

Democracy and the Unequal Citizen: Rethinking Political Equality in a Stratified Society.

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Abstract

This paper critically engages with the idea of democracy in a stratified society like India and its evolving nature in contemporary times. Its base lies on the principle that citizens are political equals, yet the social conditions within which democratic citizenship is exercised remains somewhere questionable. This rise in tension constitutes one of the enduring paradoxes of democratic politics. While democratic institutions formally recognize citizens as equal participants, unequal distributions of economic resources, social status, political access, and power can produce markedly unequal capacities to influence collective decisions. This Paper interprets political equality by taking a shift beyond its procedural interpretation as equal voting rights towards a substantive understanding of equality as the capacity to exercise meaningful political voice as well as influence. Drawing on Rousseau's conception of popular sovereignty, Rawls's account of political justice, and Dahl's formulation of political equality, this research paper highlights the normative framework of democratic equality (Rousseau, 2018; Rawls, 1971; Dahl, 1989, 2006). It then engages with various other theories of power to understand how political inequality operates not only through observable decision-making but also through agenda-setting, exclusion, and the reproduction of dominant interests (Bachrach & Baratz, 1962; Luke's, 2005; Foucault, 1980). Further, Bourdieu's theory of capital and the work of Fraser and Honneth illuminate how social and economic inequalities shape recognition, participation, and political voice (Bourdieu, 1986; Fraser & Honneth, 2003). Drawing particularly on Young and Jayal, this paper shows that formal citizenship does not necessarily produce substantive inclusion and equal representation (Young, 2000; Jayal, 2011, 2016). Finally, this paper contests that democratic equality cannot be sustained merely through equal political rights, it also requires confronting the unequal social structures that determine whose voice is heard, contests that gain representation, and whose political agency carries influence...

Keywords: Democracy, Substantive Equality, Procedural Equality, Citizenship and Representation.

INTRODUCTION

Traditionally Democracy is understood as a political order grounded in the equality of citizens and their collective capacity to shape the exercise of public power. Yet the normative promise of democratic equality exists within societies characterized by substantial differences in wealth, social position, access to institutions, and political resources. These differences creates tension between the conditions under which the equality is performed and the formal equality in itself. However, the structural framework of our democratic institutions may provide citizens with equal legal and electoral rights, the ability to convert those rights into political voice, representation, and influence is rarely distributed equally. This again raises a broader question concerning the democratic promise of rule by the people that is whether political equality can be meaningful when the social structures constituting the political community remain deeply unequal.

Political equality forms the core of democratic society and voice for equal say to everyone. Various studies by different scholars supports the same view for example. Rousseau's concept of popular sovereignty places citizens at the base of legitimate political authority, while Rawls (1971) work *A Theory of Justice*, treats equal basic liberties and the fair value of political participation as essential components of a just political order. Dahl (1989, 2006) similarly places political equality at the centre of democratic government, emphasizing citizens' capacity to participate and exercise influence over collective decisions. These approaches establish an important distinction between democracy as a formal institutional arrangement and democracy as a system in which citizens possess meaningful opportunities to exercise political agency. The existence of equal political rights, therefore, represents a necessary condition of democratic equality but does not, by itself, demonstrate that citizens possess equal political influence.

The problem becomes more challenging when democracy is measured through different theories of power. The study by Bachrach and Baratz (1962) shows that political power operates not only through decisions that are visibly made but also through the ability to prevent certain issues from becoming subjects of political deliberation. Lukes (2005) extended this argument by identifying less visible dimensions of power through which political preferences and perceptions may themselves be shaped. The Foucauldian power-knowledge relation study analysis further strengthens the argument that political influence may operate through institutions, discourses, and social practices rather than completely through formal political authority. Consequently, political equality cannot be assessed simply by asking whether citizens possess equal voting rights; it must also consider who has the capacity to shape political agendas, define legitimate claims, and influence the boundaries of public debate.

