Unequal Democracies

While economic inequality has risen in every affluent democracy in North America and Western Europe, the last three decades have also been characterized by falling or stagnating levels of state-led economic redistribution. Why have democratically accountable governments not done more to distribute top-income shares to citizens with low and middle incomes? Unequal Democracies offers answers to this question, bringing together contributions that focus on voters and their demands for redistribution with contributions on elites and unequal representation that is biased against less-affluent citizens. While large and growing bodies of research have developed around each of these perspectives, this volume brings them into rare dialogue. The chapters also incorporate analyses that center exclusively on the United States and those that examine a broader set of advanced democracies to explore the uniqueness of the American case and its contribution to comparative perspectives. This book is also available as Open Access on Cambridge Core.

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With liberal democracies afflicted by doubt and disquiet, this series probes sources of current apprehensions and explores how such regimes might thrive. What array of pressures most stresses democratic ideas and institutions? Which responses might strengthen these regimes and help them flourish?

Embedded in the Social Science Research Council’s program on “Anxieties of Democracy program,” the series focuses on how representative institutions – including elections, legislatures, political parties, the press and mass media, interest groups, social movements, and policy organizations – orient participation, learning, and accountability.

The volumes in the series further ask how particular policy challenges shape the character of democratic institutions and collective actors, and affect their capacity to address large problems in the public interest. These challenges include, but are not limited to: (1) designing democratic institutions to perform successfully under conditions of social and political polarization; (2) managing and orienting contemporary capitalism and alleviating hierarchies of inequality; (3) addressing questions of membership, including population movements and differentiated citizenship; (4) choosing policies to balance national security and civil liberty; (5) exploring the effects of global climate on citizens and the human impact on the environment; (6) managing the development of media and information technologies to ensure they enhance, rather than degrade, robust pluralism and civil political engagement.

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Public Policy, Responsiveness, and Redistribution in an Era of Rising Economic Inequality

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