Unions and Party Politics on Long Island

by Lillian Dudkiewicz-Clayman

These are interesting times for Long Island labor unions. Almost every day, newspapers are filled with stories about one level of government or the other looking to balance their budgets by laying off workers, cutting the benefits of organized workers or negotiating givebacks. On May 21, 2012, the Republican-dominated Nassau County legislature proposed a bill that would, in effect, completely undermine collective bargaining. This happened at the end of their legislative session after it had been announced that the bill would be tabled. The Republican majority passed the bill with only a few observing their deception. The legislation, which would have given the county executive free reign to make changes in union contracts in order to achieve his targets for savings in the budget, was declared illegal in court.=

All across the country from Wisconsin to Indiana to Ohio to New Jersey, where Republicans gained control of the legislatures, a similar game plan has unfolded. Their goal was to eliminate collective bargaining from the public sector and weaken public sector unions in the process. It is an agenda to privatize as many public services as possible and turn them over to corporate interests, with little regard for the jobs or the services that are eliminated in the process.

On Long Island these events – an outright attack on collective bargaining and the privatization of the bus and health care providers in Nassau County – represent a sea change in the relationship between the Republican Party and the public sector unions.

There has been a special relationship between the Republican Party and the Labor Movement on Long Island for decades, especially in Nassau County. Labor has supplied the votes and an army of campaign workers. Republicans made sure that government provided good paying jobs based on good contracts for the public sector and pro-labor legislation for the private sector unions. Labor didn't always get what it wanted and neither did the Republican machine. But there has been an 'understanding that on Long Island, Republicans were different. They were not the anti-labor Republicans that dominated the Party in the rest of the country. They were even different from their upstate brethren.

Through the years, union members on Long Island would register as Republicans because the Republican Party protected their interests. Locally, Union leaders frequently served as Republican committeemen. As long as the Party supported the unions, unions could support the party.

Many of the current union leaders and activists on Long Island were born and raised in working class families that moved to Long Island from one of New York City's five boroughs. Most have stayed true to their working class roots. As they and their families moved to the Island, they regularly enrolled as Republicans. Their unions, with only a few exceptions, supported Republican candidates. This occurred despite the fact that over the years since WWII, the national Republican Party was the party that took responsibility for the Taft-Hartley Act, the Landrum-Griffin Act and railed against what they perceived as the social excesses and the pro-worker Labor Laws of the New Deal. Former city residents and their children lived with the Tammany Democratic machine and voted Democratic in the city. But once they moved to the Island, they and their children realized that the Republican machine was the means to assure a job or access to government services.

This marriage of Republican politics and union support helped elect local mayors, town supervisors and county executives. During the 1970's and 1980's, with labor support, "Long Island Republican leaders could boast that their two counties cast more Republican votes than any other two in the nation."[2] For example, up until the past several years, Congressman Peter King's "union support had been at the heart of the Nassau G.O.P.'s success, and King prided himself on his kinship with working-class voters."[3]

How did this relationship between machine politics and labor unions diverge? Why is the Nassau County Republican Party now turning on the very organizations that, decade after decade and election after election, consistently provided the contributions and the workers that helped them get elected? As the battle lines are drawn, what will the unions do now that the party apparatus has betrayed them? Who can the public sector unions trust and who can they support?

How did unions get to this point and how do they regain their political power? I recently asked a number of labor leaders and activists on Long Island for their views on this question. I prefaced that question with another: how did they and their families arrive here on Long Island and become engaged in the Labor Movement?

First, some background. It begins in New York City. The City has long been the bastion of Democratic machine politics. During the latter part of the 19th century, Democratic politicians discovered that they could ascend to power on the wave of votes from the immigrant workers that flooded New York. Recognizing the potential of sheer numbers, the Democratic machine of Tammany Hall used the power of patronage to establish New York City as a stronghold for the Democratic Party by exchanging jobs, contracts and positions for votes.

