

# Political Equality and Political Sufficiency

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— **Draft (May 2011)** — **not for citation** — **comments welcome** —

**Abstract:** The distinction between equality and sufficiency, much discussed in the distributive justice literature, is here applied to democratic theory. Overlooking the distinction can cause two kinds of problems: conceptual and logical. Conceptually, it may not be clear if political equality and/or political sufficiency is being advocated. I offer examples from Amy Gutmann, Dennis Thompson, and James Bohman. Logical problems, which are more serious, involve invalid normative conclusions. Some defences and criticisms of political equality are called into question. I discuss examples from Mark Warren, Thomas Christiano, and David Estlund. Democratic theorists should thus take seriously the distinction between political equality and political sufficiency.

8,800 words

## 1. Introduction

Most democratic theorists support a high degree of political equality. But some confuse political equality, where everyone has the same amount of a political resource, with what I call “political sufficiency”, where everyone has at least a certain specified amount.

This distinction has three main implications. First, it is not always obvious when writers are discussing political equality or political sufficiency. These arguments simply need to be clarified. Second, and most important, some conclusions are incorrect: theorists make inferences about political equality without spotting the relevance of political sufficiency. This requires more significant changes, with different premises or even different conclusions. In this respect, equality and sufficiency are rivals. Third, theorists committed solely to political equality are open to “levelling-down” objections, accepting low-quality procedures for the sake of equality. To avoid some levelling-down objections, political egalitarians should specify the sufficient level of the resource to be equalized. In this respect, equality and sufficiency are allies. In turn, this means that political egalitarians should not reject sufficientarian arguments because of the difficulty of agreeing on what is sufficient. This is a significant difficulty with sufficientarian arguments, but egalitarians too must address it.

This paper runs as follows. After outlining my conceptual framework (section 2), I examine the “logical space” of what can happen if the equality/sufficiency distinction is overlooked. Two main kinds of problem are identified: conceptual and logical (section 3). Conceptual problems can lead to unclarity about whether an argument involves political equality or political sufficiency (section 4). Even if an argument is clearly sufficientarian or egalitarian, an author can risk confusion by using the other term (section 5).

More important are logical problems, such as sufficientarian conclusions which are wrongly inferred from egalitarian premises (section 6), or egalitarian conclusions which are wrongly inferred from sufficientarian premises (section 7). After considering an objection to

this argument, involving political power as a positional good (section 8), I discuss anti-egalitarian conclusions which are wrongly derived from sufficientarian premises (section 9).

## 2. Conceptual framework

Egalitarian claims have the form *All P's should M the same amount of X*, where *P* is an agent (e.g. individual, group), *M* is a verb (e.g. have, receive), and *X* is an object (e.g. money, opportunity). For ease of exposition, I will replace *M* with “have”. Egalitarian claims thus take the form *All P's should have the same amount of X*.

Sufficientarian claims have the form *All P's should have at least F amount of X*, where *F* is an absolute threshold, such as 10 units of a resource, or 5 units for a child and 10 for an adult. Sufficientarianism is a minimum absolute-threshold argument; maximum absolute-threshold arguments state that *All P's should have no more than G amount of X*. Some maximum absolute-threshold statements are equivalent to minimum ones, as discussed later.

What I will call “relativarian” claims have the form *All P's should have at least H amount of X*, where *H* is a relative threshold, such as half the mean amount of *X*, or 10 units less than the maximum amount of *X*. Maximum relative-thresholds may be implied by the position of the minimum threshold, or applied independently.

All three ideas are found in Rousseau's *Social Contract*. Key political resources should be distributed equally: each citizen has one vote, and no law-making power is delegated to representatives. Material resources must lie within absolute and relative thresholds. There are two absolute thresholds, one minimum and one maximum: no citizen should be so poor as to be corrupted by desiring luxury, or so rich as to be corrupted by its possession. As regards relative thresholds, no citizen should be so much richer than anyone else that he could corrupt others, or so much poorer that he could lose his independence

through bribery. These relative thresholds will sit somewhere between the minimum and maximum absolute thresholds.<sup>1</sup>

My main focus is on sufficiency and equality, not on what I am calling “relativity”. But two quick points are worth noting. One is that in sufficientarian claims, the position of other *P*'s is irrelevant when deciding whether a given *P* has more than an absolute threshold *F*, whereas in relativarian claims, the position of other *P*'s affects the decision about whether a given *P* has more than the relative threshold *G*. The second point to make is that the distinction between relativarianism and sufficientarianism may be blurred by conventional use of the term “enough”. Yet having enough in absolute terms may differ from having enough in relative terms. For example, if people need “enough” education to have a fair chance in the job market, this could imply both absolute standards, such as being able to read and write, and relative standards, such as not being so far below the average level of education that one is significantly disadvantaged. The idea of relativity thus strengthens our conceptual armoury.

Eight clarifications are needed. First, and most important, we must distinguish two separate aspects of equality, which Temkin calls “equality as universality” and “equality as comparability”.<sup>2</sup> Equality as universality involves *all P*'s, equality as comparability refers to *the same amount of X*. Egalitarian, sufficientarian and relativarian statements all entail equality as universality – indeed, most normative positions use it as a closure principle,<sup>3</sup> although they may disagree about who is a *P*. Only egalitarian statements make a further commitment to distribute the resource comparably, i.e. the same amount to all *P*'s.

<sup>1</sup> Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, ed. Victor Gourevitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 2.11 [book 2 chapter 11], p. 78; 3.4, p. 91; 3.15, pp. 114-5; 4.2, p. 124.

<sup>2</sup> Larry Temkin, “Inequality: A Complex, Individualistic, and Comparative Notion”, *Philosophical Issues* 11 (2001), 327-53.

<sup>3</sup> Joseph Raz, *The Morality of Freedom* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), p. 220.

Not distinguishing these two ideas leads some theorists to wrongly depict ideas as egalitarian rather than sufficientarian. Using the term “enough” does not make a claim sufficientarian, as we will see – but adding “equally” does not make a claim egalitarian.<sup>4</sup> “Everyone equally should have a right to political power” is ambiguous between everyone having a right to political power, everyone having the same right to political power, and everyone having a right to equal political power. From now on, I will use “universalist” when discussing equality as universality, and retain “equality” only for claims also involving equality as comparability.

