

## Book review

**Kay Lehman Schlozman, Sidney Verba and Henry E. Brady**, *The Unheavenly Chorus: Unequal Political Voice and the Broken Promise of American Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012)

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Who has voice in the political discourse of America today? In *The Unheavenly Chorus*, Kay Lehman Schlozman, Sidney Verba, and Henry E. Brady provide a definitive answer to this question. In this landmark study of political inequality, Schlozman, Verba, and Brady expound upon, update, and ultimately reinforce E.E. Schattschneider's oft-quoted observation that the "flaw in the pluralist heaven is that the heavenly chorus sings with a strong upper-class accent." This is not just an important book on the political voice of individuals. It also considers collective voice in the form of organized interests. This is crucial, since it is these voices that most influence the political dialogue and therefore the policy outcomes of the US government. The authors present evidence leaving little doubt that even James Madison would cringe at the current state of pluralism in America today.

Schlozman and her colleagues examine how citizens engage with politics, a question that they also addressed in *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics*. Their findings are consistent with previous research: socio-economic status (SES) is positively related to virtually every form of political participation that the authors examine. In this new work, they update their previous studies and uncover a virtual treasure trove of new findings at the individual level. Thus they consider, for example, local politics, a forum in which citizens may potentially be more likely to cast a vote, volunteer with a campaign, take part in a protest, join an organization, or contact an official.

On one hand, the costs of obtaining information about local politics through media may be higher for low-SES groups. Yet the authors consider whether the ample availability of low-cost information like the state of local schools or the quality of public services might attenuate the SES-induced differences in participation. Alas, it is not so. The relationship between SES and local political participation mirrors that of national politics. Citizens who are at the low end of the SES

scale participate only a fraction of the amount of their counterparts at the high end of the scale. For example, analyzing the Citizen Participation Study of 1990, the authors show that 22% of individuals at the lowest SES quintile participated in local political activity. This rate rises steadily with each quintile to 65% among those at the highest quintile (p. 134). This is, of course, just one of numerous findings in this 693-paged *tour de force* that present evidence for the relationship between SES and political voice.

The durability of this relationship between SES and political participation is reinforced as the authors discuss ways of reducing the inequality of political voice in America. They consider the seismic changes in technology and whether the advent of widespread Internet access has changed or will change the balance of participation among individuals. After all, sending a tweet is much easier than writing a letter to your member of Congress. Donating to a candidate is but a series of mouse clicks away. And finding a group that trumpets your cause requires a quick query to a search engine. But is the Internet the “great equalizer” as the authors note that some have claimed? Alas, it is not. These activities only repeat the familiar correlation between SES and citizen engagement that we see elsewhere. Schlozman, Verba, and Brady tell us that, according to a 2008 survey, 10% of those at the lowest quintile of SES took part in any online political act. At the highest quintile, 65% did so (p. 497). Again, the relationship strengthens in a linear fashion with each increase in SES. The Internet is not changing the upper-class accent of the chorus of political voices in America.

One especially surprising finding on individual political voice is the lack of change over time. The authors document the change in political participation since 1952, yet they “are not struck by any perturbations” but rather by its “enduring level” (p. 152). Marshaling surveys from the American National Election Studies (1952 to 2008) and Roper (1970 to 2003), Schlozman, Verba, and Brady document the relative stability in the stratification of participation across SES levels over time. Despite other steadily changing social and political phenomena over the past 60 years, the inequality of individual political voice has remained quite stable.

Alone, their new findings on individual political voice would constitute an important contribution to the field. But Schlozman, Verba, and Brady go much further and present the most complete study of organized interests to date. This part of their study is based on a comprehensive effort to collect data on over 35,000 groups from 1981, 1991, 2001, and 2006. They identify these groups primarily through the *Washington Directory*, and then develop nearly 100 categories into which they place the groups (though, in various parts of the book, they categorize these groups in other ways, too). The changing

characteristics of the universe of organized interests reveal much about American politics over the past 35 years. One of the dominant themes in the analysis is the dearth of interests representing the less-privileged in society. While corporations, hospitals, trade associations, universities, and state and local governments, among others, are represented to varying degrees during this period, the voice of the least privileged is virtually silent. The individual-level relationship between means and political voice is reinforced when voices are aggregated into groups.