The city Democratic machine has been long-lasting. Even today, despite the election of Republicans LaGuardia, Lindsay, Giuliani and Bloomberg as mayors, the Democratic Party is still dominant. In 2012, in most of the New York City council districts, and in most of the city's state assembly and state senate districts, the primary election for the Democratic nomination is viewed by many as the "real" election.

On Long Island, this is not the case. Historically, the Republican Party has been dominant here. Many of the people moving onto the island came from one of the five boroughs.[4] Ask almost anyone who lives on Long Island where their family came from and you will most likely hear the Brooklyn, Bronx, Queens and on occasion, Manhattan. The president of the Nassau PBA James Carver told me, "Everyone joined the Republicans when they moved here." [5]

(photo: Regional Labor Review)

Many of today's labor leaders and activists came to Long Island as children. They arrived during the 40's, 50's and 60's. Families moved to Long Island for the possibility of a single family home, good schools, less crime and a chance to get away from the crowded city. Many were part of a vast migration in the years following WWII.

In the 1940's,a severe housing shortage existed in New York City, caused in part by the razing of entire neighborhoods for highways like the Cross Bronx Expressway. The shortage provided an impetus for veterans to look for housing in places other than the City. The passage of the GI Bill after WWII provided returning soldiers with low interest mortgages for homes.[6] So, beginning in the 1940's, when William Levitt developed a method of building inexpensive tract houses by building on slabs, massive housing development projects like Levittown sprang up like weeds in a vacant lot all over Long Island, especially in Nassau County.[7] In a very short time, Long Island became an attractive alternative to crowded city living.

The roads and highways built prior to WWII also contributed to the population explosion on Long Island. During the 1930's, state park commissioner Robert Moses built the parkways and roads to reach the state parks he created on Long Island. The Northern State and Southern State Parkways provided access to much of Long Island where previously there were few roads.[8] Good roads and affordable automobiles established an easy commute for former city residents who still held jobs in the city. For an increasing number of new Long Islanders, the wartime expansion of manufacturers such as Fairchild Republic, Grumman, and Sperry Gyroscope provided jobs nearby.

By the 1950's, the population growth on Long Island was nothing short of spectacular. "In the time span between censuses, Nassau's population grew 93.3%, from 672,765 to 1,300,171. Suffolk grew from just 276,129 persons to 666,784, a whopping 141.5% increase. The Island's population count soared higher by over one million people. Housing units constructed in Nassau and Suffolk counties in the decade accounted for 30% of all the homes built in New York State. The following years (1960-1970) were the next highest decade of population growth. During this period the Nassau-Suffolk area grew by 589,000 persons, a 29.9% increase." [9]

Many of the people who moved to Long Island came from the city's many ethnic neighborhoods. One of the largest ethnic groups to move to Long Island from the five boroughs were Italian-Americans. In the early years of the twentieth century, they arrived in small numbers and were often met with outright bigotry and hostility by native Long Islanders. The Klu Klux Klan was active in Suffolk County and staged rallies against the "foreigners". White Anglo-Saxon Protestants were suspicious of Italian American Catholics, fearing that their loyalty to the Pope overrode their allegiance to the United States.[10] Most of these early Italian migrants were workers, spending most of their days putting food on the table with no time for partisan political activity.

However, even in those early years, astute Republican leaders recognized the potential votes of their new neighbors. Despite the fact that the ethnic neighborhoods in the city were overwhelmingly Democratic, Long Island Republican leaders like Wilbur G. Doughty made a point of recruiting Italian Americans into the Republican Party. Mimicking the Democratic Tammany machine in the city, Doughty appointed Italian Americans to paid positions within the Party. Recognizing that ethnic politics are based on personal relationships, this patronage paid off in years to come by establishing the groundwork for Republican Party organization among Italian Americans.

