

1

Introduction: Democracy and Political Voice

American politicians have long claimed to speak for those who have no voice. Sounding a theme with an enduring pedigree in American politics, Richard Nixon famously appealed to “the great silent majority of my fellow Americans”—whom he contrasted with the “vocal minority” protesting the war in Vietnam. More than a century before, Andrew Jackson had lamented a situation in which “the laws undertake to add . . . artificial distinctions, to grant titles, gratuities, and exclusive privileges, to make the rich richer and the potent more powerful” and justified his veto of Bank of the United States in the name of “the humble members of society—the farmers, mechanics, and laborers—who have neither the time nor the means of securing like favors to themselves.” Similarly, William Jennings Bryan exalted “the farmer who goes forth in the morning and toils all day, begins in the spring and toils all summer, and the miners who go a thousand feet into the earth” and claimed that “We come to speak for this broader class.” Later on, in a time of “grave emergency,” candidate Franklin D. Roosevelt urged the nation not to neglect “the forgotten, the unorganized.”¹

1. The sources of the quoted material are as follows: Richard M. Nixon, “President Richard M. Nixon Rallies ‘The Silent Majority’ to support the War in Vietnam” (November 3, 1969), in *Lend Me Your Ears: Great Speeches in History*, selected and introduced by William Safire (New York: W. W. Norton, 1992), pp. 839, 838; Andrew Jackson, “Veto Message Regarding the Bank of the United States” (July 10, 1832), http://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/ajveto01.asp (accessed March 6, 2011); William Jennings Bryan, “Democratic Candidate William Jennings Bryan Delivers His ‘Cross of Gold’ Speech” (July 9, 1896), in *Lend Me Your Ears*, selected by Safire, p. 769; Franklin D. Roosevelt, “The Forgotten Man” (April 7, 1932), <http://newdeal.feri.org/speeches/1932c.htm> (accessed March 6, 2011).

2 Chapter 1

Who are the silent for whom the politicians claim to speak? Who are the articulate, even the clamorous, who speak for themselves? Is it a problem for American democracy that some have no voice and others speak loudly and clearly? And when the voices from citizens and organizations come together, does the “heavenly chorus,” in E. E. Schattschneider’s memorable phrase, sing “with a strong upper-class accent”?²

Political Voice in American Democracy

Among the requirements for a functioning democracy are mechanisms for the free expression of political voice so that members of the public can communicate information about their experiences, needs, and preferences and hold public officials accountable for their conduct in office. Citizens in American democracy who wish to have an impact on politics have a variety of options for exercising political voice by acting on their own, with others, or in formal organizations. Working individually or collectively, they can communicate their concerns and opinions to policy makers in order to have a direct effect on public policy, or they can attempt to affect policy indirectly by influencing electoral outcomes. They can donate their time or their money. They can use conventional techniques or protest tactics. They can work locally or nationally. They can even have political input as the unintended by-product when, for reasons entirely outside politics, they affiliate with an organization or institution that is politically active.

This book is concerned not simply with political voice but with equality of political voice in American democracy. While it matters for democracy that there be ample opportunities for the free expression of political voice and sufficiently high levels of participation across various political acts, the distribution of that participation across individuals and organizations is also significant. Citizens are not equally likely to undertake actions to let public officials know what they want or need, political activists are not representative of the citizenry at large, and a particularly acute form of participatory distortion results from the fact that those who are disadvantaged by low levels of income and education are less likely to participate in politics.

We examine inequalities of political voice—in the participation of Americans as individuals and in the activities of organizations that represent their

2. E. E. Schattschneider, *The Semisovereign People: A Realist's View of Democracy in America* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1960), p. 35.

interests—from a variety of perspectives. Among other topics, we consider how active and inactive individuals differ in their educations and incomes, their ages, and their preferences, needs, and priorities for government action; how inequalities of political voice are passed along across generations and how they have changed in an era of increasing economic inequality; how the possibilities for amplifying political voice by devoting more time or money to politics alter our expectations about the convergence of parties and candidates at the median voter; how inequalities of political voice among individuals are reinforced by the multiple forms of political involvement by organizations active in Washington politics; how the processes of recruitment by which friends, workmates, neighbors, and fellow organization and church members who ask one another to take part politically affect the socio-economic stratification of political voice; how the possibilities for political participation on the Internet affect the extent to which political voice underrepresents both younger citizens and those who are disadvantaged in terms of socio-economic status; and whether various procedural political reforms hold the potential to alleviate participatory inequalities. Although this book relies, in the main, on the analysis of relevant evidence about individuals and organized interests, we place the subject in the broader context of, on the one hand, the American political tradition and, on the other, the contemporary increase in economic inequality.

Equal Political Voice and Democratic Accountability

Why does political voice matter in a democracy? Whether the medium is the participation of individuals or the activity of organizations, political voice performs two democratic functions: communicating information and providing incentives to policy makers. That is, through political voice, citizens inform policy makers about their interests and preferences and place pressure on them to respond positively to what they have heard.

Political acts vary in their information-carrying capacity. The vote is a blunt instrument of communication, conveying a voter's decision to support a particular candidate but, in the absence of an exit poll or other type of election follow-up, nothing about why the choice was made. In contrast, a letter from an individual to a government official or a statement made at a community meeting can carry a lot of information, especially if it is trenchant and compelling. Similarly, communications from organizations—in such forms as advertisements, congressional testimony, research reports, or amicus briefs

4 Chapter 1

—can convey detailed information. Organizations are particularly likely to be in a position to provide expert information that is useful in the formulation of policy.

Political acts also vary in the extent to which they give policy makers an incentive to heed the messages conveyed. When political input includes valued resources—whether votes, campaign contributions, campaign work, political intelligence, favors, or information germane to the making of policy—politicians may feel pressure not to ignore the accompanying messages. The member of Congress who is drafting a piece of legislation, the mayor who wants to pacify a restive group that has been staging regular protests, the state legislator who seeks votes and political support in anticipation of a run for governor, and the agency regulator who needs cooperation to ensure regulatory compliance all have incentives to pay attention to activist publics.

The Level and Distribution of Political Voice

Recent political science inquiries into political voice place the spotlight on the amount or level of citizen involvement. Has political participation been declining and, if so, why?³ What are the implications for democratic governance of the erosion in political engagement? In the discussion of this important issue, what matters about the condition of civil life is the overall level of voluntary involvement rather than its uneven distribution across society. As we shall discuss from a number of perspectives in Chapter 4, the level of participation has consequences for democracy. Citizen voice emanating from a limited number of activists might lack the legitimacy of the activity of a larger group—as witnessed by the unacceptability of using surveys to gather Census data. Similarly, the significant educative and community-building functions of political activity can be achieved only if participation is sufficiently widespread.

