Distributional issues are at the core of the study of politics. Who governs? What is the relationship between wealth and power in democratic societies? What are the political consequences of rising inequality? What policies increase or decrease inequality? Democracy is premised on formal political equality. Yet to the extent that wealth can be transformed into political influence, equal rights do not mean equal influence. In this course you will read, discuss and engage questions about the relationship between economic inequality and democracy. We draw on examples from the US and elsewhere.

**Learning Objectives:** The readings and assignments are designed to help you understand both how politics shapes economic inequality and the ways that inequality shapes politics. Upon successful completion of this course you will be able to understand and contribute to debates about 1) the tension between democracy and property; 2) how social scientists measure inequality; 3) why many prioritize liberty over economic equality; 4) the origins and evolution of inequality in the USA and elsewhere; 5) the different ways countries respond to inequality through taxation and social-welfare spending; 6) how large-scale factors along with personal and/or local experiences shape perceptions of inequality; 7) the consequences of inequality for political representation; and 8) potential remedies for inequality in the USA.

**Readings:**


You’ll find all other readings (and the syllabus, etc.) at [https://canvas.umn.edu/courses/155324](https://canvas.umn.edu/courses/155324). If a reading on Canvas is inaccessible, please notify me immediately.

**Assignments and Grades:**

1) **Five short (2 pp.) papers.** You will have ten opportunities to write short papers during the semester, and must do five. Each short paper is worth 6% of your grade (30%).
2) **One 10-page paper,** including original research, addressing a question from a list that I will hand out. A full draft is due on April 6th and the final draft is due on May 11th (30%).
3) **Participation in an in-class policy debate and poster session** (30%). This is a group project. Everyone will have a role, although only some students will give speeches (details
TBA). As part of your debate grade, a 3-page “progress report” on your group’s preparation is due 3/18 at 5 pm. This will count for 5% of your final grade, the rest of the debate 25%.

4) **General Participation:** 10%

There is no midterm or final. Grading follows CLA “Classroom Grading and Examination Procedures” (see attached departmental policy statement).

**Policies for late assignments, and incompletes:** I accept late assignments only if you have a legitimate absence. UMN policy allows the following: religious holidays; verifiable illness or medical emergency; subpoenas; jury duty; military service, or participation in university-sponsored activities such as athletics. Except in an emergency, please speak to me before or after class or in office hours about any upcoming absences. Course incompletes will be granted only in the case of documented long-term illness, and if you and I fill out the “CLA Agreement for Completion of Incomplete Work.”

**Policy on laptops/tablets/phones:**

1) Even if you take notes by hand, please do bring a device to class, as you may need it to look up information and/or take online surveys or quizzes throughout the semester.

2) However, if you take notes on your device, you must be disconnected from Wi-Fi. This is good practice for professional (and personal!) life - and checking Insta in class tends to distract your neighbors. Given this, I have two rules:

- **No surfing:** If you are using a device, set it on “airplane mode” or the equivalent during class (unless as per above you are using it for course-related activities).
- **No texting:** Put your phone on silent mode and Put. It. Away. Really away - in your bag or coat, not your pants pocket, until needed in class. (And if you think I don’t notice, normal people don’t look down at their own mid-section unless they’re texting...)

This policy is about respecting your classmates. The TA will sit in the back to watch for violations. If he/she sees you texting or surfing, I will give you a warning and ask you to stop. Appropriate classroom behavior is CLA policy and part of your participation grade (see below and attached). TL/DR: if you can’t disconnect for 2.5 hours a week, just skip class.

**Expectations for Classroom Behavior:** My goal is make you think, not tell you what to think. I will respect your views, and I expect you to respect the guidelines I establish for classroom discussion and to behave respectfully towards your classmates.

**COURSE SCHEDULE**

1/22: Democracy, Inequality and Redistribution: The “Robin Hood Paradox”

This session introduces the main theme of the course: the tension between democracy and property. Universal suffrage means formal political equality. But under capitalism, differences in luck, talent and effort - along with private property rights - generate economic inequalities. This
implies that the poor, who always outnumber the rich, *could* act like Robin Hood, voting to increase taxes and redistribute wealth to themselves. Usually, however, they do not. Why?

• Barbara Ehrenreich, *Nickel and Dimed*, Intro and Ch. 1.


What are we measuring when we say “inequality?” What are the economic indicators of interest? Do we possess good measures of those indicators? What are the political implications of different ways of portraying different facets of economic inequality?

• Barbara Ehrenreich, *Nickel and Dimed*, Ch. 2.

1/29 and 2/3: So, What? Why Should We Care about Inequality?

Distributive justice is a central question for political philosophy. We critically assess the origins and evolution of the debate between libertarian and egalitarian approaches - of the priority of rights versus liberties - and explore the philosophical and political tensions between promotion of equality of opportunity and equality of outcomes.


2/5 and 2/10: Origins and Evolution of Inequality

Is economic inequality inevitable? What are the relative contributions of political, economic, cultural and social factors for shaping the evolution of inequality? How important are immigration, globalization and technological change for shaping inequality?

