Who Speaks for the Poor?
The Implications of Electoral Geography for the Political Representation of Low-Income Citizens

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Prospectus

Who speaks for the poor? In the United States, this important question is hard to answer: Recent research demonstrates, for example, that low-income Americans’ preferences and interests are often ignored by elected officials (e.g., Gilens 2012, Bartels 2008). Further, the absence of social democratic or workers’ parties – parties that usually represent the interests of low-income citizens – sets the US apart from all other developed democracies. Why do social democratic or workers parties form and persist in other democratic systems? Why are legislators in European countries more responsive to the preferences of low income citizens than their American counterparts?

This book offers an innovative account of the origins of cross-national differences in the political representation of low-income citizens: Current explanations of cross-national differences emphasize different tastes for social policy and beliefs about the origins of poverty, the historical role of unions and class-based organizations in Europe, the disenfranchising effects of increasing income inequality in the United States, and electoral rules and their effects on government formation. What this book will show, however, is that current American electoral geography – specifically, the geographic distribution of low-income citizens across congressional districts – undermines legislators’ incentives to be responsive to the poor, and significantly limits the electoral viability of low-income peoples’ parties. Low-income voters almost never form the majority in current congressional districts and, as a consequence, few legislators owe their seats to the electoral support of a
low-income constituency. Low-income Americans have very limited “electoral power,” and
election-oriented legislators have few incentives to craft policy that is responsive to their
interests. In other countries, a more equitable mapping of low-income citizens’
votes-to-seats (even in systems with similar electoral rules) ensures that larger numbers of
legislators have incentives to be responsive to low-income voters, and social policy tends to
be more generous.

The consequences of electoral geography for party systems are also profound: This book
will demonstrate how the changing electoral geographies of the late 19th and early 20th
centuries created incentives for political entrepreneurs to form and mobilize low-income
constituencies. When migration, immigration, or suffrage expansions enhanced the electoral
power of low-income voters, political entrepreneurs recognized a constituency that was ripe
for mobilization, and recruited candidates and tailored new party platforms accordingly.
Whether these “third-party men” developed populist or social democratic platforms reflect
whether the newly pivotal voters were predominantly agricultural or industrial workers.
Importantly, elections do not simply aggregate the preferences around which parties and
candidates mobilize. Rather, which preferences are expressed by parties and candidates is a
direct consequence which groups are favored by changing electoral geographies.

Political science, however, has largely ignored the implications of electoral geography of
social and economic groups for the formation and entry of new political parties, usually
focusing instead on the geographic distribution of (already) partisan groups (e.g.,
Rodden 2011). Rather than emphasizing changes in voter preferences or long-standing
cleavages (a “comparative sociology” approach to party formation and democratic politics,
following Lipset & Rokkan 1967), a focus on changes in the electoral geography of a
potential low-income voting bloc can fully account for cross-national and temporal
variation in how well the interests of low-income voters are reflected in policy. Further, as
suggested above, unlike current political economic models of party formation (e.g., Bawn,
Cohen, Karol, Masket, Noel & Zaller 2012, Aldrich 2011, Cox 1997), this manuscript
demonstrates how changes in distribution of electoral power across groups in a society can
explain why some groups, and not others, are mobilized as partisan constituencies – a
persistent puzzle of contemporary political science (Boix 2009, Stokes 1999).

Finally, this research also provides an explanation (and a policy remedy) for the muted
political voice of American workers and their families, the limited efforts of American
political parties to mobilize a low-income constituency, and the comparatively limited
social spending and antipoverty policy in the US. When the effects of electoral geography
are understood, especially from the comparative perspective this manuscript will offer, the
limited responsiveness of American legislators to low-income voters, and indeed, the
absence of partisan representation for low-income and working class voters, are no longer
puzzling features of contemporary American politics. Instead, these are the clear
consequences of the political economic incentive structures created by the current and
historical electoral geographies of our country.
Project Outline

Chapter 1. Who Speaks for the Poor?

