

## **How Inequality Undermines Democracy: The Case Against the United States, and Beyond**

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### **Abstract**

This paper investigates the negative relationship between economic inequality and democracy. It analyzes how economic inequality translates into the political sphere, and in particular, how it operates in the American case. This paper finds that the role played by economic inequality in distorting democracy takes place through three particular areas: the role big injections of money play into electoral campaigns and subsequent elections; the role interest groups play in policy making; and, the role that inequality in American society has come to play in creating, and reproducing an ideology that maintains that very inequality. To do so, the paper draws extensively on recent data concerning American congressional elections, U.S. policy making, and on Robert Cox's mechanisms through which institutions reproduce hegemony. Using Cox's analysis of institutional hegemony production, the paper finds five analogous claims on how the individual – as an institution – is used as a mechanism for maintaining a hegemonic order.

**Keywords:** Economic Inequality, Democracy, Political Inequality, Hegemonic Order, Hegemony

## Introduction

Since what is likely the most surprising election outcome in American presidential history, many claims have been made about the reasons that led Donald Trump to the White House in 2016. Claims vary from the rise of nationalism, to Russian intervention, all the way through to democrat exhaustion; all however, seem to ignore the role of money and inequality in the subsequent outcome. Recent data on the 2016 election suggests campaign funding may be the likeliest reason explaining Trump's election. (Ferguson, T., Chen, J. & Jorgenson, P., 2018) That is, it suggests American elections are vulnerable to non-democratic external influence. This paper makes a more general claim: high levels of economic inequality in the United States undermines democracy and the democratic process, while creating a circumstance by which the individual reproduces a hegemonic order that maintains inequality. To demonstrate the claim, this paper is divided into three parts, as follows: first, an introduction to terminology and definitions concerning democracy and the economic elite; second, a literature review consisting of studies concerning American congressional elections, policy making, and political engagement in economically unequal societies; and finally, examination of how inequality creates a circumstance through which the individuals becomes a mechanism for hegemonic reproduction that. in turn, maintains inequality and undermines democracy.

## Background

Democracy is by no means a simple term to define. The word, in and of itself, is derived from the Greek '*demokratia*,' the roots meaning being *demos* (people) and *kratos* (rule) (Held, 1996, p. 13). Its practical modern-day meaning is divided into two main schools of thought: a procedural definition, and a functional one. The procedural view defines democracy as a finite process consisting of four essential attributes: "(1) free, fair, and competitive elections; (2) full

adult suffrage; (3) broad protection of civil liberties, including freedom of speech, press and association; and (4) the absence of nonelected “tutelary” authorities (e.g., militaries, monarchies, or religious bodies) that limit elected officials’ power to govern.” (Levistky & Way, 2010, p. 5-6)

The functional view, on the other hand, sees democracy as an indefinite process that is, first and foremost, a way of constituting power. Sheldon Wolin defines it as follows:

“Democracy is committed to the claim that experience with, and access to, power is essential to the development of capacities of ordinary persons because power is crucial to human dignity and realization. Power is not merely something to be “shared,” but something to be used collaboratively in order to initiate, to invent, to bring about.” (1987, p. 470)

According to Wolin, the functional view consists of more than just political participation in a finite process. Here, the functional and procedural view diverge in two respects. The first being a question of finiteness. On one hand, the participation in the process is definite and defines democracy. That is, taking part in the process is the democracy. On the other, democracy requires a prior political equality preceding the political participation. It is an ongoing process where the people *constantly* rule and political equality is *constantly* maintained. (Wolin, 1987, p. 471) It is not merely the freedom of expression at one particular moment in time, but rather, a process that continues to be legitimized by the manner in which power is constituted. Here, one can imagine a case where an individual’s inequality in one particular field – say the economic sphere – allows for inequality in the political sphere.

The second respect concerns the concentration of power. In the procedural definition, power can be concentrated in a given structure – often being the state – thereby creating a hierarchy that flows from the top-down. The democratic element is in deciding whom receives that power, and in what manner. In the functional definition, the mere notion of hierarchy is antidemocratic,

as it contradicts the assumption of equality. Instead, power can be concentrated, but into the hands of the collective.