Second, there are many types of political equality and sufficiency, due to the many parts of the political process (e.g. agenda-setting, deliberation, decision-making), and the many different *P*, *M*, *F*, *G*, *H* and *X* components. Few democratic theories are egalitarian or sufficientarian in all respects. But someone might call herself a political egalitarian or a political sufficientarian if she has a presumption in favour of that principle, or if core parts of her theory embody that principle.

Third, because the political process has several stages, egalitarianism in one respect may be sufficientarianism in another. For example, equality in votes (one person, one vote) would only be sufficiency of influence if everyone could influence outcomes but those with more voice have more chance of influence. Equal votes may even lead to insufficient influence for people in a permanent minority.<sup>5</sup>

Fourth, equality and sufficiency are analytically distinct in theory; they may or may not overlap in practice. Both equality and sufficiency are transgressed where some *P*'s have

<sup>4</sup> Raz, *The Morality of Freedom*, p. 221. I characterize egalitarianism differently to Raz but I am indebted to his conceptual analysis.

<sup>5</sup> Lani Guinier, *The Tyranny of the Majority: Fundamental Fairness in Representative Democracy* (New York: The Free Press, 1994).

at least  $F$  amount of  $X$  and some have less than  $F$  – a key reason why equality and sufficiency are often confused, as we will see.

Fifth, what is sufficient for one person may be insufficient for another, since individuals differ in their ability to convert resources. My original definition of sufficiency thus gave the example of 5 units for a child and 10 for an adult.

Sixth, “sufficiency” need not mean a bare minimum. Although the distributive justice literature often depicts sufficiency as “just enough for subsistence”, in this paper sufficiency means any specified positive level of the resource, whether that level is low or high.<sup>6</sup> A sufficiency of time for deliberation might mean enough time to cover the ground adequately, or enough time to probe the issues in detail. So, we should ask not only “equality of what?” but also “sufficient for what?” Similarly, depending on their aims, political sufficientarians could simply require one person one vote, or they could also require agenda-setting powers, recall powers, and so on. My arguments below leave open what the sufficiency threshold is.

Seventh, I have deliberately presented minimalist ideas of equality and sufficiency. Many writers are more specific. For example, Robert Huseby treats sufficiency as “a telic principle ... [which] is meant to apply to all human beings at all points in time.”<sup>7</sup> This is a legitimate *conception* of sufficiency but it is a subset of the *concept* of sufficiency used in this paper.

This has major normative implications. Egalitarians who object to particular conceptions of sufficiency can and should uphold the general concept. Starting with a specific

<sup>6</sup> Following Jeremy Waldron, “John Rawls and the Social Minimum”, in *Liberal Rights: Collected Papers 1981-1991* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 250-70, pp. 250-1, 262, 270, and Adam Swift, *Political Philosophy: A Beginner's Guide for Students and Politicians* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001), p. 122.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Huseby, “Sufficiency: Restated and Defended”, *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 18 (2010): 178-97, p. 179; emphasis removed.

conception of sufficiency may obscure the fact that egalitarians need sufficiency to avoid strong levelling-down objections.

My minimalist definition is not as minimal as Harry Brighouse and Adam Swift's definition of sufficiency: "comparisons do not matter, what is important is that all *have enough*".<sup>8</sup> The second part of this definition needs fleshing out, however, not least because an egalitarian might say that those with less of a resource do not have enough. It thus helps to add that sufficientarianism means having enough *in absolute terms* – more than  $F$  amount of a resource, where  $F$  is an absolute threshold.<sup>9</sup>

This stance partly reflects my methodological commitment to defining terms pragmatically. There are many ways of defining terms, but some are more useful. Defining sufficiency as "having enough" is plausible, indeed this is our conventional understanding. But it is not useful for most political theorists because so many theories have requirements about what is enough – and we would still need a term for distributions above an absolute threshold. Perhaps that could be called "thresholdarianism", but our philosophical language in this area is ugly enough already. There are good reasons, then, to define sufficientarianism as I have done here.

Eighth, I discuss political resources for which all relevant agents can reach sufficiency, like votes; I do not address cases where limited resources necessitate violations of sufficiency.<sup>10</sup> I conceive "political resources" broadly, to include not only such things as

<sup>8</sup> Harry Brighouse and Adam Swift, "Equality, Priority, and Positional Goods", *Ethics* 116 (2006): 471-97, p. 471; emphasis added.

<sup>9</sup> Adam Swift, *Political Philosophy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001) also moves between absolute and relative thresholds when discussing sufficiency. He discusses "enough" first in relative terms (pp. 111-2), then in absolute terms (pp. 121-2). These are both viable positions but we should not confuse them, hence my distinction between sufficientarianism and relativarianism.

<sup>10</sup> For example, Larry Temkin, *Inequality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 160-1.

votes and opportunities for deliberation but also related objects like self-respect. I focus largely on distributive issues, not on how people think of and treat each other: in Miller's terms, I address distributive rather than social equality (or social sufficiency).<sup>11</sup>

### 3. Problems for democratic theory

I now apply the equality/sufficiency distinction to democratic theory. Some democratic theorists have discussed similar ideas. Jane Mansbridge notes that participatory democrats like Carole Pateman propose an equal voice in politics when the educational benefits of participation may merely require *a* voice in politics.<sup>12</sup> Charles Beitz and Joshua Cohen argue that political equality in election campaigns is assisted not by capping spending at a maximum level but by providing a minimum, sufficient level for all candidates.<sup>13</sup> And Will Kymlicka distinguishes the view that a minority group's members should have legislative representation in proportion to their share of the population, and the view that they need "a threshold number of representatives, sufficient to ensure that the group's views and interests are effectively expressed". This sufficientarian number of representatives may be less than, the same as, or more than the number required by political equality.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>11</sup> David Miller, "Equality and Justice", *Ratio* 10 (1997), 222-37. A democratic theory focusing primarily on social rather than distributive principles is Elizabeth Anderson, "What is the Point of Equality?", *Ethics* 109 (1999), 287-337. Distributive and social arguments will partly overlap, course.

<sup>12</sup> Jane Mansbridge, *Beyond Adversary Democracy* (New York: Basic Books, 1980), p. 245.

