



Research & Methods  
ISSN 1234-9224 Vol. 19 (1, 2010): 93–110  
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## Cross-National Measures of Political Inequality of Voice\*

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Social scientists have long argued that political power is a key dimension of stratification, yet few empirically analyze political inequality or explicitly discuss the methodological implications of their measures of it. Political inequality is a distinct dimension of social stratification and a form of power inequality whose domain is all things related to political processes. It is a multidimensional concept – comprised of voice, response, and policy – that occurs in all types of governance structures. Conceptions of political inequality of voice reflect the well-established finding that position within the social and political structure impacts individual and group political influence. I argue that definitions and measures of political inequality of voice should focus on the extent of influence given its connection, but not reduction, to economic resources. This article proposes and evaluates cross-national structural measures of political inequality of voice based on the relationship between socioeconomic status and political participation. I explore the relationships between the measures and the rankings of European countries using data from the European Social Survey 2008 and the Economist Intelligence Unit Index of Democracy 2008's "political participation" category.

**Key words:** political inequality, power, cross-national, social stratification

Social scientists have long argued that political power is a key dimension of stratification (Weber 1946; Lenski 1966; Dahl 2006), yet few empirically analyze political inequality (Bartels 2008; Winters and Page 2009). Although attention to global inequality has increased, most examine income (Firebaugh 1999; Milanovic

\* The author would like to thank Kazimierz M. Slomczynski, John Markoff, Andrzej Bartelski, Irina Tomescu-Dubrow, Cosima Rughinis and Chris Kollmeyer for their helpful comments.

2002; Neckerman and Torche 2007), some examine health (Goselin and Firebaugh 2004; Mackenbach and Kunst 1997), and fewer still examine political influence (Anderson and Beramendi 2008). Most discussions of political inequality consist of philosophical debates over whether political equality is possible, or even necessary (Verba 2006; Bohman 1999; Dahl 2006; Ware 1981). The few empirical discussions neither explicitly discuss the methodological implications of their measures nor how they can be applied cross-nationally (Anderson and Beramendi 2008; Teorell et al 2007; Winters and Page 2009). These deficiencies in the social science literature constitute a huge gap in our knowledge of how modern societies work.

This article proposes and evaluates cross-national measures of political inequality. Because political power has many forms, I limit this article to the measures of inequality of citizen voice in the form of political participation, a fundamental means of influence in modern, Western democratic societies (Verba 2006: 504–5; Schlozman et al 2004). I explore the relationships between the measures and the rankings of European countries according to their level of political inequality of voice using the European Social Survey 2008 and the Economist Intelligence Unit Index of Democracy 2008.

## DEFINITIONS OF POLITICAL INEQUALITY

Although much discussed, few explicitly define political inequality. In all conceptualizations, no matter how vague, political inequality is a matter of who influences the decisions of decision-making bodies. At root, all conceptions reflect the well-established finding that position within the social and political structures impacts individual and group political influence (Verba et al 1978; APSA 2004).

Consider three definitions. One is by Sorokin (1959 [1927]): political inequality is *the existence of authority divisions*. This rather broad definition implies that political inequality is the existence of two or more groups with unequal political input into the decisions that affect them. If existence of authority divisions is the form political inequality takes, then the verticality of the authority structure, i.e. the distance between the masses and the decision makers, is its magnitude: the more layers of authority between the citizen and the decision, the greater the political inequality. There are two main problems with operationalizing this definition. First, it assumes the theoretical existence of a situation that never was: a totally flattened authority structure, i.e. no authority divisions whatsoever, where all groups would have equal say in legislation and policy. Second, to measure political inequality in this way, we would need to interpret and compare the organizational charts of political decision-making systems around the world, a daunting and potentially fruitless task.

