

**Article: “Editor's Note—Let them Eat Beignets: Inequality and American Democracy”**

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# Editor's Note—Let them Eat Beignets: Inequality and American Democracy

There was and continues to be nothing easy about being poor in the Big Easy, or anywhere else in America for that matter. The callous or incompetent handling of the evacuation of the poor from New Orleans smacked of Marie Antoinette's concern for the hungry of Paris, and underscored both the existence and consequence of income inequality in America.

In 2001, the American Political Science Association (APSA) initiated a Task Force on Inequality and American Democracy, chaired by Lawrence Jacobs and then-APSA President Theda Skocpol. The product of their two-year investigation is available on the APSA web site ([www.apsanet.org/section\\_256.cfm](http://www.apsanet.org/section_256.cfm)), was discussed in *Perspectives on Politics* in December 2004, and was published in 2005 in book form by the Russell Sage Foundation under the title, *Inequality and American Democracy*.

Since the Task Force's inception, the subject of income inequality and its consequences for social and political life has continued to receive

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scholarly attention, and has been taken up by the public media as well. The *Los Angeles Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and the *New York Times* have each recently

published series on the growing economic gap between America's rich and poor.

Attention often begets criticism, and the Task Force report is no exception. In this issue of *PS*, the authors of the Task Force report respond to a collection of critiques and comments on their work. Some criticism is mild, focusing on what could be added to the report to make it a fuller analysis. Other criticism takes exception to the report's observations, conclusions, and perceived ideological message. Andrea Brandolini and Timothy Smeeding set the stage for the interchange by examining patterns of inequality in Western democracies. Lawrence Jacobs and Theda Skocpol then discuss the creation, scope of work, and achievements of the Task Force on Inequality and American Democracy. The essays that follow alternate between a commentator's response to the report (Robert Weissberg, Frances Fox Piven, and Stephen Bennett) and a reply from a Task Force member (Larry Bartels, Jacob Hacker, and Kay Schlozman). The discussion concludes with Steve Macedo and Christopher Karpowitz's argument in favor of expanding the scope of investigations into economic and political inequality. I believe *PS* readers will find the exchanges provocative.

I thank all of the contributors to this symposium for their willingness to take part in the project even in the face of exceptionally unfor- giving deadlines.

The Task Force Report on Inequality and American Democracy consists of three major parts:

- 1) "American Democracy in an Age of Rising Inequality" is relatively short and written in a clear and forceful manner intended to provoke interest and debate. This reflects the interest of the Council, Association, and profession in expanding the public presence of political science in the broader debates on American and international politics. This report can be found at [www.apsanet.org/imgtest/taskforcereport.pdf](http://www.apsanet.org/imgtest/taskforcereport.pdf).
- 2) Several critical reviews of political science research on economic, gender, racial, and ethnic inequalities that are written in a language and tone accessible to undergraduates, graduate students, and scholars in different fields and disciplines. The critical reviews cover these principal areas of scholarly analysis and can be accessed at [www.apsanet.org/content\\_4040.cfm](http://www.apsanet.org/content_4040.cfm):
  - \* Inequalities of Political Voice
  - \* Inequality and American Governance
  - \* Inequality and Public Policy
- 3) Teaching modules on inequality and American democracy. These provide a "master" guideline for nearly two dozen distinct topics for instructors to choose among when designing course syllabi at the undergraduate and graduate levels. Individual syllabi are also offered as illustration for how this material might be assembled. The teaching material is available at [www.apsanet.org/content\\_4032.cfm](http://www.apsanet.org/content_4032.cfm).

In addition, a previous symposium on the Task Force's findings, and critiques of those findings, appears in the December 2004 issue of *Perspectives on Politics*. Finally, much of the Task Force's work has been published in an edited work, *Inequality and American Democracy* (Russell Sage, 2005), available through their web site at [www.russellsage.org/publications/books/050727.785337](http://www.russellsage.org/publications/books/050727.785337).

## SYMPOSIUM AUTHORS' BIOS

**Larry M. Bartels** is the Donald E. Stokes Professor of Public and International Affairs at Princeton University. He directs the Center for the Study of Democratic Politics, a program in Princeton's Woodrow Wilson School supporting empirical research on democratic processes and institutions.

