# THE POLITICS OF INEQUALITY

**Edited by** David Pettinicchio

RESEARCH IN
POLITICAL SOCIOLOGY

**VOLUME 28**

# THE POLITICS OF INEQUALITY

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RESEARCH IN POLITICAL SOCIOLOGY VOLUME 28

# THE POLITICS OF INEQUALITY

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# ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS

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parties on policy outcomes. In addition, she works on the impact of COVID-19 policies on collective action and social inequalities in Turkey and Brazil. Her articles have appeared in *Mobilization*, *Current Sociology*, *Social Media + Society*, *Sociology Compass*, and *Journal of Democracy*.

**Jacquelien van Stekelenburg** holds a Chair on Social Change and Conflict at the Sociology Department of the VU University Amsterdam. Her research interests focus on moderate and radical protest. With a background in social psychology, she combines a social psychological approach with sociological insights. She conducted an international comparative study on street demonstrations with Klandermans (VU University Amsterdam) and Walgrave (Antwerpen University) funded by the European-Science-Foundation entitled *Caught in the Act of Protest: Contextualized Contestation* and a study on emerging networks and feelings of belonging funded by the Dutch Royal Academy of Science entitled *The evolution of collective action in emerging neighbourhoods*. Currently she is involved in *Determinants of 'Mobilisation' at Home and Abroad: Analysing the Micro-Foundations of Out-Migration & Mass Protest.*

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# FOREWORD

When I proposed the theme "Politics of Inequality," we were living in very different times. Nevertheless, the COVID-19 pandemic – an exogenous shock to structures and systems – has shined light on extant disadvantages and inequalities as well as cracks and fault lines in policies meant to mitigate inequality.

I cannot think of a better time to talk about the cultural and institutional dimensions of inequality – especially the interplay between these arrangements that perpetuate unequal outcomes in a variety of domains – from work, to education, to health, to climate change, to criminal justice. Equally important to political sociologists is how inequality is challenged via both institutional and extrainstitutional means. Inherent in this volume are recurring subthemes of power, elites, agenda setting, neoliberalism, capitalism, collective action and activism. Contributors to *The Politics of Inequality* address core issues and concerns in political sociology using a variety of theoretical frameworks and methodological tools.

The volume begins with a discussion about how issues of inequality make it onto the policy agenda. Keith Bentele's chapter directly engages with how Democratic and Republican Party politics coupled with the rise of the Occupy Wall Street movement shaped the politics of inequality. Specifically, he examines how antiinequality positions were woven into mainstream Democratic partisan identity. Similarly, Joshua Basseches and co-authors' piece analyzes the political struggles in California when it comes to climate change, particularly the interplay between policymakers, interest groups, activists, and the business community. They show how California became a "climate change leader" by adopting an approach that relies heavily on market-oriented, neoliberal logics.

The next section of the volume focuses on the politics of welfare state retrenchment – an area that has received considerable attention by sociologists and political scientists over the years. Agnes Blome analyzes the role of public attitudes, especially polarization, on the timing and differing approaches to welfare state reforms in France and Germany. Didem Türkoğlu investigates a specific case of welfare state retrenchment: university tuition. Türkoğlu shows how media in Turkey and Germany covered protests that led right-wing governments in both countries to ultimately abandon their efforts in implementing tuition. Marco Brydolf-Horwitz and Katherine Beckett turn to the interconnected ways in which welfare and punishment serve to govern poor and marginalized peoples. They suggest a continuum of state management where marginalized peoples are subjected to varying degrees of support, surveillance, and sanction.

The third section expands on the ways in which inequality affects already vulnerable and marginalized groups. Julisa McCoy, Jessica Moronez, Evelyn Pruneda, and Ellen Reese use an intersectional feminist lens to examine the impacts of neoliberal policy trends in the United States when it comes to family planning, public infrastructure, and criminal justice particularly on women of color. Ravi Perry and Aaron Camp shed light on the intersections of race, sexual identity, and health status in shaping inequalities both within and outside of the LGBTQ community. Perry and Camp point to how racism, social and political exclusion, and barriers in accessing health care further marginalize HIV+ Black MSM in the Southern United States. Dana Moss sheds light on how diaspora mobilization facilitates immigrant voice and visibility especially in a context of "a war against immigrants and refugees" in democratic countries worldwide. More specifically, Moss focuses on different approaches between Syrian and Yemeni diaspora mobilization and their impact on host-country discrimination.

