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RESEARCH ARTICLE

PARTICIPATING UNEQUALLY?
Assessing the Macro-Micro Relationship Between Income Inequality and Political Engagement in Europe

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ABSTRACT: A great deal of attention has been paid to the consequences of economic inequality on political participation, yet only few empirical studies address the macro-micro relationship between income inequality and individual engagement. Furthermore, empirical indications diverge and give rise to competing theoretical arguments to be tested. This article seeks to fill this gap and to do so by using the latest round of the European Social Survey (ESS). The contribution is twofold: on the one hand, it establishes a direct link between measures of economic and political inequality - albeit of a particular type. On the other, it provides an up-to-date picture on participatory trends in Europe. In more details, income inequality is found to depress overall political participation and, most importantly, to increase the participatory gap between rich and poor for all unconventional forms of engagement.

KEYWORDS: *conflict, democracy, European Social Survey, inequality, participation*

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1. Introduction

Analyses on economic inequality and political participation abound in the politico-sociological literature, all the more so given the ongoing rise of economic inequality in

Western democracies and beyond (Kenworthy and Pontusson 2005; Atkinson 2008; OECD 2014). A great deal of studies, for instance, demonstrate that individual-level resources significantly shape the likelihood of political engagement - then implying that their uneven distribution translates in unequal contribution to the decision-making process, thus contributing to the violation of the democratic ideal of political equality - albeit of a particular type. Relatively less attention is traditionally placed on the macro-micro linkage between contextual factors and citizen participation, i.e. on the effect of macro-level variables on micro-level behaviors. Being economic inequality the focus of this article, it is analytically useful to distinguish between two main questions that should be addressed (Duch and Sagarzazu 2014): does economic inequality significantly affect political participation, that is everyone's likelihood to engage in politics (direct impact)? And, by doing so, does it modify the participatory gap caused by individual resources (contingent impact)?

The issue is surely relevant, both in general terms and in particular for this journal, given its focus on dynamics of conflict and participation. Indeed, inequality is classically supposed to increase political polarization (e.g. Pontusson and Rueda 2008, Rehm 2011) and, by implication, the level of political engagement. These expectations are, however, contradicted by empirical evidences (e.g. Iversen and Soskice 2015), and the opposite tendency is documented by Solt (2008, 2010, 2015) who authored one among the most systematic series of studies on this topic.

Among other noteworthy studies, Solt's stands out thanks to its systematic attention on the macro-micro impact of inequality on individual participation. On the one hand, it demonstrates that income inequality systematically depresses political engagement. On the other, his Multilevel Models show that inequality has the strongest, depressing effect among the poorest, thus contributing to enlarge the participatory gap between the better- and the worse-off. Building on Schattschneider's original hypothesis (1960), Solt elaborates a theoretical account of this tendency, i.e. the so-called "relative power theory".

Despite this important contribution, there is still place for further studies. First and foremost, it is necessary to test these findings on different datasets. As a matter of fact, Solt originally tests his theory on a very rich dataset, including data from diverse countries such as Europe, the United States, and Taiwan (Solt 2008, 59). The strategy is of course valuable, but it also entails some cons, among others the danger of the so-called omitted variable bias. In other words, it increases the likelihood of the presence of third variables that the researcher is not able to control for, and that possibly make the relationship between inequality and participation spurious.

Secondly, empirical results do not always back Solt's findings and his theoretical elaborations. As an example, Anderson and Beramendi (2008) confirm the direct, depressing effect of inequality in 18 OECD countries. Nevertheless, they also conclude that overall income inequality affects people at different ends of the income distribution similarly, thus having no effect on the participatory gap between the rich and the poor.

Thirdly, an alternative and well-established theoretical tradition - i.e. the so-called conflict theory - contradicts the aforementioned predictions and is worth being tested here. As previously mentioned, inequality is commonly associated to increased polarization, hence higher conflictuality. By replicating and testing Solt's findings, it is noteworthy to keep in mind the alternative theoretical perspective.

Fourthly, and lastly, Solt's studies employ earlier data, almost exclusively covering a period of time prior to the onset of the current economic crisis. It is thus noteworthy to replicate the analysis in a later stage of the ongoing economic turmoil, in order to evaluate whether previous predictions are confirmed or not. The article aims at doing so, by focusing on European countries only and exploiting data from the 2012 round of the European Social Survey.

The article is structured as follows: in the next section, previous analyses are presented in more details, together with the working hypotheses hinging on them. Data and methods are introduced in the third section, while the empirical analysis is developed in the fourth one. The main findings are subsequently discussed and interpreted in the light of the broader literature.

2. The state of the field

The fact that not everyone takes part in democratic politics is a well-established fact in the literature, highlighted by Lijphart's APSA Presidential Address as "democracy's unresolved dilemma" (Lijphart 1997). A number of studies show that political participation is unevenly distributed across social groups, irrespective of the indicator under analysis, i.e. income (Lane 1959; Anderson and Beramendi 2008; Solt 2008), education (Verba, Nie and Kim 1978; Marien *et al.* 2010; Armingeon and Schädel 2015), family background (Verba, Burns and Schlozman 2003), and so forth. Given my interest for income at the micro-level, and for income inequality at the macro-level, the first aim of the article is to test whether, and to what extent, differences in income translate in different propensities to engage politically. Unsurprisingly, the first hypothesis is that:

H_1) High-income earners are more likely to be politically active than low-income earners.

The design gets more complicated when it comes to the macro-micro effect of economic inequality on political participation. As suggested by Duch and Sagarzazu (2014) - and as mentioned in the introduction - , two distinct effects should be taken into account when addressing the effects of macro-economic variables on individual behaviors, i.e. the direct impact of inequality on participation, and the contingent impact, depending on individual characteristics.

For what pertains the former, two well-established schools of thought are worth being mentioned. The so-called conflict theory maintains that individuals engage in politics as soon as they have interest to do so. As economic self-interest is one among the strongest motivations for human action, inequality is expected to affect individual propensity to engage. On the one hand, higher inequality fuels differences in popular preferences about the proper policy to be adopted, either to demand state intervention in the economy, or to leave the economic sphere essentially unregulated (Meltzer and Richards 1981; Finseraas 2008). On the other, this is expected to activate both the worse- and the better-off, who are motivated to demand and oppose redistributive policies respectively. In a nutshell, the resulting working hypothesis maintains that:

H_2a) Economic inequality increases political participation.