Another more workable definition is the political resource approach: political inequality is *structured differences in the distribution and acquisition of political resources*. In this definition, political resources are like economic resources, complete with measureable boundaries in which one group has more or less of these resources than another group (see also Ware 1981: 393). The political resources approach is reflected in the 1996 APSA presidential address, in which Lijphart warned that “unequal participation spells unequal influence ... *the inequality in representation and influence are not randomly distributed but systematically biased in favor of more privileged citizens*” (1997: 1) [emphasis added].

While at times “political resources” is a useful simplifying analogy, in terms of measurement this approach is problematic. A political resource is potentially anything in a political situation that could influence a decision: it can be a social thing – material, ideational, a personal attribute, a group level attribute, an authority position, a network connection – or an action, such as political participation (Dahl 1996; Yamokoski and Dubrow 2008; Piven and Cloward 2005). If anything can be used as a political resource, it is problematic to find a measure of political resources ready-for-use in all contexts and has a functionally equivalent meaning across nations. From this criticism we can understand Dahl’s (2006) argument that a cross-national measure of political inequality is impossible to obtain: “...to estimate gains and losses in political equality we lack cardinal measures that would allow us to say, for example, that “political equality is twice as great in country X as in country Y.” At best we must rely on ordinal measures based on judgments about ‘more,’ ‘less,’ ‘about the same,’ and the like” (78). This is based on the assumption that political inequality is a distributive problem<sup>1</sup>.

Another definition is adapted from Piven and Cloward’s (2005) interdependency approach to power relations: political inequality is *the extent to which groups within society differ in their influence over government decisions*. In the interdependency approach, political influence is found in the range of actions an actor can take within a political interaction. Actions used to influence governments are context dependent: they must be appropriate to the task at hand and characteristics of the relationship between the interacting groups reveal possible (political power) actions. Piven and Cloward’s point is that even those perceived as powerless actually have great potential for political influence: “from this perspective, power resources are the attributes or things that one actor can use to coerce or induce another actor... almost everyone has something that can be used to influence somebody” (Piven and Cloward 2005: 37). For example, in communist-era Poland, political connections were more formidable resources than money in influencing political officials. The protest tactics of the non-violent Solidarity movement was able to influence government decisions in a way that an assault with weapons

could not. Unlike Sorokin's definition and the resource approach, here groups are defined by their *extent* and *potential* of political influence.

The power interdependency approach reveals another problem with the resources analogy: "resources" presupposes a distributional mechanism external to the individual or group within the interaction. Troublesome questions arise: Who distributes these resources? Are they distributed in the same manner across all political interactions? In the power interdependency approach, "resources" are replaced with "potential actions," side-stepping the problem of assuming a hypothetical cache of "political resources" and an external distributional mechanism. In sum, definitions of political inequality should focus on the extent of potential influence without the constraints the resource analogy presents.

### PREVIOUS MEASURES OF POLITICAL INEQUALITY

To construct measures of political inequality, the 2004 American Political Science Association Task Force on Inequality and American Democracy is a good starting point. In their 2004 report, "American Democracy in an Age of Rising Inequality," the APSA Task Force identified three foci of political inequality: citizen voice, government responsiveness, and patterns of public policy making. The upshot is that the disadvantaged are lesser represented and lesser involved in political participation, government officials are less inclined to be responsive to the preferences of the disadvantaged, and public policy often fails to address the needs of the disadvantaged.

Extrapolating from their study, I identify political inequality as a distinct dimension of social stratification and a form of power inequality whose domain is all things related to political processes. It is a multidimensional concept – comprised of voice, response, and policy – that occurs in all types of governance structures, from social movement organizations, to local councils, to national governments, and to global governance. A flexible concept of political inequality can be applied across nations and across time and across all types of political decision-making systems (Dubrow 2008).