Nevertheless, our concern is the equality of political voice rather than the amount of political voice. While it matters for democracy that there be ample

3. On the theme of changing levels of turnout and participation, see, among others, Ruy A. Teixeira, *The Disappearing American Voter* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1992); Steven J. Rosenstone and John Mark Hansen, *Mobilization, Participation, and Democracy in America* (New York: MacMillan, 1993); Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000); Martin P. Wattenberg, *Where Have All the Voters Gone?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002); and Stephen Macedo et al., *Democracy at Risk: How Political Choices Undermine Citizen Participation and What We Can Do about It* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2005).

opportunities for the free expression of political voice and sufficiently high levels of participation across various political acts, the distribution of that participation across individuals and groups is also significant. Equal political voice does not require universal or even a very high level of activity; it requires only representative activity. Just as a few thousand responding to a carefully selected random-sample survey can yield a fairly accurate snapshot of public attitudes, a relatively small but representative set of activists might satisfy the requisites for equal voice. Thus the conditions for political equality would be fulfilled if, across political issues, the total volume of activity were representative, containing proportionate input from those with politically relevant characteristics—which include such attributes as income, race or ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation, age, veteran status, health, or immigrant status; attitudes on political matters ranging from school prayer to taxes to environmental preservation to U.S. policy in the Middle East; or such policy-relevant circumstances as reliance on government benefits or employment in an industry that is regulated by the government or a firm that has a government as a customer. However, the individuals and organizations that are active in American politics are anything but representative. In particular, those who are not affluent and well educated are less likely to take part politically and are even less likely to be represented by the activity of organized interests.

Equal Voice—Equal Consideration

One of the hallmarks of democracy is that the concerns and interests of each citizen be given equal consideration in the process of making decisions that are binding on a political community. Robert Dahl explains the case for political equality on the basis of “the moral judgment that all human beings are of equal intrinsic worth . . . and that the good or interests of each person must be given equal consideration. . . . [Furthermore, that] among adults no persons are so definitely better qualified than others to govern that they should be entrusted with complete and final authority over the government of the state.”⁴ Thus, our concern is with equality of voice, the input side, and not with equality of response, the output side. Equal voice does not imply equal responsiveness or equal outcomes. Because politics involves conflict among those with differing preferences and clashing interests, it is inevitable

4. Robert A. Dahl, *On Political Equality* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), p. 4.

6 Chapter 1

that political outcomes will not leave all contenders equally satisfied. Yet it is possible for everyone to be heard and their views considered on an equal basis.

Nevertheless, as we shall demonstrate over and over in the pages that follow, the disparities in political voice across various segments of society are so substantial and so persistent as to preclude equal consideration. Public officials cannot consider voices they do not hear, and it is more difficult to pay attention to voices that speak softly. If some stakeholders express themselves weakly and others say nothing at all, there is little or nothing for policy makers to consider. As Lindblom and Woodhouse comment: “If poorer, less educated minorities participate less, their judgments about what problems deserve government’s attention will attain less than proportionate weight in the process of partisan mutual adjustment.”⁵ Of course public officials have other mechanisms besides participatory input from individuals and organizations for learning what is on the minds of citizens. They can, for example, consult polls or follow the media. And the influences on policy include many additional factors—ranging from an incumbent’s values and ideology to partisan pressures to a desire to take a political career up a notch—other than policy makers’ perceptions of what the public wants and needs. Still, if votes, campaign contributions, e-mails, lobbying contacts, comments on proposed agency regulations, or amicus briefs come from an unrepresentative set of individuals and organizations, government policy is likely to reflect more fully the preferences and needs of the active part of the public.

Unequal Voice: A Persistent American Problem

Unequal political voice is a persistent feature of American politics. As an illustration, Figure 1.1 presents data from surveys in the United States across half a century. The surveys contain similar questions about a variety of modes of participation beyond voting. They make clear that socio-economic stratification of political activity has been present in American politics for a long time.⁶ We can see that in each of the surveys, the average amount of political

5. Charles E. Lindblom and Edward J. Woodhouse, *The Policy Making Process*, 3rd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1993), p. 111.

6. The data are drawn from the following studies: 1959—Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba, *The Civic Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963); 1967—Sidney Verba and

activity rises steeply across five quintiles of socio-economic status (SES).⁷ Furthermore, the association between socio-economic status and political voice presumably dates back much further than the half century for which we have data.

We shall explore the theme of persistence from several perspectives in later chapters. Using panel data, we demonstrate that, even when characteristics associated with political participation are taken into account, individuals who are politically active at one time are more likely to take part politically in the future. Using cross-sectional surveys collected over several decades, we show the continuity over time of the characteristics of participant publics. And, using recall data, we establish that individuals are more likely to be politically active if their parents were, and we seek to explain why.

From the perspective of democratic equality, the finding that the same individuals are more likely, over time, to be politically active might not be cause for concern. We have argued that what matters is not that the expression of political voice be universal but that it be representative. When it comes to equal political voice, much more important than the tendency for the same individual citizens and organizations to be persistently active is the remarkable continuity in the *kinds* of individuals and organizations that express political voice. Across several decades, there has been a great deal of stability in the distribution of the kinds of individuals and organized interests

Norman H. Nie, *Participation in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972); 1990—Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Henry E. Brady, *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995); 2008—August Tracking 2008 Survey of the Pew Internet and American Life Project. The data for 1967, 1990, and 2008 are based on the same five measures of activity: working in a political campaign, contributing to a candidate or campaign, contacting a government official, belonging to a political organization, and working with others on a community issue. The data from 1960 are based on a somewhat different set of activities: acting to influence a local policy, acting to influence a national policy, taking part in a campaign, belonging to a party organization, and belonging to a nonpolitical organization that takes political stands. Because our purpose is to illustrate continuity of stratification, what counts is the similarity in the upward slope of the lines.

7. Our principal focus is on inequality of political voice on the basis of socio-economic status, a term we use interchangeably with *social class* and often identify by its abbreviation, SES. As a term in the social sciences, *social class* has accrued complex meanings, but it invariably refers to one's position in the social and economic hierarchy. The measure of socio-economic status used throughout our analyses is, in fact, quite straightforward: a combination of the respondent's level of educational attainment and family income. For details on the construction of our measure of SES and SES quintiles, see Chapter 5.