Expanding on the theme of collective action and mobilization, the volume concludes with a discussion of the ways in which everyday citizens challenge inequality. In "Occupying Against Inequality," Jacquelien van Stekelenburg and Teodora Gaidyte compare Occupy protests with other contemporaneous anti-austerity protests. Although protests in both movements targeted stark inequality following the financial meltdown, they note key differences among them, that Occupiers were much less involved in formal organizations and more dissatisfied with democracy. Eric Blanc and Barry Eidlin use the 2018 teachers' strike wave to pinpoint mechanisms associated with how unions shape moral economies. As they demonstrate, strikes helped reshape individuals' understandings of educational and economic inequality. In their chapter, Thomas Maher and Jennifer Earl investigate age inequality in political participation and the role generalized expectations that youth are "not old enough" to engage politically have on activism. Concluding the volume, John Markoff, Hillary Lazar, and Jackie Smith examine inequalities within democratic movements and how activist disappointments lead to efforts to change movement organizations. They focus specifically on transnational activism that links social justice with environmental concerns and the Occupy Movement.

David Pettinicchio

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to, above all, acknowledge the tremendous work of our authors who developed fantastic manuscripts and excellent contributions to political sociology in the midst of a global pandemic. I also want to thank our many reviewers who provided thoughtful and insightful comments on each manuscript, as well as members of the Research in Political Sociology editorial board. I want to thank Barbara Wejnert for first, agreeing that the politics of inequality is an important topic to address in the series and second, for providing guidance on the editorial process along the way. Finally, I want to thank the editorial team at Emerald for their help throughout the process and especially in finalizing the volume.

David Pettinicchio

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# PART 1

# MAKING INEQUALITY PART OF THE POLITICAL AND POLICY AGENDA

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# HOW DID INEQUALITY GAIN SUCH PROMINENCE ON THE DEMOCRATIC PARTY AGENDA?

Keith Gunnar Bentele

## ABSTRACT

*In recent years there has been a dramatic expansion in both the number and scope of policy proposals explicitly intended to reduce inequality proffered by policymakers in the Democratic Party. In the following, it is argued that this state of affairs is the result of a complex series of developments triggered by the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) protests. OWS dramatically enhanced both the salience and the politicization of economic inequality. These developments altered the strategies of elites and organizations within the institutional left and advantaged elite movement allies within the Democratic Party. In combination, these indirect and elite-mediated responses resulted in antiinequality positions becoming integrated into both the partisan identity and the platform of the Democratic Party. Despite the Occupy movement being relatively short-lived and explicitly eschewing reliance on institutional politics, it nonetheless had a significant impact on conventional politics. By significantly shifting the political discourse around the issue of inequality, the movement reshaped the political landscape in a manner that created new opportunities and openings for political actors. As organizations within the Democratic Party's coalition increasingly adopted antiinequality messaging this both pressured and incentivized establishment Democrats to fully embrace an antiinequality agenda. This account is consistent with a theory of political parties in which the key actors are activists and interest groups, not party leaders, and social movement research that suggests that movements are often more influential in the earliest stages of the policymaking process.*

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> Democrats believe that today's extreme levels of income and wealth inequality are bad for our people, bad for our businesses, and bad for our economy. Our country depends on a thriving middle class to drive economic growth, but the middle class is shrinking. Meanwhile, the top one-tenth of one percent of Americans now own almost as much wealth as the bottom 90 percent combined. These trends create problems beyond insulting our sense of basic fairness. Social mobility is far lower than most believe it to be. Children who are born to families in the lowest fifth of earnings are more than 10 times more likely to remain there as adults than they are to earn as much as those in the top fifth. Unless we invest in building a level playing field, we all lose – 2016 Democratic Party Platform.