Previous empirical studies have measured political inequality in three different ways, each with shortcomings. The first is in terms of social concentrations occupying strategic political positions where some groups are on the winning side of political competitions more often than others. This "concentrations" conception of political inequality has been measured as concentration of power (Acemoglu et al 2007) and descriptive representation, i.e. the extent to which the parliament resembles the demographic and experiential diversity of the citizenry (Griffin and Keane 2006). There are two problems. First, political concentration measures underestimate the degree of influence ordinary citizens have in political interactions

(Piven and Cloward 2005). Second, descriptive representation measures in and of themselves fail to account for whether descriptive representatives are actually concerned with acting in accordance with their role (Dubrow 2010).

The second is in terms of efforts individuals and groups make to achieve political decisions favorable to them. Previous “efforts” measures include psychological engagement with politics (Solt 2008) and voter turnout (Anderson and Beramendi 2008). This, too, has problems. Psychological engagement such as knowledge and attitudes toward politics are preconditions for political action, but attitudinal measures are not substitutes for measures of citizen behavior. Voter turnout is an important aspect, but there are four problems with using it in and of itself as a measure of political inequality. First, influence of voting on government decisions depends on the choices offered in the political market: If voters are faced with parties and candidates who do not share their interests, then voting itself will not make change. Second, voter turnout assumes that all people vote. In reality, the advantaged tend to vote more than the disadvantaged. Third, those who cannot vote, i.e. the disenfranchised, are not accounted for. Fourth, voting is often over-reported in surveys, making them unreliable guides for the extent of citizen engagement and over-estimating the degree of political equality in citizen voice.

The third type is an accounting of which groups tend to have more political decisions that are favorable to them. “Outcomes” measures are rare. Bartels’ (2008) study of public opinion and roll-call voting that suggests that government is more responsive to higher level income groups is remarkable in this regard (see also Gilens 2005). While outcome measures are potentially the best, complexity in policy outcomes can be hard to handle; who the winning group(s) are in policy decisions is often not clear, forcing some contestable decisions on the part of the researcher.

These previous attempts highlight two key problems in measuring political inequality<sup>2</sup>. The first is how to measure influence. Political influence is notoriously difficult to measure as it is an interaction process that is more inferred from conditions, efforts and outcomes than directly observed (see Dahl 2006: Chapter 6). The second is that inequality must be understood as the distance between two groups, i.e. “to distinguish perfect equality from a state of inequality” (Allison 1979: 865). A comparison to income inequality is useful, here. Income inequality is often measured by the distance between those with more income and those with less. In contrast, political inequality is the distance between those with a lot of *potential* influence and those with less. Unlike income, we do not actually see what is measured, and we can only infer it from its outcome. In cross-national perspective, this is further complicated by needing a measure that is functionally equivalent across nations.

In this article, I explore political inequality of a particular type, that being citizen voice in terms of conventional political participation. Conventional political participation refers here to the lawful activities citizens do to influence government decisions in legislation and policy. Political participation arose out of the relationship between state and masses, where masses attempt to be heard from outside the decision-making chambers occupied by the elite.

Measures of political inequality in Europe should account for how political inequality of voice functions in modern democracies, that is, political inequality is rooted in the connection between socioeconomic resources and political participation. Classic and contemporary theories suggest that political influence is intertwined with economic privilege (Lenski 1966; Weber 1946). Weber argued that political power stemmed from the organization of interests into parties. This political organizational aspect of social life called “parties” consists of class or status situations, and thus products of the economic and social orders, respectively. As party composition is determined by the structure of domination within the community, in modern capitalist societies, where the economic situation is dominant, parties are intimately connected to the economic order. Borrowing from Weber, Lenski (1966: 318) argued that political regimes influence the distribution of scarce and valued resources, and modern industrial society has lower inequality because democracy distributes power more equitably. In market societies, according to Lenski, political power is a function of wealth (229). Lenski’s point is echoed in the most consistent finding in the political participation literature: the economically advantaged, more privileged members of society tend to participate more than the disadvantaged (Verba et al 1978; see also Gallego 2008). Thus, in Europe conventional political participation and economic resources can be combined to form a valid measure of political influence. It is expected that countries differ in the way they combine political with socioeconomic resources, with some countries having a stronger economic tie to political participation than others.