The overwhelming majority of organized interests are groups composed, not by individuals, but by entities like governments, institutions (a broad category that includes corporations, universities, and hospitals, among others), and associations of institutions. By contrast, in 2001, associations of individuals composed less than 12% of organizations in their study (p. 320). Surprisingly, corporations have seen a decline in their share of the interest group universe. In their analysis from 1981 to 2006, corporations still compose a plurality of the organized interests, but it is a plurality that peaked in 1981, when they composed nearly 46% of groups. Since then, their presence as a percent of all interests groups has fallen to between 34 and 36%. The next largest group was trade and other business associations. In 1981, they composed nearly 16% of the groups in the authors' study, though they too fell, to 11% by 2006. Sectors that saw relative increases include state and local governments, educational institutions (e.g., colleges and universities), and healthcare organizations (e.g., hospitals).

Though the changes in relative composition are notable, more striking is the overall increase in the sheer number of interests at the political table. The total number of groups "increased by 19% from 1981 to 1991, by 47% from 1991 to 2001, and by 19% in the 5-year period from 2001 to 2006" (p. 349). So even while corporations' share of groups shrank, the total number of corporate interest groups increased, by 1898 or 62% from 1981 to 2006 (p. 353). Many types of groups saw growth well over one 100%. For example, education saw 643 new groups during this period, which reflects a 612% increase (p. 353). While underlying changes occurred in the relative composition of interest groups by sector, the real change was the explosive number of groups that were created during this period. The authors, in characterizing the change, note that organized interests saw "expansion but not metamorphoses" (p. 366).

Overall, the picture of organized interests is equally insightful and fascinating but not as consistent as the findings with respect to SES and individual political voice. This is practically a necessary truth, given the diversity of groups and actions that the authors consider in their analysis. But the main theme is still present. Severe inequality exists in the representation of interests. Schlozman, Verba, and Brady summarize one manifestation of this disparity in noting that

“those whose work is unskilled have no occupational associations at all to represent their interests in Washington” (p. 346). This theme is echoed again and again in the discussion of organized interests. Just as with individual voice, the picture of collective political voice is skewed toward privileged interests.

The inequality of political voice is undoubtedly offensive to any “small d” democrat. Schlozman and her colleagues expertly document and explain the presence of this phenomena. There are, of course, additional questions to ask. Namely: what are the effects of inequality of political voice? If poor people had a stronger voice in Washington, would economic inequality be less severe? If the universe of organized interests spoke loudly for the poor, would different laws be passed? Would different men and women be elected to political office? Schlozman, Verba, and Brady hardly ignore these questions, but they are also not the primary ones that they set out to answer. Yet these are questions that are worth further investigation. Elite political polarization and economic inequality have become more pervasive over time, yet the state of political voice appears relatively stable against this backdrop. One wonders if political voice is a cause or a symptom of various other social and political changes over the past three decades.

Other studies have considered the role of an abundance of money in politics and the pitifully low rates of voter turnout among segments of the public. But when scholars have tried to assess the effect of these ills on the political system, they often find small or null effects.<sup>1</sup> These nay-sayers are hardly the final voices in these arguments. Often, these studies result in scholarly debates that push researchers to look deeper and think harder about the ways in which these factors influence a variety of outcomes.<sup>2</sup> This is one direction for this expansive research agenda as these and other scholars pursue further questions about political voice and pluralism.

The picture of political voice that emerges from this important book is not a rosy one. Pluralism in America is characterized by deep inequality. In addition to being a landmark study in its own right, *The Unheavenly Chorus* is likely to invigorate an already lively area of scholarly research. Schlozman, Verba, and Brady show that to understand fully the consequences of unequal political voice, we must examine the intersection of organized interests, political participation, lobbying, and policy. This is the route to perceiving just how “unheavenly” the pluralist chorus is that sings in America today.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, on voter turnout see Citrin, Schickler, and Sides (2003) and Highton and Wolfinger (2001). On the role of money in politics see Ansolabehere, de Figueiredo, and Snyder (2003).

<sup>2</sup> For example, on voter turnout, see Leighley and Nagler (2007). On the role of money in politics, see Powell (2012).

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