Needless to say, empirical results rarely corroborate such expectation. Macro-level data show that economic inequality is on the rise virtually everywhere, whereas polarization is not (Iversen and Soskice 2015). Furthermore, participation in Western Europe has declined steadily: rather than being motivated to defend politically their interest, citizens apparently refrain from political actions, be it in form of party membership (Dalton and Wattenberg 2000) or in terms of voter turnout (Blais 2007).

A possible explanation is elaborated by Solt (2008, 2010), who builds on Schattschneider's original hypothesis predicting the association between high rates of economic inequality and lower - and more biased - electoral turnout. The point of departure is the assumption that money and personal affluence can be used to influence others and to steer political decisions. The more concentrated wealth and income, the more concentrated its power, with better-off turning out to be even richer (hence, more powerful) in comparison to poor. On this basis, well-off in unequal countries are expected to more easily prevail in occasionally open conflicts on issues of their interest (Goodin and Dryzek 1980, 286), or even to prevent some issues to become part of the

agenda (Bachrach and Baratz 1970, 6-11; Schattschneider 1960, 106). Should the poor perceive the political system to be unable to develop any alternative narrative in their interest, they can rationally decide to give up engagement in politics (Gaventa 1980, 9-13; Pateman 1971, 297-98; Schattschneider 1960, 105). Conversely, this reduces also well-off's incentives to political mobilization, given the withdrawal of the main contenders (and the possibility to steer politics by other means). In a nutshell: the relative power theory predicts a diametrically opposite impact of economic inequality (Schattschneider 1960; Ulsaner and Brown 2005, Solt 2008):

H_2b) Economic inequality decreases political participation.

A potentially alternative explanation lies in the rise of alternative forms of engagement. As Dalton puts it, "rising sophistication levels may change the nature of participation" (2008, 54); hence, declining electoral turnouts might be counterbalanced by the rise of alternative forms of campaigning and/or expression of political dissent/support, especially in established democracies (e.g. Zuckin *et al*. 2006; Marien *et al.* 2010).

In other words, it is plausible to assume that unconventional forms of participation may be perceived as corrective mechanisms of representative democracies' shortcomings (Offe 2003; Della Porta 2011). Whereas voting is interpreted as paying lip service to an *unjust* political system that remains silent on people problems, alternative forms of participation could be perceived as the only way to steer or counterbalance the establishment-driven mainstream politics. The related working hypothesis thus goes as follows:

H_2c) Economic inequality depresses electoral participation, but it encourages alternative forms of participation.

This is what concerns the direct impact of income inequality on political participation. However, "what matters is not only the amount of civic activity but its distribution, not just how many people take part but who they are" (Schlozman *et al.* 2005). In other words, it is also important to assess whether inequality has an impact which is contingent on individual characteristics.

As previously mentioned (H_1), the focus of this article is on individual-level economic resources, so does income inequality modify the participatory gap that exists between the rich and the poor, all other things being equal? Once again, two competing predictions are worth being mentioned: on the one hand, it is classically assumed that larger

social distances generate the feeling that the poor are relatively poorer, and that such feelings of relative deprivation act as strong motivation for people to engage (Lipsky 1968; Gurr 1970). In this light, the contextual effect of inequality should affect first and foremost those who are *relatively* impoverished[1], i.e. the worse-off, by increasing their likelihood of political engagement. Muller and Seligson (1987), for instance, demonstrate that high inequality increases the probability that most disaffected groups organize in collective actions. Consequently, the participatory gap between the better- and worse-off should decline with the increase of inequality, at least for what concerns alternative forms of participation. The third working hypothesis can thus be stated as follows:

H_3a) Economic inequality decreases the participatory gap between rich and poor, since it promotes political engagement among the worse-off.

Once again, this is rarely confirmed by existing empirical studies. According to the relative power theory presented above, the possibility of the rich to influence and steer politics by other means discourages political participation first and foremost among the worse-off. Consistently, Solt (2008, 2010, 2015) repeatedly demonstrates that the macro-micro depressing impact of income inequality is stronger for the poor than for the rich. The same asymmetric effect on civic engagement in post-communist countries is documented by Karakoç (2013), who shows that increasing inequality declines participation overall, but with a stronger effect on the poorest quintile.

H_3b) Economic inequality increases the participatory gap between rich and poor, since it promotes political engagement among the worse-off.

3. Data, variables, and methods

3.1 Data

Whereas aforementioned studies address the macro-micro relationship between economic inequality and political participation well before the current economic crisis, this article tests the competing hypotheses during the crisis. All data are obtained from the sixth round of the European Social Survey (ESS), which has been administered in

[1] Anderson and Beramendi (2012) offer a noteworthy contribution in this respect, as they highlight that party competition on the left creates different incentives for the mobilization of lower income voters in contexts characterized by different levels of inequality.

2012. The ESS is a biennial, high-quality survey of values, attitudes and behavior among Europeans and integrates the survey answers with multilevel data at the regional and national level; more information, including the complete list of participating countries, can be found at http://europeansocialsurvey.org. Replicating previous studies in the course of the economic crisis is particularly important, as the economic dimension of political competition might become a stronger motivator for political engagement in times of economic turmoil - thus making the difference for participatory rates.

To be sure, all those countries that are not rated as free by Freedom House in 2012 are excluded from the analysis, i.e. Russia, Ukraine, Albania, and Kosovo (the complete report is available on http://freedomhouse.org). Needless to say, comparing participation trends in free and unfree countries is misleading, since the choice not to participate has a totally different meaning. By contrast, Israel is kept in the sample as it is commonly rated as a full democracy by international observers. Beyond the controversies about considering Israel as a European country, the focus here is on the effect of macro-economic conditions on individual behavior, regardless of any cultural consideration. As a result, my dataset includes 25 countries and a total of 47515 individuals (table 1 below provides with a comprehensive list of countries, as well as some descriptive statistics for each).

3.2 Independent variables

In regards to the main explanatory variables at the individual level, I consider first and foremost the level of income. Even though some economists prefer other monetary variable to evaluate the distribution of living standards in a given society (e.g. consumption expenditures), income remains the prevalent focal variable used in rich countries, such as the European ones (Brandolini and Smeeding 2011). The ESS provides with a measure of the household's total net income, through which respondents are asked to place themselves in income deciles groups specific to each country.

Strictly connected to this, the main independent variable of interest at the country level is income inequality, measured by the widely-used Gini coefficient after taxes and transfers. Values for these variables are taken from the ESS datasets and the OECD databases. As developed in more details in the previous section, my expectation is that income inequality has a comparable effect on each country included in the dataset. As amply documented in the literature, Europe is pretty cohesive in its widening economic inequality and the neoliberal distribution mechanisms of economic resources. As such,

there are no theoretical reasons to expect a different impact of income inequality across countries[2].

