only hope that Larry Bartels will turn his extraordinary intelligence and analytic sophistication toward illuminating the politics of intersectional inequality in the same way that he has illuminated the politics of economic inequality.