In essence, these two views of democracy diverge on the prior assumptions they make on political equality. The procedural view takes the position that participation in elections is the political equality, while the functional view treats political equality as exclusive to the process. In considering the data about democracy in the United States, we will make reference to both these definitions, and show that independent of definition, economic inequality undermines democracy.

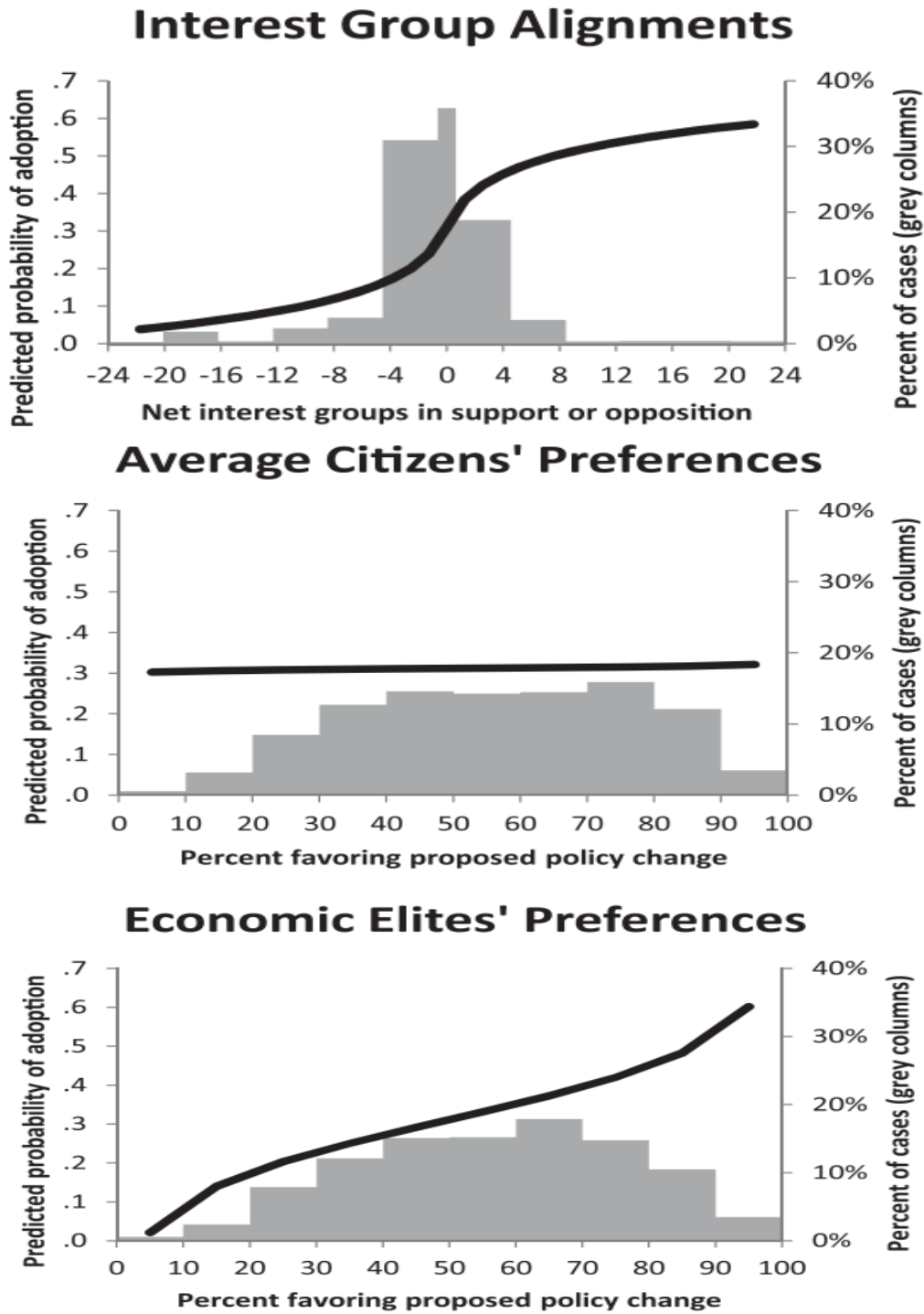
### **The economic elite in the United States**