8 Chapter 1

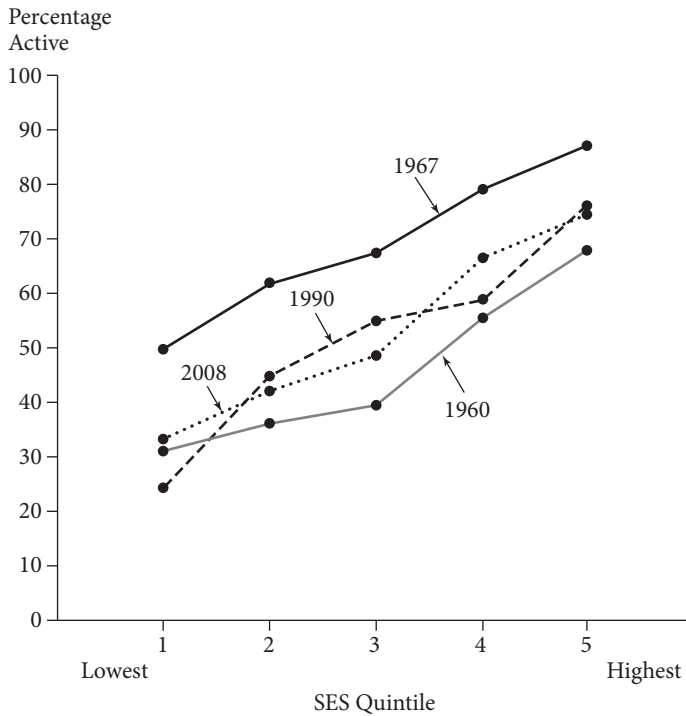


Figure 1.1 The Continuing Stratification of Political Participation: Political Activity by SES Quintile, 1960, 1967, 1990, 2008

Sources: 1960—Civic Culture Study; 1967—Political Participation in America; 1990—Citizen Participation Study; 2008—Pew Internet and American Life Survey.

Note: The figure shows for SES quintiles the percentage engaging in at least one political act other than voting. The data for 1967, 1990, and 2008 are based on the same five measures of activity: working in a political campaign, contributing to a candidate or campaign, contacting a government official, belonging to a political organization, and working with others on a community issue. The data for 1960 are based on a somewhat different set of activities, although ones that closely parallel those used in the other studies.

represented in politics. Such findings converge with the message conveyed by the data in Figure 1.1 with respect to the long-term structuring of political voice by socio-economic status and underscore that inequalities of political voice are deeply embedded in American politics. Although public issues and citizen concerns may come and go, the affluent and well educated are consistently overrepresented.

Individual and Collective Political Voice

Implicit in the concept of equal political voice is equality among individuals. In the vast political science literature concerned with public opinion and political participation, the individual is the main actor in the democratic system. However, while the voice of a single individual is usually fairly weak, when collectivities of individuals are coordinated within organizations, they can be a more potent force. Political voice in America is often the voice of organized interests. Organizations frequently speak loudly and clearly on political matters.

The political participation of members of the public and the activities of organized interests are often studied separately from one another with different frameworks and methods. When it comes to inequalities of political voice, however, they are two aspects of the same issue. Essential to our inquiry is that we construe political voice in terms of both the activity of individual citizens and the efforts of the thousands of organized interests. A large section of what is to come is dedicated to understanding the kinds of interests and concerns that achieve political voice through the varied forms of collective advocacy. We consider politically active organizations of many kinds: membership associations like unions, professional associations, and citizens groups that have individuals as members; trade associations that unite firms in an industry; state and local governments; and organizations like corporations, hospitals, and even universities—which, following Robert Salisbury, we designate as “institutions”—that have no members at all.⁸

In considering political voice through organizational activity, we ask the same questions about political organizations that we ask about individual citizens: What interests do they represent through what kinds of activity, and how equal or unequal is that representation? The results for organized interests parallel the findings for individuals and show the extent and durability of political inequality in America.

Who Is Speaking When an Organization Speaks?

When an individual speaks in politics, there is no ambiguity as to who is being represented by the message. The voice is that of the individual. When

8. Robert H. Salisbury, “Interest Representation: The Dominance of Institutions,” *American Political Science Review* 78 (1984): 64–76. As a matter of fact, among political organizations, even membership associations are less likely to have individuals as members than to be made up of institutions.

10 Chapter 1

organizations serve as the conduits for giving voice to citizen interests, however, complex questions of representation invariably arise. Robert Michels originally posed the issue of the ambiguity of organizational representation in membership groups in his discussion of the “Iron Law of Oligarchy.”⁹ Membership associations are assumed to communicate the interests of their members. But whose interests? Those of management? The board? The staff? The rank and file? And which ones among the rank and file? The old or the young? The most privileged or the least? This problem is even knottier for the vast majority of politically active organizations that are not membership associations composed of individuals. It is even more difficult to discern for whom an organization speaks when it is composed of institutions rather than individuals or when it has no members at all. Which of the various stakeholders are being represented when a corporation or a museum speaks in politics? In short, an organization may have a powerful voice in politics, but it may not be clear whose voice it is.

Defining Political Voice

We understand political voice as any activity undertaken by individuals and organizations “that has the intent or effect of influencing government action—either directly by affecting the making or implementation of public policy or indirectly by influencing the selection of people who make those policies.”¹⁰ Although this understanding encompasses many forms of activity in multiple venues, in recent years there has been considerable interest in an even more capacious understanding of what constitutes political participation.¹¹ In particular, arguments are made that two important forms of civic

9. Robert Michels, *Political Parties: A Sociological Study of the Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracy*, trans. Eden and Cedar Paul (New York: Dover, 1959).

10. Verba, Schlozman, and Brady, *Voice and Equality*, p. 38.

11. For discussion of the limitations of conventional definitions of participation and references, see Pippa Norris, *Democratic Phoenix: Reinventing Political Activism* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. xii, 190 ff.; Dietlind Stolle and Marc Hooghe, “Review Article: Inaccurate, Exceptional, One-Sided or Irrelevant? The Debate about the Alleged Decline of Social Capital and Civic Engagement in Western Societies,” *British Journal of Political Science* 35 (2004): 154; Cliff Zukin, Scott Keeter, Molly Andolina, Krista Jenkins, and Michael X. Delli Carpini, *A New Engagement? Political Participation, Civic Life, and the Changing American Citizen* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 5–10; and Lawrence R. Jacobs, Fay Lomax Cook, and Michael X. Delli Carpini, *Talking Together: Public Deliberation and Political Participation in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), p. 153. For a different perspective, see Ben Berger, “Political Theory, Political Science,

involvement should be brought under the conceptual umbrella of our understanding of political participation. The first includes many ways of engaging in civic life that bypass the usual institutions of politics and government and seek the public good without appeal to government intervention. Scholars have introduced several terms—among them, “creative participation,” “civic innovation,” “postmodern participation,” “lifestyle politics,” “individualized collective action,” and “DIY [do-it-yourself] engagement”—to capture these forms of involvement, to which we, for convenience’s sake, shall refer as creative participation.¹² The other includes a variety of ways—called “discursive participation” in a recent study—in which citizens talk and deliberate about public life.¹³

Creative participation includes a somewhat idiosyncratic set of actions that seek social change without involving public authorities. Some prominent examples are anti-sweatshop campaigns, protests against the World Trade Organization, and the most common form of creative participation, political consumerism—buying, or refusing to buy, products with the objective of achieving a public good.

