



**Inequality**

The IFS Deaton Review

# Political inequality: reasons for optimism?

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# Political inequality: reasons for optimism?

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## Introduction

I am pleased to have the opportunity to comment on the very interesting chapter by Ben Ansell and Jane Gingrich, entitled 'Political Inequality'. Ansell and Gingrich (2022) first thoroughly discuss the concept of political inequality (and provide a very complete overview of the state of the literature on the topic). Then they investigate empirically whether political inequality has risen in line with economic inequality over the past few decades in the United Kingdom. This is a particularly important question, as political inequality can easily generate an inequality trap. In other words, as a result of the growing role of private money in the democratic process, economic inequalities may reinforce political inequalities, which in turn exacerbate economic inequalities; for example, see Cagé (2018) and see also Page and Gilens (2017) for evidence of this vicious circle in the case of the United States. Ansell and Gingrich tackle this question in a very systematic way, taking into account various dimensions of political inequality: who votes, who they vote for, and who politicians are.

I was particularly impressed by the new results that they present on the role of local housing wealth in shaping General Election voting back to 1997 – what they call the 'end of class geography'. Ansell and Gingrich (2022) show, in particular, that the pattern of constituencies with affluent housing that vote Conservative has evaporated since the Brexit referendum of 2016. Next, they show that not only the value of housing but also the structure of housing tenure has political implications. These are new results in the literature – which the authors relate to findings by Chou and Dancygier (2021), who argue that New Labour deliberately moved away from its voter base in social housing – and they deserve to be taken seriously by researchers interested in better understanding the determinants of voting behaviours. I am sure that the chapter by Ansell and Gingrich will pave the way for new research on this topic in the next few years.<sup>2</sup>

In this commentary, I would like to focus on the last dimension of political inequality that Ansell and Gingrich consider – who politicians are – and highlight that it is strongly linked to the first two: who votes, and who they vote for. I will first argue that political representativeness (or the lack of) may at least partly explain the rise in abstention. I will then highlight the role played by campaign finance regulations in explaining the relationship between political and economic inequalities. Finally, beyond the question of economic inequality, using the example of gender under-representation, I will argue that shifting descriptive representation may have concrete policy consequences.

## The importance of unequal descriptive representation

Democratic representation comes in different forms. Here, I would first like to focus on political representativeness understood in the sense of 'descriptive representation' (Pitkin, 1967), that is, the extent to which MPs are 'representative' of (i.e. resemble) the general population.

### Are politicians just like us?

Ansell and Gingrich (2022) provide a number of interesting descriptive facts regarding demographics, education and occupation; they show that, since 1979, the UK Parliament has

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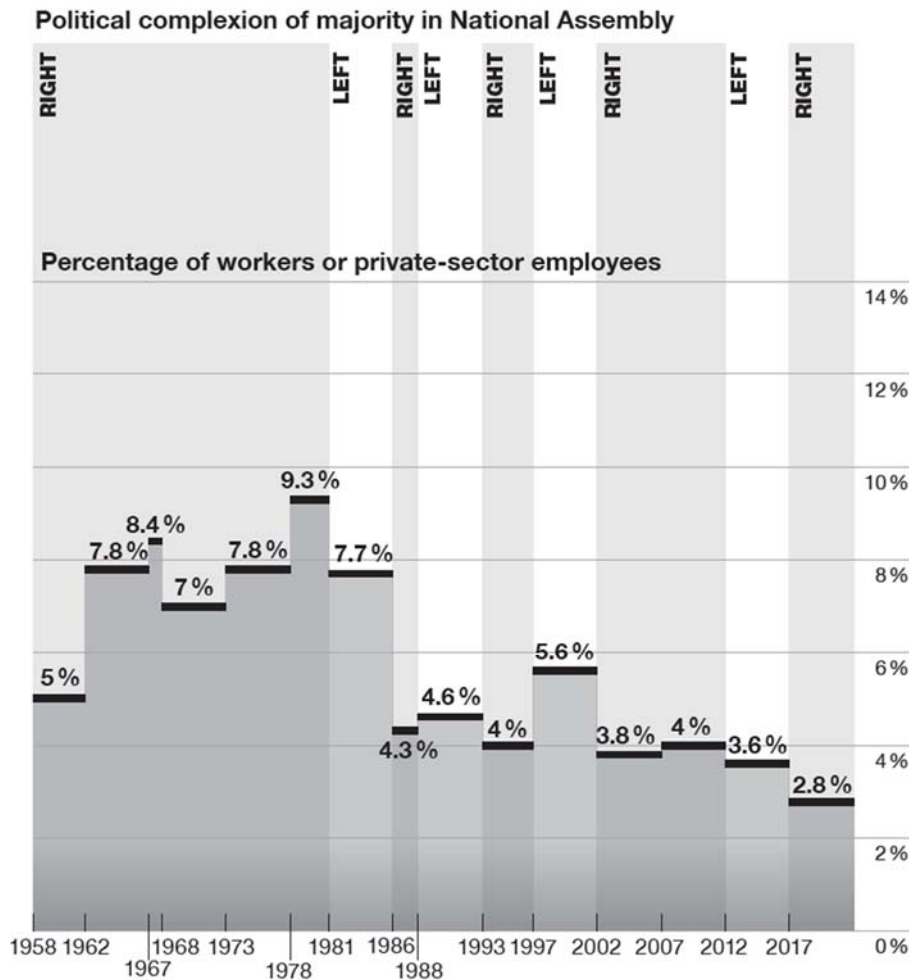
<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Tim Besley and Thomas Piketty for many constructive comments and suggestions. All errors remain my own.