Republican Party influence among Italian Americans became more important in the post war years as Italian Americans grew to be the largest ethnic group on the island.[11] While many of the former city dwellers may have been democrats or voted Democratic in city elections, the Republican Party provided tangible opportunities to the new arrivals. If you lived in the city and you needed a summer job or a pothole fixed on your street, you went to the Democratic precinct captain. On Long Island, you went to the Republican committeeman. As former city dwellers, Italian Americans understood the party machine. In fact, during the 1930's, in New York City, Italian Americans had "more active political clubs than any other city nationality group."[12] The experience of Italian-Americans was similar to every other ethnic group that moved to Long Island, albeit in larger numbers. Party leaders could get things done for you if you needed them. Party leaders could get you a job.

The population explosion of the 50's and 60's led to a demand for government services. Providing services, especially by county and local government, meant creating jobs. On Long Island, the Civil Service Commission handled all county jobs. The commission was made up of part-time political appointees who ruled on the job applications. Job applications were processed by an Executive Secretary who was appointed by the county executive, but could be fired by the commission. The executive secretary was also responsible for administering tests and day-to-day operations. Some municipalities like Long Beach, Hempstead and Glen Cove had their own commissions.While state statute called for mandatory testing and written specifications for civil service jobs, there was no statutory requirement for municipal government to follow state civil service rules.

This is how it worked. If you wanted a job, you went to a party leader.

In Nassau County, new hires were generally temporary appointments. In 1956 for example, 41 per cent of county civil service employees and two thirds of town and village workers, with the exception of police officers, were temporary appointees.[13] Hiring temporary employees also took place in Suffolk County but not to the same extent as its neighbor to the west. In 1961 in Suffolk County only 14 per cent of the county's 2500 workers were temporary employees.

Republican Party sources acknowledged, in a 1972 newspaper article, that before any new applicant was hired for a county government job, "he is cleared through Republican headquarters to determine whether his employment has been approved by his local Republican leader and (County chairman Joe) Margiotta."[14]

With no enforceable civil service rules and regulations, job applicants and employees became dependent on the relationships they developed with the power structure. Starting in 1968 until 1983, as head of the Nassau County Republicans, Joe Margiotta fine-tuned the patronage system to build one of the most successful political machines in the country.

Another way to get hired was to have a relative, who had the connections with the party. In 1977, 93% of the 601 summer jobs available in Hempstead "went to persons with GOP connections". In addition, 74% of the 2,311 total summer jobs of Nassau County, Hempstead, Oyster Bay and Hempstead went to "enrolled Republicans or to persons whose family members were Republicans." [15]

A *Newsweek* study done in 1972 revealed that many of the Republican political leaders of Nassau County and the towns used their influence to hire family members and relatives. Some of the family members had the required job qualifications while others "got their posts because of family connections and lacked the background that other applicants for the job would have needed."[16] So, when former Senator Alphonse D'Amato was Hempstead Town Supervisor, his father was made a director of commercial research and evaluation. His sister got a job as a Hempstead Town senior citizens counselor.

Nepotism crossed party lines. Glen Cove, the only municipality under Democratic control when the study was done in 1972, also adopted the practice of using family influence to hire relatives for government jobs. Then Mayor-Supervisor Andrew DiPaola, his chief aide Vincent Suozzi and the Democratic Commissioner of Accounts all had relatives working for Glen Cove. On the county level, the director of the Nassau County Civil Service Commission, Adele Leonard, was hired by a Democratic county executive at the same time that her husband served as chief deputy county attorney. When asked if there was anything wrong with relatives in public jobs, she opined that there "was nothing wrong with several members of a political family holding public jobs. 'I happen to come from a brilliant family', she said. 'It would be a disservice to the people of Nassau County to deprive them of one of us just because we are related.'"

Getting a government job, particularly in Nassau County or one the towns and villages, came with a price. As early as 1952, if you had a job with the town or city, the rule of thumb was to contribute one percent of your annual salary to the Republican Party. According to Margiotta, this rule was seen "as an acceptable contribution from public employees."[17]

Part of the formula for the success of the GOP machine was that many Republican committeemen were the heads of town departments or held key supervisory positions. By 1973, the GOP county chairman said that anywhere from "50 to 75 percent of the party's nearly 2,000 committeemen are on public payrolls."[18] In Nassau, there were 2 committeemen in each of the 971 districts. Part of their job was to raise $400.00 in contributions from each election district. He was also responsible for selling tickets to Republican events and making sure that voters turned out on Election Day. More importantly, the committeemen collected the "contributions" of one percent from the public employees who owed their jobs to the political machine.[19] This made it easy for party leaders to keep track of who contributed and who didn't.