The inequality parameters in terms of social and economic balance further add another lens to this study. Bourdieu's (1986) analysis of economic, social, and cultural capital presents how unequal resources can generate durable differences in social and institutional power. These differences have direct implications for political participation because citizens do not enter democratic institutions with equivalent resources or capacities.

Political equality consists of questions of inclusion, representation as well as recognition. The study by Fraser and Honneth (2003) shows that questions of distribution and redistribution cannot be separately struggle on the question of recognition, on the other-hand the study by young (2000), argues for the importance of inclusion and differentiated social experiences within democratic institutions. These studies challenge the basic assumption that treating citizens identically necessarily produces substantive equality. Jayal (2011) similarly identifies an unresolved tension between universal and differentiated citizenship, while her analysis of representative claims in Indian democracy represents how competing demands for representation shape the meaning of democratic citizenship (Jayal, 2016). Political equality consequently involves not only equal formal status but also the capacity of differently situated citizens to secure recognition and effective political representation.

Against this theoretical background, this paper argues that the central paradox of democracy lies in the coexistence of equal political citizenship and unequal political capacity. The paper brings together theories of equality, power, participation, recognition, and representation to conceptualize political inequality as a multidimensional phenomenon. It argues that democratic equality remains incomplete when socioeconomic resources, institutional structures, and unequal forms of power systematically determine whose voices are heard, whose interests become politically visible, and whose claims acquire greater influence. The paper therefore shifts the analytical focus from formal equality of political rights to the substantive conditions necessary for citizens to exercise those rights meaningfully, offering a broader framework for understanding the relationship between democracy and persistent social inequality.

2. Literature Review

There is a vast availability of literature on democracy and political equality but most of them are conceptually fragmented. Political theorists have largely examined equality as a normative principle of democratic legitimacy, while scholarship on power, participation, representation, and social inequality has presented the substantial distance between formal democratic rights and citizens' actual political capacities. Bringing these strands together is essential for understanding why political equality may remain incomplete even within formally democratic institutions. The present review therefore organizes the existing literature around five interconnected themes: The normative foundation of political equality, relationship between democracy and power. The unequal voices over the resources, representation and recognition, and the tension between universal citizenship and differentiated inclusion.

2.1 Political equality as the normative foundation of democracy

The classical democratic tradition establishes equality as an essential condition of legitimate political authority. Rousseau's conception of popular sovereignty places citizens collectively at the centre of political authority, implying that legitimate government cannot be separated from the equal political standing of those who constitute the sovereign people (Rousseau, 2018). Rawls (1971) subsequently develops a modern liberal conception of equality in which equal basic liberties and fair political participation are integral to a just democratic order. His

framework is significant because it distinguishes the mere possession of political rights from the conditions necessary for those rights to possess comparable value across citizens.

Dahl (1989, 2006) gives political equality a more explicitly democratic formulation. For Dahl, democracy requires citizens to possess meaningful and reasonably equal opportunities to participate in collective decision-making. On Political Equality is particularly important because it directly confronts the persistent difficulty of reconciling democratic equality with the unequal social and economic conditions found in actual societies. The literature at this level therefore establishes the normative benchmark against which democratic institutions should be assessed: citizens may be formally equal before the law, but democracy becomes problematic when underlying inequalities substantially affect their capacity to exercise political influence.

However, this normative literature leaves an important analytical question insufficiently resolved. Establishing political equality as a democratic ideal does not, by itself, explain the mechanisms through which formally equal citizens acquire unequal political capacities. This requires moving from theories of equality to theories of power and social structure.

2.2 Democracy and the multidimensionality of political power

The literature on power fundamentally complicates procedural understandings of democracy. Bachrach and Baratz (1962), in their influential account of the “two faces of power,” argue that political power cannot be identified solely by observing decisions that are openly made. Power also operates through the capacity to restrict the issues that reach the political agenda. Their intervention therefore exposes a crucial limitation in approaches that equate political influence simply with visible participation or observable decision-making.