This introductory chapter focuses attention on the manuscript’s key contribution: Electoral geography has profound implications for the incentives of legislators and parties to represent the interests of different social and economic groups in a society. This is because the geographic distribution of groups and legislative seats across electoral district boundaries determines the distribution of electoral power in a society, or the total shares of seats different groups can elect in the legislature, if all members of that group turn out to vote, and all members cast ballots for the same party. By focusing on low-income citizens – a group whose size can be fixed across time and space, and for whom policy responsiveness is well-defined – this manuscript will show how contemporary and historical electoral geographies have undermined or facilitated the political representation of society’s most vulnerable members.

This chapter uses a stylized model of democratic politics to organize current explanations of differences in the political representation of low-income voters and social policy, more generally, and then to demonstrate the crucial role of electoral geography. In this way, this chapter will show that our current understanding of democratic politics is ill-equipped to account for variation in the representation of different groups in society.

Chapter 1 also provides an overview of the extensive, original datasets that describe the early electoral geographies of income in the US, Canada, the UK, and Sweden, and provide the empirical foundation of this project. Each dataset measures changes in the electoral power of low-income voters within each electoral district, and during a crucial period of demographic change in each country. These data-sets make it possible, therefore, to identify opportunities for new party entry, and later chapters will present analytic case studies that use these datasets to evaluate new parties’ strategic entry decisions.

Chapter 2. How Electoral Geography Matters

This chapter develops a general theory of strategic party formation and entry, and outlines the conditions under which we might expect a party to enter and mobilize a low-income constituency. Specifically, if established parties are limited in their abilities to change positions, and local candidates are somewhat tied to their party labels, established parties may be unable to respond when changes in electoral geography alter the distribution of electoral power. Especially when the newly-pivotal voters are excluded from existing local partisan networks, perhaps because they are new arrivals or new voters, changes in a substantial number of districts that favor the same group create opportunities for new parties to enter electoral contests.
The rest of the manuscript is motivated by two empirical implications that are developed in this chapter: First, new parties enter electoral competition following changes in electoral geography, or more specifically, following periods of migration, immigration, electoral reform, or profound but geographically-concentrated economic shocks. Second, new parties will recruit candidates in those districts in which the balance of electoral power has changed, and groups that are “ripe for mobilization” are now pivotal.


When do new parties enter electoral competition? If, as Chapter 2 suggests, political entrepreneurs respond to changes in the distribution of electoral power in their decision to form new parties, then it ought to be the case that new parties generally enter electoral competition following changes in electoral geography. This chapter tests this implication using data that describe all new party entries and estimates of local population change (a proximate measure of changes in the distribution of electoral power) for fourteen developed democracies, between 1880 and 2000. In fact, new parties are more likely to enter electoral competition in decades following periods of heightened migration or immigration. Other explanations that might signal profound discontent or a change in policy demands (e.g., economic decline or change in levels of income inequality) explain little of the variation in the rate of new party entry. This chapter also provides evidence that new parties enter more frequently under plurality rules, which amplify local changes in the distribution of electoral power, and clearly focus attention on the importance of the way groups are distributed across district boundaries.

Chapter 4. The Populists and the American Third Party Men

This Chapter presents the first of four analytic case studies that is motivated by the second empirical implication developed in Chapter 2: If changes in electoral geography represent new opportunities for party entry, political entrepreneurs will recruit candidates in those districts where the new electoral geography favors their constituency. By focusing on the People’s Party, and on how American electoral geography changed at the end of the nineteenth 19th this chapter draws attention to features of American electoral geography that set it apart from other developed democracies. Specifically, this chapter uses individual-level census data, matched to congressional district boundaries, and historical wage and salary data to track changes in the electoral geography of income, and to identify opportunities for new party entry. This chapter shows that changes in the electoral power of low-income voters during this period are concentrated in the rural areas of the midwest and western states. Not surprisingly, the Populists recruited candidates predominantly in these districts, and craft appeals that were tailored to the needs of agricultural workers in these regions. Drawing on archival evidence, as well as a rigorous
quantitative analysis of Populist entry decisions, this chapter presents evidence that corroborates the importance of electoral geography and the theory of strategic party entry, presented in Chapter 2.