And what happened if you didn't contribute to the party? It was understood that raises and promotions were contingent upon contributions. As one Republican source said to a newspaper reporter, "This is the deal. If you don't give your one percent you don't get a raise or a promotion."[20]

This system, attributed to Nassau County Chairman Joe Margiotta, made the Republican Party very wealthy. By 1973, with 23 full-time workers, the administrative staff of the Nassau County Republicans was the same size as the state Republican committee. The staffers had high salaries with medical, dental, insurance benefits and a pension plan. Margiotta's Republican committee dominated almost all of Nassau's local governments, including many of their more than 25,000 jobs. Because the expectation was that government employees would contribute one percent of their salary, buy tickets to fundraisers and work on elections, in return for promotions, patronage and job security, the Republican Party was able to build an army of workers that could virtually guarantee re-election of their candidates. That was the system. As George Washington Plunkitt said, "Men ain't in politics for nothin'. They want to get somethin' out of it."[21] So during the 1960's, even with the Democrats in control of county government, "there were enough jobs left in Nassau's three Republican-controlled town administrations to care for the basic employment needs of the party."[22]

The Republicans, by collecting the one percent from people who got their jobs through the patronage system, reinforced the idea that what the machine gave, the machine could take away. Most people understood that politicians have long memories, that loyalty counted for something. Even those who were not employed with any municipality understood the system. They knew that if they wanted something from the town or county, they had to go to their election district committeeman. As one committeeman said, "People come to me when they want a summer job for their kids, a pothole fixed in the streets, all kinds of things."[23]

During the administration of Eugene Nickerson, when the Democrats controlled the Nassau County government in the 1960's, they, too, solicited contributions from employees. They went further than the Republicans; the Democrats asked for three percent of employees' annual salary. But the democrats weren't very successful at collecting. They raised money by selling ads in party journals to businesses that wanted government contracts-$800,000.00 in 1970 when a Democratic county executive was still in office. The downside to this system was that if they weren't in office, it was more difficult to sell ads. The unpredictability of elections made businesses more reluctant to contribute to the Democrats.

Without collective bargaining rights public employees had to go along with the patronage system. They had no alternative. During the 1950's and 1960's, the Civil Service Employees Association was more like a "fraternal organization". When CSEA leaders wanted to do anything for members, they "had to curry favor with elected officials, to lobby for salary increases and to go with hat in hand to complain about grievances."[24] Irving Flaumenbaum, the CSEA leader on Long Island since 1950, held "secret meetings in the basements of bars and grills because if the county knew where we were meeting, they would have a man taking down the names of people who attended."[25] In the face of the Republican machine, the union, such as it was, was impotent. As late as 1970, the CSEA' membership was described "like the Odd Fellows and the political clout of a Goldie Hawn Fan Club." [26]

In 1967, the passage of the Taylor Law created collective bargaining rights for public employees. At first, neither the workers nor the Republican Party recognized that the law would change their alliance.

Flaumenbaum and the Republicans had a long political marriage even if CSEA didn't have the same rights as unions in the private sector.

Why should things change? Relying on the new law, CSEA moved for recognition without calling for elections, often with the support of the elected officials. CSEA became the recognized bargaining agent without an election in 99% of the units in Nassau and Suffolk County. They had 111 units in Nassau and 50 in Suffolk.[27]

The Taylor Law provided an opportunity for other unions to challenge CSEA for representation rights. Teamsters Local 237, the Service Employees International Union and others contested CSEA's apparent unilateral right to represent the public sector on Long Island and demanded to be included in representation elections. Some unions opposing CSEA were quick to point out the cozy relationship between the Republican Party and CSEA. It was typified as anti-democratic and wrong.