Several control variables are introduced in the models. At the country-level, controls are used with parsimony because of the limited number of countries (level-2 units) and the related statistical problems (Hox 2002; Hayes 2006). Following the relevant literature, participation is supposed to be influenced first and foremost by the institutional set-up and by the party-system (Blais 2007). On the one hand, the focus is on electoral systems: whereas proportional systems are expected to increase individuals' motivation to participate, disproportional systems tend to decrease it (Lijphart 1997; Blais and Aarts 2006). On the other, this might be due to the fact that proportional systems tend to encourage the establishment of a higher number of parties running for elections (Duverger 1954). The presence of more parties translates in more choice and, eventually, in higher turnout, since citizens have higher probability to find a party near their position[3]. In order to capture both sides of the coin, I include in the models the Index of Absolute Disproportionality, which is obtained from the Comparative Political Data Sets.

In addition to this, post-communist legacy should also be controlled for. The literature shows that political participation is systematically lower in post-communist countries (Howard, 2003; Bernhard and Karakoç 2007; Pacek et al, 2009). I therefore create a dummy variable distinguishing post-communist countries from Western European[4].

Further control variables are included at level-1. More than anything, the role of education in connection to political participation has been assessed at length by the literature (e.g. Almond and Verba, 1963) and its importance is confirmed repeatedly (Verba *et al.* 1995; Blais 2000; Marien *et al.* 2010; Armingeon and Schädel 2015). Classically, people with a longer educational history are supposed to be more able to assess the importance of politics and the consequences of their participation. As a consequence, more years spent in the educational system are expected to have a powerful (and positive) influence on individual propensity to participate. Age is also supposed to show a strong impact (Blais 2000, 2007), even though its influence might be multifaceted.

[2] Having said that, a pilot test has been carried out to evaluate whether differences in the impact of inequality between post-communist and Western European countries are visible, but the results show no empirical support, statistically non significant coefficients for the interaction terms..

[3] This relationship is however contested in the literature, as some authors find that more parties tend to depress turnout (Blais and Dobrzynska 1998; Fornos *et al.* 2004).

[4] Another macro-level factor that is often controlled for is the level of economic wellbeing. Besides the methodological problems associated to adding a new level-2 variable in the present study, I do not include it, because studies show that economic wellbeing affects the difference between rich (and somewhat rich) countries and poor ones, while it does not hold in analyses focused on Western democracies (Blais 2007).

Whereas younger generations are generally found to be less interested in recognized political engagement, recent studies suggest that they tend to vote less, but participate more through alternative channels, e.g. protest actions (Melo and Stockemer 2014). Similarly, existing research finds marked differences between males and females in intended political participation (Hooghe and Stolle 2004). In this light, a dummy for gender (1 = female) is included in all models. Unsurprisingly, membership in a union is supposed to increase the likelihood of people to engage (Radcliff and Davis 2000), while being born in another country most probably depresses interest and engagement in the political process of the destination country. Last but not least, individual religiosity may have some kind of impact as well (Blais 2000), although no agreement over its effect exists in the literature, both because religiosity entails diverse dimensions that shape political attitudes differently (Bloom and Arikan 2012) and because different political behaviors are not equally affected by religiosity (Filetti 2014).

3.3 Dependent variables

As previously argued, there are all reasons to take into consideration all actions undertaken by ordinary citizens to influence politics, thus assessing the effects of income inequality on different forms of political participation. The European Social Survey allows to do so, since it provides with a relatively vast range of engagement. Table 1 reports some descriptive statistics at the aggregate level for each form of participation.

As it is clear, strong differences exist both between countries and between forms of participation. Voting is evidently the most diffused form of participation in Europe. With an average of 71.9% of voters at the latest national elections, Europe is below the global average of 75.5% provided by Blais (2007, 622-623) and this holds true also if one excludes the post-communist countries (73.1%). Among the alternative forms of participation, only three surpass the threshold of 15% of the active population: working in organizations, signing petitions and boycotting products. The first two - working in organizations and petitioning - have a clear political connotation and are both included among the conventional and non-electoral activities in Brady's classification system for political activities (2004). Boycotting products is also politically relevant, even if it does not necessarily imply a direct interaction with the political sphere as in the other cases. Most of the literature includes boycotts among the bottom-up actions aiming at coercing corporate and policy change, even if indirectly (e.g. Brady 2004; a more extensive discussion on boycott and consumerism as political behavior can be found in Stolle *et al.* 2005). In addition to electoral participation, I thus focus on these three, most diffused, forms of participation.

Table 1 - Participation in European countries (aggregate %)

Countries	Voted	Contacted politicians	Worked party	Worked organiz.	Worn badge	Signed petition	Public demonst.	Boycott product
Belgium	78.5	16.1	4.4	18.4	6.5	20.6	5.2	11.3
Bulgaria	72.9	4.8	3.0	1.3	2.6	7.8	5.8	3.7
Switzerland	55.5	14.8	6.4	17.4	5.6	34.1	4.4	28.2
Cyprus	73.8	15.4	4.9	7.3	4.8	10.7	4.5	10.2
Czech Rep.	58.2	12.1	1.6	5.9	7.5	18.9	6.9	13.7
Germany	72.9	15.9	4.8	32.7	6.2	34.9	9.1	35.8
Denmark	85.3	16.6	3.9	25.0	6.3	25.0	4.3	25.7
Estonia	59.3	12.3	2.3	4.8	3.7	9.6	4.0	6.5
Spain	72.3	13.3	7.9	22.1	10.8	33.2	25.9	17.4
Finland	79.0	18.4	3.1	37.2	16.8	23.7	1.5	34.9
France	70.1	11.1	3.1	12.4	6.9	28.8	11.7	31.7
United Kingdom	66.3	15.2	1.9	7.7	6.0	32.1	3.1	18.5
Hungary	67.3	4.9	1.1	3.3	1.2	3.0	3.6	3.7
Ireland	68.3	18.4	3.4	12.3	7.5	23.6	11.5	11.2
Israel	69.8	10.7	22.3	3.9	3.5	13.4	11.0	22.0
Iceland	77.8	26.3	10.4	40.1	43.8	56.4	17.4	32.7
Italy	78.3	15.5	5.4	12.6	10.9	23.2	17.3	12.0
Lithuania	51.6	7.3	3.8	2.8	3.0	6.0	2.1	1.9
Netherlands	79.9	14.3	3.5	25.7	3.8	22.1	2.8	12.1
Norway	75.3	21.8	7.9	32.1	29.7	35.4	9.6	24.0
Poland	64.5	7.3	2.5	7.1	4.4	10.4	2.3	5.7
Portugal	64.0	6.2	1.4	4.2	1.9	7.5	6.9	2.9
Sweden	82.1	16.3	4.4	34.3	20.0	43.6	7.3	42.8
Slovenia	59.7	7.2	2.6	1.9	1.4	7.7	3.4	3.9
Slovakia	74.1	8.3	1.7	4.1	3.0	20.1	4.1	10.4
Total	71.9	13.2	4.0	16.5	7.4	26.3	9.9	20.6