**Stephen Earl Bennett** is adjunct professor of political science at the University of Southern Indiana, and emeritus professor of political science at the University of Cincinnati. Bennett's Ph.D. is from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. His fields of specialization are American public opinion and political communication.

**Andrea Brandolini** is an economist in the Economic Research Department of the Bank of Italy, the Italian central bank. His research interests are income and wealth distribution, poverty and social exclusion, measurement of economic well-being, and labour economics. He is currently studying long run changes in income inequality in rich countries.

**Jacob S. Hacker** is Peter Strauss Family Associate Professor of Political Science at Yale University. He is the author of numerous articles and books on American politics and public policy—most recently, *Off Center: The Republican Revolution and the Erosion of American Democracy* (with Paul Pierson). Currently, he is heading a Social Science Research Council project on "The Privatization of Risk."

**Lawrence R. Jacobs** is the Walter F. and Joan Mondale Chair for Political Studies in the Hubert H. Humphrey Institute and Department of Political Science at the University of Minnesota. Jacobs served as co-chair (with Theda Skocpol) of the American Political Science Association Task Force on Inequality and American Democracy. He is the co-editor, with James Morone, of *Healthy, Wealthy, and Fair*, a pioneering study of the interconnections of inequality, public policy, and health, and coauthor, with Robert Shapiro, of *Politicians Don't Pander: Political Manipulation and the Loss of Democratic Responsiveness* (University of Chicago Press, 2000).

**Christopher F. Karpowitz** is the postdoctoral fellow in democracy and human values and associate director of the Program in Ethics and Public Affairs at Princeton's University Center for Human Values. His research is located at the intersection between political behavior and political theory, and he has developed special interests in deliberation, democratic theory, civic engagement, political psychology, and American political thought. He is a co-author of *Democracy at Risk: How Political Choices Undermine Citizen Participation, and What We Can Do About It* (Brookings, 2005).

**Stephen Macedo** is Laurance S. Rockefeller Professor of Politics and director of the University Center for Human Values at Princeton

University. He chaired the APSA's first Standing Committee on Civic Education and Engagement and is lead author of its collective effort, *Democracy at Risk: How Political Choices Undermine Citizen Participation and What We Can Do About It* (Brookings Institution Press, 2005).

**Frances Fox Piven** is Distinguished Professor of Political Science and Sociology at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. Among her books are *Regulating the Poor, Poor People's Movements, Why Americans Still Don't Vote*, and, most recently, *The War at Home*.

**Kay Lehman Scholzman** is J. Joseph Moakley Endowed Professor of Political Science at Boston College. She has written numerous articles in professional journals and is editor of *Elections in America* and co-author of *Injury to Insult: Unemployment, Class and Political Response* (with Sidney Verba), *Organized Interests and American Democracy* (with John T. Tierney), *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics* (with Sidney Verba and Henry E. Brady) and, most recently, *The Private Roots of Public Action: Gender, Equality, and Political Participation* (with Nancy Burns and Sidney Verba), which was co-winner of the American Political Science Association's Schuck Prize.

**Theda Skocpol** is the Victor S. Thomas Professor of Government and Sociology, and Dean of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences at Harvard University. Skocpol served as co-chair (with Lawrence Jacobs) of the American Political Science Association Task Force on Inequality and American Democracy. She is author of *Diminished Democracy: From Membership to Management in American Civic Life* (University of Oklahoma Press, 2003), which won the J. David Greenstone Award of the Politics and History Section of the American Political Science Association.

**Timothy M. Smeeding** is an economist and Maxwell Professor of Public Policy at the Maxwell School of Syracuse University. He is director of the Luxembourg Income Study Project, which he founded in 1983 and which recently won an APSA award for comparative databases. Smeeding's primary research focuses on national and cross-national comparisons of income and wealth inequality and poverty among vulnerable groups, including low-wage workers, children, and the aged.

**Robert Weissberg** received his Ph.D. from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, taught at Cornell and the University of Illinois, Urbana, and is now emeritus. He has published books on public opinion, political participation, tolerance, empowerment, and other topics. His articles have appeared in major professional journals plus more popular outlets such as the *Public Interest*, *Society*, and *The Weekly Standard*.