One must also seek to define economic inequality and its representatives in society – namely, the economic elite. It is generally defined in two strands: income and wealth. Income refers to a wage being earned on a given basis, while wealth refers to a net worth (assets minus liabilities). (Alvaredo, Chancel, Piketty, Saez and Zucman, 2018) Wealth, therefore, represents a more reliable long term variable to possibly define the economic elite. For example, in the U.S., the top 1% of income earners (85% of which are men) earn over 20% of national income. In addition, the increase in income of the top 1% has been proportional to the decrease in income of the bottom 50% since the 1980s. (Alvaredo et al., 2018, p.78) In terms of wealth, however, the numbers are more surprising. The top 0.1% own over 22% of national wealth while the top 10% represent over 70%. (Alvaredo et al., 2018, p.212) These numbers are comparable only to wealth inequality in Russia and China, but unparalleled in western democracies. Therefore, one can define the economic elite using economic definitions: that is, the group of income and wealth earners who represent a disproportionate portion of both wealth and income – commonly referred to as ‘the 1%’.

However, the economic elite, as a group, is not merely a set of individuals who are characterized by a given attribute. They are in fact, a social group like any other – women, blacks, or Muslims. They identify one another, and with another. They are an expression of social relations defined in terms of economic criteria. Their defining characteristic with respect to other groups is their economic supremacy. (Domhoff, 2005, p. 6) Accordingly, they act in unison because they share a similar experience and view of the world, just as any other social group does. Therefore, to define the economic elite is not simply to associate an economic characteristic to a set of individuals; rather, it is to view this set of individuals as one, largely cohesive group, defined in terms of an economic characteristic. This will be the definition used throughout the remainder of the paper.

### **Literature review**

In Martin Gilens and Benjamin Page's (2014) study on American policy making, they test theories of democracy with respect to data of public opinion on policy decisions accumulated between 1981 and 2014. This period also coincided with the neoliberal period that saw the wealth share for the top 0.1% grow from 7% to 22%. (Alvaredo et al., 2018) The data, in particular, investigates the exclusive impact average citizens, economic elites, and interest groups have on policy-making. That is, cases where average citizens receive a favourable outcome – because their interest may positively correlate with that of the economic elites – does not imply the average citizens had any impact on the policy's adoption. What they find first, is that the support or opposition of average citizens to any policies have little to no impact on the likelihood of adoption. (Gilens and Page, 2014, p.573) In other words, the support for or against a policy by the average citizen, isn't taken into account by lawmakers.



**Figure 1: comparing policy-adoption with respect to economic elite interest, average citizen interest, and interest-group interest. (Gilens and Page, 2014, p.573)**

Conversely, they find that when economic elites favour a certain policy, it is nearly two times as likely to be adopted. (Gilens and Page, 2014, p.573) In other words, the position of the economic elite matters with respect to policy adoption. This is not say the average citizens is deprived of any policy they favour; rather, it is to say that they have no impact over its adoption. As the authors note, there is in fact, a high correlation between economic elite interest, and average citizen interest. (Gilens and Page, 2014, p. 568) The point however, is that economic elites receive policies they favour twice as many times average citizens do, who don't have any significant impact in the process. As a consequence, it undermines democracy in so far as the average citizen – the majority of the population – is not represented in government policy making.

It undermines procedural democracy because it allows for non-elected bodies, such as those business groups, lobbies, and economic elites to limit, and even distort, elected officials' ability to govern. It also undermines functional democracy because, (1) it permits power to be used for the good of the few, and (2) it proposes a hierarchy whereby citizens with more economic power are allotted more political power, which means unequal division of power, and thus poses an ideological contradiction to the functional definition.