There have been dramatic changes in both the scope and aggressiveness with which prominent politicians in the Democratic Party have been addressing the issue of economic inequality in recent years. The political magnitude of this development is captured well in the lead to this article on the 2020 Democratic Presidential primary candidates' plans to reduce inequality:

> White House hopefuls have been condemning the maldistribution of America's income and wealth with an intensity – and a specificity – that would have been unimaginable just a few years ago. And the rich are squirming. They see candidates proposing unprecedented taxes on their assets and even questioning their right to exist. Perhaps most worrying, this time moderates aren't exactly rushing to their defense. (Pizzigati, 2019, p. 2)

This article notes that the majority of the front-runners in the Democratic primary have proposals to reduce inequality and tax the wealthy that are on a scale exponentially larger than the most ambitious of such proposals in recent decades. For example, the wealth taxes proposed by Senators Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren are roughly 20 times larger than a wealth tax approach proposed by Economist Edward Wolff in 1995 (Pizzigati, 2019). The dramatic expansion of the scope of wealth tax proposals is an impressive shift, especially given that until just recently such proposals have been considered largely outside of the mainstream policy consensus within the Democratic Party.

This discussion of wealth taxes constitutes the leading edge of much deeper and broader changes in both the scope and tone of the political discourse regarding economic inequality within the Democratic Party. The proposals of the 2020 Democratic candidates and the 2016 Democratic Party Platform are noteworthy for the incredible diversity of specific policies proposed with the explicit intention of reducing inequality. This development is evident in the amount of attention paid to economic inequality and related issues in the Democratic Party Platform.

Fig. 1 presents the proportions of the total word count in the 2008, 2012, and 2016 Democratic Party platforms dedicated to different specific topics (Democratic National Convention, 2008, 2012, 2016).[1] The category of "General Economic Inequality" captures any explicit discussion of inequality in wealth or incomes or any discussion of policies that would either exacerbate or reduce economic inequality that mention such impacts. Between the 2008 and 2016

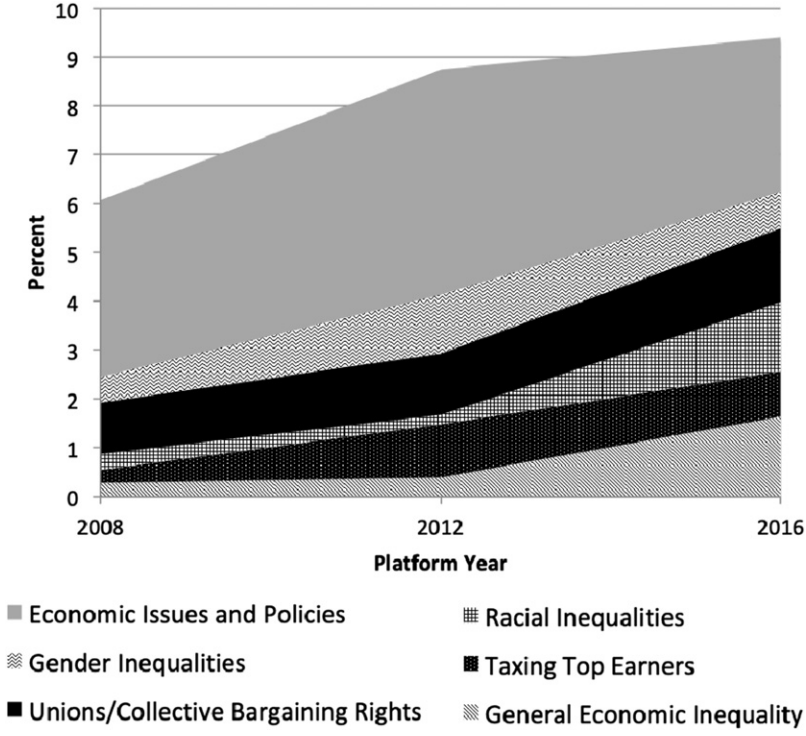


*Fig. 1.* Percent of Total Word Count of Democratic Party Platforms Dedicated to Various Topics.

platforms, the proportion of text dedicated to the discussion of economic inequality increased nearly sixfold, comprising roughly 1.6% of the total word count of the platform in 2016. Another category, "Taxing Top Earners," was created to capture any discussion of raising taxes on top earners or functionally similar policies such as closing loopholes in the tax code utilized by the wealthy. Discussion of this specific issue of increasing taxes on the wealthy more than quadruples between the 2008 and 2012 platforms. And this proportion of attention to this category of policies holds steady into 2016 at roughly 1% of the total word count of the document.

