Upward Representation Bias: 
How Voters Sustain Political Inequality*

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Abstract

Inequality in representation is linked to inequality in participation, where social groups with low turnout levels in elections tend to be underrepresented in decision-making bodies. Equality in participation has thus rightfully been identified in the literature as a pivotal concern to achieve equality in representation. We show here, however, that equal participation is an insufficient condition due to what we label as the upward representation bias: citizens of lower socioeconomic status tend to want politicians of higher socioeconomic status, even if the citizens know their political views will be less represented. We demonstrate this phenomenon using a candidate choice experiment fielded in probability-based surveys in France, Germany, Iceland, The Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden (N=17,964). This type of voter bias reinforces existing inequalities, even under equal participation.

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