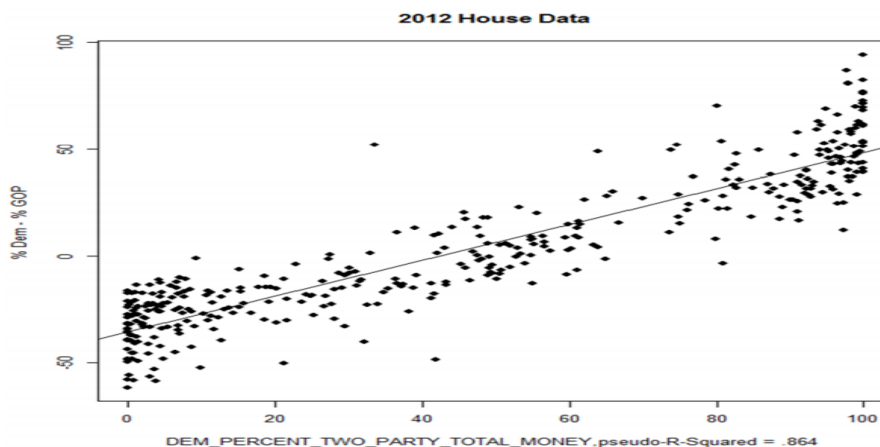
Equally as interesting as the results in Figure 1 was the impact interest groups, such as business groups, and lobbies, had in policy rejection. Figure 1 shows that when interest groups opposed a certain policy, its likeliness of adoption tended towards zero. One is therefore left with a rather condemning conclusion: when average citizens' interests disagree with those of the economic elites or that of interest groups, the average citizen loses almost all the time.

The findings provided by Gilens and Page (2014) are not to imply that, in theory, inequality renders democracy completely incapable of adjusting to economic inequality. As Houle (2018) notes in his study, there are in fact European democracies that are better able to represent the poor

in face of large economic inequality. (p. 1501) Houle continues to demonstrate the mechanisms by which economic inequality distorts political inequality. As noted earlier, the United States is second to no Western democracy with respect to its economic inequality, and in turn, the extent to which this inequality impacts political equality is the significance of the Gilens-Page (2014) results. According to Houle, economic inequality, “increases the resources of the rich relative to the poor,” “widens the gap in policy preferences across income groups,” “reduces participation,” and “depresses support for democracy.” (Houle, 2018, p.1500) Thus, in the U.S., this points to a monopoly of power, and its manifestation, to an undermined democracy.

### Congressional elections

The impact of the elites doesn't limit itself to policy; they also impact the electoral process. Recent studies on American congressional elections have investigated the relationship between money and electoral votes. (Ferguson, Chen and Jorgenson, 2016; Ferguson, Chen, & Jorgenson, 2017) In doing so, the paper finds that there was a “strongly linear relationship between Democratic candidates' shares of total two party spending in House elections and the percentage of major party votes they won.” (Ferguson, Chen and Jorgenson, 2016, p.14)



**Figure 2: the linear relationship between money and votes during the 2012 democrat house elections.** (Ferguson, Chen and Jorgenson, 2016)

In addition to the 2012 democrat house elections, the researchers decided to investigate further, relationships in both the house and senate for a period spanning from 1980 to 2014. The results “confirm that the patterns we found for 1980, 1996, and 2012 are not flukes.” (Ferguson et al., 2016, p.16) With the exception of 1982 senate election, the linear relationship between money and votes received holds for all congressional elections spanning from 1980 to 2014.