<sup>2</sup> There is a growing literature suggesting that geography has gradually replaced income as a driver of party identification; for example, in the case of the US, Hacker et al. (2022) highlight that the population density of the place in which one lives explains heightened partisan polarisation. Future research needs to go beyond density to improve our understanding of the role played by geography in voting behaviour, and in particular to investigate the importance of the availability of affordable housing. For existing evidence on the relationship between the pattern of house prices and support for far-right parties, see Adler and Ansell (2020).

become more representative of the population in terms of both gender and ethnic diversity, but that manual work backgrounds remain very rare in Parliament and have declined much more quickly than in the population as a whole. This is far from being specific to the UK, however; in France (see Figure 1) and in the US, the working classes are also noticeable for their absence from the benches of Parliament (Cagé, 2018; Carnes, 2013, 2018).

To what extent do citizens care about descriptive representation, as long as their preferences are taken into account by politicians? First, it is important to remember – as Ansell and Gingrich (2022) do – that elected representatives vote in keeping with their occupational (and social) origins; Carnes (2013), for example, has shown that if the share of workers in the US Congress had reflected their share in the population, then the support in Congress for George W. Bush’s tax cuts would have fallen from 62% to 28%. Second, the literature has highlighted that the proximity between candidates and voters may play an important role. In particular, it identifies a gender affinity effect (Sanbonmatsu, 2002; King and Matland, 2003; Dolan, 2008): women (men) are expected to be more supportive of female (male) candidates, in terms of both votes and political contributions (for evidence regarding campaign donations, see also Bouton et al., 2022). Furthermore, race and ethnicity are other relevant factors, as shown in Grumbach and Sahn (2020).<sup>3</sup>

**Figure 1. Percentage of deputies who were blue-collar workers or low-skilled private-sector employees before entering Parliament, France, 1958–2021**



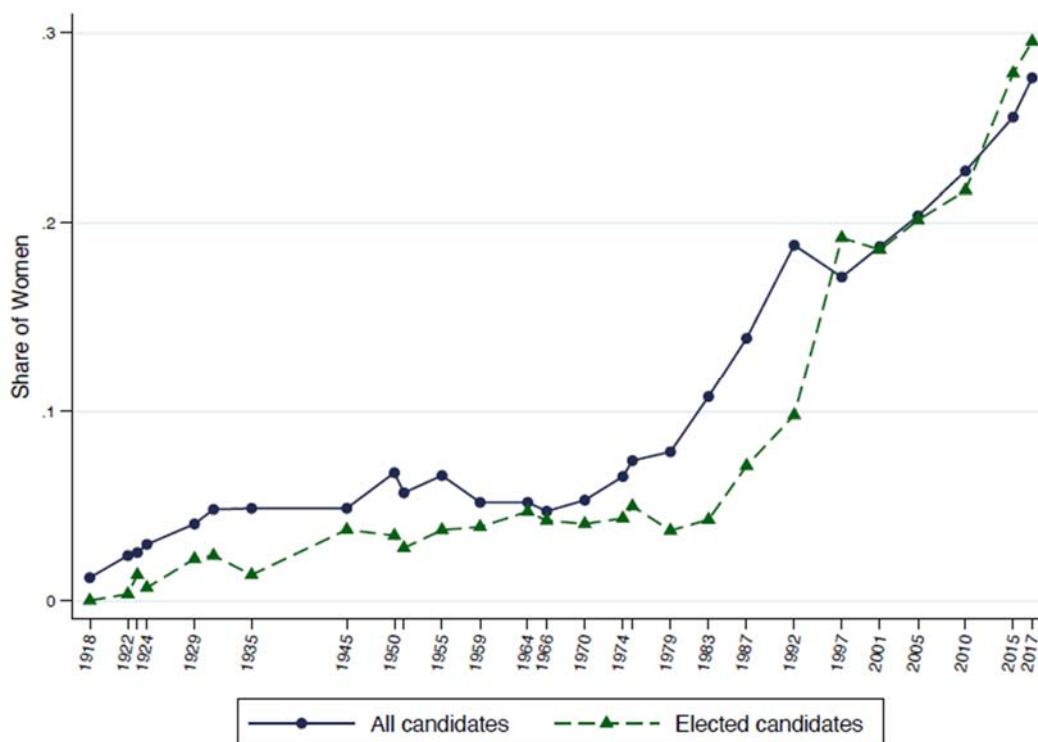
Note: The figure is reproduced from Cagé (2018).

<sup>3</sup> In the last part of this commentary, I provide additional evidence on the impact of male–female parity in politics on policymaking.

Hence, even though during the 20<sup>th</sup> century social scientists used to suggest a preference for elite politicians – particularly more educated ones (Jacobson, 1997) – citizens actually care about descriptive representation per se, a fact that Edgard Dewitte and I have quantified in the case of the UK (Cagé and Dewitte, 2020). More specifically, we have built a novel dataset on the characteristics of all the candidates in the UK General Elections since 1918, and of the constituencies in which they run. Our data cover 26 General Elections and 30,590 unique candidates (57,500 candidates–elections) for whom we have information on gender, age and education, as well as previous occupations. These unique candidate-level data mostly come from *The Times Guide to the House of Commons*: since 1880, in the year following each General Election, *The Times* has published a guide providing biographical details on every elected member of the House and, since 1929, on every unsuccessful candidate. We have digitised this paper format repertory of all the candidates and complemented it with other archival sources (such as the Labour Party *Who's Who*, *Dods Parliamentary Companion*, *Burke's Peerage*, etc.). Regarding constituency characteristics, we mainly rely on the UK Decennial Censuses: tracing the changes in constituencies over time and using the mapping tables provided in the censuses, we build constituency-level socio-demographic indicators, such as the average age of the adult population, the share of women, and the share of the population with a higher education degree.