Chapter 5. Canadian Electoral Geography and the Strategic Entry of CCF and Social Credit

Like the “third party men” who organized and recruited candidates to contest elections on the People’s Party ticket, the leaders of the Canadian Cooperative Commonwealth Federation (CCF, now the New Democratic Party) and Social Credit were political entrepreneurs who recognized an opportunity for party entry in the Canada’s electoral geography changed during the late 1920s and early 1930s. In fact, as this chapter shows using archival and quantitative evidence, the CCF and Social Credit party leaders responded to similar incentive structures as the Populists: Both parties recruited candidates in those districts where the electoral power of low-income voters had recently increased, and especially among new arrivals who were excluded from existing local partisan networks.

The Canadian case provides an important analytic advantage in evaluating the importance of electoral geography in strategic party entry: CCF and Social Credit represent very different ideological positions. However, the evidence presented in this chapter suggests that political entrepreneurs of both parties recognized the same incentive structures, vis-a-vis the recruitment of candidates and mobilization of voters. The Canadian case, in particular, therefore, raises important questions about the validity of the more conventional (sociological) explanations of party formation, which emphasize changes in voter demands as the origins of new parties.

Chapter 6. The Implications of Electoral Geography for British Labour

The case of British Labour might seem quite different from the American and Canadian parties. To the extent that opportunities in subnational governments structure the incentives of political entrepreneurs, an explanation emphasized by other accounts of party formation (e.g., Chhibber & Kollman 2004), the unitary England is clearly different from the federal systems of North America. Further, one might expect the importance of the presidency to structure American party formation incentives quite differently from the incentives of British political entrepreneurs, who can focus exclusively on the legislature. This chapter will show, however, that the early leaders of British Labour structured their decisions in ways that were similar to the decisions of political entrepreneurs in Canada and the US: They recognized opportunities for entry in districts where the composition of voters had changed dramatically, and in ways that favored especially newly-arrived low-income citizens. Early Labour leaders than crafted a platform that reflected the interests of these newly pivotal voters – although these voters were industrial voters, rather than agricultural workers. Finally, Labour recruited candidates in those
electoral contests in which low-income voters were likely to be pivotal, and especially where large numbers of migrants were concentrated.

Like the analytic case studies presented in Chapters 4 and 5, this chapter draws on electoral district profiles that are constructed from individual-level census data and information about historical wages and salaries, as well as primary accounts of party leader perceptions and strategies.

Chapter 7. The Swedish Social Democratic Party, and the Long-Term Implications of Electoral Reform

The strategic entry of Sweden’s Social Democrats offers a unique analytic perspective on how changing electoral geography creates new opportunities for political parties: Unlike in each of the other cases considered, the new voters entered their local electorates through changes in their eligibility status, as well as migration. As we shall see, although some of these new voters may have lived in their district for most of their lives, they were not incorporated into local partisan or electoral networks until rapid economic growth increased their incomes above 800 crowns, the level required for voter eligibility. The dramatic increase in newly available voters in some districts, especially in urban areas, created new, important opportunities for the Swedish Social Democratic Party to enter electoral contests, that were similar to the opportunities created by migration in the US, Canada, and the UK. Note that, although the Social Democrats were formed in 1889, it was only following the dramatic changes in electoral geography that preceded the 1902 and especially the 1905 election that the Social Democrats began to recruit candidates and compete in elections under its own label.

The Swedish case also offers an important opportunity to evaluate the implications of electoral reform for the long-term distribution of electoral power: Shortly after the entry of the Social Democrats, Sweden extended full suffrage rights to all adult men, but simultaneously “guaranteed” the protection of proportional representation, multimember districts to the established parties. Although the Social Democrats opposed the adopt of multimember districts – their geographically-concentrated constituency was better served by single-member districts – this electoral reform established an equitable vote-to-seat mapping ensured that the electoral power of low-income voters would be relatively protected from future demographic changes.