Although there is ample historical precedent—for example, the Boston Tea Party, nineteenth-century utopian communities, and the brief movement to get women out of their corsets and into bloomers—for efforts to seek public outcomes without appeal to government, significant recent economic, technological, and social developments would lead us to expect an upsurge of creative participation in recent years. For one thing, creative participation may be the only option when there is no governmental entity with the wherewithal or inclination to confront a particular problem. The proliferation of transnational economic and political institutions—in particular, multinational corporations and the World Trade Organization—imply that there may be no single governing authority with jurisdiction over a matter that activists seek to have addressed. In addition, technological developments make it fea-

and the End of Civic Engagement,” *Perspectives on Politics* 7 (2009): 335–350. Berger argues that the term *civic engagement* has been stretched to accommodate “almost anything that citizens might happen to do together or alone” and argues that “politics loses all meaning if anything and everything can fall within its purview.”

12. For examples and discussion of “creative participation,” see Michele Micheletti and Andrew McFarland, eds., *Creative Participation: Responsibility-Taking in the Political World* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm, 2010), and Andrew S. McFarland, *Boycotts and Dixie Chicks: Creative Participation at Home and Abroad* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm, 2011).

13. See Jacobs, Cook, and Delli Carpini, *Talking Together*, pp. 23–24, 35–36.

12 Chapter 1

sible to communicate with large numbers of people at great distance. Digital media can be used to assemble on short notice large groups of people who are connected by weak ties for some kind of goal-oriented action. Moreover, civic innovation articulates with the distinctive values and preferences of twenty- and thirty-somethings that would predispose them to postmodern modes of voluntarism. A number of observers have commented on the extent to which post-Boomer cohorts gravitate toward voluntary support of direct delivery of services rather than political activity in the name of policy change; prefer to eschew traditional political intermediaries, most notably parties and interest groups; and favor participatory forms that are anchored in non-hierarchical and informal networks and therefore permit greater spontaneity and individual autonomy.¹⁴

A second form of engagement that is sometimes classified along with political participation includes several forms of discussion about politics and public issues.¹⁵ Such discussions can take place in person, on the phone, or over the Internet; they can be informal and spontaneous or can occur in structured meetings, often organized by a religious, social, civic, political, or government groups; they can involve exchange of views or self-conscious attempts to persuade.¹⁶ Obviously, this is an important set of activities.

14. Variations on these themes can be found in many places. See, for example, W. Lance Bennett, "The UnCivic Culture: Communication, Identity, and the Rise of Lifestyle Politics," *PS: Political Science and Politics* 31 (1998): 745; Paul Kennedy, "Selling Virtue: Political and Economic Contradictions of Green/Ethical Marketing in the United Kingdom," in *Politics, Products, and Markets: Exploring Political Consumerism Past and Present*, ed. Michele Micheletti, Andreas Follesdal, and Dietlind Stolle (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 2006), pp. 24–25; Stolle and Hooghe, "Review Article," p. 159; and Zukin et al., *A New Engagement?* chap. 4.

15. Although there is an extensive literature—much of it theoretical and philosophical—about deliberative democracy, investigations about how ordinary citizens engage in discussions about politics are less common. For a systematic survey-based study of political discussions, see Jacobs, Cook, and Delli Carpini, *Talking Together*. Other empirical studies of political discussion include William A. Gamson, *Talking Politics* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Stephen E. Bennett, Bonnie Fisher, and David Resnick, "Political Conversations in the United States: Who Talks to Whom, Why and Why Not," *American Review of Politics* 16 (1995): 277–298; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady, *Voice and Equality*, pp. 362–364; Nina Eliasoph, *Avoiding Politics: How Americans Produce Apathy in Everyday Life* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Stephen E. Bennett, Richard S. Flickinger, and Staci L. Rhine, "Political Talk over Here, over There, over Time," *British Journal of Political Science* 30 (2000): 99–119; Katherine Cramer Walsh, *Talking about Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); and Andrew J. Perrin, *Citizen Speak* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

16. We have adapted our understanding of the varieties of political discussion from the questions asked by Jacobs, Cook, and Delli Carpini in *Talking Together*, chap. 2.

According to a recent survey, 68 percent of respondents reported taking part in political conversations in person or on the phone, a figure that is comparable to the share indicating having gone to the polls.¹⁷ Besides, political discussions may foster political interest or clarify thinking about political matters and thus facilitate future participatory acts.

In short, by focusing on actions directed at government, our definition of political voice excludes acts of creative participation, and in focusing on doing not talking, our definition excludes political discussion. However, we should make clear that the boundaries between these two important forms of engagement and our more conventional understanding of political participation are quite porous. Moreover, data presented in Chapter 5 show that these alternative forms of civic involvement are characterized by the same kind of social class stratification typical of acts falling under our definition of political voice.

Measuring Inequalities of Political Voice

The empirical analysis to come investigates inequalities of political voice from many angles. However, because there are so many avenues for the expression of political voice, there is no simple way to measure degrees of inequality with precision. The individual acts that convey political voice have no single metric of input, thus making it difficult to make comparisons across acts. These acts differ with regard to their capacity to convey information to policy makers and to exert pressure on them to respond to what they hear.¹⁸ They also vary in the extent to which their volume can be multiplied. Political arrangements like the selection of the president by the Electoral College and political disputes over the drawing of electoral districts to gain partisan advantage or to ensure the election of candidates with particular racial characteristics to the contrary, among particular political acts, voting would seem to pose the fewest obstacles to measuring equal political voice. In contrast to votes, the quantity of other forms of political activity can be increased as the time and resources of the activist allow. Thus the measurement of political voice requires that we consider not just how many people are active and whether they are a representative set but also how much they do. These con-

17. Jacobs, Cook, and Delli Carpini, *Talking Together*, p. 37. For information on the national telephone survey that forms the basis of their analysis, see pp. 24–25.

