

Voters around the world think their governments are out of touch. They have a point.

We looked at the data on 52 countries over 33 years



Indigenous Nahuatl in Atzacoyaloya, Mexico, on June 6 wait outside a polling station to cast their votes in a midterm election. (Edgard Garrido/Reuters)

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Since being elected, [President Biden](#) has repeatedly echoed his campaign promise to restore faith in [American democracy](#). In his presidential address, he [said](#) that his administration would show that “we can deliver for our people.” “Our Constitution doesn’t begin with the phrase, ‘We the Democrats’ or ‘We the Republicans,’ ” he [said](#) when he launched his presidential campaign. “And it certainly doesn’t begin with the phrase, ‘We the Donors.’ ”

But Donald Trump suggested that he would make democracy deliver, too, when he [promised](#) to “Drain the Swamp,” referring to a [rigged](#) system that benefits only the

wealthy. Around the world, from [Brazil](#) and [Mexico](#) to [Spain](#) and [South Africa](#), politicians are winning elections on similar pledges.

Voters clearly seem to think that their governments are captured by wealthy elites, and they're electing politicians they hope will better represent them. But are they right to think that elected representatives are out of touch?

We decided to look into this. In a new study, [we collected data](#) on 52 countries over 33 years — and we found that these voters are right. Around the world, elected representatives' policy positions are substantially closer to those of the rich than they are to those of the poor.

How we did our research

Some theories of democracy say that elected politicians should do the right thing to reflect voters' interests when they are in office, even if this is unpopular. Others suggest that politicians should take positions that reflect the people they represent. We focused on evaluating this latter view, by collecting every available survey of national elected representatives from around the world.

[*Despite the pandemic, Americans are still optimists. That's a powerful political force.*](#)

In each of those surveys, lawmakers were asked to position themselves on a left-right scale. We then matched those surveys to available public opinion surveys from the same country and time, which asked voters to place themselves on a left-right scale.

Altogether, our data set includes 92,000 politicians and nearly 4 million voters.

We used this data to see whether the views of elected representatives matched those of richer or poorer citizens in each country and year. If democratic governments are captured by wealthy elites, we should see that the views of representatives reflect the preferences of the rich more than they do the preferences of the poor.

Representatives are closer to the rich

That's exactly what we found. In the average country in our sample, lawmakers' views are ideologically most similar — or “closest” — to the preferences of well-to-do voters. On the measures we use, middle-class voters are typically about 2 percent farther away from their representatives than are the rich. And the poorest are a whopping 16 percent farther away than rich people from their representatives. While elected representatives do have their finger on the pulse of wealthy voters' wishes, they are much more likely to be out of touch with poor voters' preferences. Modern democracies seem to be producing political inequality — politicians reflect rich people's preferences much more than that of poor people.

Of course, if people were interpreting “left” and “right” in different ways, it might undermine our findings. But in some countries, we were able to check this by looking at data on more specific questions, relating to the economy, government spending, and whether money should be redistributed from rich to poor. We found similar patterns with this more detailed data. The preferences of elected representatives are closer to the preferences of the affluent than the poor.

[*Trump didn't bring White working-class voters to the Republican Party. The data suggest he kept them away.*](#)

Elected representatives are more conservative on economic issues

We also looked at what these patterns mean for the ideological direction of this bias. In Latin America, for instance, we have surveys of rich and ordinary citizens that were conducted between 2010 and 2014. When we compare the average position of poor people on an index of economic issues to the average position of rich citizens, we found, unsurprisingly, that rich people were more conservative on economic issues. What is more interesting is that elected representatives in almost every country in the region held views that were closer to the economically conservative preferences of the rich. Even more strikingly, lawmakers don't just hold views that are closer to the preferences of the rich — they often have even more conservative positions than the rich. At least in this Latin American sample, unequal representation means that elected representatives hold more conservative economic positions than they would if they were reflecting the views of all citizens equally.

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Pro-rich bias and the future of democracy

Does this pro-rich bias in preferences matter for actual policy outcomes? Our data doesn't allow us to say for sure. Still, there are [more](#) and [more studies](#) showing that policy outcomes are similarly biased in favor of the rich. And even if these biases don't affect policy outcomes, they may still be affecting voters' [perceptions](#) about how well their governments represent their views. That may drive many of them into the arms of populists and would-be authoritarians.

If politicians such as Biden want to save liberal democracies, they may want to start by figuring out what ordinary people want and representing their views, even if these preferences clash with the preferences of the affluent.

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