Some assert the primacy of economic resources over political ones, reducing political inequality to economic inequality (Winters and Page 2008). For the purposes of cross-national measurement, we should limit “resources” to that which is mainly political, with the understanding that some resources – such as economic ones – are integral to the formation of political inequality in certain historical and contextual situations. In sum, structural measures of political inequality of voice in modern democracies must reflect the extent of inequality given its connection, but not reduction, to economic resources.

## DATA, MEASURES AND METHODS

The purpose of the empirical evaluation is to interrogate the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of the political inequality measures.

### Data

I constructed a country-level dataset in which each country has variables that represent measures of political inequality of voice. My base is Round Four of the European Social Survey (ESS 2008). ESS is a cross-sectional, cross-national dataset with individuals as the units of analysis. My sample size consists of 25 countries inside or adjacent to the European continent (with the exception of Israel). Appendix A presents the variables' distribution across the included countries.

### Measures of Political Inequality

The Achilles Heel of political participation-based studies is that substantive conclusions depend in large part on the political participation items the researcher selects<sup>3</sup>. Choosing cross-national measures of political participation is usually based on (1) a construct of political participation that is country invariant (using variations of data reduction techniques such as factor-analysis) (e.g. Teorell et al 2007), (2) country-specific political participation types, and (3) all available types.

ESS has a wide range of political participation types. The battery of political participation items reads:

“There are different ways of trying to improve things in [name of a country] or help prevent things from going wrong. During the last 12 months, have you done any of the following? Have you:

- (a) contacted a politician, government or local government official?
- (b) worked in a political party or action group?
- (c) worked in another organization or association?
- (d) worn or displayed a campaign badge/sticker?
- (e) signed a petition?
- (f) taken part in a lawful public demonstration?
- (g) boycotted certain products?”

To measure conventional political participation, I used all political participation items in ESS 2008 except voting; I classify a case as representing political participation if the respondent provided a positive answer to at least one of the items. I argue that idiosyncratic national patterns of the indicators under

consideration should be treated as alternative expressions of political participation rather than cumulative ones that measure the intensity of the underlying common phenomenon. I have two reasons for this argument. First, the meaning of the participation indicators could be country-specific (for a general argument, see Tilly 2006). Second, number of total different political actions would wrongly suggest a reliable measure of the effect of those actions on a political outcome. Imagine a situation in which one person performs all political actions included in ESS, and another who did just one. The one-type actor may be more politically powerful depending on how many times they performed that one action and the action's effect on a political decision. Thus, for each country I created a dichotomy, dividing all respondents into those who participated in any of forms and the rest.

As I am concerned with structural political inequality, I created two measures that explicitly link political participation with socioeconomic status. The first is the ratio of high to low SES quintiles with regard to the percentage of those who engaged in at least one form of political participation. I measure SES as a combination of household income, international socioeconomic index (ISEI) score, and years of education<sup>4</sup>. I conducted a factor analysis of these three components for each country separately. Next, I calculated quintiles for each country. Ratio is interpreted as the following: the greater the score, the greater the political inequality of voice between high and low SES quintiles.

The second measure is an index of dissimilarity, where the higher the score, the greater the political inequality. Index of dissimilarity was calculated for each country separately using the following equation:

$$(1) \quad \text{Index of Dissimilarity} = 0,5 \left( \sum |p_{ij} - e_{ij}| \right)$$

Where  $p$  is the predicted value,  $e$  is the expected value (in this case, proportion of 0,20),  $i$  is the quintile, and  $j$  is the country.

Each measure addresses a different question regarding the structural nature of political inequality of voice. Ratio of high to low quintiles measures the extremity of political inequality. The question the ratio addresses is, what is the extent of political voice inequality between the most advantaged and the most disadvantaged? The advantage of the index of dissimilarity is that it takes into account the entire range of SES quintiles, and thus can address a broader question: what is the extent of political voice inequality across the entire social structure? If we consider country differences in political participation, we would rephrase the question as: given the distribution of political participation across SES quintiles, and given the overall level of political participation, what percentage of political participators would have to change SES quintiles to achieve perfect political equality of voice? Note that these structural measures are highly sensitive to country-specific relationships between SES and political participation.