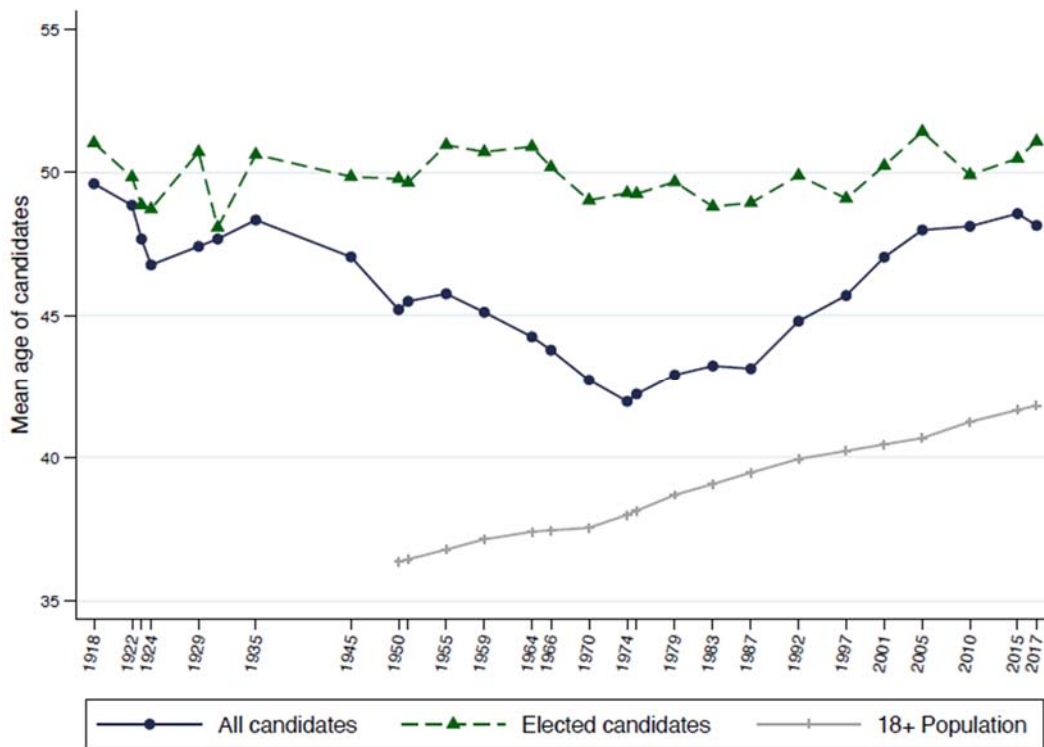
Thanks to these unprecedented data, we can document not only the long-run evolution of the characteristics of MPs – as is carefully done in Ansell and Gingrich (2022) – but also that of the unsuccessful candidates. We indeed believe that both successful and unsuccessful candidates need to be taken into account when studying who politicians are. From a descriptive point of view, whether we consider only the elected politicians or all the candidates running may indeed change our understanding of the degree of political inequality at a given point in time. This is illustrated in Figure 2 where I consider gender: the share of women candidates began rising in the mid-1970s (solid blue line with dots), but it took at least another 10 years for this to translate into more women in Parliament (dashed green line with triangles). Interestingly, it is only recently that we begin to observe more women among the elected politicians than among all the candidates (though at a level well below gender parity – around 30%).

**Figure 2. Evolution of the share of women candidates, UK General Elections, 1917–2017**



Note: The figure displays the evolution of the share of women among all candidates running (solid blue line with dots) and among elected candidates (dashed green line with triangles) in General Elections in the UK between 1917 and 2017.

Source: Reproduced from Cagé and Dewitte (2020).

**Figure 3. Evolution of the age of the candidates, UK General Elections, 1917-2017**

Note: The figure displays the evolution of the average age of all the candidates (solid blue line with dots) and of the elected candidates (dashed green line with triangles) running in General Elections in the UK between 1917 and 2017. The solid grey line with plus symbols reports the evolution of the average age of the overall adult population.

Source: Reproduced from Cagé and Dewitte (2020).

If we now turn to age, we see a recent significant ageing – by six to seven years – of all the candidates (solid blue line with dots in Figure 3). Interestingly, since the end of the 1980s, this ageing occurred at a faster rate than for the overall population (solid grey line with plus symbols). One might be tempted to relate this finding to the fact that most young people – in the UK just as in France and the US – do not actually vote. Furthermore, elected candidates (dashed green line with triangles) tend to be older than unsuccessful candidates (a phenomenon that is only partly driven by an incumbency advantage).

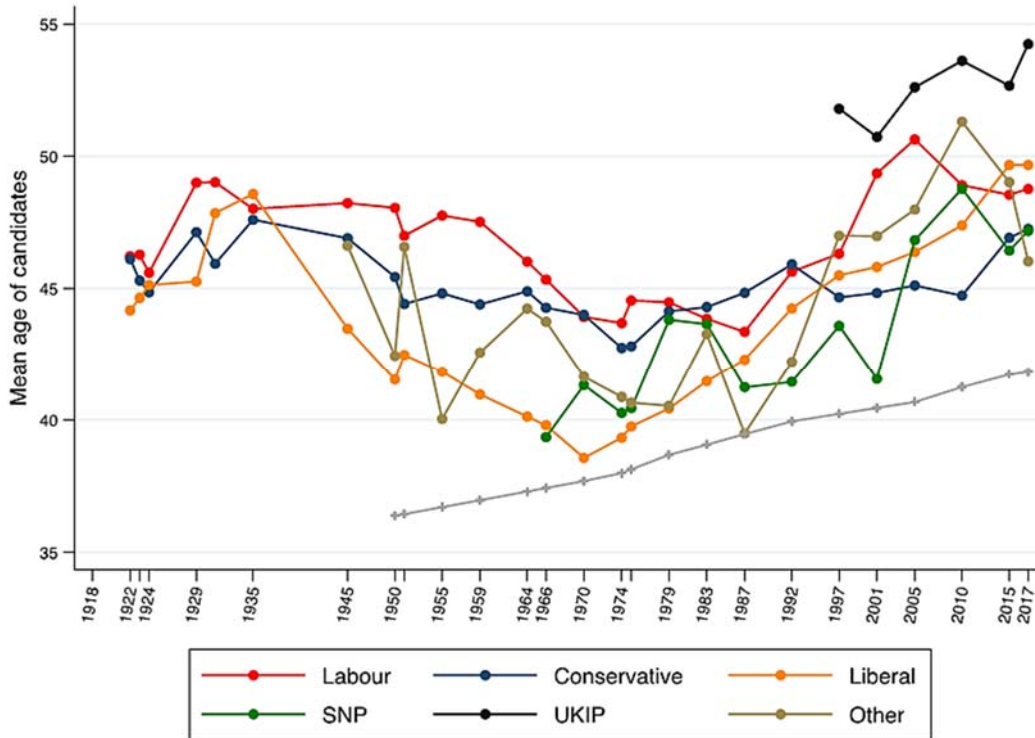
There is heterogeneity depending on the political parties, however (see Figure 4). In particular, UKIP candidates tend to be, on average, older than the candidates from all the other parties. More generally, differentiating parties, an interesting pattern emerges: across all of the different characteristics considered in Cagé and Dewitte (2020) – that is, age and gender, but also education and occupation – UKIP candidates systematically differ from all other parties. They are older – as we have just seen – but also less educated<sup>4</sup> and more often male – and this is true for all the elections in which they participated.