Lukes (2005) extends this argument by conceptualizing power as multidimensional, including forms of influence that operate through the shaping of preferences and perceptions. Foucault (1980), from a different theoretical tradition, further questions the assumption that power is concentrated exclusively in formal political institutions. His account emphasizes the relationship between power and knowledge and draws attention to the dispersed social practices through which political realities and legitimate forms of discourse are constructed.

Taken together, these perspectives significantly broaden the meaning of political equality. They suggest that equality cannot be assessed only by examining whether citizens possess equal formal opportunities to vote or participate. It must also involve examining whose concerns become politically visible, which interests are considered legitimate, and which actors possess the capacity to shape political agendas. Yet the power literature and democratic equality literature have frequently developed in parallel. The former explains how power operates; the latter specifies why democratic equality matters. A more integrated framework is therefore required to explain how unequal social resources are translated into unequal political influence.

2.3 Socioeconomic inequality and unequal political voice

Studies shows that political participation groomed throughout with people having varying distribution of resources. Bourdieu (1986) provides a particularly useful theoretical basis through his conceptualization of economic, social, and cultural capital. His framework demonstrates that inequalities extend beyond material wealth: networks, knowledge, educational credentials, and culturally valued competencies can also become resources that generate social and institutional advantage. Within democratic politics, these forms of capital may shape citizens’ ability to access political organizations, communicate political claims, navigate institutions, and gain recognition.

Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995) similarly establish the importance of resources and civic capacities for political participation. Their work demonstrates that political voice is not distributed randomly across society; rather, participation is systematically associated with citizens’ available resources and capacities. Dalton (2017) places this problem more explicitly within the concept of the “participation gap,” highlighting the relationship between social status and political inequality. Schlozman, Verba, and Brady (2012) further develop this argument by demonstrating how unequal capacities for participation contribute to unequal political voice and thereby challenge the democratic promise of political responsiveness.

Gilens (2012) pushes the argument toward political influence more directly by examining the relationship between economic inequality and government responsiveness. His analysis draws attention to the possibility that substantial differences in economic resources may translate into differences in the extent to which citizens’ preferences are reflected in public policy. Piketty (2020), meanwhile, places inequality within a broader ideological and historical framework, demonstrating that inequality is not simply an economic condition but is embedded in political and institutional arrangements through which it is justified and reproduced.

This literature is particularly important for the present study because it demonstrates that political inequality cannot be treated as an independent political phenomenon. Political voice is partly produced by the unequal social and economic environment in which citizens participate. Nevertheless, much of this literature focuses on participation, responsiveness, or the influence of socioeconomic resources separately. The relationship among resources, power, representation, and recognition requires greater conceptual integration.

2.4 Recognition, inclusion, and the problem of representation

The literature on recognition and inclusion extends the debate beyond resource distribution and participation. Fraser and Honneth (2003) demonstrate that social justice involves both redistribution and recognition, thereby challenging approaches that understand inequality exclusively in material terms. Political equality consequently requires attention to whether citizens and social groups are recognized as legitimate participants whose experiences and claims deserve political consideration.

Young (2000) advances this argument through a theory of inclusion and democracy that is sensitive to differences among social groups. Her work challenges the assumption that treating everyone identically necessarily creates democratic equality. Where citizens occupy structurally different social positions, formally identical procedures may reproduce rather than eliminate inequalities in political voice and representation. Inclusion must therefore be understood substantively rather than merely procedurally.

Jayal's work is particularly valuable in extending these theoretical debates to the Indian democratic context. Jayal (2011) examines the tension between universal and differentiated citizenship and demonstrates why formally universal citizenship may not adequately address historically embedded group inequalities. Her analysis cautions against treating universal and differentiated citizenship as mutually exclusive categories and instead emphasizes the normative complexity of democratic citizenship in a socially diverse society. Jayal (2016) subsequently highlights the competing representative claims through which Indian political actors and political formations seek to define who legitimately speaks for citizens. Her analysis of the 2014 Lok Sabha election demonstrates that representation itself can become contested through competing understandings of democratic legitimacy.