3.4 Method

A two-step strategy is adopted to investigate the relationship between macro-economic inequality and political participation. As a first step, the analysis is at the aggregate level: a measure of political inequality between better- and worse-off is computed in the next section and, subsequently, the connection between this country-level

index and the measure of economic inequality is assessed. This is useful to gain a general picture of the relationship between political and economic inequalities.

As a second step, the findings are tested at the individual-level. The focus thus shifts to the macro-micro relationship between income inequality and individual participation in politics. The study thus involves variables at more levels of analysis and data cannot be investigated using ordinary least squares (OLS) regression analysis, since this would entail some methodological problems. First, OLS models are unable to disentangle the contribution of the hierarchical levels: units belonging to the same cluster share unobserved common factors so that their outcomes are positively correlated. Second, they perform inaccurate inferences on the statistical significance of level-2 variables - since it is calculated on the larger number of level-1 units, the significance tests reject the null hypothesis more often than if calculated at the appropriate level (Hox 2002; or Snijders and Bosker, 1999).

Multilevel Regression Models (MRM) are used instead. Contrary to OLS, MRM are best suited because they are both able to take into account the hierarchical structure of the dataset, and to estimate level-1 and level-2 coefficients at their own level of analysis. More precisely, Multilevel Regression Models with Random Intercept are specified, which basically means that the average level of response (i.e. active population) is expected to vary *randomly* across countries.

4. Empirical analysis

4.1 Income Inequality and Participation at the Aggregate Level

As Dubrow nicely summarizes, focusing on participatory patterns allows to approach the issue of political (in)equality from a specific angle. Needless to say, major concerns are associated with measuring empirically political inequality: being the concept so complex and open to different interpretations, several approaches can be adopted to measure it. Among others[5], one strategy is to pay attention to the efforts that individuals and groups make (or do not make) to achieve political decisions favorable to them (Dubrow 2014, 21). In other words, studying trends of political participation and con-

[5] Dubrow (2014) distinguishes between two broad strategies: voice and response. Whether this article posits itself in the former field, the alternative perspective highlights whether and to what extent the political system is differently responsive to citizens demands. Bartels (2008) and Gilens (2012), for instance, famously demonstrate that the interest of the worse-off is systematically underrepresented by US public policies. However, as Dubrow himself concedes, not a single study can be characterized as truly comprehensive, and one should be clear to address a specific feature of political inequality.

necting them to economic predictors sheds light on the link between economic and political inequality - albeit of a particular type.

The first empirical goal is thus to elaborate a synthetic measure of inequality of political participation. To this end, the active population among the two poorest and the two richest quintiles in each European country is taken into consideration, in order to calculate the odds ratio (OR) of participation. The OR is a relative measure of effect that permits to quantify how strongly the presence or absence of a given characteristic shapes the observed phenomenon - i.e. how strongly the fact of belonging to the lowest/richest part of the population shapes the probability to be politically active.

Percentages of active population in the poorest and richest quintiles, as well as the computed OR for each country are reported in Appendix A. As it is clear, the closer the OR to 1, the more equal the participation of better- and worse-off; the lower this measure, the more unequal it becomes. As an example, the likelihood of poor people to vote in Belgium - as compared to the likelihood among the rich - is to be multiplied by .539, i.e. it is roughly halved by the fact of "being poor". Obviously, clear differences across countries as well across types of participation exist. Whereas voting seems to be afflicted by a relatively larger gap in countries such as Germany, Denmark, and the Netherlands, alternative forms are more discriminatory in others, e.g. Portugal and Iceland.

In order to have a clearer picture, it is meaningful to associate it to the selected measure of income inequality. The relationship between income inequality and the OR for each form of participation is graphically represented in the charts below.

Two points are worthy of mention. On the one hand, income inequality seems to be positively associated with the computed measure of political inequality. As a general tendency, the higher the Gini coefficient, the lower the Odds Ratio that calculates the relative probability of poor, as compared to the rich, to be politically active. On the other hand, this association is particularly strong for alternative forms of participation: whereas in the case of voting, the slope of the regression line approximates 0 (i.e. the line is practically flat) and the R^2 indicates a very low fit, things change in the case of boycotting products, working in organizations, and signing petitions. In all three cases, the OR evidently decreases - indicating a wider gap between the likelihoods of participation of better- and worse-off - alongside the increase of the Gini coefficient. Additionally, the R^2 indicates a fairly good fit of the regression line and preliminarily confirms the positive association between income and economic inequalities.