These descriptive findings regarding UKIP candidates are consistent with the evidence provided by Dal Bó et al. (2022) on the Sweden Democrats, the radical-right Swedish party. Dal Bó et al. (2022) indeed show that the politicians from the Sweden Democrats over-represent marginalised groups without strong attachments to the labour market or to traditional nuclear families (in contrast, these groups are under-represented among politicians in all other parties). They then relate these characteristics to those of the Sweden Democrats' electorate and show that, on average, the Sweden Democrats receive distinctively higher vote shares in precincts where a higher share of voters belongs to marginalised groups. Likewise, it would be of interest in

<sup>4</sup> As highlighted in Cagé and Dewitte (2020), the over-representation of college-educated contenders among both candidates and MPs, although decreasing, remains strikingly high (particularly in the case of Oxbridge-educated candidates).

future research to relate the characteristics of UKIP candidates to those of their electorate, and also to investigate the extent to which they reflect the changing structure of the political conflict documented in Piketty (2018) and in Gethin, Martínez-Toledano and Piketty (2022).

**Figure 4. Evolution of the age of the candidates, depending on the party, UK General Elections, 1917–2017**



Note: The figure displays the evolution of the average age of the candidates running in General Elections in the UK between 1917 and 2017. Labour Party candidates are in red, Conservative in blue, Liberal in orange, SNP in green and UKIP in black. The continuous grey line with plus symbols reports the evolution of the average age of the overall adult population.

Source: Reproduced from Cagé and Dewitte (2020).

### The cost of political inequality

In Cagé and Dewitte (2020), we take a first step at analysing the relationship between the characteristics of the candidates and voters' behaviours. While the existing literature has highlighted the existence of a trade-off in selection between competence and social representation – a trade-off that is weak, however, at least in the case of Sweden according to Dal Bó et al. (2017), due to strong positive selection of politicians of low parental socio-economic status<sup>5</sup> – we investigate whether the lack of social representation can have a negative democratic cost in terms of political participation. More precisely, while the literature has so far focused mostly on the quality of politicians, often proxied by their education, we test whether representation can be a marker of the quality of a democratic system.

Leveraging our unique data on constituencies and candidates, we propose a new representation gap index that measures the distance between the socio-demographic characteristics of the candidates and those of their constituents (e.g. the distance between the average age of the candidates running in a constituency and the average age of the voting-age population in this constituency – we consider age, education, gender and occupation). We find that while the average representativeness of the candidates had little impact on political participation at the constituency level over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this has changed radically in recent years.

<sup>5</sup> Consistent with the evidence from the UK, Dal Bó et al. (2017) also show that, compared with the population, Swedish politicians under-represent women as well as people born outside Sweden.

In particular, three of the most recent General Elections (2010, 2015 and 2017) have been characterised by lower turnout in places where the candidates were on average more-educated than citizens – or from higher occupational groups, and so controlling for both electoral and demographic determinants of turnout traditionally studied by the literature. This effect is mainly (but not only) driven by the distance to the incumbent, while the closest candidate plays a smaller role. Using British Election Surveys between 1964 and 2015, we next document a similar pattern at the individual level and find that, quite intuitively, the drop in turnout comes from those voters who are more different from the candidates standing for election. In other words, there seems to be – at least in the case of the UK – a political cost to the lack of descriptive representation: politicians who are more elite tend to discourage citizens from more-marginalised groups from participating in elections.

Does this mean that the representation gap has also become detrimental for the elite candidates in terms of the votes they receive? In other words, should we expect candidates who are more elite to suffer electorally from their lack of representativeness in the years to come? To answer this additional question, in Cagé and Dewitte (2020), we perform a candidate-level analysis where we study the extent to which the vote share obtained by a candidate (controlling for candidate, constituency, and party times election fixed effects) is affected by the distance between the candidate's characteristics and the characteristics of the constituency's voting-age population.

Echoing our results on turnout, we find that candidates who differ more from their constituents in terms of education level performed relatively less well in recent elections. This is also true for older candidates, even though they seem to have enjoyed an electoral advantage throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Overall, this preliminary evidence is consistent with the findings of Dal Bó et al. (2022) regarding the Sweden Democrats' voters. Future research should aim at better understanding the reasons why descriptive representation seems to have become more important in recent years, and the extent to which this might explain the electoral successes of right-wing populist parties in a number of countries, starting with the UK.