<sup>13</sup> Charles Beitz, *Political Equality: An Essay in Democratic Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), pp. 207-9; Joshua Cohen, "Procedure and Substance in Deliberative Democracy", in Seyla Benhabib, ed., *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 95-119, pp. 109-10.

<sup>14</sup> Will Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), pp. 146-7.



Nonetheless, the equality/sufficiency distinction is not prominent in democratic theory. To see what problems can arise from not distinguishing political equality and political sufficiency, we can explore the “logical space” of the issue.

There are two kinds of problem: conceptual and logical. Conceptual problems involve confusion over what an argument is about. There are two sub-categories. The first is where it is not clear if an argument involves political equality or political sufficiency. I exemplify this with a passage from Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson’s work on deliberative democracy (section 4). The second is where the argument is clearly sufficientarian or egalitarian but where an author risks confusion by using the other term. James Bohman’s work is a sufficientarian position described as egalitarian (section 5). I do not know of democratic theorists who describe egalitarian arguments as sufficientarian.

Logical problems are more important. They involve egalitarian or sufficientarian conclusions which are wrongly inferred from a sufficientarian or egalitarian premise, respectively. There are two subsets: defences and criticisms of political equality. Defences of political equality can be divided in two. Sufficientarian conclusions may be wrongly inferred from egalitarian premises, as with Mark Warren (section 6). Or egalitarian conclusions may be wrongly inferred from sufficientarian premises, as with Thomas Christiano (section 7). The other main subset of logical problems involves criticisms of political equality, which can again be divided in two. Anti-egalitarian conclusions may be wrongly inferred from sufficientarian premises, as with David Estlund (section 9). Sufficientarian conclusions may also be wrongly inferred from anti-egalitarian premises, but again I do not know of a democratic theorist who does this,

#### **4. Confusion over content**

I start with a case where it is hard to see which of political equality and political sufficiency is being advocated. Take this statement of Gutmann and Thompson’s:

Deliberative democracy ... exposes the exclusionary biases in democratic practice that undermine the conditions of civic equality that its principles defend. To the extent that the least advantaged are excluded because they are too poor to have equal access to the political media, the principles of deliberative democracy support an effective critique of this unfairness.

Consider the inequality of campaign finance in the United States ... [which] disadvantages already disadvantaged citizens ....<sup>15</sup>

This passage shifts from insufficiency to inequality, focusing first on exclusion, then on unequal access, from halfway through the second sentence to the end of the passage quoted.

It is not clear precisely what concerns Gutmann and Thompson here: exclusion and/or inequality. Their basic principle stays intact: deliberative democracy gives criteria for assessing the fairness of background conditions.<sup>16</sup> But this particular passage is not clear about whether those criteria include political equality, political sufficiency, or both.

## 5. Confusion over labels

A second conceptual problem involves cases where the substance of an argument conflicts with an author's labels. One example is James Bohman's account, influenced by Amartya Sen, of a "capability-based notion of political equality",<sup>17</sup> or "capability equality".<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson, *Why Deliberative Democracy?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), pp. 48-9.

<sup>16</sup> Gutmann and Thompson, *Why Deliberative Democracy?*, p. 49.

<sup>17</sup> James Bohman, "Deliberative Democracy and Effective Social Freedom: Capabilities, Resources, and Opportunities", in James Bohman and William Rehg, ed., *Deliberative Democracy: Essays on Reason and*

Bohman's capability equality, as I read it, is primarily sufficientarian.<sup>19</sup> Political equality is an ideal, but it is often "counterfactual", so we should focus more on "thresholds" – on "the inclusion of all citizens in deliberation and the exclusion of extra-political ... forms of influence" like wealth and social inequalities.<sup>20</sup> For example, avoiding "political poverty" requires "a threshold of access to public resources and opportunities",<sup>21</sup> below which citizens "do not have the reasonable expectation of being able to affect decisions".<sup>22</sup> Above the threshold, this implies, all citizens can expect to affect decisions, but some citizens may find this easier than others.

Bohman's arguments show how genuine democrats can take sufficiency seriously. My concern is that the language of capability *equality* could obscure this. For example, Bohman writes that the "possibility that some groups are so impoverished as to be excluded sets a 'floor' of civil equality".<sup>23</sup> I would prefer to talk of floors and ceilings of civil *resources*, not of civil equality, just as we discuss floors and ceilings in campaign finances, not floors and ceilings in campaign equality. Nor would I talk about "the floor and ceiling of political equality",<sup>24</sup> but about the floor and ceiling of the resources required for political equality, or about acceptable levels of political inequality.

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*Politics* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press), 321-48, p. 342; see also James Bohman, *Public Deliberation: Pluralism, Complexity, and Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press), p. 130.

<sup>18</sup> Bohman, *Public Deliberation*, p. 325.

<sup>19</sup> See Bohman, *Public Deliberation*, pp. 107-13, 121-42; Bohman, "Deliberative Democracy", pp. 323-6, 331-46.

<sup>20</sup> Bohman, *Public Deliberation*, pp. 36, 111.

<sup>21</sup> Bohman, *Public Deliberation*, pp. 110-1.

<sup>22</sup> Bohman, "Deliberative Democracy", p. 333; see also Bohman, *Public Deliberation*, pp. 125-6.

<sup>23</sup> Bohman, "Deliberative Democracy", p. 339.

<sup>24</sup> Bohman, "Deliberative Democracy", pp. 343, 346.

Bohman's focus on sufficiency may explain why he talks not of capacity "inequality" but capacity "failure".<sup>25</sup> However, "equality of political capacities"<sup>26</sup> seems to be a universalist not a strictly egalitarian claim: deliberative democracy requires that "*all* citizens can effectively exercise their freedom" and that "*all* participants must develop their public capacities, have access to the public sphere, and have the opportunity to influence the course of deliberation in a favorable direction".<sup>27</sup> Bohman's talk of capability equality and capacity failure reflects Sen's influence, of course, but like Martha Nussbaum I see Sen's capabilities approach as primarily sufficientarian.<sup>28</sup>

My criticism is purely semantic: I am not challenging Bohman's arguments, merely suggesting that the sufficientarian parts of his theory should not be called egalitarian.

