After Equality: Why a Decreasing Turnout Harms Democracy (Armin Schäfer: Der Verlust politischer Gleichheit: Warum die sinkende Wahlbeteiligung der Demokratie schadet)
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Democracy, it seems, is stuck in a crisis of self-discovery. Or at any rate, one might be forgiven for thinking so when taking a look at current turnout statistics. The problem of increasing numbers of voting abstentions is no longer only a concern for social scientists, since today the media and politicians are also preoccupied with what seems to be an inexorable decline in the casting of votes. Democratic processes still abound, of course, yet many assert that they are undermined beyond recognition. Despite there being no one-and-only definition of democracy, but rather a wealth of theoretical models each at odds with one another, they all embrace the same central promise: that of political equality. It is this very promise to which Armin Schäfer, a researcher at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies, has dedicated his 2015 book *Der Verlust politischer Gleichheit* (in German). By establishing a relationship between liberalisation on the one hand, and political inequality, poverty of resources and political commitment on the other hand, Schäfer seeks to find an answer to the question of whether democracy is actually suffering from a declining voter turnout and, if so, how a declining voter turnout is distributed among the different strata of society.

"The Bourgeois has his place in modern
FACT, empirical studies suggest that with income inequality and voter turnout. In
terest, Schäfer proceeds to examine in the
qualities, the liberal notion of freedom, the
republican definition is based rather on the
equality of the exercise of rights, as Isaiah
Berlin famously put it.

Schäfer in particular addresses the repub-
lican model of democracy and freedom,
known for its focus on political participa-
tion as a precondition for individual free-
dom. Adhering to this model, he posits in
chapter one (11-26) that a low turnout is
always a socially unequal turnout – and
expectably so, he insists, for the willing-
ness to participate is unlikely to decrease
equally among all social groups at the
same time. From a neo-republican point
of view, the unequal participation of social
groups clearly constitutes a loss of demo-
cratic quality. In order to do justice to the
notion of neo-republicanism, however,
Schäfer distinguishes between the neo-
Roman (“freedom as non-domination”) and
neo-Athenian form of republicanism
(“freedom as political participation”). It is
the latter, in particular, which serves as a
bogeyman to many liberal authors – or so
he argues.

Ever since the 1980s, a clear trend towards
liberalisation has been happening in the
Western world, both in political as well
as in economic terms. In order to under-
stand the general progress of liberalisation,
Schäfer summarises the development in
21 OECD countries over the period from
1980 to 2010. The result is what he calls
a “process of double convergence” (72):
not only do all countries appear to be de-
veloping in the same direction, but rather
the previously least-regulated countries
are liberalising particularly rapidly. At the
same time, income distribution is becom-
ing more and more unequal. The OECD
explains this by pointing to deregulated
product markets, low incidental labour
costs, low labour replacement ratios, and
weak unions.1 Based on the correlation
between liberalisation and income ine-
quality, Schäfer proceeds to examine in the
next chapter what he has already discussed
at the beginning: the link between social
and political inequality, that is, between
income inequality and voter turnout. In
fact, empirical studies suggest that with
an increasing income, the probability of
political participation rises as well. Even
though this correlation is controversial
among scholars, Schäfer notes that citi-
zens with lower incomes and less educa-
tion exhibit the lowest participation rate.
He points out, however, that this is not
only due to a lack of resources but also a
matter of personal motivation: once voters
are excluded from social life, they feel that
their voice will not be heard and therefore
their vote cannot change anything. From
a democratic perspective, these findings
point towards a vicious circle which push-
es socially weak and politically inactive
citizens more and more into an offside po-
sition and into political resignation. Legal
equality and political equality, therefore,
are not simply the same.

Just as important, according to Schäfer,
is the impact that the network of social
relations has on voters. The voting behav-
ior of the neighbourhood, for example, is
not to be underestimated; and the social
segregation facilitated by the rental mar-
et is widening the gap between the
resource-poor and higher earning sections of
the population. It is therefore an illusion,
Schäfer holds, to believe that non-voters
have already arrived in the mainstream of
society (121).

On the other hand, the individual election
results of the parties are less influenced by
the changes in voting behaviour, Schäfer
argues: “How to vote depends less closely
on the class situation than it used to, but
whether one chooses to vote does so all the
more,” as he puts it (123). Nevertheless,
there is evidence for a certain degree of
alienation from the major political parties
among the non-voters. It follows that pro-
test parties enjoy more “goodwill” among
abstainers.

The election campaign is another issue in-
troduced by Schäfer. He begins by focus-
ing on the target groups that are addressed
by parties and candidates: Since most of
the time, parties have less contact persons
in socially disadvantaged areas and their
budget is limited anyway, many of them
tend to narrow down their campaigns to
areas in which they have better chances of
recruiting voters. In this context, Schäfer
also addresses the private election expenses
of candidates and comes to the conclusion
that, without them, the chances of getting
elected are extremely remote. This fact
also contributes to the increasing acade-
misation of the Bundestag as well as of the
Landstage (state parliaments).