During one challenge in 1974, Hempstead town sanitation workers picketed in opposition to CSEA claiming that the union was "an extension of the Republican Party." The local union representative on the negotiating committee was also a Republican committeeman from East Meadow. The workers claimed that to get a promotion they had to contribute one percent of their salary to the Republican Party. Illustrating the political culture, the local CSEA president

observed, "In order to get their jobs here, you have to be a Republican. Is it any different anywhere else?" [28] The newspaper carried a picture of the protesting workers. This marked one of the first times that there was a very public opposition to the power structure.

Party boss Joe Margiotta defended the one percent rule. He claimed that asking workers for contributions to the party ensured that they would have a say in party operations. After all, he asked, "Do you want a few rich men to run the party?" [29]

The major newspaper, Newsday, began to attack the Republican Party, calling the one-percent rule a "kickback". Hiring friends and relatives was "patronage oil" for the machine. In 1976, headlines announced the indictment of Hempstead officials, one of whom was Joe Margiotta's top aide in a joint federal- county probe of the one percent payments to the GOP. Instead of the "'strong arm ' tactics to get contributions from workers-tactics party leaders deny were ever used in the first place-Republicans now use(d) dinners, ticket sales and direct contributions to raise the bulk of their expenses." [30]

These events led to a new paradigm. With unions now able to bargain instead of beg, and party leaders under indictment, the question for the GOP was, to quote George Washington Plunkitt, "How are you goin' to interest our young men ... if you have no offices to give them when they work for their party?" [31]

There were other ways in which the old style relationship between machine politics and labor unions began to unravel. In 1975, Republican Nassau County Executive Ralph Caso was drawn into a two year legal battle while negotiating the police union contract. In 1976, a year before seeking re-election, Caso demanded that CSEA "agree to increase its workweek to 40 hours, freeze all wages, wipe out all raises for experience, and require new employees to pay the entire cost of their pensions." [32]

It came as a surprise to the Caso administration when CSEA president Irving Flaumenbaum angrily responded to Caso, claiming that he and the 12,000 employees he represented were "incensed". Quite a change for Flaumenbaum. The county labor commissioner observed that Flaumenbaum's belligerent language was "highly unusual for him." Newsday noted that his aggressive position was a "sharp reversal" from a union leader who had "preferred conciliation and a low profile over bombast to win gains in negotiations" in the past.[33] While Caso didn't back down from the CSEA, Party boss Joe Margiotta had seen enough. Margiotta dropped his support of Ralph Caso in his re-election bid for County executive. Caso was faced with a primary by Board of Supervisors member, Hempstead Presiding Supervisor Francis Purcell.

Caso campaigned for re-election on a platform of resisting "unreasonable union demands". This position turned out to be political suicide. Caso lost the primary and Francis Purcell was elected. Caso's loss made two things clear. First, the Republican machine needed public sector workers to win an election. Second, anti-union rhetoric would not be an acceptable GOP campaign tactic in Nassau County for another 30 years.

In 1977, labor could claim a new-found power. Expectations rose. County and Town leaders now had to be held accountable for how they responded to workers demands. With this power came more pressure on union leaders to do more for their members. Union leaders had to deliver to their membership or they could lose their office or perhaps face a challenge from another union for representation. In the old days, before passage of the Taylor Law, backroom deals could be cut. Now, union members had a say in their contracts.

Over the years, Flaumenbaum successfully won increased wages and benefits for his members. And in 1977, despite initial resistance, the union merged with the American Federation of State County and Municipal Employees giving it a powerful voice in Albany and the ability to draw on the resources of the newly-formed Public Employees Department of the AFL-CIO. By 1980, CSEA membership in the Long Island region reached 60,000 members. After Flaumenbaum died in 1980, Daniel Donahue became the new president of the Long Island region.