## **6. Inferring political sufficiency from political equality**

I now turn to the more important issue: logical problems, where overlooking the equality/sufficiency distinction leads to faulty normative inferences. I start with sufficientarian conclusions wrongly drawn from egalitarian premises, as in Mark Warren's account of democracy and corruption.

Corruption is inherently normative, so Warren updates traditional ideas of corruption by drawing on democratic norms. He depicts the basic democratic norm in three ways:

<sup>25</sup> Bohman, *Public Deliberation*, pp. 125, 128.

<sup>26</sup> Bohman, *Public Deliberation*, p. 109.

<sup>27</sup> Bohman, *Public Deliberation*, p. 111, emphasis added; see also p. 148.

<sup>28</sup> Martha Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 12, 86; Martha Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), pp. 291-5. On Sen's ambiguity about equality and sufficiency, see Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development*, p. 12.

- (a) “every individual potentially affected by a decision should have an equal opportunity to influence the decision”;<sup>29</sup>
- (b) “every individual potentially affected by a collective decision should have an opportunity to affect the decision proportional to his or her stake in the outcome”;<sup>30</sup>
- (c) “every individual potentially affected by a collective decision should have an equal opportunity to influence the decision proportionally [to] his or her stake in the outcome”.<sup>31</sup>

The first norm is a standard democratic one, based on political equality. The second and third are variants of this idea, replacing equality with *proportionality*: the more stake you have in an outcome, the more opportunity you should have to influence the decision. If everyone has the same stake in an outcome, they should have the same opportunity to influence the decision; someone with a small stake will take part in deliberation and decision-making but should not have as much weight as others. This valuable idea is now getting more attention in democratic theory.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Mark Warren, “What does corruption mean in a democracy?”, *American Journal of Political Science* 48 (2004), 328-43, p. 333; emphasis removed.

<sup>30</sup> Mark Warren, “Political corruption as duplicitous exclusion”, *PS: Political Science and Politics* 39 (2006), 803-7, p. 804; emphasis removed

<sup>31</sup> Mark Warren, “Democracy and the state”, in John Dryzek, Bonnie Honig and Anne Phillips, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Political Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 382-99, p. 386; emphasis removed.

<sup>32</sup> Harry Brighouse and Mark Fleurbaey, “Democracy and proportionality”, *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 18 (2010), 137-55.

Given this paper's focus, a tiny criticism is worth making: definition (c) wrongly states that every individual potentially affected by a decision should have an *equal* opportunity to influence it. But proportionality implies that only people with the same stake should have the same opportunity for influence. All affected individuals are included (political sufficiency) but they may not have the same opportunity for influence (political equality).

The more important problem comes when Warren applies democratic norms to corruption. He argues that the most common idea of corruption today, the misuse of public office for private gain, is inadequate for contemporary democracies. Egalitarian and proportional democratic norms give us new insights about corruption.

However, Warren moves from egalitarian and proportional democratic norms to an idea of corruption based on *insufficiency*: “the norm violated by corruption is that of inclusion in collective decisions and actions of all affected”, such that “the very logic of corruption involved exclusion”, and “every form of corruption involves exclusion”.<sup>33</sup> Similarly, “political corruption attacks democracy by *excluding* people from decisions that affect them”.<sup>34</sup> The new conception is even called “corruption as duplicitous exclusion”.

Such unjustified exclusion from politics means insufficiency, in a democracy. But Warren's norms do not warrant this view of corruption as exclusion/insufficiency. Strictly speaking, democratic norms of equality or proportionality suggest that corruption attacks democracy by giving affected people *less weight* than they should get. The egalitarian norm in definition (a) implies that corruption violates political equality: the corruptor gets above-average influence, others have less. The proportional norm in definitions (b) and (c) imply

<sup>33</sup> Warren, “What does corruption mean in a democracy?”, p. 333; emphasis removed

<sup>34</sup> Warren, “Political corruption”, p. 804; emphasis in the original. Warren adds further conditions, including that the exclusion be duplicitous (“What does corruption mean in a democracy?”, pp. 332-4; “Political corruption”, p. 804). But these details do not concern us here.

that corruption violates proportionality: the corruptor gets more influence than she is due, others have less.

Indeed, exclusion is too strong a requirement for corruption: democracy can still be corrupted where affected parties are included but have unequal or disproportionately low influence. Imagine that a quarry opens in the countryside near a village. Lorries from the quarry will disturb villagers, through noise, smell and so on. Politicians are asked to decide whether to restrict the hours in which lorries can go to or from the quarry. The politicians consult with villagers and the quarry-owner. The villagers conclude that while they would ideally not want any lorries, the business is legitimate. The villagers thus ask that lorries run from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., on weekdays only. The quarry-owner concludes that while she would ideally want lorries to run at all hours of all days, the villagers' concerns are legitimate. The quarry-owner agrees with villagers' proposal, and the politicians enact this.

Now imagine a corrupt version of this scenario: the quarry-owner bribes the politicians. The politicians refuse to accept the quarry-owner's ideal scenario, running lorries at all hours of all days, but agrees to let lorries run from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m., for six days of the week.

In the corrupt scenario, citizens have not been excluded. If they had been, lorries would have run at all hours of all days. The citizens still have some voice: their views are listened to, and they have influenced the outcome. But they do not have as much influence as they should have done, because of corruption.

This suggests that Warren moves too quickly, from an egalitarian/proportional norm to a conclusion involving sufficiency. Insufficiency is an extreme form of corruption, and is all too common, alas. But Warren's democratic norms seem instead to imply that corruption involves unequal or disproportional influence. "Corruption as duplicitous exclusion" should be "corruption as duplicitous inequality" or "corruption as duplicitous disproportionality". Warren's formulation is certainly catchier. But it is not quite right.

## 7. Inferring political equality from political sufficiency

I now turn to the most significant problem: egalitarian conclusions wrongly inferred from sufficientarian premises. I exemplify this using the work of Thomas Christiano.