1 - Odds Ratios (OR) for voting

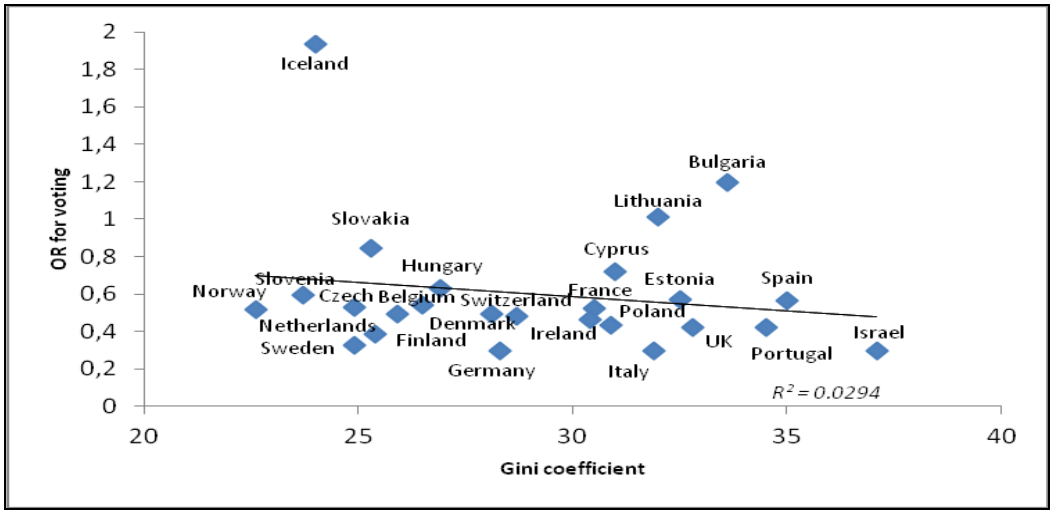


Figure 2 - Odds Ratios (OR) for working in organizations

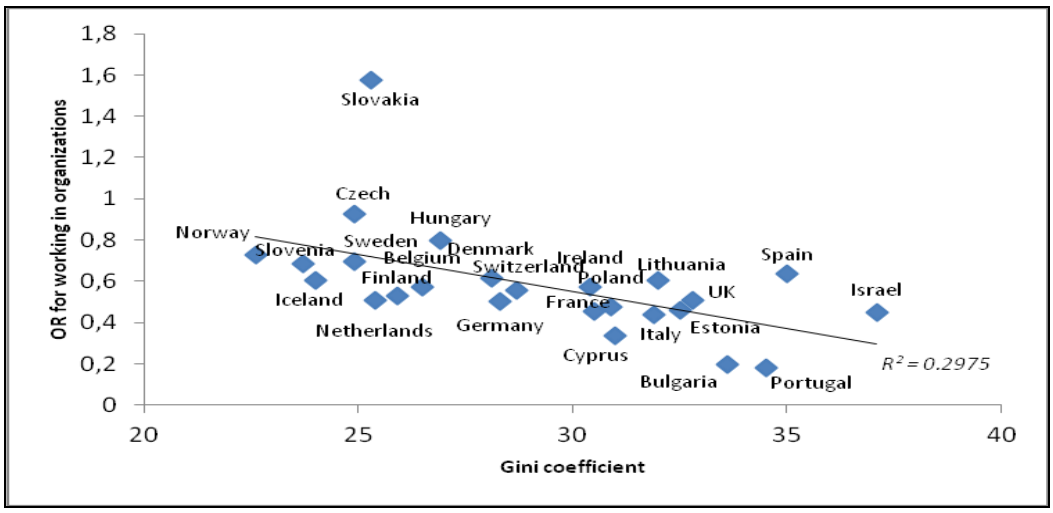


Figure 3 - Odds Ratios (OR) for signing a petition

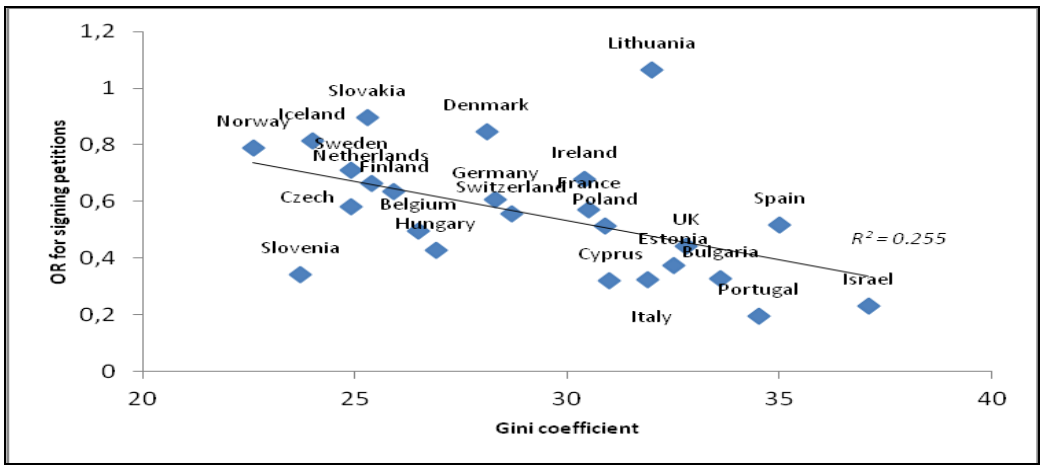
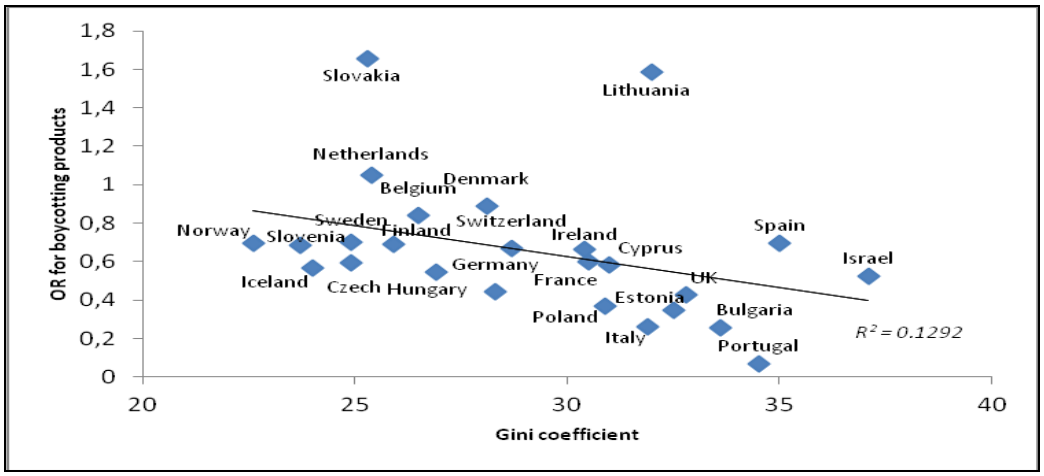


Figure 4 - Odds Ratios (OR) for boycotting certain products



4.2 Income Inequality and Participation at the Individual Level

Needless to say, the analysis in the previous section is still preliminary. On the one hand, the association between economic and political inequality is not controlled for a number of variables - at level-1 and level-2 - that might make the relationship spurious. On the other hand, the analysis is at the aggregate level and is not informative on the

macro-micro impact of economic inequality on individual propensity to engage politically. This is instead necessary, in order to assess a direct link between the effect of macro-economic predictors and micro-level behaviors. As explained in more details in section 3.4, Multilevel Models are necessary to test correctly the impact of variables at different levels of analysis.

Table 2 below displays the coefficients of the Multilevel analysis. Two different models for each form of participation are reported: the first one addresses the research question on the direct effect of inequality on participation, the second one includes the interaction terms between Gini and income, and is thus related to the second research inquiry, i.e. the effect of inequality contingent on individual income[6].