From all these points of critique, Schäfer
concludes that the means of citizens to par-
ticipate need to be expanded. He gives the
example of cumulating and splitting votes
(German: kumulieren und panaschieren),
which was introduced in the last two de-
cades in almost all German Länder (federate
states). In this context, he also addresses
direct democratic elections as they are
championed by neo-Athenian republicans.
However, Schäfer isn’t oblivious to the risk
posed by this form of democratic govern-
ment: if only a privileged minority partic-
icipates in the elections, it is hardly the ma-
jority opinion that is articulated. This risk,
he argues in the penultimate chapter, can
be mitigated only with compulsory voting
(207-227). The obligation to vote could at
least lead to a balanced turnout, even
if other forms of participation, such as in-
volvement in associations or parties, might
not be affected. Based on surveys, Schäfer
demonstrates successfully the equalising
effect of compulsory voting that is reflect-
ed in the average increase of the citizens’
likelihood to vote by 15 percentage points.
However, anyone hoping for an increase
in political interest is bound to be disapp-
onted, he suggests.

In the eleventh and final chapter, Schäfer
makes a diagnosis which locates the crisis
of democracy in the loss of political equal-
ity and succinctly summarises possible re-
actions to it: from Schäfer’s neo-republican
view, it is necessary to identify the appro-
priate reforms that will allow maximising
the freedom of the individual, for example
by preventing arbitrary domination. Among these reforms he counts an obligation to vote, which at least would provide for an evenly distributed turnout and force policymakers to include each and every citizen in their election campaign as part of a potential target audience. Furthermore, Schäfer envisions the struggle against segregation as a mandatory policy objective: The social context with its decisive influence on voting behaviour, as set out above, can be steered through specific urban planning in disadvantaged neighbourhoods or through increased investment in local schools. The same principle can be applied to parties, who are able to change the landscape in particular with regard to leadership positions. In addition, Schäfer alludes to more unconventional reform options, such as the formation of committees – based on the American model – whose members are drawn from the general public to discuss reform proposals.

However, all these reforms are subject to the “Republican dilemma”: “The more unequal political participation becomes, the less likely it is for reforms to resolve this disparity” (242). This vicious circle exposes the neo-republicanism to the common critique of giving a diagnosis without having a solution to offer. Schäfer puts all his hope in the public discourse. Realising the injustice that is happening to those who are socially excluded from collective self-determination could be an appropriate beginning.

In this book as well as in many others, Armin Schäfer argues against the popular misconception that non-voters are to be found particularly among the politically interested. Prominent people who profess publicly their abstention from voting, for example the German television philosopher Richard David Precht or the former “Handelsblatt” chief editor Gabo Steingart, create the impression that non-voters mostly act out of protest. This book contributes to this debate by demonstrating, in a scientific manner, that these protest abstainers represent a vanishingly small proportion of those who stay away from the ballot box. Working with many far-reaching surveys and statistics, Schäfer explains that it is rather the social exclusion that keeps especially socially disadvantaged groups from voting. “Why should a lawyer, a teacher, a public functionary or a professor represent the interests of workers better than a male deputy the interests of women?” This quote from Rainer Geißler reflects, in a provocative manner, the basic statement of Schäfer about representative democracy losing its legitimacy to social division.

The structure of the book is well thought out and outlines Schäfer’s neo-republican criticism of the current situation of democracy comprehensively. His portrayal of democracy as an “unfinished project” implies the need for a democratic progress that he believes can be divided into three different steps: first of all, the inclusion of groups previously excluded from democratic processes. This proposal, as it were, constitutes the more productive version of the exclamation by Rainer Geißler quoted above. Furthermore, Schäfer mentions the option to incorporate democratic principles in all decision-making processes, even within schools or enterprises. Finally, Schäfer recommends again and again to expand the options of citizens when it comes to determining their representatives. This goal-oriented attitude can be observed in the whole book, but unfortunately it goes out of sight in the conclusion of the last chapter. Even if, as the saying goes, “a fault confessed is half redressed”, one can blame Schäfer for the same reproach neo-republicanism is often criticised for: giving a diagnosis without naming the remedy. He analyses the problems of democracy with meticulous precision, but he addresses suitable solutions only superficially. The only attempt towards a solution which he treats in some detail is compulsory voting and its impact on the turnout. Even though Schäfer does not claim to have found solutions, but rather to have provided an analysis of the current situation, it still would have been interesting at this point to get a closer insight into his thoughts. He barely elaborates on proposals in questions such as suffrage from the age of 16, enabling absentee voting or reforming party financing, which are for example mentioned by the Bertelsmann Foundation in its special edition of the “Future of Democracy” (German: “Zukunft der Demokratie”) 2016. This is unfortunate but nonetheless understandable, since focusing on social exclusion as a priority in the crisis of democracy is precisely what he had set out to do in the book. But his fixation on the idea of exclusion causes him to leave alternative explanatory models unaddressed. It seems inconceivable for Schäfer that many citizens might be dissatisfied with the options themselves, and that declining electoral participation could just be an augmentation of the established phrase “I choose the lesser of two evils.”

In the same context, he criticises the argument of several authors according to whom the socially selective turnout constitutes a “ruse of reason” (243) and amounts to the natural enforcement of competences. By contradicting this statement, he completes the circle of his book and delivers the answer to the question that is posed by its title: the social exclusion of collective self-determination does an injustice to the excluded, and therefore takes the legitimacy out of representative democracy.

Notes