The significance of this literature is that it reveals another dimension of political equality: citizens may possess equal formal membership in a political community while remaining unequally recognized, represented, or positioned within democratic institutions. However, recognition and representation are often examined separately from the literature on political resources and multidimensional power. This separation obscures the ways in which material resources, social status, institutional access, and representational authority reinforce one another.

2.5 Political equality as an unresolved multidimensional problem

The literature reviewed above demonstrates that political equality has several dimensions. At the normative level, Rousseau, Rawls, and Dahl establish equality as a constitutive principle of democratic legitimacy (Rousseau, 2018; Rawls, 1971; Dahl, 1989, 2006). At the level of power, Bachrach and Baratz, Lukes, and Foucault demonstrate that political influence extends beyond visible decision-making into agenda-setting, preference formation, and knowledge production (Bachrach & Baratz, 1962; Lukes, 2005; Foucault, 1980). At the level of resources, Bourdieu, Verba et al., Dalton, Schlozman et al., Gilens, and Piketty reveal the relationship between social and economic inequalities and unequal political capacity (Bourdieu, 1986; Verba et al., 1995; Dalton, 2017; Schlozman et al., 2012; Gilens, 2012; Piketty, 2020). Finally, Fraser, Honneth, Young, and Jayal show that substantive equality also depends on recognition, inclusion, citizenship, and representation (Fraser & Honneth, 2003; Young, 2000; Jayal, 2011, 2016).

The central weakness in the existing literature is therefore not the absence of sophisticated theories of equality, power, participation, or representation. Rather, it is the limited integration of these dimensions into a single conceptual account of the unequal citizen. The literature tells us that citizens possess unequal resources, that power operates through visible and invisible mechanisms, and that recognition and representation are socially differentiated. What remains less fully theorized is how these processes interact to transform formally equal citizens into politically unequal actors within democratic institutions.

3. Research Gap

The first gap is conceptual fragmentation. Existing study generally examines political equality through particular dimensions, rights and participation, economic resources, political power, recognition, or representation. While each literature is theoretically rich, insufficient attention has been given to their interdependence. Political inequality is consequently often treated as a collection of separate problems rather than a single problem in which resources, power, participation, and representation reinforce one another.

Second, there is a formal–substantive gap in the understanding of political equality. Democratic theory recognizes formal political equality as a fundamental principle, yet the possession of equal rights does not necessarily generate equal political capacity. Dahl (2006) directly confronts the difficulty of achieving political equality, while the participation and political-voice literature demonstrates the persistence of unequal capacities. What remains insufficiently developed is a conceptual framework explaining precisely how formal equality is transformed—or frustrated by unequal social conditions.

Third, the literature contains a power–participation gap. Research on participation often focuses on whether citizens participate, whereas theories of power reveal that influence may occur before, beyond, or independently of visible participation (Bachrach & Baratz, 1962; Lukes, 2005). A citizen may therefore be formally included and politically active while still lacking comparable capacity to shape the agenda or determine outcomes. This suggests that participation should not be treated as an adequate proxy for political equality.

Fourth, there is a resource–recognition gap. Bourdieu (1986), Gilens (2012), Dalton (2017), and Schlozman et al. (2012) emphasize resources and political voice, while Fraser and Honneth (2003) and Young (2000) emphasize recognition and inclusion. These dimensions are analytically connected, because social status and material resources can affect not only the capacity to participate but also whether political claims receive recognition and institutional attention. The existing literature does not sufficiently theorize this interaction.

Finally, there is an integrative and context-sensitive gap concerning democratic citizenship. Jayal's (2011, 2016) work demonstrates the importance of differentiated citizenship and competing representative claims in India, but a broader synthesis is still needed that connects these questions with the theories of power, capital, participation, and political inequality developed in the wider literature. The Indian experience is particularly valuable because it illustrates how formal universal citizenship operates within deeply differentiated social structures.