18. On these distinctions among participatory acts, see Verba and Nie, *Participation in America*, chap. 3; and Verba, Scholzman, and Brady, *Voice and Equality*, pp. 44–46.

14 Chapter 1

siderations loom especially large when it comes to political money: even in the extremely unlikely circumstance that all eligible voters made some kind of political contribution, the high variation in the size of the donations would preclude anything resembling political equality when it comes to the financing of campaigns and other political causes.

That the acts that carry political voice vary with respect to their volume and the form taken by their input means that it is difficult to sum across them to assess the relative weight of different bundles of activities. That is, how many hours of volunteering at the phone bank at campaign headquarters is the equivalent of a \$5,000 check? How many e-mails from constituents equal a large protest? How can these participatory acts be added up to produce a number that can be compared across individuals? For these reasons, we shall consider particular political acts as well as composite indexes of participation.

The data in Figure 1.2 illustrate the implications for inequalities of political voice of the way that certain political acts can be expanded in volume. As in Figure 1.1, the respondents in the 1990 Citizen Participation Survey are divided into equal socio-economic quintiles. Figure 1.2 shows for each of three forms of political input—voting, giving time to politics, and making contributions to campaigns and other political causes—the proportion coming from the various quintiles. There is substantial variation in the concentration of activity across the three modes of political expression. Comparing the highest and lowest SES quintiles, the top quintile is responsible for 1.8 times the number of votes, more than 2.6 times the number of hours, and 76 times the number of dollars of the lowest quintile.

When we move from the political voice of individuals to that emanating from political organizations, we do not obviate any of these difficulties. Nevertheless, for all the limitations in our ability to measure political voice with precision, the differences we find across individuals, aggregations of individuals, and organizations are sufficiently striking that there can be no doubt about the existence and persistence of real inequalities of political voice in America.

Fostering Activity: The Origins of Political Voice

The political voice expressed by individuals, aggregates of individuals, and organizations reflects a variety of factors that operate to boost or depress political activity. Some of these factors—most importantly, the rights that inhere in citizenship—place most members of the political community on an

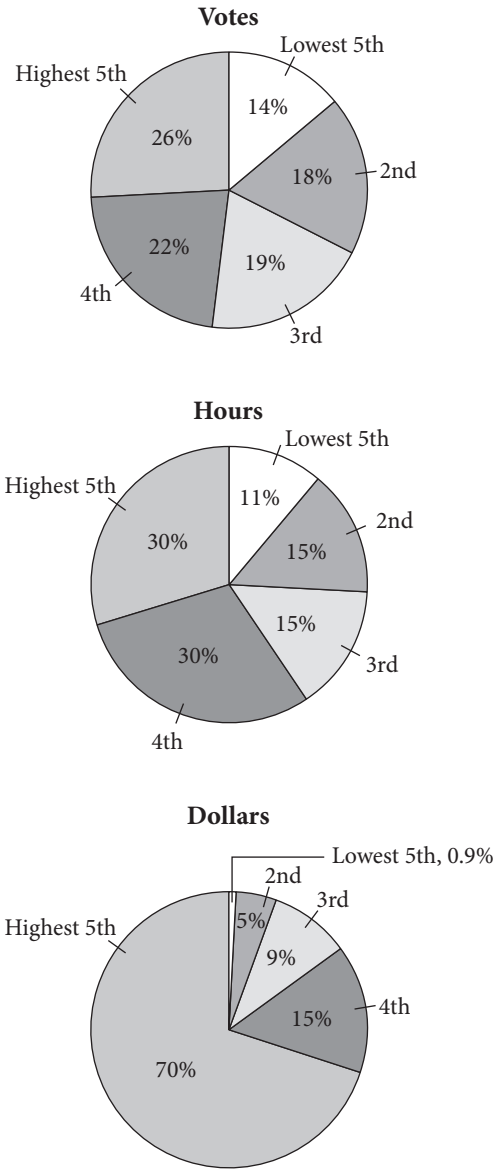


Figure 1.2 Distribution of Political Inputs: Percentage of Activity from SES Quintiles, 1990

Source: Citizen Participation Study (1990).

Note: Inputs are percentage of votes, percentage of hours given to politics, and percentage of dollars given to politics.

16 Chapter 1

equal footing. However, most of them—the motivation to take part and the resources so to do, as well as the connection to networks that foster activity—are unequally distributed and contribute to inequalities of political voice. The more unequal the distribution of the factors that foster participation across politically relevant groups, the more unequal is political voice.

The Basic Requisite: The Right to Participate

The clearest and most basic requisite for equal political voice is the right to express that voice. For most forms of political activity, the right to take part is very widely dispersed. As applied to the states through judicial interpretation of the Fourteenth Amendment, the basic participatory rights of the First Amendment—freedom of speech and press, the rights of assembly and petition—are generally available to all within the borders of the United States, regardless of citizenship status.¹⁹ In fact, within limits, such rights may be available to noncitizens, even those who do not reside in the United States. The op-ed pages of major newspapers often feature opinion pieces by foreign commentators. Although their communications might not be heeded or even answered, non-Americans are free to get in touch with American public officials. Aware of the worldwide repercussions of American electoral outcomes, foreign visitors have been known to take part in presidential campaigns while visiting the United States. Nevertheless, although making campaign contributions has been interpreted as a form of protected speech by the Supreme Court, foreigners are not permitted to donate to federal campaigns.

The right to take part in particular ways is limited to some citizen members of the relevant political community. For example, residents of one town are not free to vote in the elections of an adjoining town. They may not even be free to attend town meetings in a neighboring community even though an issue on the agenda—say, a pending decision to close the bridge that spans the river—might have an impact on them. As is well known, important categories of citizens—including those without property, African Americans, and women—have been excluded from the franchise in the past.²⁰ In fact,

19. Illegal aliens have been deported when their illegal status was discovered through their political speech. In *Reno v. American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee*, 525 U.S. 471 (1999), the Supreme Court affirmed their right to speak out but did not overturn their deportation, arguing that they were deported for their illegal residential status, not for their speech.

20. Alexander Keyssar, *The Right to Vote: The Contested History of Democracy in the United States*, 2nd ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2009).

when Virginia Minor sued the Missouri voting registrar who denied her application to register under the Privileges and Immunities clause of the Fourteenth Amendment, the Supreme Court ruled unanimously in 1875 that, although Minor was a citizen, the franchise is not necessarily a right protected from state infringement.²¹ Although racial, gender, and economic barriers to the vote have fallen after a long and bumpy journey, there are, even today, categories of citizens who are denied the vote. Children—whose First Amendment rights are also circumscribed—are the most obvious example of citizens who lack access to the ballot.²² Another category is convicted felons.²³ All but two states have some restrictions on the voting rights of felons, and a number disenfranchise them even after they are no longer under the supervision of the criminal justice system. Nevertheless, for all the qualifications that are applied to the universality of the right to take part politically, political rights and liberties have the effect of acting as an equalizing force with respect to political voice.

