

The Effect of Income Inequality on Civic Engagement

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Rising income inequality is a growing concern in the United States, undermining economic mobility and civic trust. A majority of Americans believe income inequality is a significant problem that needs policy solutions, but what if the continued widening gap between the haves and the have nots restricts the ability of citizens to propose remedies? Income inequality at local levels may weaken citizens belief and engagement in political institutions and undermine one of the hallmarks of American democracy – citizen participation.

In a [research article](#) recently published in the [American Review of Public Administration](#), I addressed those concerns using a survey of small and mid-sized American cities to see how changes in income inequality within those communities impacted whether citizens participate in decision making with several government departments (policy, city and parks, economic development, budgeting, and the mayor).

I found that, as expected, in cities where there was an increase in income inequality over the previous decade there were **lower** rates of citizen participation. Unexpectedly though, the level of income inequality in a given year was associated with **higher** levels of participation. How can those conflicting results be reconciled?

In part, those results likely arise from the fact that income inequality gives the wealthy greater means and incentive to participate in order to enact their favored policies. The conflicting impacts may arise from the wealthy capturing the policy process, and once captured, they need to participate less in the future. Regardless, the study shows how complex the relationship between rising income inequality and citizen participation is, and the potential for it to undermine democratic processes at the local level.

Beyond income inequality, there is evidence about **what cities can and should do** to increase the voices of citizens in the decision-making process.

A manager's attitude towards citizen participation and belief in its importance plays a substantial role in determining where citizens participate. In cities where managers provide encouragement towards the public and value the process, citizens respond. Cities can implement training and education opportunities to ensure that managers understand the importance and benefits of citizen participation.

Less centralized departments and those that had a greater culture of risk taking see higher rates of citizen participation as well. Increasing the role of citizens can introduce confusion and hitches to the process, but taking those risks is shown here to have a tangible reward of greater citizen engagement.

And finally, using online platforms such as Facebook to create additional opportunities is shown to increase participation. Making participation more accessible and meeting citizens where they are can have a real impact. The use of online technologies to encourage and facilitate participation continues to evolve, and the efficacy of different programs still needs greater evaluation but making an online effort can get citizens involved in the process can have real benefits.

The threat of rising income inequality continues to threaten the economic vitality of the country and our political institutions. Cities and citizens should take what steps they can to help ensure the strength of our democracy.