Christiano's democratic theory certainly places most emphasis on political equality, in relation to justice,<sup>35</sup> giving everyone an equal say,<sup>36</sup> and the institutions which embody this.<sup>37</sup> He explicitly rejects the view, compatible with sufficientarianism, that "everyone's complaints ought to be taken seriously but some of these ought to be taken more seriously than others".<sup>38</sup>

But Christiano does sound sufficientarian in places. For example, "if one *excludes* a person or group of persons from having a say, their interests will not be properly taken

<sup>35</sup> Thomas Christiano, *The Rule of the Many: Fundamental Issues in Democratic Theory* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996), p. 59; Thomas Christiano, *The Constitution of Equality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 4.

<sup>36</sup> Thomas Christiano, "Waldron on Law and Disagreement", *Law and Philosophy* 19 (2000), 513-43, p. 540; see also Thomas Christiano, "Is Democracy Merely a Means to Social Justice?", in Andrew Reeve and Andrew Williams, ed., *Real Libertarianism Assessed: Political Theory After van Parijs* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 172-200, p. 195; Thomas Christiano, "The Authority of Democracy", *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 12 (2004), 266-90, p. 276; Christiano, *The Constitution of Equality*, pp. 88, 95-6, 201-2.

<sup>37</sup> Christiano, *The Rule of the Many*, pp. 224-40, 265-95; Thomas Christiano, "The Significance of Public Deliberation", in James Bohman and William Rehg, ed., *Deliberative Democracy: Essays on Reason and Politics* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1997), 243-77, pp. 256-61.

<sup>38</sup> Thomas Christiano, "Knowledge and Power in the Justification of Democracy", *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 79 (2001), 197-215, p. 212.



account of”.<sup>39</sup> “When an individual’s views are *ignored* or not given *any* weight, this undermines his sense of self-respect, in which he has a deep interest”.<sup>40</sup>

The problem is that Christiano uses these examples to argue for equality. His egalitarian conclusions, I will suggest, are too hasty in these places. Inequality where everyone is above the sufficiency level may not be as troubling as inequality where some people are below it. Egalitarian conclusions do not thus follow from the latter situation. Either the premise or the conclusion must be altered.

Consider the above quotation about someone’s self-respect being undermined if her views are ignored or given no weight. This attack on insufficiency is one justification for “the intrinsic importance of equality in public deliberation”, and Christiano concludes that “each person has a just claim to an equal share of the resources for making decisions and contributing to the public deliberations”.<sup>41</sup> This has major political implications, but the egalitarian conclusion also requires us to show deep losses of self-respect for citizens who are included but whose views are merely considered less strongly than others. And – crucially – such situations of inequality above the sufficiency level will not necessarily cause deep losses of self-respect. For example, the single-member plurality electoral system, or first-past-the-post, breaks some principles of political equality.<sup>42</sup> Many citizens do not know this, but some do. This includes democratic theorists, such as myself, who criticise these inequalities – without suffering deep losses of self-respect.<sup>43</sup> Christiano’s sufficientarian premise does not

<sup>39</sup> Christiano, “Is Democracy Merely a Means to Social Justice?”, p. 191; emphasis added.

<sup>40</sup> Christiano, “The Significance of Public Deliberation”, p. 259; emphasis added. See also Christiano, *The Rule of the Many*, p. 72.

<sup>41</sup> Christiano, “The Significance of Public Deliberation”, pp. 259, 261.

<sup>42</sup> E.g. Christiano, *The Rule of the Many*, p. 234.

<sup>43</sup> [Author reference deleted.]

support his egalitarian conclusion. An egalitarian justification is required, or a sufficientarian conclusion.

Another example is Christiano's explanation of why societal institutions must publicly and visibly "embody the equal advancement of interests". We have "fundamental interests in being publicly treated as equals", Christiano writes, and this requires "equality in voting power, equality of opportunities to run for office, and ideally equality of opportunities to participate in the processes of negotiation and discussion that lead up to voting". But he then moves to sufficientarianism:

If someone's judgment is not permitted a hearing in society, then the interests described above will be set back. Anyone who is excluded from participation in discussion and debate can see that his or her interests are not being taken seriously and may legitimately infer that his or her moral standing is being treated as less than that of others. So justice, which requires public equality, demands equal respect for the judgment of each.<sup>44</sup>

Here too, Christiano's example involves inequality where some people are below sufficiency. This cannot justify the "So" of the final sentence. The danger is that Christiano's inference is being driven at least partly by insufficiency. The solution is to upgrade the sufficientarian sentences into egalitarian ones, for example as follows:

If someone's judgment is not permitted *an equal* hearing in society, then the interests described above will be set back. Anyone *whose views are given less weight* in discussion and debate can see that his or her interests are not being taken *as seriously*

<sup>44</sup> Christiano, "The Authority of Democracy", pp. 275-6; see also Christiano, *The Constitution of Equality*, p. 88.

*as others* and may legitimately infer that his or her moral standing is being treated as less than that of others. So justice, which requires public equality, demands equal respect for the judgment of each.

The italicized changes better justify the egalitarian conclusion in the final sentence. The second sentence may need expanding: for example, racist interests might legitimately be given less weight. But overall, the amended version supports political equality better.

Elsewhere, though, the solution is not to change a sufficientarian premise to an egalitarian one, but to change an egalitarian conclusion to a sufficientarian one. Consider this claim:

each person has a fundamental interest in being treated as a person with equal moral standing among his fellow citizens. To be treated in a way that entirely ignores one's way of perceiving how one is treated constitutes a serious loss of status for a person in a society. A person whose judgment about that society is never taken seriously by others is treated in effect like a child or a madman. Such a person is denied recognition of his or her moral personality. ... This is a disastrous loss of moral standing.<sup>45</sup>

The egalitarian first sentence is stronger than the ensuing sufficientarian sentences. Yet being totally ignored is more degrading than being listened to less seriously than others. So, "with equal moral standing" should be changed to "with moral standing". Indeed, Christiano adds that one has "a deep interest in having one's moral standing among one's fellows clearly

<sup>45</sup> Christiano, "The Authority of Democracy", p. 273; see also Christiano, "Knowledge and Power", p. 206.

recognized and affirmed”.<sup>46</sup> The conclusion here should be sufficientarian, not egalitarian. (In the next section I consider the possibility that anything less than equal moral standing amounts to no moral standing.)