Finally, it would be useful to compare these measures of political inequality of voice with another well-known measure. To this end, I examine the Economist Intelligence Unit Index of Democracy 2008 (EIU). EIU is the average of five categories: electoral process and pluralism; civil liberties; the functioning of government; political participation; and political culture. I focus on their measure of “political participation” which ranges from 0 to 10, where the higher the score, the greater the political participation. In the context of this study, lower scores indicate greater political inequality of voice. See *Economist Intelligence Unit’s Index of Democracy 2008* (pp. 24 – 26) for its constituent items.

While an intriguing cross-national measure that includes over a hundred different countries, EIU’s political participation measure is problematic for a number of reasons. First, EIU does not present information on the extent to which its constituent items statistically fit together. Second, it conflates political participation with political representation (specifically, it includes percent women in parliament), two analytically distinct concepts. Third, it includes “adult literacy” which is not an inherently political concept. Fourth, items such as whether “ethnic, religious and other minorities have a reasonable degree of autonomy and voice in the political process” and whether “the authorities make a serious effort to promote political participation” are not clear: what is “reasonable autonomy?” Who are “the authorities,” and what is meant by “serious effort?” Fifth, considering the source of the study – *The Economist* – it is strange that it does not account at all for economic resources.

### **Relationships between the Measures**

The first thing to note is that, for the masses, political voice is more whisper than shout: people tend not to engage in basic forms of political participation<sup>5</sup> (see Appendix A). The median is 31 percent, ranging from Sweden’s high of 69 percent to Turkey’s low of 13 percent. To account for country differences in this regard, I weighted the index of dissimilarity by the proportion of overall political participation.

Table 1 presents bivariate correlations of the relationships between these three measures plus the overall percentage of political participation. Three findings should be noted. First, all measures are statistically related ( $p < 0,05$ ). Second, the index of dissimilarity and the ratio measures are very highly correlated (0,95). Third, EIU is only moderately correlated with the structural measures based on ESS.

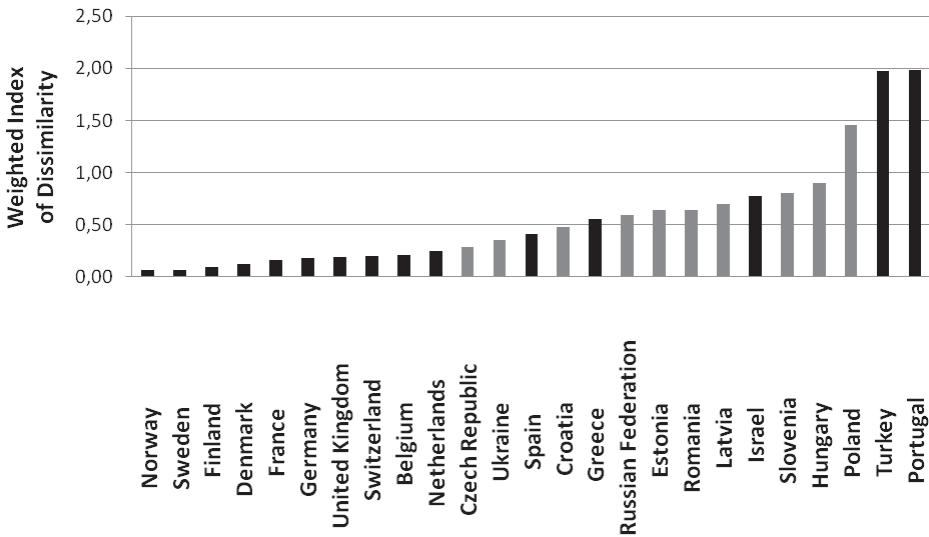
**Table 1** Correlation Matrix of Measures of Political Inequality of Voice

	I	II	III	IV
I Percent Political Participation	–			
II Ratio of High to Low SES Quintiles	-0,59	–		
III Index of Dissimilarity	-0,74	0,95	–	
IV EIU Political Participation (2008)	0,70	-0,49	-0,55	–

Note: All correlations are statistically significant at the 0,05 level or below.