As a general rule, expectations about control variables included in the model are confirmed. First and foremost, the dummy associated with the post-communist legacy always displays a strongly negative effect on any form of participation, which confirms the gap in political engagement between Eastern and Western European countries highlighted by previous studies (Howard 2003; Bernhard and Karakoç 2007; Pacek *et al*. 2009). In more detail, living in a post-communist country decreases the predicted probability to vote (-12.49%), to work in organizations (-11.64%), to sign petitions (-14.21%) and to boycott products (-10.57%). All predicted probabilities are reported in table 3 below. In a Binomial Multilevel Model, the coefficient β associated with each X_n is the effect of a unit increment of X on the logit scale and the probability is thus computed by assigning different scores for the variable under scrutiny, holding all other variables constant at their mean value and dummy variables at 1 (Afshartous and de Leeuw 2005; Skrondal and Rabe-Hesketh 2009). Needless to say, the percentages do not correspond to observed percentages, since they are computed probabilities with all other variables held constant at their mean value[7].

For the other control at the country-level, the selected measure of electoral disproportionality indeed shows a statistically significant and negative effect on voting, which accounts for approximately 10 percentage points less in the probability to be active. At

[6] Even if not reported, an empty model (or random intercept-only model) was estimated, in order to see whether significant variance exists between countries. The test showed that statistically significant differences exist and that a percentage of 9% (voting), 19% (petitioning), 23% (boycotting products), and 28% (working in organizations) of the total variance in the level of participation is accounted for by differences between countries (on this, see Hayes 2006, 393-394). These percentages are roughly halved by the introduction of the independent variables, as reported in the VPC row.

[7] If any, the computed probabilities confirm the fairly good fit of the statistical models: as an example, the observed percentages of voters in Western and Eastern European countries is 80.3% and 68.9% respectively. The figures come close to the 82.23% and 69.74% computed on the basis of the coefficients reported in Table 2.

the same time, it apparently does not make any difference for all other behaviors, even though it is interesting to note that disproportionality is negatively associated with a conventional behavior such as working in organizations, and positively associated with unconventional behaviors such as petitioning and boycotting.

Among controls at the individual level, the two dummies on trade union membership and on the place of birth display a constant and opposite influence. On the one hand, citizens born in another country display systematically lower interest in political engagement: the participatory gap is particularly strong in the case of voting (-21.86%), for which restrictive citizenship rules probably make the difference, but it is significant also for all other forms of participation. On the other hand, members of the trade union are unsurprisingly more active, with approximately 5 percentage points more on average in their predicted probabilities to participate. More interestingly, the effect of other control variables is not equally constant. Age, for instance, is negatively associated with voting and working in association (e.g. a 65-year old is 30 percentage points more likely to have voted in the last election as compared to a 25-year old), but it is positively associated to both petitioning and boycotting products. This is coherent with Melo and Stockemer's findings (2014) on the age effect regarding protest behaviors.

In a similar manner, females do not necessarily participate less: even though they have lower probability to vote and work in organizations, they are more active both in the case of petitioning and boycotting. Conversely, religious people are generally more active, but not in the case of petitioning and, even more, boycotting.

Last but not least, education is the single, strongest predictor of political activism. Having a 10-year educational history (the common compulsory education in countries such as France, Germany, Spain, and Italy) or a 20-year one accounts for a large difference in citizen probability to vote (17.27%), to work in organizations (14.67%), to sign petitions (20.33%), and to boycott products (17.03%).

Coming to the main variables of interest, the data show that economic resources at the individual level do make a difference (coherently with H_1), even though its effect is smaller than other indicators of socio-economic status (such as education). Most surprisingly, the income effect is stronger for voting than for other forms of participation, but this is mainly due to the fact that the predicted probabilities are computed at different points along the logistic curve. At the country-level, income inequality never increases the level of participation: quite the opposite, the predicted probabilities to be active invariably drop, when comparing an individual living in the most equal and someone living in the most unequal country: voting (-11.04%), working in

Table 2 - Multilevel binomial regression models

	Vote		*Work organiz.*		*Sign petition*		*Boycott products*	
	Model 1	*Model 2*	*Model 1*	*Model 2*	*Model 1*	*Model 2*	*Model 1*	*Model 2*
Income	.101***	.310***	.065***	-.129*	.039***	-.183***	.047***	-.190***
	(.006)	(.048)	(.006)	(.056)	(.005)	(.044)	(.006)	(.051)
Gini	-.053*	-.019	-.118***	-.158***	-.071*	-.115***	-.102***	-.150***
	(.026)	(.027)	(.032)	(.033)	(.036)	(.036)	(.040)	(.042)
Gini*income		-.007***		.007**		.008***		.009***
		(.002)		(.002)		(.002)		(.002)
Individual controls								
Years of educ.	.106***	.107***	.090***	.089***	.098***	.097***	.106***	.105***
	(.005)	(.005)	(.004)	(.004)	(.004)	(.004)	(.004)	(.004)
Age	.032***	.032***	.007***	.007***	-.009***	-.009***	.002*	.002*
	(.001)	(.001)	(.001)	(.001)	(.001)	(.001)	(.001)	(.001)
Religiosity	.043***	.043***	.072***	.072***	.005	.005	-.014*	-.014*
	(.005)	(.005)	(.006)	(.006)	(.005)	(.005)	(.005)	(.005)
Gender (female)	-.060*	-.060*	-.321***	-.322***	.173***	.172***	.174***	.173***
	(.030)	(.030)	(.033)	(.033)	(.028)	(.028)	(.031)	(.031)
Born in another country	-1.111***	-1.111***	-.464***	-.462***	-.495***	-.494***	-.255***	-.253***
	(.053)	(.053)	(.061)	(.061)	(.052)	(.052)	(.056)	(.056)
Member trade union	.241***	.240***	.327***	.326***	.399***	.398***	.271***	.269***
	(.035)	(.035)	(.037)	(.037)	(.033)	(.033)	(.036)	(.036)
Country controls								
Index of dispropor.	-.298*	-.303*	-.156	-.158	.225	.225	.125	.125
	(.151)	(.151)	(.184)	(.184)	(.209)	(.209)	(.236)	(.236)
Post-communism	-.697***	-.691***	-1.721***	-1.737***	-1.365***	-1.382***	-1.502***	-1.521***
	(.199)	(.199)	(.246)	(.246)	(.277)	(.274)	(.312)	(.312)
Intercept	-.168	-1.166	-.164	.938	-.479	.756	-.460	.888
	(.735)	(.769)	(.898)	(.944)	(1.012)	(1.031)	(1.143)	(1.174)
Level 2 residual var.	.172**	.171**	.252**	.247**	.334**	.327**	.423**	.419**
	(.058)	(.058)	(.088)	(.086)	(.112)	(.110)	(.142)	(.141)
VPC	.050	.049	.071	.069	.092	.090	.114	.112
N level-1	47,515	47,515	47,515	47,515	47,515	47,515	47,515	47,515
N level-2	25	25	25	25	25	25	25	25
AIC	154104.2	154330.6	179102.2	179609.6	163494.3	163791.5	172860.3	173285.5