Christiano’s main concern again seems to be inequality where some are below sufficiency: “those who are excluded” can see that “their interests are not treated as equally worthy of advancement” and feel “as if they have a lesser moral standing”.<sup>47</sup> But to reject inequality *in general*, Christian should not place so much weight on examples of inequality which involve insufficiency. Otherwise, readers might accept egalitarian conclusions because they dislike *particular* kinds of inequality, where some people are below sufficiency.

When there is both inequality and insufficiency, is the fundamental problem insufficiency alone, or is it the *combination* of inequality and insufficiency? This is hard to answer in the abstract: the answer depends on the resources involved, the reasons for the inequality/insufficiency, and so on. The question is especially hard to answer in democratic contexts, for the following reason. To assess the relative importance of equality and sufficiency, we ideally need to compare at least three situations: (a) inequality with everyone above sufficiency; (b) inequality with some above and some below sufficiency; and (c) equality with everyone below sufficiency. Yet category (c) is unusual in democracy: for example, a situation where everyone was equal in having no voting rights would be anarchism, not democracy. Here is one example, though: a purely aggregative democracy where no deliberation is allowed. For most of us, this level of deliberation is insufficient. But it is less demeaning than category (a) situations where everyone has the right to deliberate but some have more opportunities than others, and much less demeaning than category (b) situations where some people have the right to deliberate and others do not.

<sup>46</sup> Christiano, “The Authority of Democracy”, p. 273.

<sup>47</sup> Christiano, “The Authority of Democracy”, p. 276.

This again suggests that inequality where everyone is above the sufficiency level is not as worrying as inequality where some people are below it. But it also suggests, at least in this case, and at least in terms of Christiano's emphasis on self-respect, that insufficiency alone is not as worrying as a *combination* of inequality and insufficiency. If we are all in the same boat, it may not matter if it leaks.

This is why it is dangerous to justify political equality using examples which involve both inequality and insufficiency. The extra variable, insufficiency, distorts the results, because it interacts with the variable Christiano is most interested in, inequality. To make such strong conclusions about the importance of equality, we need different examples, featuring inequality in situations where everyone is above sufficiency levels.

The above criticisms do not fundamentally undermine Christiano's democratic theory. But in key places his language could be tighter in distinguishing egalitarian and sufficientarian claims.

## **8. Political power as a positional good**

Before moving on, I must consider an objection to the previous section's arguments, involving the idea of political resources as positional goods.<sup>48</sup> A good is positional when its benefits depend on how much of it other people have.<sup>49</sup> As more people move into a secluded part of the countryside, for example, the benefit of living there decreases. "If everyone stands on tiptoe, no one sees better", in Fred Hirsch's words.<sup>50</sup> More formally, Brighthouse and Swift write: "The absolute value of a positional good depends ... on how much of it one has

<sup>48</sup> [Acknowledgements deleted to preserve anonymity.]

<sup>49</sup> Daniel Hausman and Michael McPherson, *Economic Analysis, Moral Philosophy, and Public Policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006; second edition), p. 181.

<sup>50</sup> Fred Hirsch, *Social Limits to Growth* (London: Routledge, 2005; revised edition), p. 5.

compared to others. ... Insofar as goods are positional, relative amount determines absolute value”.<sup>51</sup>

Clearly, political power can be at least partly positional. Imagine a proposal to give university graduates three votes and all other citizens two votes. Everyone would have greater choice and voice than under one-person-one-vote arrangements. People can vote for the same candidate more than once or spread their votes around: for example, someone could vote for a social democrat twice and a green candidate once, showing support for two political positions rather than just one – more choice, more voice. But would everyone really be better off? Positionally, non-graduates would have *less* power than before. For Christiano, this would be so demeaning as to cause a disastrous loss of moral standing. Inequality *causes* insufficiency, on this view.

This threatens my distinction between political equality and political sufficiency. In politics, one might argue, only equal treatment is enough treatment: if someone has less of a political resource than others, she does not have enough. Equality and sufficiency go hand in hand, it seems. Brighouse and Swift characterize this as sufficientarianism: in politics, “only a fair chance is enough of a chance”, and “only an equal chance is a fair chance”.<sup>52</sup>

One way to think about positional goods, then, is that positionality involves the relation between two scales: your relative achievement on one scale determines your absolute achievement on another.<sup>53</sup> For our purposes, this means that the partly positional nature of political resources can bring absolute thresholds into play in a related resource: inequality in one resource causes insufficiency in another.

<sup>51</sup> Brighouse and Swift, “Equality, Priority, and Positional Goods”, pp. 474-5.

<sup>52</sup> Brighouse and Swift, “Equality, Priority, and Positional Goods”, p. 476. A similar view is taken by Edward Foley, “Equal-Dollars-Per-Voter: a Constitutional Principle of Campaign Finance”, *Columbia Law Review* 94 (1994), 1204-57, p. 1241.

<sup>53</sup> Amartya Sen, ‘Poor, Relatively Speaking’, *Oxford Economic Papers* 35 (1983), 153-69, p. 156.

This undeniably *can* happen. But all my argument requires is that it will not *necessarily* happen. As shown by the previous section's example of single-member plurality elections, having less of a political resource does not always undermine self-respect, let alone cause insufficient self-respect. Consider, similarly, people too poor to make campaign contributions in American elections. Even if such citizens feel frustrated, I doubt that they would suffer the same loss of moral standing as African Americans excluded from the franchise or prevented from voting, say. In these examples, inequalities where some people are below the sufficiency level cause insufficient self-respect, but inequalities where everyone is above the sufficiency level may not have as strong a positional effect, and criticizing them requires a different argument.

Again, I do not deny that political power can have the positional effect of turning inequality into insufficiency. This may be what Christiano has in mind when discussing equal moral standing (section 7): perhaps anything less than equal moral standing implies that one has no moral standing, that one is seen as sub-human. Perhaps – although the term “moral standing” is hazy, and this argument needs fleshing out.

So, the partly positional nature of political resources may or may not mean that inequalities cause insufficiency in a related resource. It is beyond the scope of this paper to explore when positionality has this effect. All I need to show is that as regards political resources, we cannot simply say that all that matters is everyone having the same amount.