• Larry Bartels, *Unequal Democracy*, Chs. 1-2

2/12 and 2/17: The US in Comparative Perspective: Inequality and Redistribution in Wealthy Countries

What sorts of policies are “redistributive?” Why do some countries redistribute more than others? What factors are responsible for these differences?

• Alesina & Glaeser, Fighting Poverty in the US and Europe. Chs. 1-4

2/19: Democracy and Redistribution: The “Free Lunch Puzzle”

If libertarianism were correct, there should be no “free lunch.” Social welfare spending should impose economic losses, because government intervention undermines market efficiency. By this logic, the larger the welfare state, the lower the growth rate. Yet a cursory look at global data calls this argument into question and suggests that there is a free lunch: the greater the redistribution, the richer the country. What explains this positive relationship between redistributive social-welfare spending and economic growth?

• Peter Lindert (2004). Growing Public, Ch. 10 (“Keys to the Free Lunch Puzzle.”)

2/24 and 2/26: Inequality and American Democracy

How do Americans think about inequality, taxes and redistribution? What sorts of experiences are most relevant for shaping such attitudes? Which groups in society are most important for determining the extent to which and how the US government addresses inequality?

• J.D. Vance (2016). Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis, Ch. 4.

3/2 and 3/4: Politics of the American Safety Net
How have racial attitudes and/or identities shaped both inequality and political responses to it (social welfare policy) in the USA?

- Alesina and Glaeser, Ch. 6 (“Race and redistribution”).

3/9 and 3/11 NO CLASS - SPRING BREAK

3/16 and 3/18: How personal and local experience shape attitudes about inequality

Compared to “bigger” factors we discussed earlier in the semester, to what extent do factors “closer to home” shape Americans’ perceptions of inequality and what to do about it?

- Larry Bartels, Unequal Democracy, Ch4 (“Do Americans Care about Inequality?”)
- Barbara Ehrenreich, Nickel and Dimed, remainder of book.
- Reema Khrais (2019), This is Uncomfortable podcast, “I have class anxiety.” https://www.marketplace.org/shows/this-is-uncomfortable-reema-khrais/i-have-class-anxiety/.

March 18th 5 pm: Debate Team “Progress Report” Due

3/23 and 3/25: (Mis-)Perceiving Inequality

A key explanation for the Robin Hood paradox is that individuals’ cannot perceive actual levels of economic inequality - or are unwilling to interpret inequalities they do perceive as unfair. To
what extent and under what conditions can individuals accurately estimate inequality? When do people believe inequality to be unfair?

• Alesina & Glaeser, Ch7: “The Ideology of Redistribution.”

3/30: The National Consequences of Local Politics

How do the actions of local governments affect broader patterns of economic inequality?

• Jessica Trounstine (2018), Segregation by Design: Local Politics and Inequality in American Cities. Ch. 4, “Engineering Enclaves: How Local Governments Produce Segregation”

4/1: Minnesota (Not So) Nice? Historical Inequalities in the Twin Cities

• Watch: “Race: The House We Live In.” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mW764dXE1_8
• Explore: “Mapping Inequality: Redlining in New Deal America.” https://dsl.richmond.edu/panorama/redlining/#loc=12/44.989/-93.259&city=minneapolis-mn. 1940s era redlining maps of Minneapolis and St. Paul created by the Home Owners Loan Corporation, a federal government agency that sought to streamline the mortgage lending process across the USA. The maps are interactive - you can click on different neighborhoods to read about their “desirability.” Click on the “Introduction” tab to understand the context for the maps’ creation, and also click on the US map icon next to the zoom in/zoom out tabs to explore other cities’ maps.
• “Minneapolis Mayor Unveils Plan to Undo History of Segregation,” https://nextcity.org/daily/entry/minneapolis-mayor-unveils-plan-to-undo-history-of-segregation
4/6: Catch-up day/In-class debate preparation meetings

April 6th, 11 AM: Paper draft due!

4/8, 4/13 and 4/15: Political Consequences: Affluence and Influence

To what extent does inequality affect democratic politics? These sessions explore debates about the ways and extent to which inequality undermines the quality of democracy – both through “inputs” such as participation and as “output” in terms of policy representation.

1) Sources of Unequal Influence: Unequal Voice, Unequal Resources, Distinct Policy Views?

- Kay Schlozman et al. (2012), *The Unheavenly Chorus* chs. 1, 4, 5

2) Evidence of Unequal Influence: Do the Rich Always Win?

- Larry Bartels, Ch. 8 (“Inequality and Political Representation”)

4/20: In-class debate preparation meetings

4/22: Potential Solutions Debate 1: Tax Multinational Corporations at Higher Rates

4/27: Potential Solutions Debate 2: Provide “Minimum Basic Income” to All

4/29: Potential Solutions Debate 3: Increase the Estate Tax

5/4: Potential Solutions Debate 4: Raise the Minimum Wage

Final Draft of Paper Due: Friday 5/11, 11 AM uploaded to Canvas