All in all, our findings suggest a recent and sudden shift in the impact of descriptive representation on electoral outcomes, which needs to be further studied. It could shed new light on how we approach the so-called quality–representation trade-off, and the reasons behind the persistent gap between political elites and those they are supposed to represent. It could also help us to better understand why the increase in political inequality – once we consider its various dimensions – seems to have entered a vicious circle: citizens who resemble both elected politicians and unsuccessful candidates voted less frequently in elections (precisely because of the representation gap), leading to rising political inequality as measured by participation in elections. Further, the fact that today's politics seems to be characterised by a demand for more descriptive grassroots representation somehow counter-balances the optimistic results in Ansell and Gingrich (2022) regarding the growing gender and ethnic equality of Parliament; indeed, this growth may be happening more slowly than the demand for it. (Furthermore, as the authors highlight, descriptive representational equality has not moved solely in one direction and has in fact decreased when we consider manual backgrounds. While we lack evidence on income and wealth, the evidence we have regarding manual backgrounds – and the growth in economic inequalities – suggests that it might also have decreased for these other two aspects.)

## The unequal funding of democracy

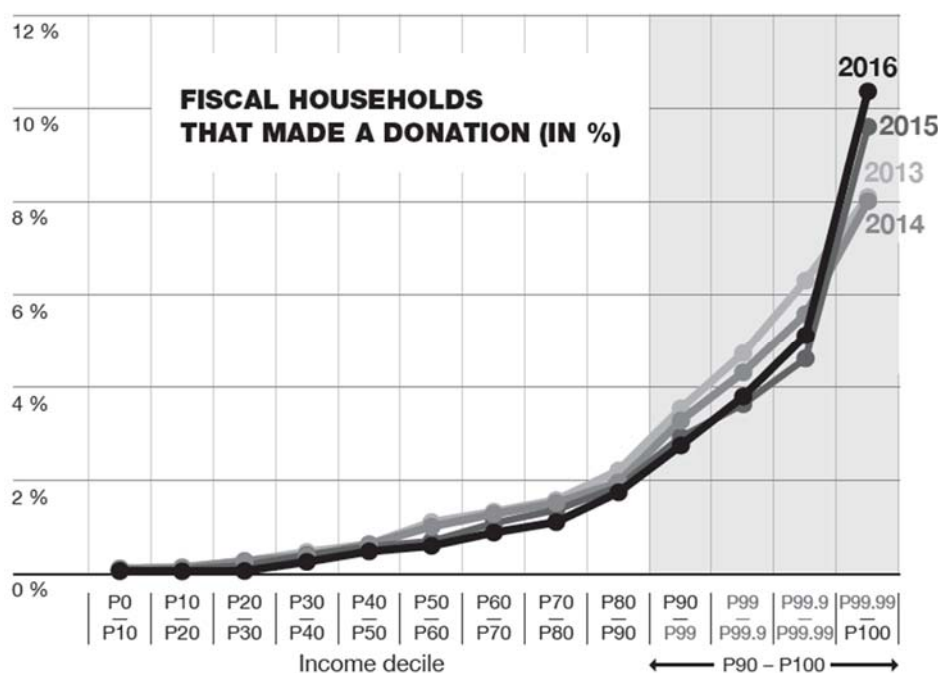
Many important questions remain open, however. Voting is only one of the ways people may participate in politics; hence, one of the limitations of the analysis by Ansell and Gingrich (2022) when they consider citizens is to focus mainly on who votes (i.e. on turnout). Other forms of participation should also be considered, especially campaign donations, when we investigate the relationship between economic and political inequalities. In Cagé (2018), using fiscal data from France, I have shown that the rich disproportionately finance political life: whereas, in 2016, only 0.79% of tax households declared a donation, the figure was higher than 10% among the 0.01% of French people with the highest income (Figure 4). Overall, the richest 10% of French people account for more than 53% of the total in donations and membership fees handed over to political parties (see also Cagé and Guillot, 2022). This is higher than their share of total income

(33%). The richest 1% contribute 12.4%, the top 0.1% account for 3.87% and the top 0.01% give 1.4%. In France, however, political donations are limited by law.

### From economic to political inequalities

There are, however, no such restrictions on political donations in the UK, where citizens (as well as corporations) can contribute as much as they like, and one could thus expect donations to political parties to be even more of a class phenomenon. It would therefore be of interest to use similar data to document the relationship between political and economic inequalities in the UK from the point of view of political donations. It would also be interesting to see the extent to which campaign contributions have become more unequal in recent decades (i.e. more concentrated at the top of the income distribution). Indeed, this is most probably the case given that, according to the Party Funding Review (2006), 'the three main parties have had to rely increasingly on donations or loans from a small number of very rich individuals'.<sup>6</sup>

**Figure 5. Percentage of fiscal households declaring a donation or subscription to political parties, by income level, France, 2013–16**



Note: In 2016, 0.6% of taxpayers in the sixth income decile declared at least one donation or subscription to a political party.

Source: Reproduced from Cagé (2018).

I think future research should aim to gain a better understanding of why certain types of citizens self-select into politics (for the state of the literature, see, in particular, Dal Bó and Finan, 2018). Interestingly, here again, economic inequalities may play an important role, even in a country like the UK where political expenditures at General Elections are limited by law (and are therefore at rather low levels compared with other countries). Indeed, not only could candidates be financially constrained when they run in General Elections (see, for example, survey data from Fisher and Denver, 2009) but, given that a large number of candidates rely primarily on their personal wealth to fund their campaign (Gwyn, 1962; Butler and Lovenduski, 1995), this factor may also mean that potential candidates decide not to run.

Furthermore, an individual's contributions to the funding of a political party may be used as a tool to be selected as a candidate by that party. Of course, even though information on large donors has been publicly available on the Electoral Commission website since 2000, establishing a

<sup>6</sup> The review of the funding of political parties was commissioned in 2006 to Sir Hayden Phillips by Tony Blair, the Prime Minister at the time.



