Our Defective Democracy

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In a democracy, by definition, elected officials respond to the preferences of citizens, who are treated as political equals. Judged by that standard, according to Martin Gilens, a professor of politics at Princeton University, the United States has become increasingly undemocratic.

In Affluence & Influence, Gilens examines the support of poor, middle-class, and rich Americans for thousands of policy proposals debated in Congress over the last three decades. Responsiveness to the preferences of the less-well-off, he demonstrates, "is virtually non-existent" when they do not agree with the rich, and "seems consistent only with the most cynical view of American politics." Nor does the middle-class fare all that much better. By contrast, a policy strongly favored by Americans in the top 10 percent of income distribution is twice as likely to be adopted as one they strongly oppose. This concentration of influence, which Gilens attributes to the role of money in elections, "is incompatible with the core democratic principle of political equality."

Making extensive use of regression analysis and the Net Interest Group Alignment Index, Affluence & Influence is aimed at academics -- and isn't an easy read. And Gilens does not measure key variables (including the intensity of voter preference for a particular policy and race and ethnicity as qualifying factors in his class-based analysis). Nonetheless, the findings in his book are important, timely, and, at times, surprising.

Interest groups clearly influence legislation, Gilens acknowledges, but he points out that they are far more effective in defending the status quo than in securing the adoption of changes they support. Most significant, with a few notable exceptions, interest groups do not trump the influence of affluent Americans. The gun lobby is a case in point. Two factors contribute to its success. Anti-gun interest groups are virtually non-existent. Between 1990 and 2008, gun-control groups contributed $1.8 million to candidates for federal office, while opponents ponied up $21.4 million. And the efforts of pro-gun organizations are largely defensive. The preference of wealthy Americans for gun control and the activities of the NRA, Gilens suggests, have "served to keep each other in check," resulting in only incremental legislative reforms in the last few decades.

During election years, Gilens has found, politicians are somewhat more responsive to all income groups, including poor and middle-income Americans. But as soon as the pressure is off, and especially when one party replaces another in the White House, policies that are particularly beneficial to high-income Americans are passed, with Democrats not all that different from Republicans. When preferences across income groups diverged, Gilens reveals, the views of the poor and middle class got almost no traction during the Johnson, Reagan, and Clinton administrations. And, alas, when one party controls the presidency and commands substantial majorities in both houses of Congress, the link between the preferences of citizens and the legislative agenda "becomes uniformly low."

Gilens recognizes that the challenges to obtaining representational equality for all citizens in the United States are daunting. After all, the economic resources and political power of the already affluent continue to increase, dramatically. The share of all income that went to the top ten percent of families, which was about one-third in the 1950s and '60s, is now almost one-half. And the share going to the top one percent has skyrocketed from 9 percent in 1974 to over 23 percent.

To help make our democracy more responsive, Gilens rounds up the usual suspects: campaign finance reform and non-partisan redistricting of congressional districts to increase electoral competitiveness. More interestingly, he encourages politicians to concentrate on policies (like increases in the minimum wage and government support for education) that are strongly favored by poor, middle-class and affluent voters.

But it appears that if by some miracle, the preferences of the vast majority of Americans begin to have a substantial impact on government policy, we will face a different, and in its own way, even more troubling, problem. Our fellow citizens, Gilens reminds us, oppose legislation liberals consider enlightened. To be sure, poor and middle-class Americans supported Medicare, Medicaid, aid to education, and civil rights during the 1960s. But they turned thumbs down on aid to cities, low-income housing, welfare payments, and the admission of more (non-European) immigrants to the United States. These days, of course, they are firmly in favor of an individual right to bear arms, income tax cuts, and the elimination of "the death tax."
Perhaps "the problem" is false consciousness and a failure of education. Perhaps "ordinary Americans" oppose estate taxes because they think them unfair. And support tax cuts that dispense disproportionate benefits to the rich out of a pragmatic conviction that they're the best deal they can get for themselves.

In any event, although it's definitely the right thing to do, returning power to the people highlights a different defect of democracy.

Glenn C. Altschuler: Our Defective Democracy http://www.huffingtonpost.com/glenn-c-altschuler/martin-gilens-book_b...