## **9. Attacking political equality on the basis of political sufficiency**

I now turn to the last area of the logical space of the equality/sufficiency distinction: anti-egalitarian conclusions which are wrongly derived from sufficientarian premises. Here, I treat sufficiency not as an alternative to equality but as an *ally*: sufficiency helps egalitarians defend themselves against some criticisms of levelling-down. An instructive example comes from David Estlund's powerful challenge to political equality.

Estlund dislikes political equality being pursued at excessive cost to political “quality”. Using the example of an innovative voucher scheme for financing election campaigns, Estlund shows that for any given egalitarian distribution of campaign finance, a maximin distribution would increase the quality of political debate. Estlund is not arguing that political quality must override political equality. But the two can clash, and rigidly egalitarian arguments can permit low-quality politics.<sup>54</sup>

I agree with Estlund’s general argument but I have concerns about one part of it: the levelling-down objection. Critics of equality sometimes note that if equality is all that counts, it would be better in one respect if (a) everyone had 100 units of money than if (b) half have 150 and half have 200. Yet (b) would be preferred by those who seek to maximize aggregate utility, and on Pareto-superior grounds.<sup>55</sup> (A Pareto-superior situation is better for at least one person and no worse for others.)

Estlund makes similar criticisms of political egalitarians. “Suppose that the only way to achieve equal (available) influence is by leveling down .... If this low level is very low, the reduction in the total volume of deliberation might damage its epistemic value”. Estlund’s example is a debate in which the two sides can either have 50 and 60 minutes respectively, or 2 minutes each. Another example is equal campaign contributions: if so little money is raised that the issues are poorly discussed, then higher but unequal contributions could be preferable.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>54</sup> David Estlund, “Political Quality”, in Ellen Frankel Paul, Fred Miller, and Jeffrey Paul, ed., *Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 127-60; David Estlund, *Democratic Authority: A Philosophical Framework* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), pp. 195-8.

<sup>55</sup> See, for example, Derek Parfit, “Equality or Priority?”, in Matthew Clayton and Andrew Williams, ed., *The Ideal of Equality* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), 81-125.

<sup>56</sup> Estlund, “Political Quality”, pp. 136, 148-9, 153-6; Estlund, *Democratic Authority*, p. 195.



A crucial feature of Estlund's critique, as I read it, involves political equality trumping other values, such as political quality. Giving political equality so much weight tells us nothing about the right *level* of the resource to be distributed, as long as everyone has the same. The required level of equal power might be so high as to permit control over all aspects of our lives, or so low as to amount to anarchism. The required level of equal deliberation could be so high as to require an infinite amount of time, or so low as to give almost no time for discussion. The required level of equal campaign contributions might be so high as to bankrupt most citizens, or so low as to prevent campaigning. Insufficient deliberation and insufficient money are the target of Estlund's levelling-down objection, which we can now see as part of a broader problem: excessive weight on equality permits over-flexibility in the level of another resource.

We should thus distinguish between two forms of levelling-down. Strong levelling-down means equalizing a resource below the sufficiency level. Weak levelling-down means equalizing a resource at or above this level. (As Section 2 explained, the sufficientarian level need not be the barest minimum but the minimum acceptable level. I will not address strong levelling-up, where the resource is equalized above a maximum threshold. This may anyway be equivalent to strong levelling-down: levelling up to a very high degree of equal power, for example, may violate sufficiency by leading to transgression of basic interests.) Egalitarians who accept weak but not strong levelling-down can also be called sufficiency-constrained-levelling-down egalitarians.<sup>57</sup>

The distinction between strong and weak levelling-down suggests that Estlund has overstated his case, because some supporters of political equality will not accept strong levelling-down. Faced with Estlund's debating scenario, where the two speakers could have 50 and 60 minutes each or just 2 minutes each, some theorists will grudgingly accept the 50-

<sup>57</sup> Paula Casal, "Why Sufficiency Is Not Enough", *Ethics* 117 (2007), 296-326, p. 319.

60 distribution: this inequality is worse than both having 50 minutes each, or 60 minutes each, but all things considered it is better than only 2 minutes each. On the other hand, most theorists would choose 40 minutes each if possible: both sides would get a decent hearing, and the small extra benefit from a 50-60 distribution would not negate the disrespect shown to or felt by the speaker with less time. Without a good reason for unequal times, such as both speakers agreeing that one of them has a more complex case to present, 40 minutes each would be better than a 50-60 distribution.

Estlund's point, of course, is that political equality is not so vital that the quality of the political process can be neglected. He is quite right. Nonetheless, his thought experiment does not show that the problem is political equality, but political equality where some are above sufficiency and others are below. Where everyone is above this line, political equality is less controversial. Most of us would accept levelling-down to 40 minutes even with a small loss of quality.

So, by giving the example of 2-minute speeches, which would prevent proper discussion of complex political issues, Estlund has made the reverse error to Christiano. Christiano defends egalitarianism, but sometimes objects to a combination of inequality and insufficiency, not inequality alone. This weakens his egalitarianism, since inequalities where everyone has a sufficiency are less troubling. Estlund attacks rather than defends egalitarianism, but unlike the voucher-scheme example, the 2-minute-speeches example suggests that the problem is a combination of equality and insufficiency, not equality alone. This weakens his anti-egalitarianism, because equality above the sufficiency level is less troubling. Both authors, then, need to clarify when their focus is political equality, and when it is political equality where some or all are below sufficiency levels.

Importantly, political egalitarians should address the sufficient level of the resource being equalized, to avoid strong levelling-down objections. Although equality and sufficiency

may be competing distributive principles, sufficiency should also be *part of* an egalitarian theory which avoids equalisation at too low a level.

Consequently, political egalitarians should not reject sufficientarianism because of the difficulty of agreeing on what is an acceptable minimum.<sup>58</sup> This is a significant difficulty with sufficientarianism, but egalitarians too must address it. “Political egalitarianism is a crude and implausible principle”, writes Estlund.<sup>59</sup> If political egalitarianism means defending political equality no matter what, I agree; this applies to egalitarianism more generally.<sup>60</sup> Political egalitarians should thus specify absolute thresholds below which political equality is unacceptable. Egalitarians, then, can accept that “sufficiency is not enough”<sup>61</sup> *and* that equality is not enough. Sufficiency helps equality.<sup>62</sup>

Upper thresholds could also be specified. For example, if issues are so complex that political equality can only be achieved by giving every citizen 50 minutes to state her or his case, a population of 10 million adults would need 950 years for the ensuing discussion. In terms of time for deliberation, this would allow the original participants to be equally treated, at the cost of leaving them equally dead. Time limits are one example of a practical limit on political equality.<sup>63</sup>

<sup>58</sup> An example of this egalitarian argument against sufficientarianism is Foley, “Equal-Dollars-Per-Voter”, p. 1241.