* p< 0.05 ** p<0.01 *** p<0.005

organizations (-22.93%), signing petitions (-17.09%), and boycotting products (-19.09%). This is at odds with the expectations derived from the conflict theory presented above. Political participation is never nourished by larger economic inequalities,

neither if one considers classic electoral participation (H_2a), nor for what pertains to alternative forms of engagement (H_2c). Rather, it significantly diminishes the level of participation in all four types (H_2b).

Table 3 - Predicted probabilities

	Voting		*Work organization*		*Sign petition*		*Boycott products*	
	*Min***	*Max***	*Min***	*Max***	*Min***	*Max***	*Min***	*Max***
Level-1 variables								
Income	75.45	88.41	11.62	19.10	17.88	23.63	11.95	17.16
Education	73.60	90.87	10.01	24.68	13.77	34.10	9.00	26.09
Religiosity	79.79	85.32	11.59	20.04	20.02*	20.75*	14.74	13.22
Age***	68.20	88.52	12.40	16.06	24.54	18.09	13.46	14.50
Born in another country	82.23	60.37	14.61	9.71	20.32	13.45	14.10	11.29
Gender	82.23	81.34	14.61	11.04	20.32	23.27	14.10	16.35
Member of union	82.23	85.48	14.61	19.17	20.32	27.54	14.10	17.72
Level-2 variables								
Absolute disproport.	86.03	75.47	16.58*	12.14*	17.05*	25.77*	12.71*	16.31*
Post-communist	82.23	69.74	14.61	2.97	20.32	6.11	14.10	3.53
Gini coeff.	87.52	76.48	30.17	7.24	30.81	13.72	26.78	7.69

* Statistically non significant effects.

** The minimum and the maximum correspond to the smallest and biggest value in any scale (e.g. 1 and 10 respectively in the income scale). As for dummy variables, maximum is always 1 (e.g. females).

*** For the sake of the argument, the minimum and the maximum are 25 and 65 years respectively.

In regards to the second research inquiry mentioned in the introduction, one should be interested in evaluating whether the Gini coefficient has an effect that is contingent on income. Such inquiry is typically addressed with cross-level interactions (Anderson 2007; Aguinis and Culpepper 2015): an interaction term between Gini and income is thus included in model 2. If expectations based on the conflict theory and on studies on the effects of relative deprivation on political engagement are correct, one should expect the interaction term to counteract the impact of income on political participation.

The data provide contradictory results in this respect. On the one hand, the interaction term suggests that the participatory gap determined by income is diminished by higher levels of inequality in the case of voting: all other things being equal, the difference in electoral participation is diminished by higher inequality. On the other, the opposite trend is highlighted in the case of all other forms of participation, i.e. a larger

gap in most unequal countries. Moreover, the interaction effects need to be tested, because their interpretation is symmetrical in nature (Aguinis *et al*. 2013). In other words, it is necessary to make sure that the decreased or increased gap determined by income is directly linked to a different macro-micro impact by income inequality on individuals[8]. To this end, I replicate the analysis with all control variables in the dataset, split in income quintiles.

Table 4 - Effects of inequality on political participation by income quintile

	Poorest quintile	*Second quintile*	*Median quintile*	*Fourth quintile*	*Richest quintile*
Vote	-.033	-.057	-.065*	-.053	-.069*
	(.029)	(.030)	(.029)	(.028)	(.032)
Work organization	-.134***	-.152***	-.130***	-.114**	-.055
	(.033)	(.037)	(.031)	(.035)	(.037)
Sign petition	-.067*	-.103*	-.073*	-.059	-.020
	(.034)	(.041)	(.037)	(.041)	(.033)
Boycott	-.096*	-.163***	.-.086*	-.060	-.059
	(.044)	(.041)	(.040)	(.042)	(.049)

* p< 0.05 ** p<0.01 *** p<0.005

The first row describes the effect of income inequality for voting: coherently with its main effect reported in model 1 (Table 2), the impact is barely significant across the whole population. However, its influence is sizeable only for the richest and the medium income earners, hence the diminished participatory gap between better- and worse-off in most unequal countries. The other rows tell quite a different story: income inequality never shows a statistically significant effect on the richest and, set aside the case of working in organizations, on the second richest quintiles. Its negative impact is significant only for medium income earners and the poorest group in the population and it is thus accountable for the increased participatory gap between well-to-do and others in most unequal countries.

[8] Even though the alternative interpretation – that the effect of income is different across levels of income inequality - is in principle the other side of the same coin, other unobserved variables may intervene and make the interaction spurious. The same confirmatory analysis is thus employed in similar studies (e.g. Solt 2008).

5. Conclusion

Inequality has recently attracted a great deal of attention with respect to its effect on democratic stability (Houle 2009, Jung and Sunde 2014). Its ramifications should be carefully evaluated, first and foremost with regards to the democratic ideal of political equality. Following Dubrow (2014), this article contributes to highlight the link between economic and political inequalities - at least for what concerns citizen participation. A small digression in this respect is needed. As a matter of fact, simply acknowledging that some participate and some others do not, may be interpreted as irrelevant, as long as no legal obstacle prevents individuals to be politically active. As it is well-known, the mainstream definition of democracy is dependent on the power to decide in the course of a competitive process (Schumpeter 1942; Sartori 1987). From this point of view, unequal participation is not problematic *per se*, even more so as liberal democracy recognizes (and upholds) both the right to participate and the right not to do so. Demonstrating that some citizens abstain from voting is thus no major problem, as long as it is assumed to be depending on an individual's free choice.