Chapter 8. “It didn’t happen here;” The General Implications of Electoral Geography for the Political Representation of the Poor

This concluding chapter focuses attention on contemporary variation in the electoral power of low-income voters, across the US states, and then in a more broadly comparative analysis of developed democracies. In each case, this chapter demonstrates that levels of social spending and antipoverty cash transfers are
well-explained by variation in the shares of seats low-income voters can elect in each state or national legislature. In each case, however, the importance of parties and party systems is affirmed, and the presence of especially left parties contributes to variance in social policy. This demonstrates the importance of contemporary distributions of electoral power, but also suggests that early electoral geographies have lasting legacies with important implications for the current quality of democratic representation.

This chapter, finally, speaks directly to the motivating question of the larger project: Who, in the US, speaks for the poor? How might we account for the accumulating evidence that the interests and preferences of low-income Americans are routinely ignored? In the analysis of contemporary electoral power distributions, in both the US House of Representatives, and indeed, in all of the American state legislatures, low-income voters are dramatically under-represented in the mapping of votes to seats. While the poorest thirty-three percent of citizens in France can elect more than thirty percent of the seats in the Chamber of Deputies, low-income Americans elect less than ten percent of the seats in the House, and less than fifteen percent of the seats in any state legislature. While it is tempting to attribute this disparity to the strategic manipulation of district boundaries, this chapter suggests that this disparity results from the size of American electoral districts, which are much larger and more economically heterogeneous than districts elsewhere. As a consequence, low-income voters are almost never present in sufficient numbers to form an electoral majority. This analysis also suggests a straightforward policy remedy: With the creation of smaller, more economically homogenous electoral districts, American legislators would more frequently owe their seat to the support of low-income voters, and would craft more responsive social policy, as a consequence.

This chapter also presents a new, innovative argument for the absence of especially a social democratic party in the US, but also the more general absence of a party that represents a low-income constituency: If changes in electoral geography provide the opportunity for new party entry, early opportunities in the US occurred exclusively in agricultural areas, and political entrepreneurs tailored their appeals to mobilize low-income agricultural workers. Further, since the size of the House of Representatives was fixed early in the 20th century, the increasing size of congressional districts and increasingly stable American electoral geography (a trend established in Chapter 3) has undermined any further opportunities for party entry, and therefore, the partisan representation of low-income voters.
Empirical Foundation

This research was made possible through the construction of several district-level data-sets that describe the distribution of income, for the US, Canada, England, and Sweden, in addition to a variety of primary-source electoral reports and documents. The district-level datasets were constructed from individual-level census datasets, available through the North Atlantic Population Project (US, England, and Sweden) and the Canadian Century Research Infrastructure. In each case, census geographies were matched to electoral district boundaries. Income profiles of each district were developed using reported occupations and historical wage data, or in the Canadian case, income levels reported in the census. Whenever possible and reasonable, wages and salaries were estimated separately for residents of different regions, to take account of regional variation in the cost of living.

The details of district-level data-set construction are included in technical appendices that follow Chapters 4-7. Replication data-sets and code will be fully documented, and made publicly available at the time of publication.

Structure of the Manuscript

The current manuscript is approximately 300 pages long, including appendices, notes, and references. There are twenty-two grayscale figures (ten maps), and twenty-six tables.

Credentials

Karen Jusko is an assistant professor of political science at Stanford University, and a faculty affiliate of Stanford’s Europe Center and the Center for the Study of Poverty and Inequality.

Jusko holds a Ph.D. from the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, and an undergraduate degree from the University of Toronto. She has been a National Hoover fellow, and a fellow at the Center for the Study Democratic Politics, at Princeton University. Jusko’s research has been supported by the National Science Foundation, the European Science Foundation, and the Institute for Research in the Social Sciences at Stanford University. This manuscript builds on her dissertation project, “The Political Representation of the Poor,” which was awarded the American Political Science Associations Harold D. Lasswell Award for the Best Dissertation in the Field of Public Policy, 2010.
References