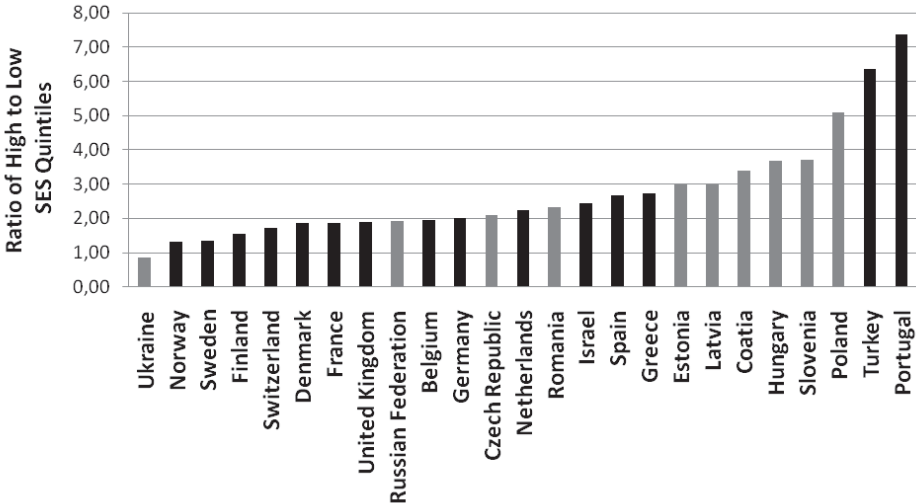
The use of creating a cross-national measure is in comparative research. Figures 1 and 2 rank each country according to their score on the weighted index of dissimilarity and ratio of low to high SES quintiles, respectively.

**Figure 1** Political Inequality of Voice by Country Based on Weighted Index of Dissimilarity



Note: Post-communist countries are in gray.

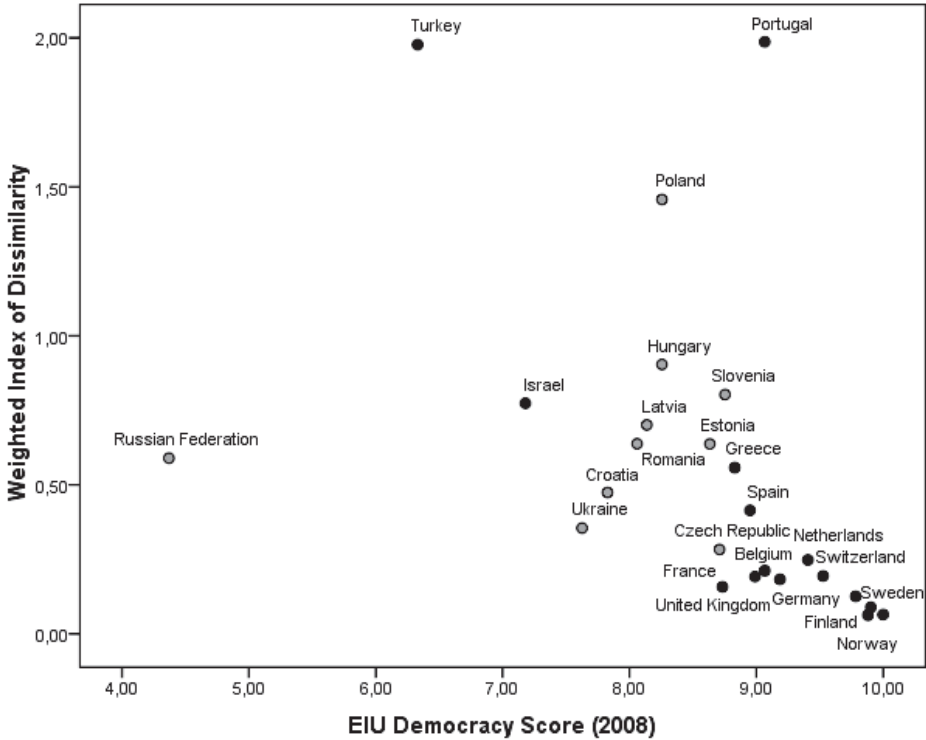
**Figure 2** Political Inequality of Voice by Country Based on Ratio of High to Low SES Quintiles