CSEA, no longer the "make-believe union" of the 1950's, became a force to be reckoned with. As Daniel Donahue declared in 1980 "We are not Democrat or Republican anymore. The days of us saying we would like you (a politician) to do something for us are over. They will either sit down or help us, or we will remove them." [34] The shift in power became increasingly clear.

Nassau County Republicans adjusted to the power of the labor unions. During the 1980's, the national Republican Party became more conservative, the Nassau Republicans did not. Even after President Ronald Reagan fired striking members of the national Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization in 1981, Nassau County Executive Francis Purcell said that "Although President Reagan has headed us in a new direction," he hoped that the President would not "go too far- we don't want to go overboard." [35]

While the national party was calling for smaller government at all levels, Purcell proposed an increase in services for the residents of Nassau County including "drug treatment, daycare, handicapped classes and other welfare programs". He even suggested "free shuttle buses in 'downtown Nassau'." [36]

Purcell's successor, Thomas Gulotta, took office in 1987. Gulotta found it "difficult to cut off the contracts, the patronage jobs and other perquisites that bound individuals to the machine." [37] In 1991, he recommended a large tax increase to cover increasing expenditures and came very close to losing the election. Needing the support of public sector unions and unwilling to face the ire of residents by raising taxes, Gulotta's solution to his political dilemma was deficit spending. By the year 2000 Gulotta's last year in office, county debt was a staggering $2.9 billion.[38] By the time the 2001 elections came around, even the most loyal Republicans were ready for a change.

Tom Suozzi, a Democrat, was elected in 2001 after winning a primary election against the Democratic Party endorsed candidate, New York State Assemblyman Tom DiNapoli. He was able to establish and maintain good relations with Nassau County unions through two terms in office. In 2009, however, the Republican machine rallied its troops as the national recession undermined County finances. Once again the Republicans regained the County Executive's seat by narrowly electing Edward Mangano as County Executive, denying Suozzi a third term in the process.

Edward Mangano has a decidedly different approach to county workers. Since taking office, he has proposed layoffs, furloughs and cuts to budgets, some so deep that they have left public employees reeling. His direct attack on collective bargaining rights has frayed the alliance that emerged during the 1950's. The loyalty of county workers, who were raised as Republicans Long Island style, is being sorely tested. At one public meeting on the budget, Jerry Laricciutta, president of CSEA Nassau County Local 830, accused the Republicans of taking up the national party's assault on public workers."I'm a Republican – a committeeman for 16 years. The Republicans I met twenty years ago are not the same. These Republicans have decided to take the national agenda and attack the ... workforce day after day."[39] Mangano also angered the Nassau County Police Benevolent Association which had "been major financial contributors to Republicans for years." In 2012, their Political Action Committee gave "more than $500,000 to Nassau Democrats – and nothing to Republicans." [40]

The Nassau County Republican machine was once the envy of politicians across the country. When President Richard Nixon came to Nassau Coliseum for a re- election rally in 1972, his first words to the crowd of 15,000 were, "This is the biggest and best rally ... I have ever seen."[41] The Republican Party was able to build an army of Party workers because they hired their neighbors, family and friends. It didn't matter that unions had achieved legal status and had to be bargained with; the party's elected leaders were bargaining with people with whom they had personal relationships. The party were the workers and the workers were the party. That has changed. The Republican Party is now turning on the very organizations that decade after decade and election after election provided the contributions and the workers that got them elected. As the battle lines are drawn, the crucial question for the Party is whether that strategy has come at too high a cost.

The rhetoric has become heated in Nassau County. Elected officials are echoing anti-unions slogans heard in places like Wisconsin or Texas. Unions are being blamed for the budget deficits that arose from policies put in place over several decades and then became exacerbated by the financial meltdown in 2008. Nassau County unions must ask themselves who they can trust and support now that the party apparatus they backed for so long has betrayed them.

There are some Nassau Republicans and union leaders who believe that the right-wing turn of Nassau Republicans is temporary – a result of a bad economy. As soon as the economy improves, they believe, things will go back to normal. We shall see.