The political rights of organizations are not as broad as the rights of individuals. Organizations have free speech rights for communicating on public issues, but such rights may be constricted when it comes to partisan participation in elections. Nonprofits with 501(c)3 tax status are restricted in the amount of lobbying they are permitted to undertake without losing the tax deductibility of donations made to them. As we discuss in Chapter 17, the right of corporations and other organizations to make campaign contributions is currently being contested in the courts, and the Supreme Court has ruled to permit greater freedom for such involvement.

The equal right to act does not inevitably lead to equal political voice. It functions as a form of political equality of opportunity, a necessary but not a sufficient condition for political action. We focus on the participatory inequalities flowing from disparities in the factors that shape the activity levels of rights-bearing individuals. Among the factors that foster political activity are the motivation to take part; resources that provide the capacity to act, such as knowledge and skills, money, and time; and location in the

21. *Minor v. Happersett*, 88 U.S. (21 Wall) 627 (1875).

22. On the First Amendment rights of minors, see, for example, John W. Johnson, *The Struggle for Student Rights* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1997), and Erwin Chemerinsky, "Students Do Leave Their First Amendment Rights at the Schoolhouse Gates: What's Left of Tinker?" *Drake Law Review* 48 (1999–2000): 527–546.

23. For a summary of state restrictions on felon voting, see Jeff Manza and Christopher Uggen, *Locked Out* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 247.

social networks that serve to stimulate activity and to mediate requests for participation.²⁴

Motivation

Not all who have the right to participate do so. Voting turnout among eligible voters is lower in the United States than in most democracies, and the proportion of the population that takes part in other ways—by working in campaigns, taking part in protests, and so forth—is much lower than the proportion that goes to the polls. Often the catalyst for the expression of political voice is the motivation to do so.²⁵ A series of psychological orientations to politics predispose some individuals to participate politically. Among them are an interest in political matters, a belief that they could make a difference politically, and a sense that it is a civic obligation to vote and to be otherwise actively engaged in the political process. When an intense concern about an issue is coupled to a perception that politics is connected to individuals' preferences and needs, citizen activity is more likely to ensue.

We ordinarily consider such motivations with respect to an individual's propensity to express political voice. However, they are also germane to organizations with potential interests in politics. Although studies of organized interests in politics tend to focus on organizations that are politically active and exclude organizations outside politics, there are many examples of organizations that self-consciously eschew political involvement even though they are well endowed with the necessary resources, only to decide later that the benefits from political activity outweigh the costs. Samuel Gompers's reluctance to bring organized labor into politics is a famous historical example. Less widely known is the process of learning by which many corporations have come to appreciate the remarkable return on investment that accrues to political activity.²⁶

24. These are the factors specified in the Civic Voluntarism Model presented in Verba, Scholzman, and Brady, *Voice and Equality*.

25. Hahrie Han, in *Moved to Action: Motivation, Participation, and Inequality in American Politics* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), makes the point that less is known about the way that motivations function in fostering participation and argues that deep issue commitments can overcome resource deficits in stimulating political activity among the resource disadvantaged.

26. For example, at one time high-tech firms such as Microsoft and Google had little involvement in political matters, but they now devote major resources to lobbying. On political learning by corporations, see Lee Drutman, "The Business of America Is Lobbying" (PhD Dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 2010).

*Resources: Knowledge and Skills,
Money, and Time*

Motivation, especially strong motivation, fosters political activity, but those who command such resources as knowledge and skills, money, and time are much more likely to be able to act on that motivation.

Knowledge and Skills. Those who have a deep reservoir of knowledge and skills are less likely to feel daunted about taking part and more likely to be effective as participants. They are more likely to know how to participate—to be able to figure out, for example, the location of their polling place or who in town hall can help with a missed garbage pick-up or when the crucial zoning board meeting is to take place or how to contact their representative in Congress about a pressing matter. They are more likely to understand politics and public issues and thus to be able to connect their preferences to their participation—for example, to identify which candidates deserve their votes or campaign support or to find the political organization associated with a cherished cause. And they are more likely to be effective when they take part—to be able to organize a demonstration that attracts favorable media attention, to inspire campaign workers and deploy their talents efficiently, to make a compelling presentation or write a convincing letter, and, most importantly, to know when it is the right time to act.

Political skills and information are perhaps even more important for the effective expression of political voice by organized interests. Just as individuals communicate information about their preferences or their needs and circumstances, so do organizations. In particular, they can use their resources to convey information from policy experts, information that is often highly valued by policy makers. As we shall show when we turn to the role of interest organizations in the communication of political voice, lobbyists use information and political expertise to gain access to policy makers and to influence their decisions. The effectiveness of organized interests depends on many factors, among them the number and quality of their lobbyists.

Money. Mark Hanna is said to have remarked more than a century ago: “There are two things that are important in politics. The first is money, and I can’t remember the second.” We might not go quite as far as did Hanna—many factors do matter in politics—but money certainly deserves a place of honor among the factors that facilitate political activity. While individuals use money to make contributions to electoral campaigns and to political organizations and causes, organizations use financial resources for many political purposes—for example, to staff an office, hire lobbyists and other

20 Chapter 1

experts, make donations to political action committees, or engage in independent spending in elections.

We have already seen in Figure 1.2 the way that forms of input based on dollars amplify the possibilities for inequality of political voice. As a medium of participatory input, money has some special characteristics. In contrast to time, there is no ceiling on income and wealth, and individuals are much more unequal when it comes to money than when it comes to time. Comparing the best and worst off with respect to extra dollars and extra hours, the most affluent person is relatively much better off than the most leisured one. Although there are obvious limits on the amount of time that an individual can devote to political activity, bank accounts have no such upper bound. Besides, money not used today can be banked for later use. Time cannot.

Individual activity in making financial donations is, not unexpectedly, highly stratified, with a substantial gap between the affluent and the less well off. In fact, while a number of factors, ranging from civic skills to interest in politics, are associated with such participatory acts as working in a campaign, attending a local community meeting, or contacting a public official, only one factor, family income, strongly predicts the size of the contributions made to political campaigns and causes. Money is an even more critical resource for organized interests. Because they can convert cash into staff and expert assistance, organizations are able to use their financial resources to expand political activity, with the consequence that organizations vary even more than individuals in the volume of their political activity.