What is not captured in such figures is a qualitative shift in tone in the 2016 platform. The few mentions of inequality in the 2012 platform are largely couched in critiques of Republican approaches to economic policy, whereas in the 2016 platform economic inequality is presented as unfair in and of itself with connections drawn to multiple negative consequences of rising inequality. Further, the language used in the 2016 platform, such as "income and wealth inequality are bad for our people, bad for our businesses, and bad for our economy" is substantially more moralistic and aggressive. By 2016, it

appears that the Democratic Party has clearly abandoned caution in regards to discussing economic inequality straight on and has fully embraced anti-inequality positions. Further, increased taxation of the wealthy has not just become a prominent policy plank on the agenda but has become enmeshed in a broader array of policy proposals as the primary source of revenue for those new efforts.

## THE REBIRTH OF ECONOMIC INEQUALITY AS A POLITICAL ISSUE

Despite the fact that income inequality and the concentration of wealth have been increasing consistently since at least the late-1970s, by many metrics public concern about inequality has been both low and quite stable over time. A 2019 Gallup study on inequality as a voter concern reports that in response to the question "What is the most important problem facing the country today?":

> …[t]he average number of mentions our coders put into the "gap between rich and poor" category since 2001 has been only 1.5%. Between 0% and 2% of Americans have mentioned inequality as the nation's top problem across the seven months of 2019 so far. Certainly this is not a significant top-of-mind concern for Americans and no more of a concern now than it has been in the past. (Newport, 2019, p. 1)

This same article opens by noting the contrast between the focus on economic inequality among Democratic presidential candidates and the lack of evidence that inequality has become a more pressing concern for Americans. So what then explains the focus on inequality among the Democratic Party establishment and candidates? Why has one of the two major political parties so fully embraced an antiinequality agenda?

This current state of affairs is a result of a complex series of developments triggered by the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) protests. But how can such a strong influence on a party platform in 2016 be attributed to a relatively short-lived social movement that was widely referred to in the past tense by 2013? Further, how could such an impact result from a movement that largely eschewed and explicitly critiqued reliance on traditional institutional politics? In a nutshell, the account proposed here is that OWS dramatically enhanced both the salience and the politicization of the issue of inequality. These developments altered the strategies of elites and organizations within the "institutional left" and advantaged elite movement allies within the Democratic Party. In combination, these indirect and elite-mediated responses resulted in antiinequality positions becoming integrated into both the partisan identity and the platform of the Democratic Party. And while the political conditions necessary for Democrats to *actually enact* substantive policy changes to reduce inequality have not yet emerged, getting the issue on the agenda is a critical first step. As Peters (1999, p. 45) notes in his classic text on American public policy, "[a]genda setting is crucial, for if an issue cannot be placed on the agenda, it cannot be considered and nothing will happen."

## SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND POLITICAL PARTIES

Picco (2016) argues that the nature and character of interactions between social movements and political parties are an undertheorized and understudied area of social movement research. He views this as curious given that a simple and largely unchallenged proposition made in classic work by Gamson (1975) is that political institutions will mediate social movement outcomes. Given the key role of political parties in modern democracies, in terms of both representation and policymaking, they often, "constitute a fundamental juncture in the chain of social movement political outcomes" (Piccio, 2016, p. 267). Consequently, the extent to which a social movement has an impact on a political party is often critical to the achievement of political goals. As such, he proposes three conditions that are likely to shape the character of social movement–party interactions: (1) party electoral vulnerability, (2) the cumulative involvement of party members in social movement activities, and (3) the affinity between the partisan identity and the social movement's goals. Schlozman (2015), in his sweeping work examining interactions between political parties and social movements over the long course of American history, argues that mutually beneficial party–movement alliances form when these affiliations are anchored by organized groups. The leaders of these groups are able to operate within and outside of the political party itself to advance both the competitiveness of the party and the goals of their own organizations (Schlozman, 2015). In order for these relationships to work, party elites must agree to cooperate with these affiliated groups and advance their priorities, which Schlozman (2015) argues they are only likely to do for the benefit of electoral success. Groups that are able to deliver more in terms of party support wield more influence in internal party decisions and are more likely to be able to effect substantive policy changes.