3.1 The present study's contribution

This paper addresses these gaps by developing the concept of the unequal citizen as an analytical bridge between democratic theory and the sociology of political inequality. Rather than treating political equality as a single institutional attribute, the paper conceptualizes it as a multidimensional condition involving political rights, resources, voice, participation, recognition, representation, and influence. Its central argument is that formal political equality remains substantively incomplete when unequal social and economic structures generate unequal capacities to exercise political agency.

The contribution is therefore not to reject procedural democracy, but to demonstrate its limitations as a complete account of democratic equality. By bringing together the literature on equality, power, capital, political participation, recognition, and representation, this paper proposes that the democratic problem is best understood not simply as unequal participation among citizens, but unequal capacity among formally equal citizens to convert political rights into effective political influence. This provides the conceptual foundation for rethinking the relationship between democracy and social inequality.

4. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, conceptual, and interpretive research design to examine the relationship between democracy, political equality, and socially structured inequalities. As the central objective is to re-analyze the meaning of political equality rather than statistically measure its distribution, the study relies on conceptual analysis and critical synthesis of political theory.

The literature is selected purposively on the basis of its theoretical relevance to the central argument. The analysis brings together five interconnected strands of scholarship. First, Rousseau (2018), Rawls (1971), and Dahl (1989, 2006) provide the normative foundations for understanding democratic equality and equal citizenship. Second, Bachrach and Baratz (1962), Lukes (2005), and Foucault (1980) provide different approaches to understanding visible, hidden, and dispersed forms of political power. Third, Bourdieu (1986), Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995), Dalton (2017), Gilens (2012), Schlozman, Verba, and Brady (2012), and Piketty (2020) are examined to establish the relationship between socioeconomic resources and unequal political voice. Fourth, Fraser and Honneth (2003) and Young (2000) contribute perspectives on recognition, inclusion, and substantive equality. Finally, Jayal (2011, 2016) provides an important perspective on differentiated citizenship and representation within Indian democracy.

This analytical framework centers on the concept of the “unequal citizen”, referring to the condition in which citizens possess formally equal political rights but unequal capacities to exercise those rights effectively. The study therefore distinguishes between formal political equality and substantive political equality, examining the intervening dimensions of political resources, participation, voice, recognition, representation, and influence.

Through comparative interpretation and theoretical synthesis, the study identifies points of convergence and tension across these perspectives and integrates them into a multidimensional framework. The methodology ultimately enables the paper to examine how unequal social and economic structures can translate formal democratic equality into unequal political capacity and influence.

Conclusion

The democratic ideal begins with the principle that citizens are political equals. Yet the investigation developed in this paper revealed that formal equality of citizenship does not automatically produce substantive equality in political life. Citizens enter democratic institutions from socially and economically unequal positions, carrying different levels of material resources, social capital, cultural capital, institutional access, recognition, and political capacity (Bourdieu, 1986; Verba et al., 1995; Dalton, 2017). The irony is that democracy can simultaneously expand political equality through universal citizenship while reproducing political inequality through the unequal conditions surrounding citizenship. The theories of power developed by Bachrach and Baratz (1962), Lukes (2005), and Foucault (1980) demonstrate why political inequality cannot be understood solely through observable participation or electoral outcomes. Similarly, Fraser and Honneth (2003), Young (2000), and Jayal (2011, 2016) demonstrate that recognition, inclusion, and representation are indispensable to understanding substantive

democratic equality. This paper therefore argues that the central challenge for contemporary democracy is not simply to ensure that citizens possess equal political rights, but to ensure that social and economic inequalities do not systematically determine the extent to which those rights can be exercised. Political equality should consequently be understood as a multidimensional democratic condition encompassing rights, resources, voice, participation, recognition, representation, and political influence. The concept of the unequal citizen captures this unresolved tension. It describes the distance between the citizen as a formally equal political subject and the citizen as a socially situated actor whose capacity for political influence is shaped by unequal structures. Closing this distance does not require eliminating every difference among citizens. Rather, it requires democratic institutions capable of preventing persistent inequalities of resources, power, and recognition from becoming durable inequalities of political voice and influence...

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