For several reasons, including the strength of First Amendment protections, the United States tends to allow more freedom in using market resources to influence political outcomes than do other countries. Because financial resources are so unevenly distributed and because differences in income hew to the fault lines of important political conflicts, political money raises the dilemma of how to reconcile inequalities of market resources with the desire to establish a level playing field for democracy. Thus money is unusual among political resources as the one for which free use is regulated. We are not limited in using our spare time to work as many hours in a campaign or to attend as many protests as we like. We are not restricted in exploiting a talent with words as we dispatch zinger e-mails to public officials. However, as we shall discuss at several points in the coming chapters, in politics we are not free to spend as much as we wish in whatever ways we wish. Some of the restrictions on how money is used in politics—for example, the proscription on bribing voters or public officials—are not controver-

sial. Others—in particular, limitations on campaign contributions—have been attacked as unconstitutional infringements on free speech.

Time. In contrast to money, time is the political resource on which there is an upper bound. Because no one has more than twenty-four hours in a day, we are much less unequal with respect to leisure time than with respect to money. Besides, compared to inequalities in income, inequalities in spare time are much less likely to adhere to the boundaries of politically relevant categories—not only socio-economic status but also race, ethnicity, and gender. Instead, the availability of extra time is structured by such life circumstances as paid work and the presence of children, especially young ones, in the household.²⁷ What is more, the likelihood of taking part politically is not affected by the amount of available spare time.²⁸ Thus it seems that “If you want something done in politics, ask a busy person. If you want a political contribution, don’t ask a poor one.”

Location in Social Networks

Location in supportive social networks is yet another factor that can function to catalyze political participation. Whether groups of family and friends or networks located in such nonpolitical settings as schools, workplaces, voluntary associations, or religious institutions, the social networks in which individuals are embedded foster or inhibit political activity. In such settings people are exposed to informal conversations about politics, to information about political issues and developments and opportunities for political involvement, and to requests—from other individuals or from the institution itself—to take part politically. As we shall see, extensive and supportive networks accentuate socio-economic inequalities in participation. These inequalities are further amplified by the differential extent to which various categories of individuals are represented by organized interests.

The Pervasive and Durable Role of Socio-economic Status

The factors that foster political participation are not independent of one another. Those who have the skills and information to take part are more likely to want to do so. Reciprocally, those with a concern about politics are

27. See Nancy Burns, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Sidney Verba, *The Private Roots of Public Action* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), pp. 184–185.

28. Verba, Schlozman, and Brady, *Voice and Equality*, chap. 12. However, the availability of leisure time is related to *how much time* is given to politics among those who are active.

predisposed to make efforts to learn the relevant skills of influence. Similarly, as we shall see in Chapter 15, those who are embedded in social networks are more likely to be asked to take political action and to get involved politically. Moreover, those who have the capacity to participate effectively—those who are able to write a big check to a campaign or to make a coherent statement at a school board meeting—are more likely to be the targets of such requests. Thus the processes that foster political voice also create unequal political voice.

At the root of these self-reinforcing processes is socio-economic status. Those who are well educated are likely to have a stockpile of a variety of other participatory factors: for example, to have the kinds of jobs that inculcate civic skills and generate high incomes; to be politically interested, knowledgeable, and efficacious; and to be connected to the networks through which requests for political activity are mediated. When we embarked on this project, we did not anticipate the extent to which we would uncover, under every intellectual rock we excavated, the deeply embedded and durable character of socio-economic inequalities in political voice. Inequalities of political voice are found in every cross-sectional analysis, and they are linked to such politically relevant circumstances as living in dilapidated housing, being without health insurance, needing Pell Grants, and suffering such problems of basic human need as having to cut back spending on groceries. They persist over time and are passed on across generations. The same biases pertain to political voice expressed through organized interests—a fact that, over time, has consistently led to overrepresentation of the concerns and needs of business and other resource-endowed publics. In short, however we look at the issue and however we analyze our wide-ranging data, SES always seems to return to the center of our understanding. Inside this fox of a big book with its many parts beats the heart of a hedgehog.

Breaking the Persistence of Political Inequality

The pervasiveness of inequalities of political voice leads us to investigate the possibilities for ameliorating the political underrepresentation of the young and the disadvantaged. What, if anything, might be done? We approach this question from three different perspectives. We consider first the possibility of reducing inequality through political mobilization. The history of social movements provides vivid examples—the labor movement and the civil rights movement come to mind—in which disadvantaged groups overcame the participatory hurdle rooted in social and economic structures and were brought into politics as effective voices for political and social change. We

look next at the new and constantly expanding possibilities for political participation on the Internet. Does the Internet bring into politics not just new people but new kinds of people—in particular, younger people and those from lower on the SES hierarchy—thus equalizing political voice? Finally, we review a variety of procedural changes and public policies that might equalize activity. To give away our conclusion prematurely, those expecting a silver bullet are likely to be disappointed.

Other Bases of the Inequality of Political Voice

Our analysis of data about individuals emphasizes socio-economic status—and, to a lesser extent, age—at the expense of other major distinctions that are fundamental to politics: not only demographic characteristics like race or ethnicity, gender, and religion but also ideology and party.²⁹ Still, our concern with inequalities of political voice extends to any politically relevant attribute—that is, to any characteristic that might become a source of conflict in politics.

One explanation for the limitation of focus in this context is simply that we could not cover everything in a project of already substantial scope. A more substantive justification for our emphasis on SES is that it is not only a significant distinction for politics but also, as we have just seen, an important causal factor in the explanation of individual differences in political activity. Income and education are strongly associated with political participation.

In a multivariate analysis, disparities in participation among non-Latino whites, African Americans, and Latinos or between men and women can be largely or fully understood in terms of differences in characteristics that have

29. We have dealt with participatory stratification based on race and gender in other writings. On race, ethnicity, and political activity, see Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman, Henry Brady, and Norman H. Nie, "Race, Ethnicity, and Political Resources: Participation in the United States," *British Journal of Political Science* 23 (1993): 453–497, and "Race, Ethnicity and Participation," in *Counting by Race*, ed. Paul E. Peterson (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995). On gender, see Burns, Schlozman, and Verba, *Private Roots of Public Action*, as well as Kay Lehman Schlozman, Nancy Burns, and Sidney Verba, "Gender and the Pathways to Participation: The Role of Resources," *Journal of Politics* 56 (1994): 963–990; Kay Lehman Schlozman, Nancy Burns, Sidney Verba, and Jesse Donahue, "Gender and Citizen Activity: Is There a Different Voice?" *American Journal of Political Science* 39 (1995), 267–293; Sidney Verba, Nancy Burns, and Kay Lehman Schlozman, "Knowing and Caring about Politics: Gender and Political Engagement," *Journal of Politics* 59 (1997): 1051–1072; Nancy Burns, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Sidney Verba, "The Public Consequences of Private Inequality: Family Life and Citizen Participation," *American Political Science Review* 91 (1997), 373–389; and Kay Lehman Schlozman, Nancy Burns, and Sidney Verba, "What Happened at Work Today? A Multi-Stage Model of Gender, Employment, and Political Participation," *Journal of Politics* 61 (1999): 29–54.