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The Impacts of Recession on Civic Participation in the New York City Metro Area

by Oren M. Levin-Waldman

Recently in these pages I discussed the impact of income inequality on civic participation in the New York Metro area in 2008. It was clear from my statistical findings that those in households with incomes of less than $30,000 a year were considerably less likely to be civically engaged than those in households with more, and that this was a nationwide problem. But this pattern has been even more pronounced in the New York City metro area where income inequality has been higher. In this paper, I seek to take the findings of the earlier study a step further. I show that between 2008 and 2010, when the country was plunged deep into recession, participation in civic affairs decreased. And yet civic participation was worse in the New York metro area, especially among those in low-income households than it was in both New York State and the U.S. as a whole. During the same period, income inequality increased more in the New York metro area. On one level, this might not be considered problematic in a large metropolitan region where the hustle and bustle of daily living leaves little spare time. But on another level, given New York's diversity, one would expect to see dynamic pluralism. None of this is to suggest it is not happening; only that it is not for the least advantaged.

Why Inequality Harms Democracy

Although income inequality is often considered to be the purview of the market place, it does impact the political universe, with clear implications for democracy. Unequal distribution in wealth and income might mean unequal political access. In situations of extreme inequality of resources, individuals might find that they really do not enjoy the same standing. Inequality is not only a matter of standing with implications for outcomes, rather it affects one's ability to participate. Democracy does not require that all participate, but it does require that there be no barriers to participation. According to Robert Putnam, democracy requires the development of social capital, which only comes about through the active participation in the myriad of activities and organizations that comprise civil society.[1] And yet, income inequality might just be a barrier to even this level of participation. It is perhaps a bedrock principle that all individuals as citizens enjoy the same consideration of their preferences and interests. All citizens have the same access to governing institutions, and at the most nominal level, this finds expressions in "one person one vote," equality before the law, and equal rights when it comes to speech, press, and assembly. Still, one must surely affect the other. Voter turnout, for instance, is much higher among the wealthy than among the poor. This fact alone has been the basis for the SES model of participation — that those with higher socioeconomic status are more likely to be engaged, especially when it comes to voting — than those with lower socioeconomic status. The SES model does not only encompass levels of income, but education as well.[2]

Unequal distribution of wealth and income, however, is believed to affect access and may adversely affect individuals' ability to participate in the democratic process on the same footing. Those lacking wealth and income do not always enjoy the same access to political power as do wealthy, high- income households. In the United States, where politics and money are tightly intertwined, those with lower incomes tend to experience less responsiveness by representatives in Congress. Two extremes in the distribution of income, with great concentrations at both the top and the bottom, can effectively distort opportunity. The ability of those at the top to attain their policy and other ideological preferences is greater.[3] Larry Bartels has observed that members of Congress tend to be more responsive to those who are affluent than those in the lower and middle classes, which is essentially the question of access. Analyzing voting patterns on the minimum wage increase that took effect in 2007, he found that senators attached no weight at all to the views of constituents in the bottom end of the income distribution. And the views of those in the middle class appeared to only have been slightly more influential. Senators, however, were more responsive to the opinions of affluent constituents than middle class constituents. Republican senators were about twice as responsive as Democrats to the views of higher income constituents, but both Democrats and Republicans were about equally responsive to the views of middle class constituents. There was no evidence of any responsiveness to the views of constituents in the bottom third of the distribution. While senators were consistently responsive to the views of affluent constituents, they were entirely unresponsive to the views of low-income constituents.

All of this would appear to suggest that a more equitable distribution might conceivably result in more responsiveness because members of Congress would no longer have incentives to favor the affluent over the less affluent.[4] But it also begs another question: were the senators who were unresponsive to those at the bottom of the distribution less responsive because they had low incomes, or because they themselves were less likely to participate in the political process in whatever form? This is by no means a trivial question because, if the latter, it would imply that if lower inequality would lead to greater participation, especially among those at the lower rungs of the distribution, political figures might be more inclined to be responsive.