

Upward Representation Bias: How Voters Sustain Political Inequality*

Sveinung Arnesen,[†] Dominik Duell,[‡] Mikael Poul Johannesson,[§] Yvette Peters[¶]

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.

*The authors are listed in alphabetical order. This version: July 18, 2019. This research is partially funded by the Research Council of Norway (NFR) under the project "Can Fair Decision-Making Procedures Increase the Legitimacy of Democracies?" (project no. 262986). Yvette Peters would like to acknowledge support from the Trond Mohn Foundation (grant no: 811309). We also gratefully acknowledge support from the 2017 EIPS collaboration between European probability-based online survey panels, and would like to express our sincere gratitude to the L'étude longitudinale par internet pour les sciences sociales (Sciences Po), the German Internet Panel (University of Mannheim), the Social Science Research Institute Panel (University of Reykjavik), the Longitudinal Internet Studies for the Social Sciences (CentERdata), the Norwegian Citizen Panel (University of Bergen), and the Swedish Citizen Panel (University of Gothenburg) for fielding the experiment.

[†]NORCE Norwegian Research Centre. Email: sveinung.arnesen@uib.no

[‡]University of Essex. Email: dominik.duell@essex.ac.uk

[§]University of Bergen. Email: mikael.johannesson@uib.no

[¶]University of Bergen. Email: yvette.peters@uib.no