One must still, however, demonstrate the correlation between the elites’ actions and these results. As a social group, defined by their economic power, the economic elite derive, what Domhoff (2005) calls “distributive power.” (p.12) Distributive power, in contrast to collective power, refers to the ability of a group to influence, so to “realize its goals even if some other group or class is opposed” to it. (Domhoff, 2005, p.12) The elite, therefore, can use their economic advantage to seek to influence voters. This can entail money being spent to advertise, promote, and advocate for certain candidates, policies, and campaigns. As a result, voters’ view of electoral campaigns is largely a function of their candidates ability to reach them, or be reachable – which in turn is largely a function of campaign donations. (Domhoff, 2005, p.153)

This much, has been demonstrated in studies relating the perception economic inequality and political mobilization. In Frederick Solt’s (2008) study on the relationship between economic inequality and political mobilization, he surveys 23 “advanced industrial democracies” (including the United States) where “coercion and clientelism are rare” therefore allowing for a direct relationship between economic inequality and political interests.(p.48) The results are quite condemning: Solt (2008) finds that income inequality had “a strong negative effect on the political interest of those with incomes in the median quintile or below” with the exception of “those in the richest quintile.”(p.54) Figure 3 shows that relation and makes an important point concerning the distributive power yielded by the economic elite.

**TABLE 1** Effects of Inequality and Income on Political Engagement

Independent Variable	Political Interest		Political Discussion		Electoral Participation	
	Estimate	(Std. Error)	Estimate	(Std. Error)	Estimate	(Std. Error)
Income Inequality	-7.911*	(2.745)	-8.118*	(2.300)	-5.331*	(2.271)
Household Income	-.129	(.098)	-.144	(.077)	.027	(.103)
Inequality × Income	1.093*	(.345)	.980*	(.271)	.458	(.353)
<i>Individual Controls</i>						
Age	.046*	(.003)	.060*	(.003)	.089*	(.004)
Age <sup>2</sup> /100	-.031*	(.003)	-.052*	(.003)	-.069*	(.004)
Years of Education	.117*	(.002)	.110*	(.002)	.058*	(.003)
Female	-.600*	(.015)	-.472*	(.015)	-.011	(.021)
Married	-.073*	(.017)	-.036*	(.018)	.169*	(.025)
Number of Children	-.013*	(.006)	-.009	(.006)	-.036*	(.010)
Rural Household	-.119*	(.021)	-.099*	(.022)	.033	(.025)
Employed	-.010	(.018)	.064*	(.018)	.057*	(.027)
Union Member	.315*	(.019)	.327*	(.021)	.263*	(.030)
Active Church Member	.084*	(.019)	-.010	(.020)	.281*	(.031)
<i>Country-Year Controls</i>						
District Magnitude	.012*	(.006)	.007	(.005)	.011*	(.005)
Party Pluralism	-.016	(.040)	.059*	(.033)	-.105*	(.035)
Election Year	.083	(.106)	.019	(.113)		
GDP/Capita	.001	(.013)	.011	(.011)	.006	(.010)
Union Density	-.005	(.007)	.006	(.005)	.001	(.005)
<i>Country Controls</i>						
Presidentialism	.721*	(.232)	.556*	(.197)	.124	(.203)
Federalism	.825*	(.246)	.670*	(.202)	-.066	(.194)
Unicameralism	.859*	(.288)	.692*	(.226)	.222	(.206)
Compulsory Voting	-.067	(.267)	-.203	(.221)	1.192*	(.226)
Constant	.281	(.934)	-.164	(.804)	.740	(.848)
Second Threshold	1.658*	(.011)	2.879*	(.013)		
Third Threshold	3.862*	(.016)				
Individuals	68,907		71,596		64,092	
Country-Years	71		62		59	
Countries	22		22		23	
-2 × Log Likelihood	333621.8		276778.2		182587.2	

\**p* < .05**Figure 3: the impact inequality had on participants' political interest.** (Solt, 2008, p.55)