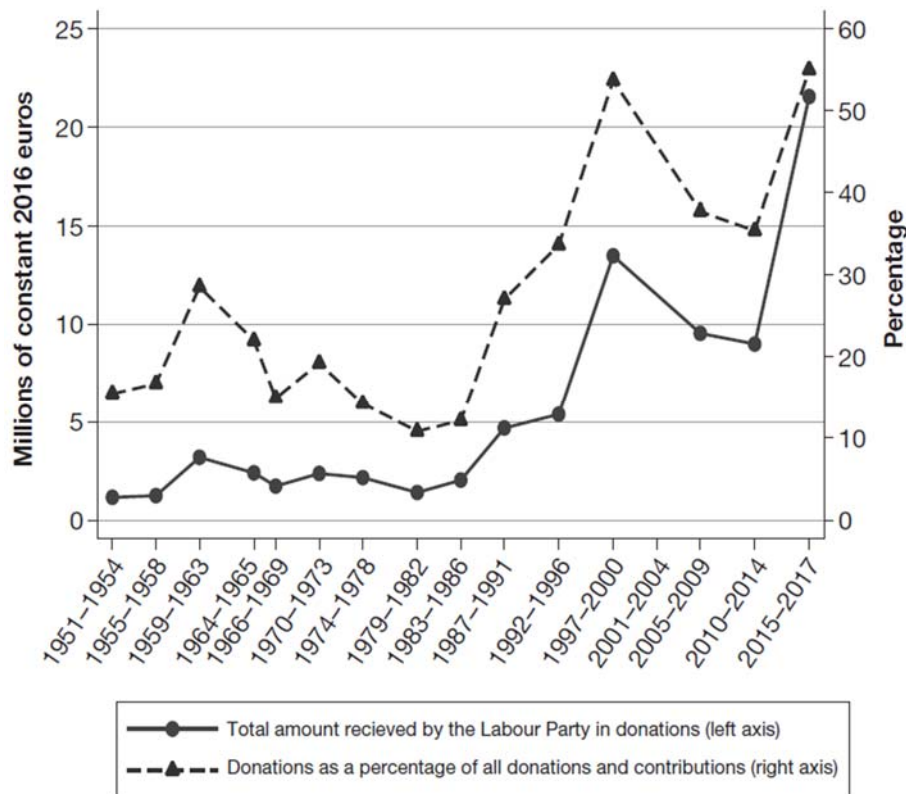
causal link between the amount contributed and parliamentary candidate selection seems challenging, beyond revealing anecdotal evidence. However, having enough money might be – at least for some – a covert qualification to run for elections.<sup>7</sup> What are the others? As highlighted by Hardman (2018), 'the cost of standing for Parliament is absurd'. This cost is monetary, but not solely; being a candidate is also costly personally: 'marriages break down, candidates develop addictions and mental health problems, and others end up sobbing on their kitchen floors night after night after reading streams of personal abuse over email and social media'. In spite of this, Hardman (2018) notes that 24% of voters would consider standing as an MP if someone suggested it. But, the large majority of people are never asked to become involved in politics. In particular, people from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to have been socialised in politics.

In the end, if money is not a sufficient condition to enter politics, it seems to be a necessary one – many people simply cannot afford to stand for Parliament. Note that when Margaret Thatcher set out to weaken the labour movement in 1984, she made it more difficult for the unions to continue funding the Labour Party – which was concomitant to the declining presence of workers on Labour's parliamentary benches. Of course, it is difficult to establish a causal link between the two events. But the correlation between the decline in the share of workers in the UK Parliament – a phenomenon out of all proportion to their declining share in the active population – and the increase in private donations to Labour from the late 1980s is nonetheless striking. Whereas, until the middle of the decade, private donations accounted for barely 10% of its total revenue in donations and membership fees, today they make up more than half (Figure 6). This growing weight of private donations is due partly to their quantitative increase since the early 1980s, but also to the collapse of union contributions since 1986 following the measures taken by Margaret Thatcher. With less of a financial presence, workers have been gradually shut out of the political process. Further, although the rise of private money began well before the arrival of New Labour, it accelerated in 1997 after the term inaugurated by Tony Blair.

Here again, the link between the financial health of labour unions and parties of the left – and the political consequences of the weakening of that link – is far from being a British peculiarity. It is also found in the US, for example, where the unions have for years been the main funders of the Democratic Party. In both the US and the UK, when Republicans/Conservatives have sought to weaken their Democratic/Labour rivals, they have blocked the conduits between union and party coffers. In the US, this has taken the form of so-called right-to-work laws. While the National Labor Relations Act in 1935 had significantly protected the right to form unions in the private sector, the Taft-Hartley Act of 1947 curbed these advances and enabled individual states to introduce right-to-work laws. These removed the obligation for workers, both unionised and non-unionised, to pay agency shop protection, thereby allowing individuals to benefit from collective bargaining and union representation without having to pay union dues. The direct result was a considerable weakening of the unions' financial base. Feigenbaum, Hertel-Fernandez, and Williamson (2018) have studied the impact of right-to-work laws in a number of US states between 1980 and 2016. According to their estimates, the resultant weakening of the unions led to a 3.5% drop in the electoral score of the Democratic Party in presidential elections (as well as a fall in voter turnout) and a worsening of its results in elections to the House of Representatives and the Senate. The mechanism is evident: the right-to-work laws reduced union contributions by 1.25%, and the Democratic Party was unable to make up the shortfall through other sources of funding. On average, and everything else equal, the candidates with fewer funds have less chance of winning an election (see, for example, Bekkouche, Cagé and Dewitte 2022 for evidence from France and the UK).

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<sup>7</sup> Note furthermore that, in the UK, candidates must pay a £500 deposit, which is only returned to them if they win at least 5% of the votes cast; for potential candidates from working-class backgrounds, this can act as a deterrent.

**Figure 6. Evolution of private donations to the Labour Party, UK, 1951-2017**

Source: Reproduced from Cagé (2018).