Note: Post-communist countries are in gray.

There are several aspects of note. First, It is striking that the median political inequality of voice score is 0,56 for the weighted index of dissimilarity and 2,74 for the ratio, both of which are rather low. While the aim of this paper is to conceptualize and measure political inequality of voice, these relatively low scores require at least some explanation. The overall low level of inequality may be explained by the relative homogeneity of European countries in terms of the rights to politically participate. As a test of this assumption, I examined the relationship between democracy – measured by the EIU democracy score – and the index of dissimilarity ( $r = -0,54, p < 0,05$ ). As expected, most European countries cluster in the high democracy, low political voice inequality quadrant of Figure 3, with democratically challenged countries of the Russian Federation and Turkey clearly apart. Of Russia and Turkey, only Turkey has a clearly high level of political inequality. Both Russia and Ukraine present curious cases, as one would not expect such low political inequality of voice in the midst of struggling democracies. One should note that in these countries far less than 20 percent of the population report that they politically participate, a very low score considering the company they keep: Finland has 66 percent, Denmark has 62 percent, and France has 56 percent, each some three times the level of political participation.

Figure 3 Relationship between Democracy and Political Inequality of Voice



Note: Post-communist countries are in gray.

Second, there may be a regional effect, as Northern European countries tend to have the lowest levels of political inequality while post-communist Central and Eastern European countries have the highest. No other regional effects are clearly evident.

Third, these figures highlight the outliers of Poland and Portugal, who have relatively high political inequality yet formally possess all the rights of their fellow European democracies. Here the structural nature of the political inequality measure may drive the result. It can be surmised that in these countries, with post-communist countries of Croatia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, and Slovenia not far behind, socioeconomic status has a rather tight grip on political participation.

**SUMMARY**

Although political inequality is often discussed in the social sciences, few attempted to systematically define, measure, and determine the extent of it. In this article

I presented various definitions and measures of political inequality, focusing on voice inequality. Because this study focuses on European countries, I constructed measures that accounts for, but does not reduce to, economic resources. Specifically, I measured structural political inequality of voice of political participation. As was the point of the article, I discussed each decision in the process of conceptualization and measurement. Empirical results reveal that, on average, political inequality in Europe is rather low, owing much to the similarly high levels of democracy across the nations studied.

## DISCUSSION

Political inequality bridges sociology and political science, political sociology and social stratification. The challenge of the field of political inequality is to unite the vast knowledge we have about social stratification – its theories, its empirical research, its methodology – with the vast knowledge we have about politics found in political science and political sociology. In essence, the challenge is to take what is currently fragmented and multidisciplinary and build a coherent interdisciplinary knowledge of concepts, measures, causes and consequences of political inequality.

While there are many clear definitions and well-established measures of other major types of inequality – e.g. economic and educational inequalities – that enable researchers to address basic empirical questions of, “how unequal is society?” and “what are the causes and consequences of this inequality?” there are few attempts to directly measure political inequality. As a result, the following key questions remain unaddressed:

- (1) How do we define and measure political inequality, within and between nations?
- (2) How does political inequality differ from democracy and the quality of democracy?
- (3) How does political inequality interact with other inequalities: economic, gender, racial and ethnic, educational, health and others?
- (4) How politically unequal are modern democracies?
- (5) What causes political inequality?
- (6) What are the consequences of political inequality for individuals, societies and social structures?