Turning to the first column of Figure 3, one notes the dominant factor affecting individuals' political interest is incomparably income inequality. This remained true in the face of other possible factors such as employment or union membership. This helps demonstrate the relation between Houle's claim about political inequality as a function of economic inequality, and the U.S. case. That is, the fact income inequality more significantly impacts individuals' political interests explains the case disenfranchisement of American voters. Furthermore, in analyzing the row variables, such as household income, age, education, all had little to no impact on political mobilization; instead, it was the knowledge that there are 'others,' the economic elites, with unequal ability to influence political discourse through their distributive power – that led to negative correlations with political mobilization. In addition, the results provided indicate that the

impact of economic inequality enters both political and social spheres, that is, it also discouraged political mobilization, such as voting, and social mobilization, such as political discussion. These results seem particularly relevant in light of the fact that wealth concentration in the U.S. is second to none – far ahead any industrialized democracies and only comparable to China and Russia. (Alvaredo et al., 2018) Additional studies relating the same variables in Eastern Europe have drawn the same conclusion. (see Loveless 2013) It is therefore clear, that economic inequality harms political mobilization and participation. However, to properly understand the mechanisms by which inequality manifests itself, one must consider the notion of power.

Three principles power indicators lie in asking who benefits, who governs, and who wins? (Domhoff, 2005, p.9) The inability to influence policy, the distorting impact of money in elections, and the harming of political mobilization all point to the economic elite as having a monopoly in those power indicators. Referring to Houle’s mechanisms by which economic inequality manifests itself, he points to fact that high levels of inequality lead to equally high levels of resource concentration, which in turn translates into differing policy interests that are almost always won by the elites. Democracy, therefore, from the average citizen’s point of view, becomes but a burden, and its ability to function, ineffective, in both its procedural and functional sense.

### **Inequality, and its facilitation of hegemony**

Economic inequality’s negative impact on democracy is clear. Since democracy is “embedded in a socioeconomic system” that “systematically grants a ‘privileged position’” to the interest of the wealthy, inequality therefore undermines both the procedural and functional meanings of democracy. (Held, 1996, p.215) Moreover, the effect inequality has in creating a circumstance that facilitates a hegemonic order is equally as important. That is, its ability to create a culture of inequality, an ideology, that justifies, legitimizes, and spreads its hegemony. In

particular, the role assumed by the individual in a given society becomes the very mechanism by which a hegemonic order is maintained.

Hegemony, according to Gramsci, was the idea that an individual is not uniquely ruled by force, but by ideas. (Bates, 1975, p.351) It meant that to be in a state of hegemony, was to determine “a reform of consciousness and of methods of knowledge.” (Gramsci and Forgacs, 1988, p.192) It is the idea that hegemony is to represent an ideological fact of knowledge, a philosophical fact. As Gramsci put it, “when one succeeds in introducing a new morality in conformity with a new conception of the world, one finishes by introducing the conception as well.” (Gramsci and Forgacs, 1988, p.192) That is to say, when one is able to create a circumstance, where it is possible to secure the ‘free’ consent of the masses, then that circumstance would be considered hegemonic. In Robert Cox’s (1983) essay *Gramsci, Hegemony and International Relations: An Essay in Method*, he considers the role international institutions play in maintaining a world order and producing a hegemony. He concludes that international institutions help create a hegemony through 5 principle mechanisms:

Among the features of international organisation that express its hegemonic role are the following: (1) embody the rules which facilitate the expansion of hegemonic world orders; (2) they are themselves the product of the hegemonic world order; (3) they ideologically legitimate the norms of the world order; (4) they co-opt elites from peripheral states; (5) they absorb counter-hegemonic ideas. (p.172)

In an analogous manner, I claim, the individual, viewed as an institution, is a mechanism by which hegemony is created. The individual embodies the rules which facilitate the expansion of the “unequal” ideology. Whether conscious or not, the individual’s personal belief that personal advancement – economic, cultural, or otherwise – is equivalent to individual uniqueness is the very embodiment of inequality that facilitates its expansion. In other words, the misplaced belief propagates the expansion of the ideology.

Individuals are themselves products of the “unequal” ideology. As economic elements, the individual is a product of the hegemonic order as this inequality creates an elite with unequal political power, as demonstrated earlier. As a consequence, the rules and policies that govern the individual are largely decided on by the ruling elite, which in turn makes the role assumed by the individual a product of this order.