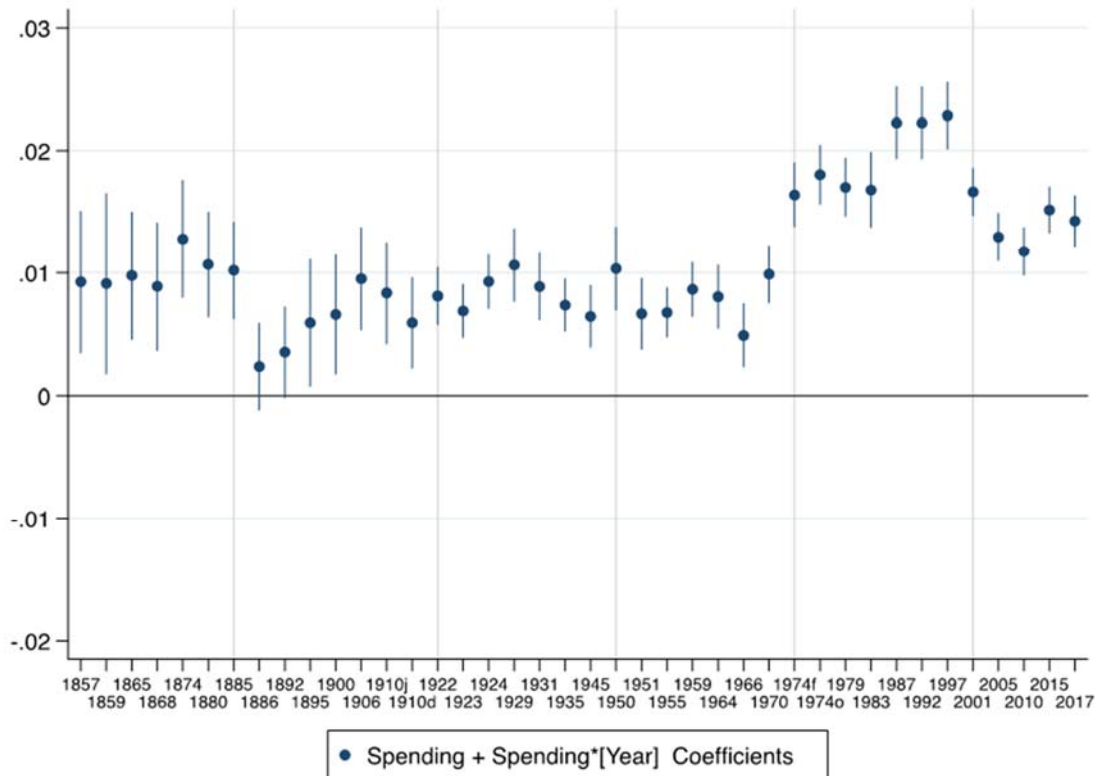
Hence, future research should investigate the extent to which changes in campaign finance rules in the UK, which is a country that has been regulating campaign finance practices for more than 150 years, have been effective at reducing political inequalities and, in particular, the link between political and economic inequalities, from the point of view of the set of candidates running for elections. This seems all the more important considering that, while in the UK the amounts spent on candidates' campaigns have decreased dramatically since 1880, the correlation between this spending and the votes candidates receive has in fact risen, as illustrated in Figure 7 (Cagé and Dewitte, 2021).

### **(Better) regulating campaigns**

However, the fact that economic inequalities reinforce political inequalities is not a fatality. It reflects the insufficiencies of existing campaign finance regulations. The persistent correlation between campaign spending and votes in the UK shows that measures aimed at reducing the amounts of money spent during elections (such as spending caps) may not necessarily decrease the role money plays in the process. These measures can nevertheless have different effects, such as changing the pool of potential candidates. It would thus be of interest to study how spending caps affect political selection; see Avis et al. (2022) and Fourinaies (2021) for evidence regarding their impact on political competition in Brazil and in the UK, respectively.

In addition, in their appreciation of the efficiency of campaign finance regulations, researchers – as well as policymakers – should consider the role played by media outlets, even those on which candidates are forbidden to advertise (e.g. television in countries such as France and the UK). Indeed, media outlets are not solely a support platform for campaign advertising, but also serve as information channels about – and sometimes amplifiers of – any candidate's public appearances. Hence, all kinds of support platforms can have an impact, in particular those that have a local or decentralised aspect, as most legislative campaigns do. Furthermore – even if here again additional research is needed – it seems that increasing economic inequalities have also resulted in media ownership concentration, with a small number of billionaires owning the majority of the news media in countries such as France, the UK and the US. This is not without consequences for news content and ultimately for voter information and electoral behaviour

**Figure 7. Evolution of the relationship between the candidates' share of the constituency total spending and their vote share, 1857–2017**



Note: The figure plots, for each election year, the point estimates and 95% confidence intervals of the linear combination of the share of spending coefficient and its interaction with an election year. Vertical lines indicate relatively homogeneous (in terms of electoral and mediatic environment) time periods (for details, see Cagé and Dewitte, 2022).

(DellaVigna and Kaplan, 2007; Martin and Yurukoglu, 2017; Martin and McCrain, 2019; Cagé et al., 2021a). Meanwhile, public service broadcasting is under attack in many Western democracies, the UK to begin with, where the BBC faces funding cuts.

When investigating the relationship between economic and political inequalities and studying the potential impact of campaign finance reforms, researchers should also take into account the potential changes in parties' strategies that their reforms might entail. Parties are strategic actors whose adaptation to the new regulatory constraints can significantly affect the importance of money in politics – and of who spends it.<sup>8</sup>

Finally, if it eventually appears that policymakers have only limited influence on the capacity of campaign spending to attract votes, it would make sense to reflect on who is funding candidates' campaigns, and, if the capture of elections by private interests is a concern, to consider introducing public funding, such as the reimbursement of campaign costs or subsidies to political parties. Contrary to what we observe in a number of Western democracies (and beyond), there is indeed no public reimbursement of campaign expenditures in the UK, which may increase political inequalities. Indeed, money for General Elections in the UK comes mainly from the candidates' personal wealth on the one hand (this point is linked to the issue of political selection) and from local fundraising on the other hand, which raises the question of the risks of capture.