This account is consistent with, and fits neatly within, broader work challenging the dominant theorizing about political parties in which election-minded politicians are the key actors. Bawn et al. (2012) argue that the central drivers of party agendas and nominations are coalitions of interest groups and activists that identify and advocate for mutually acceptable policies and candidates. This is a distinct contrast to canonical work such as Carmines and Stimson's (1989) model in which changes in party positions are viewed as a consequence of party elites testing different issues in pursuit of attracting voters. For example, Bawn et al. (2012) argue that the embrace of the issue of civil rights by the Democratic Party in the 1960s was a product of decades of pressure by organizations that comprised the core of the party's coalition. In their account, advocacy and support for civil rights began with progressive intellectuals and activists in the party and then spread among progressive policy organizations and especially unions. From this perspective, the adoption of liberal positions on civil rights by President Johnson and other Democratic Party elites in 1964 is, "better understood as responses to deeply rooted forces within their parties than as free and independent decisions by first movers in a sequence" (Feinstein & Schickler, 2008, p. 18).

## THE ENDURING IMPACTS OF THE OCCUPY MOVEMENT

The OWS protests and various elements of the broader Occupy movement are frequently identified by both political commentators and social movement scholars as central to the dramatic increase in the salience of income and wealth inequality as political issues (Blow, 2013; Gaby & Caren, 2016; vanden Heuvel, 2012; Malone & Fredericks, 2012). The most straightforward impact was to dramatically increase the volume of media attention to the issue of economic inequality. The number of newspaper articles mentioning inequality or income inequality spiked sharply following the beginning of the protests in September of 2011 (Gaby & Caren, 2016). This can be seen clearly in Fig. 2 which contains the monthly count of articles in newspapers, journals, and magazines, as well as press releases and news transcripts containing the phrase "income inequality" from January 2004 to January 2020 based on searches using Nexis Uni.[2]

Media attention is a powerful force in and of itself. Hilgartner and Bosk's (1988) classic work on the social construction of social problems argued that the emergence of an issue as a social problem within public arenas is the result of that issue successfully outcompeting a limitless number of other issues of concern to different stakeholders. Increased media attention to an issue has the potential to increase the visibility of an issue with the public and may facilitate the entry of that issue into broader political agendas (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; Peters, 1999). However, this is not a forgone conclusion, and often issues experience a rapid "issue attention cycle" in which issues rise and then fall as matters of public concern regardless of whether the underlying issue itself is addressed in any manner (e.g. shark attacks or "killer" bees) (Peters, 1999, p. 46). As Fig. 2 makes clear, the issue of inequality did not fade from the public eye as the years passed after the Occupy encampments were dispersed. Rather, despite the somewhat short-lived nature of the Occupy movement itself, the issue of inequality continued to gain traction as a political issue and reached "celebrity" status in the words of Hilgartner and Bosk (1988, p. 57) becoming one of the "dominant topics of political and social discourse."

## A DISCURSIVE ERUPTION

Gaby and Caren (2016) make the case that OWS had profound long-term discursive consequences for the issue of inequality. In addition to increasing overall media attention to inequality, they argue that OWS shifted the focus of inequality coverage toward specific issues of interest to movement participants, especially the minimum wage. While increasingly difficult to appreciate with the passage of time, Malone and Fredericks (2012) remind us that this increase in attention to inequality constituted a dramatic redirection of the mainstream public discourse which had previously been dominated by debate over the federal deficit and government spending following the 2010 midterms and the partisan 2011 debt ceiling standoff. Further, Gaby and Caren (2016) point to the fact that inequality emerged as a prominent theme in coverage of election contests post-