<sup>59</sup> Estlund, *Democratic Authority*, p. 198.

<sup>60</sup> Larry Temkin, “Illuminating Egalitarianism”, in Thomas Christiano and John Christman, ed., *Contemporary Debates in Political Philosophy* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 155-78, pp. 157, 168.

<sup>61</sup> Casal, “Why Sufficiency Is Not Enough”, p. 296.

<sup>62</sup> Casal, “Why Sufficiency Is Not Enough”, pp. 318-9, 321-6.

<sup>63</sup> On time limits, see for example Harry Brighouse, “Political Equality and the Funding of Political Speech”, *Social Theory and Practice* 21 (1995), 473-500.

Two brief points are worth adding. First, political sufficiency would also help Estlund's inegalitarian democratic proposals: his voucher scheme does not guarantee minimum funds for candidates. No system where money is distributed solely by citizen contributions can guarantee sufficiency, although two-party American elections are unlikely to see problems here. Meanwhile, Brighouse's alternative proposal does provide a minimum threshold – subsidized election broadcasts for all candidates – but arguably at too low a level: capping campaign spending only at the level needed to reach all citizens would not help campaign quality much.<sup>64</sup> Or to put it another way, when we ask “sufficient for what?”, the answer – candidates' messages reaching all voters – is too narrow. Brighouse's scheme thus risks making the error that Estlund warns against, although a small restatement would avert this problem.

Second, the equality/sufficiency distinction implies that Estlund somewhat overstates the weight that certain democratic theorists place on political equality. He mentions six to eight studies which defend political equality so strongly that they would permit insufficiency, but in my view only one fully fits his description: Knight and Johnson's study.<sup>65</sup> Four studies probably contradict his claim that political egalitarians would prefer 2 minutes of deliberation each to a 50-60 split,<sup>66</sup> while six studies partly contradict his claim that political egalitarians

<sup>64</sup> Harry Brighouse, “Democracy and Inequality”, in April Carter and Geoffrey Stokes, ed., *Democratic Theory Today* (Cambridge: Polity, 2002), 52-72, p. 68. Brighouse (personal communication) has stated that he does not intend very low levels of funding, but that his proposals might have this effect if there were no incentive to fund at higher levels.

<sup>65</sup> Jack Knight and James Johnson, “What Sort of Political Equality Does Deliberative Democracy Require?”, in James Bohman and William Rehg, ed., *Deliberative Democracy: Essays on Reason and Politics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), 279-319.

<sup>66</sup> Strong levelling-down in deliberative time is prevented by the emphasis on rationality and the common good in Joshua Cohen, “Deliberation and Democratic Legitimacy”, in Alan Hamlin and Philip Pettit, ed., *The Good*

neglect political quality.<sup>67</sup> Nonetheless, such comments are fleeting and often implicit; here and in much of the democratic theory literature, political equality gets far more attention than political quality. Estlund's critique thus retains considerable force.

## 10. Conclusion

Careful comparison is at the heart of correct inference, whether in the natural and social sciences<sup>68</sup> or in normative theory.<sup>69</sup> If relevant variables are not appropriately handled, errors of inference can result from statistical analysis and controlled experiments in the natural and social sciences, and from examples and thought experiments in normative theory. Understanding interaction is often vital in both areas. To say that hunger causes migraine, for

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*Polity: Normative Analysis of the State* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 17-34, pp. 22-4: we need enough discussion to produce decisions which are rational and which are based on preferences that are compatible with the common good. Brighouse wants a "full" airing of different positions to ensure autonomous voting ("Egalitarianism", pp. 126, 128), Christiano wants "full" not just "equal" access to deliberative procedures (*The Rule of the Many*, p. 200), and Robert Dahl wants "adequate" as well as "equal" opportunities for discussions (*Democracy and its Critics* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989], pp. 109, 112).

<sup>67</sup> As regards procedural quality, Ronald Dworkin suggests that more political equality can improve the quality of political discussion ("The Curse of American Politics", *New York Review of Books*, 17 October 1996, 19-24, pp. 19, 21-2), and Cass Sunstein recognizes that caps could 'sharply' limit campaign activity ("Political Equality and Unintended Consequences", *Columbia Law Review* 94 [1994], 1390-1414, p. 1410). As regards substantive quality, Dahl attacks some political inequalities for leading to bad decisions (*Democracy* pp. 69-70, 337-8), as does Brighouse ("Egalitarianism", p. 133 n. 25), while political equality is defended partly for making substantive injustice less likely by Brighouse ("Egalitarianism", p. 125), Christiano (*The Rule of the Many* pp. 82-3), and Rawls (*Political Liberalism* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1993], pp. 327-39).

<sup>68</sup> Gary King, Robert Keohane, and Sidney Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), pp. 124-207.

<sup>69</sup> Frances Kamm, *Morality, Mortality. Volume II: Rights, Duties, and Status* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 17-42.

example, cannot be quite right: hunger never causes migraine in most people, and only sometimes does so in those disposed to migraine. At least one other variable must be relevant, and understanding the interaction with hunger is the key.

The same applies in democratic theory. This paper has discussed examples and thought experiments which theorists have used to analyse political equality. I have shown that if political sufficiency is not controlled for, its interaction with political equality may be overlooked, leading to faulty normative inferences. Even theorists simply describing their arguments do not always separate political equality and political sufficiency clearly enough.

It remains to be seen which political resources should be distributed equally, when minimum or maximum absolute or relative thresholds should be applied, and what the thresholds should be. A fully specified democratic theory will probably involve each distributional principle at different points. For now, it is enough to conclude that even when there is a presumption in favour of political equality, this should not be the only way of distributing political resources; and even when a resource is to be distributed equally, we may need to specify the sufficient level of that resource. The conceptual tools developed in this paper should thus enrich normative debates about democracy.