24 Chapter 1

their roots in socio-economic status. That socio-economic status is behind the attributes that explain racial or ethnic and gender differences in political participation does not, however, justify the conclusion that these differences are all about SES and that race—or ethnicity or gender—is irrelevant. Just because we can use SES to explain disparities in political voice between groups differentiated on the basis of such characteristics as race, ethnicity, or gender does not reduce the substantive political significance of these characteristics. As long as there are politically relevant issues associated with policies that have a differential impact on men and women or on Latinos, African Americans, and non-Latino whites, it matters for politics that public officials hear disproportionately from members of some groups. More generally, inequalities of political voice among persons with politically relevant characteristics are consequential even if those characteristics are not themselves causally related to the group differences in political participation.

Furthermore, it is not exactly a coincidence that persons of color and women command fewer of the SES-based resources for political activity than do non-Latino whites or men. Indeed, these gaps in socio-economic status are intimately connected to the structures that sustain social and economic distinctions on the basis of race or ethnicity and gender in America. For these reasons, even though they are not central to our SES-based analysis of inequalities of political voice, it is essential not to dismiss inequalities of political voice rooted in other bases of political conflict.

A Note on Data

To pursue these multiple themes we draw on evidence from a number of sources ranging from the U.S. Census to the constitutions of the states. However, we rely principally on data from four sources:

- The Citizen Participation Study. Although the data from this 1990 survey are now two decades old, this survey contains the most comprehensive set of measures of individual participatory acts, the factors that facilitate participation, and the institutional contexts of adult life—work, nonpolitical organizations, and religious institutions.³⁰

30. We designed and conducted the Citizen Participation Study in conjunction with Norman H. Nie. It forms the basis for the analysis in Verba, Schlozman, and Brady, *Voice and Equality*.

- American National Election Studies (ANES). Although the ANES focus on forms of individual participation associated with elections and only occasionally include items about nonelectoral forms of activity, the invaluable ongoing portrait of the American electorate they provide has a time series that dates back more than half a century as well as several panels in which respondents were re-interviewed in successive surveys. Electoral participation follows a zigzag pattern, spiking in years with presidential elections and falling off in the congressional elections two years later; therefore, unless otherwise noted, we use only the data from the surveys conducted in presidential years.
- Pew Internet and American Life Project–August Tracking 2008. This survey, which replicated some of the questions on the Citizen Participation Study, included items about Internet use as well as political engagement and activity both on the Internet and offline.³¹
- Washington Representatives Study. We have assembled the most extensive and comprehensive database to date of organizations active in Washington politics. The more than 35,000 organizations in the database include all the organizations listed in the 1981, 1991, 2001, and 2006 editions of the *Washington Representatives* directory—along with additional organizations listed in archival sources as having been politically active by, for example, testifying in Congress or filing an amicus brief.³² For each organization, we coded information on its history, the kinds of interests on behalf of which it advocates, and the activities it undertakes in the quest for policy influence.

Our practice throughout is to use the most recent available data set that allows us to answer the intellectual questions we are posing and, whenever possible, to use other data sets to check our results. Because the Citizen Participation Study contained such rich measures, it often permits more complex—if cross-sectional and possibly dated—analysis. When we use that survey, we do so because we could not find a more recent data set containing appropriate measures.

31. We were fortunate to have been able to work with Lee Rainie and Scott Keeter of the Pew Internet and American Life Project in the design of this survey.

32. *Washington Representatives*, ed. Valerie Stevens (Washington, DC: Columbia Books).

What Comes Next

Unequal political voice, the subject of this book, is a major problem in American democracy. Despite the prominence of equality among American values, political voice is more unequal in the United States than in most comparable affluent industrialized democracies. It is manifest in the political participation of individuals and the political activity of organizations. It is rooted in social and economic inequalities and produces participant publics that are unrepresentative of the nation as a whole. It is a persistent problem, reproduced over time and across generations. It is a violation of basic ideals of American democracy. And, sadly, it is hard to change.

Let us provide a road map to the chapters to come. Part I (Chapters 2–4) provides additional background for our inquiry, placing the question of inequality of political voice in context and reflecting on the complicated relationship between, on the one hand, the commitment to political equality among citizens and, on the other, American individualism and the deep-seated public belief in the American Dream of equality of opportunity. We examine the debates about equality at the writing of the Constitution, debates with relevance today, as well as what state constitutions have to say about equality and what public opinion polls tell us about citizen attitudes. We also survey the economic environment of growing economic inequalities and weakening labor unions. We consider dilemmas of democratic governance, asking whether we really would want a condition of equality of political voice and whether fundamental liberties are in tension with equality of political voice.

Part II (Chapters 5–9) considers inequalities of political voice among individuals from several perspectives. In particular, we focus on the persistence of political participation, including how inequalities of political voice are passed along from one generation to the next and how they have changed over the past several decades. In addition, we investigate how participatory habits vary over the life cycle and seek to explain the deficit in activity of younger adults. Moreover, we use our findings to rethink two predictions about democracy derived from the Downsian model: that parties and candidates will converge at the point of the median voter and that voters lower on the scale will direct redistributive policies at the resources commanded by those higher up.

Part III (Chapters 10–14) looks at many of the same questions with respect to the organizations that become involved in Washington politics. We devote attention to considering the kinds of interests that are represented by the

thousands of organizations in the Washington pressure system and how the distribution of organizations has changed over time. Furthermore, we show how those myriad interests are represented through different forms of advocacy—for example, lobbying, testifying in congressional hearings, or making campaign contributions.

Part IV (Chapters 15–17) inquires whether it is possible to break the pattern of inequality of political voice through the processes of mobilization into politics by which people ask their neighbors, workmates, and fellow organization and church members to get involved in politics; as a result of the possibilities for enhanced political participation over the Internet; or through the introduction of procedural reforms.