Whether this might change in the near future remains an open question. Interesting proposals have been made in recent years, in particular as part of the Party Funding Review (2006). In this

<sup>8</sup> On changes in parties' strategies as a consequence of increasing economic inequalities, see Hacker and Pierson (2020). Using evidence from France, Cagé, Le Pennec and Mougín (2021b) show that campaign finance reforms lead politicians to adjust their campaign communication strategically, thereby affecting the information made available to voters.

report, Sir Hayden Philips discusses a number of different scenarios, including a 'complete' scenario with greater transparency, greater expenditure control, the introduction of a cap on donations – so as to 'stop political parties relying on a small number of high net-worth individuals' and also to make 'smaller donations more important to parties' – and greater levels of public funding. But the road to the adoption of such a reform still seems very long.

## Why we should care about the identity of politicians

It has proven somehow easier to adopt reforms towards greater male–female parity in politics. Until now, the main focus of this commentary has been on the economic dimension of political inequality, but many other dimensions come into play, starting with gender. An improvement in the representation of women in elected offices and the introduction of public campaign finance could even be two sides of the same coin. In Brazil, electoral law reforms were passed in 2020–21 that vary the allocation of the Electoral Fund (i.e. the public money funding the elections) across parties depending on the gender (as well as on the race) of the candidates.

As highlighted above, Ansell and Gingrich (2022) note that, regarding gender, Parliament has moved towards the people in the UK, but only to some extent. The glass is half full ('women made up just 3% of MPs in 1979 but over a third by 2019') but also half empty (30% is still 20 percentage points below 50). In most countries, the increase in political gender equality can be at least partly explained by the introduction of gender quotas. Since the 1995 Beijing Declaration (as part of the Fourth World Conference on Women) – where most countries committed to increasing the representation of women in parliaments to 30% – gender quotas have been adopted in 132 countries. But the UK political parties were relatively slower to move towards positive action policies than other European parties, a fact that is often related to the specificities of the first-past-the-post electoral system with single-member constituencies (Kelly and White, 2016).

A number of policies intended to increase female representation have been implemented by the parties, however, in particular the Labour Party's 1993 all-women shortlists (AWS). This policy mandates that only female aspirants be considered in half of the vacant seats the party is likely to win.<sup>9</sup> While it received a lot of criticism, Nugent and Krook (2015) show that the arguments do not hold; in particular, contrary to what has often been claimed, they demonstrate that AWS did not facilitate the entry of unqualified women or jeopardise the Labour Party's electoral success. Interestingly, their findings are consistent with evidence from other countries. While opponents to quotas often emphasise the potential threat to meritocratic selection, Besley et al. (2017) have shown, using the adoption of a gender quota by Sweden's Social Democratic Party in 1993, that competence actually increased following the introduction of the quota, and more so in municipalities where the quota led to the biggest increase in the proportion of elected women. In other words, contrary to the expectations of quota sceptics, women's competence did not go down but stayed roughly constant, and the competence of the elected men also went up significantly.

Furthermore, not only does gender equality not come at a cost, but existing research has shown that male–female parity in politics has a positive impact on policymaking and the ways in which policy decisions are implemented. In the US Congress, for instance, draft legislation introduced by women gains, on average, more co-sponsors than legislation introduced by men, and Republican congresswomen also have a greater chance of obtaining bipartisan support for the legislation they advocate (Gagliarducci and Paserman, 2022). In the case of India, Chattopadhyay and Duflo (2004) have shown that when women – rather than men – headed municipal councils, there was more investment particularly in the provision of drinking water. Interestingly, their study is based on the existence of reserved seats for women in India since the mid-1990s; all citizens (men and women) vote to choose their representatives, but only women do so for these seats.

India, the world's largest democracy, has also gone the furthest in introducing genuine social parity in its legislative bodies. Since independence, it has established quotas for social groups that

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<sup>9</sup> Further, to some extent, both the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives have also called for gender-balanced shortlists.

have historically suffered discrimination (the scheduled castes, also called untouchables or Dalits; see, e.g., Jensenius, 2017). This takes the form of constituencies (16% of the total) in which only candidates from those groups can run in legislative elections. As highlighted by Jensenius (2017), if the reserved constituencies did not exist, it is likely that no former untouchables would ever make it to the assembly.

Would it not be possible to introduce similar rules – either in the form of quotas or reservations – to improve the representation of the working classes (and not only of women) in countries such as France, the UK and the US? Of course, further research would be needed. To begin with, it would be of interest to carefully study whether AWS have had concrete policy consequences in the UK, and also to investigate the effects of central parties' attempts to diversify candidates. However, given that, as noted by Ansell and Gingrich (2022), 'if anything there might have been a slight recent convergence towards general dissatisfaction', it seems to be that there is no other choice than to radically innovate if one does not want democracies to die from unsustainable political inequalities.

## Concluding comments

A lot still needs to be done if we are to better understand political inequality. Ansell and Gingrich (2022) already cover an impressive number of issues. In this commentary, I have stressed the key importance of unequal descriptive representation and the unequal funding of democracy for a fuller understanding of the issues at stake. It is clear, however, that many other factors should be included in this discussion, such as the interplay between political inequality and new media technologies, as well as the rising importance of racial inequalities.

Let me end on an optimistic note. Although political inequality has largely increased in recent decades, our improved understanding of the processes at play can also help us design more effective solutions. To tackle unequal representation, it may be necessary to implement new forms of affirmative action in order to attain more socially representative parliaments. This has been done in a large number of countries in order to gradually improve the representation of women, and similar measures may be needed to improve the representation of the less well-off and of younger citizens in the future. Regarding the unequal funding of democracy, it is clear that this has largely been a blind spot in our democratic thinking. Attempts to regulate the power of private money have been sketchy and incomplete, and have not taken full advantage of the experience of the various countries. An egalitarian system of democratic equality vouchers might be the only way to reconcile the philosophical ideal of political equality with the unfortunate reality of unequal voice and participation. The many insights provided by Ansell and Gingrich in their highly informative chapter help us move in that direction.

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