The issue is complex and addressing it exhaustively is well beyond the scope of this article. However, a preliminary response may be sketched: first of all, democracy is both a descriptive and a prescriptive term (Morlino 2011, 34). As such, it cannot resolve, once and for all, the inescapable tension between its pragmatic and its redemptive face (Blokker 2010, 19-20; Canovan 1999, 9-14; Oakeshott 1996) - i.e. its normative ideals such as the equal representation of citizen interests (Dahl 1971). In addition to this, the very basic notion of free choice is questionable. Abstention from voting might not be a problem, as long as it is evenly spread across a population. If not - that is if individual predictors of socio-economic conditions significantly correlate with the choice to abstain - participation is not freely chosen, "or it is freely chosen in a different sense, as the conditions that are statistically correlated with this choice [of non-participation] are themselves not freely chosen but consist of circumstances that are given" (Offe 2013, 203).

Bearing this in mind, the article elaborates first a measure of political inequality. Unsurprisingly, the analysis confirms the recurrent gap between high- and low-income earners. More interestingly, the data show also that such gap is positively associated with the selected macro-economic indicators of income inequality, thus suggesting a link between the two dimensions.

The second part of the empirical analysis goes more in depth, and seeks to establish a connection between the participatory gap and the macro-micro impact of economic inequality. It is thus shown that inequality always depresses political participation -

contrary to expectations rooted in the conflict theory - and almost always contributes to enlarge the participatory gap between the rich and the poor. In particular, it shows its detrimental role in connection to alternative forms of participation, which is anything but negligible, given those studies showing that alternative forms of engagement are even more influential than conventional ones (APSA Task Force on Inequality and American Democracy 2004).

All in all: Solt's findings are by and large confirmed, even if tested in times of economic turmoil. Nevertheless, an important distinction is introduced, as the discriminatory impact of income inequality holds true for all alternative forms of engagement, but not for voting. Further studies can easily follow to explain this. Does it depend on the economic crisis itself, which might have promoted electoral participation among the worse-off under conditions of higher inequality? Or does it depend on the peculiar nature of electoral participation, which is typically influenced by moral beliefs, or by expressive concerns, rather than by economic motivations (Brennan and Hamlin, 2000; Baron 2003)?

The analysis suggests that alternative forms of participation, i.e. those that are more expensive in terms of money, time, and intellectual commitment. are more exposed to the macro-micro discriminatory effect of contextual variables such as inequality. In this respect, the article builds on Schäfer's warning against the higher discriminatory nature of alternative forms of engagement as compared to traditional voting (Schäfer 2012; Schäfer and Schoen 2013). Rather than fostering a conflictual engagement in politics, economic inequality is thus found to alienate the poorest part of the population, thus magnifying the discriminatory impact of economic resources at the individual level.

Appendix A - Participation in rich and poor quintiles and Odds Ratios (OR)

		Voting		*Working in organizations*		*Signing petitions*		*Boycotting products*	
		%	**OR**	**%**	**OR**	**%**	**OR**	**%**	**OR**
Belgium	Poor	86,1	0,539	14,8	0,572	15,4	0,495	11,1	0,843
	Rich	92		23,3		26,9		12,9	
Bulgaria	Poor	76,2	1,196	0,5	0,196	4,7	0,327	1,6	0,255
	Rich	72,8		2,5		13,1		6	
Switzerland	Poor	59,6	0,481	14,2	0,554	29,1	0,555	26,5	0,670
	Rich	75,4		23		42,5		35	
Cyprus	Poor	78,6	0,721	5,4	0,337	8,3	0,321	9	0,583
	Rich	83,6		14,5		22		14,5	
Czech	Poor	57,1	0,531	5,4	0,927	16,5	0,580	10,1	0,594
	Rich	71,5		5,8		25,4		15,9	
Germany	Poor	73,7	0,298	25	0,500	30,3	0,605	27	0,441
	Rich	90,4		40		41,8		45,6	
Denmark	Poor	92,6	0,494	22,1	0,617	24,4	0,847	26,2	0,891
	Rich	96,2		31,5		27,6		28,5	
Estonia	Poor	62,9	0,571	3,4	0,461	5,9	0,373	3,7	0,350
	Rich	74,8		7,1		14,4		9,9	
Spain	Poor	73,2	0,563	21,4	0,635	30,3	0,519	16,2	0,693
	Rich	82,9		30		45,6		21,8	
Finland	Poor	80,9	0,492	29,5	0,530	20,4	0,637	31	0,688
	Rich	89,6		44,1		28,7		39,5	
France	Poor	75,3	0,525	9,5	0,456	25,3	0,572	27,3	0,600
	Rich	85,3		18,7		37,2		38,5	
UK	Poor	63,4	0,422	5,6	0,506	26,2	0,441	13,9	0,430
	Rich	80,4		10,5		44,6		27,3	
Hungary	Poor	68,4	0,632	3,3	0,798	1,8	0,429	3,2	0,547
	Rich	77,4		4,1		4,1		5,7	
Ireland	Poor	70,8	0,465	10,4	0,571	22,3	0,679	10,2	0,664
	Rich	83,9		16,9		29,7		14,6	
Israel	Poor	71	0,296	2,5	0,449	6,7	0,230	18,8	0,523
	Rich	89,2		5,4		23,8		30,7	
Iceland	Poor	90,8	1,936	37,7	0,605	57,2	0,816	30	0,566
	Rich	83,6		50		62,1		43,1	
Italy	Poor	78,4	0,299	12,2	0,438	18,4	0,324	7,6	0,263
	Rich	92,4		24,1		41		23,8	
Lithuania	Poor	54,7	1,012	1,9	0,605	6,9	1,066	2,2	1,584
	Rich	54,4		3,1		6,5		1,4	
Netherlands	Poor	76,8	0,384	19,8	0,508	18,8	0,666	13,9	1,052
	Rich	89,6		32,7		25,8		13,3	
Norway	Poor	83,6	0,516	28,7	0,728	33,3	0,787	21	0,697
	Rich	90,8		35,6		38,8		27,6	
Poland	Poor	62,4	0,436	5,5	0,476	7,9	0,514	3,2	0,370
	Rich	79,2		10,9		14,3		8,2	

Portugal	Poor	64,1	0,419	2,9	0,179	4,1	0,196	0,9	0,067
	Rich	81		14,3		17,9		11,9	
Sweden	Poor	85,6	0,326	30,6	0,695	39,6	0,710	39,5	0,699
	Rich	94,8		38,8		48		48,3	
Slovenia	Poor	70,4	0,595	1,8	0,687	5,3	0,344	3,7	0,687
	Rich	80		2,6		14		5,3	
Slovakia	Poor	75,9	0,842	5,4	1,574	17,1	0,897	13,2	1,658
	Rich	78,9		3,5		18,7		8,4	

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