Critical to answering these questions are developing cross-national measures of all types of political inequality. To do this, as Sorokin (1959 [1927]) suggested, we must first recognize that political inequality is a distinct dimension of stratification. This means that in theory or in operationalization of its concepts, political inequality cannot be reduced to economic, status, gender, race and ethnic, or class

inequalities. Empirical research should treat political inequality as an analytically distinct form of stratification. For example, instead of assuming that economic resources equal political resources, we should try to understand the extent to which they are separate, and in what contexts their differences and similarities are most prominent. In sum, the way we approach economic inequality, or status inequality, should be the same way we approach political inequality.

## NOTES

- 1 Dahl (1996) defines political resources as “almost anything” – including money, reputation, legal status, social capital and knowledge, to name a few – that has value and can be used to achieve political ends.
- 2 A criticism that applies to all previous measurement attempts is that political inequality is not precisely defined: most are measuring political inequality of voice, and others, like Bartels (2008), are measuring political inequality in terms of government responsiveness. These are separate dimensions of political inequality that should not be confused with political inequality as a whole.
- 3 Because few studies of political inequality critically examine the impact of their measures on their substantive conclusions, it is important to note that operationalizing political inequality requires a series of methodological decisions – which political participation items to use, the measures of economic resources, not to mention dataset choice – each of which influences the variation in the variable and the ranking of the countries. What I present is not a definitive operationalization; rather, it should be seen as the product of the various decisions I made given my theoretical construct. As with measures of economic inequality, I encourage debate as to which series of measurement decisions capture the “true” state of political inequality of voice for a given country.
- 4 ISEI is a combination of income and level of education attached to occupation (so-called ISCO, or international standardized classification of occupation) scores, where the higher the number, the greater the ISEI (see Ganzeboom et al 1992).
- 5 A simple percentage of political participation does not meet the basic requirements of measures of inequality, i.e. the measurable distance between groups, and thus is not an empirical focus.

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**APPENDIX A. VARIABLES' DISTRIBUTION**

Country	Political Participation (%)	Ratio of High to Low SES Quintiles	Index of Dissimilarity	Weighted Index of Dissimilarity	Political Participation: EIU
Belgium	48,75	1,96	0,10	0,21	6,11
Croatia	33,42	3,39	0,16	0,47	6,11
Czech Republic	31,42	2,10	0,09	0,28	6,67
Denmark	62,61	1,85	0,08	0,13	8,89
Estonia	23,24	3,00	0,15	0,64	5,0
Finland	66,38	1,56	0,06	0,09	7,78
France	56,01	1,87	0,09	0,16	6,67
Germany	58,49	2,02	0,11	0,18	7,78
Greece	25,58	2,73	0,14	0,56	6,67
Hungary	19,04	3,68	0,17	0,90	5,56
Israel	18,88	2,43	0,15	0,77	8,33
Latvia	22,73	3,00	0,16	0,70	6,11
Netherlands	46,01	2,23	0,11	0,25	9,44
Norway	68,37	1,33	0,04	0,06	10,0
Poland	18,10	5,11	0,26	1,46	6,11
Portugal	14,45	7,38	0,29	1,99	5,56
Romania	17,57	2,32	0,11	0,64	6,11
Russian Federation	16,96	1,94	0,10	0,59	5,56
Slovenia	21,62	3,72	0,17	0,80	6,67
Spain	33,00	2,67	0,14	0,41	6,67
Sweden	69,73	1,36	0,05	0,07	10,0
Switzerland	53,49	1,71	0,10	0,19	7,78
Turkey	12,96	6,38	0,26	1,98	4,44
Ukraine	17,99	0,87	0,06	0,36	5,56
United Kingdom	52,72	1,90	0,10	0,19	5,0

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