



Does socio-economic inequality affect individuals' civic engagement?

Joris Schröder - Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam | Michaela Neumayr - Vienna University of Economics and Business

How does inequality affect individuals' civic engagement in charitable giving, volunteering and non-profit membership? This article reviews the literature on this question and summarizes the empirical results and main explanations for this relationship.

Reviewing 70 studies, it was found that higher inequality is most often negatively related to civic engagement and that this relation is moderated by individual factors, for example, income and education. The main theories used to explain the relationship are described.

This study provides people working in philanthropy with an up-to-date overview of the latest research on this topic, and can help them understand how to engage with this issue in their work.

[#Inequality](#) [#CivilSociety](#) [#NonProfit](#) [#Engagement](#) [#ProSocial](#)

Background

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Context



- A **growing body of literature** has started to address the question of how inequality affects civic engagement.
- If higher inequality undermines civic engagement, **the various goods and services provided through individuals' civic engagement might be at stake**. If civic engagement is a tool for alleviating socio-economic inequality, **it might be expected to increase as inequality increases**.
- The authors describe that there are **arguments for both a negative and positive effect of socio-economic inequality on civic engagement**, but **existing knowledge was quite fragmented**.
- **The social disintegration hypothesis** is the most commonly used explanation for a negative effect. It argues that inequality leads to a decrease in social cohesion, which in turn **lowers the generalized social trust** of individuals, and subsequently leads to reduced civic engagement.
- **The inequality aversion hypothesis** is the most commonly used explanation for a positive effect. It argues that **higher inequality leads to a greater number of people in need**, and that (some) individuals that are driven by inequality aversion, altruism or impure altruism (including altruism and the feeling of a warm glow) **increase their engagement with to address these needs**.
- This study aimed to provide an **overview of the empirical findings** and **develop a conceptual framework** that outlines the mechanisms commonly put forward to explain the effects of socio-economic inequality on civic engagement.

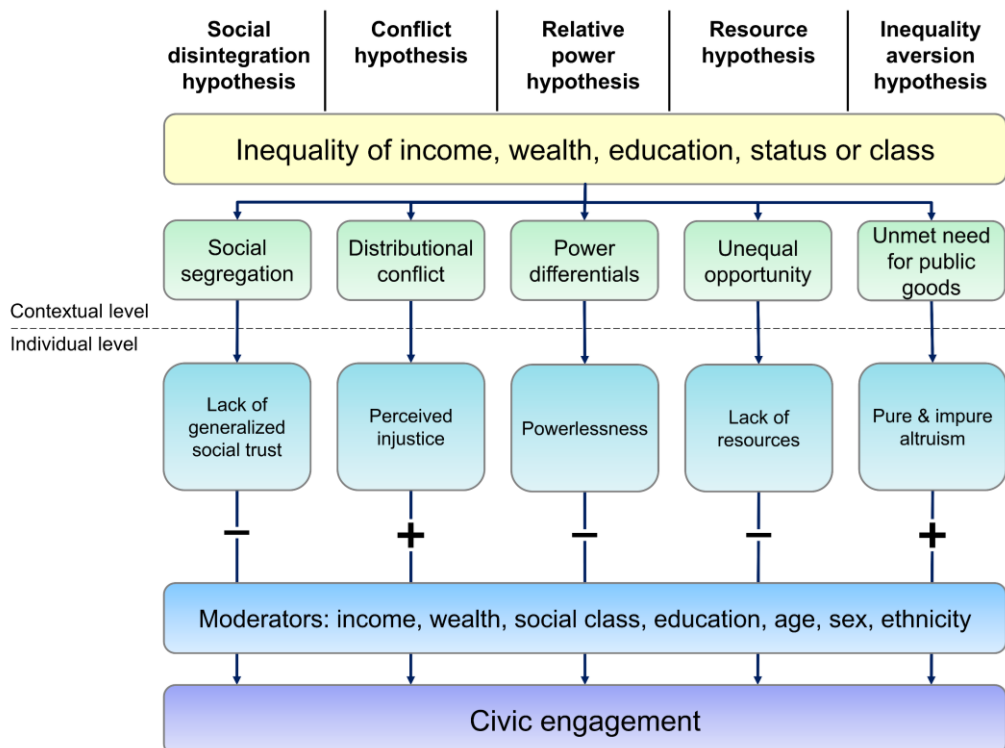
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Take aways & Learnings



- There is evidence for a **negative relationship between socio-economic inequality and civic engagement**. This result is rather consistent for the incidence and amount of charitable giving and non-profit membership.
- For volunteering, the negative relationship seems to hold for European countries**, while there is less (consistent) evidence for countries outside of Europe.
- The relationship seems to hold across countries and over time: **countries and regions with higher inequality have lower levels of civic engagement**, and **increasing socio-economic inequality similarly decreases civic engagement over time**.
- Regarding factors that increase or decrease the effect (**moderators**), **there was no clear evidence of the direction of their influence**. For instance, while some studies find that, under higher inequality, high-resource individuals engage more, others find the opposite.
- The conceptual model below provides an **overview of the hypothesized pathways** between inequality and civic engagement. However, the authors note that **none of these mechanisms has been thoroughly tested by previous studies**, an important area of research for future studies.



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