Individuals ideologically legitimate the norms of the world order by taking part in its process and being themselves embodiments of the ideology. That is, independent of economic class, individuals believe they are right to pursue their personal advancement at the cost of others, because such is the principle of inequality. Money and fame are in and of themselves justification for their pursuit. Therefore, to function according to these principles is to legitimize the dominant ideology of inequality.

Individuals co-opt elites within and outside national boundaries. Due to their status experience as a social group, individuals are able to co-opt elites within and outside the state, and across social groups. They form alliances through networks that help them further their own interest, and allow them to transfer their collective power into distributive power, which in turn, is used to further group interest. An interesting example was the recent support by civil rights groups, backed by the telecom industry, to support Donald Trump’s campaign, provided he was to rollback net neutrality once president. (Fang, 2017)

The individuals absorb counter-hegemonic ideas. For example, the reality of class division has been transformed into an opportunity for social mobility. Instead of the view that economic inequality leads to social and political inequality, and must therefore be changed, individuals view this inequality as an opportunity for social mobility, to achieve the American dream, to represent one’s individuality, in spite of numerous studies demonstrating the myth of such a claim. (see

Rank, Yoon and Hirschl, 2003) This ability to absorb a counter-hegemonic idea, and transfer it into a hegemonic one is a product of the introduced conception Gramsci references. Ideas are not simply challenged by the hegemonic narrative; they are subordinate to them.

An example of the individual as a mechanism to spread hegemony can be considered in educational reforms in investment. (Harmes, 2001, p. 113) In the American case, this can be viewed from marketing strategies targeting children like Stein Roe's 'Young Investor' and AIG's 'Children's World' to educational programs like the 'JumpStart Coalition for Personal Financial Literacy' in addition to new "guidelines for teaching basic investment skills" in schools. (Harmes, 2001, p. 114) The idea is to reach children at a young age, in the hopes of introducing and integrating them into a certain way of thought, the mainstream way of thought. In doing so, children, once adults, become a mechanism that justifies and reproduces the circumstance (inequality) that makes way for a hegemonic order. They become the product of the hegemony; they legitimize the hegemony by taking part in it; and, they absorb counter-hegemonic ideas through the indoctrination and prioritization of one particular idea above others. In other words, social relations become defined by this hegemonic force, and consent ensues.

Gramsci believed that hegemony was rooted in social relations, and as a result, any change of hegemonic order must also be rooted in those relations, which in turn, are derived from the hegemonic ideology. (Cox, 1983, p.175) Change in culture and in social relations among the non-elites is therefore the only way in which circumstances can present themselves for radical change. The relevance to inequality's impact on democracy is not trivial. Inequality negatively impacts democracy, as was shown earlier. However, inequality also creates a circumstance which produces a hegemonic order. One where individuals are tools (mechanisms) by which that hegemony remains, and spreads.

## Conclusion

This paper analyzes the negative relationship between democracy and economic inequality. It studies, in particular, the effects money has in influencing elections; the influence the average citizen has in policy making; and, the harm inequality does to political mobilization. In addition, building off Robert Cox's study of institutional reproduction of hegemonic order, the study produces 5 analogous mechanisms that the individual reproduces a hegemonic order. Namely, the study finds that the individual, as an institution, is used as a mechanism to maintain hegemonic order through the five following mechanism: first, the individual embodies the rules which facilitate the expansion of the "unequal" ideology; second, individuals are themselves products of the "unequal" ideology; third, individuals ideologically legitimate the norms of the world order by taking part in its process and being themselves embodiments of the ideology; fourth, they co-opt elites within and outside national boundaries; and fifth, they absorb counter-hegemonic ideas.

The study's shortcomings do exist, and lie in its ability to quantify the extent of which economic inequality influences democracy. Further research ought to engage such a question, and seek to determine a threshold where inequality most endangers democracy – provided its discovery is of importance. A great benefit in having conducted the research with a qualitative approach, however, is that the notion of inequality, by definition, is antidemocratic, and that the research need not only apply to the American case or provide a quantifiable threshold, but in fact, can be extended to all democracies where inequality persists. As a result, little seems more disruptive to politics, than the undermining of democracy.

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