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# On Democratic (E)quality in the United States

A Study on Contemporary American Democracy

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# Abstract

Much attention has been paid to Western democracies' (in particular the United State's) eagerness to promote (liberal) democracy worldwide. However, less attention has been paid to the domestic democratic condition in these countries.

Consequently, this thesis is concerned with the state of democracy in the United States and the basic purpose is to evaluate its (e)quality. As a result, we apply three different indicators (economic and political inequality respectively, and social capital) in order to measure American democratic quality. These indicators are chosen on the basis of our empirical starting point (liberal democracy) and normative viewpoint (strong democracy), in which equality, participation and social trust constitute important democratic elements.

Arguably, American democracy clearly exhibit problems of keeping up with its liberal democratic ideals despite constitutional guarantees for e.g. equal voice and participation. Our conclusion is that this situation has worsened over time and that income and wealth disparities have increased. At the same time, the thesis argues that economic inequality, together with a more money-based participatory system, is an important explanation to this development. Thus, these two factors, together with decreasing levels of social trust and political participation, constitute substantial threats to American democratic quality.

*Key words:* United States, state of democracy, democratic quality, participation, liberal and strong democratic ideals

*Word count:* 68 813

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# 1 Introduction

Due to the three waves of democratisation, an increasing number of countries now have democratised and from a macro-perspective, the democratic horizon looks brighter than ever before (Grugel 2002:2).

However, examinations of the state of democracy that mainly focus on a couple of formal prerequisites (e.g. that universal suffrage exists, that political rights and civil liberties are protected and that democracy is a superior form of governance compared to other polities) tell us little about the actual quality of democracy (Rothstein et al. 1995:10). Such a focus also removes attention, at least partly, from more profound problems existing in many established democracies.

Subsequently, contemporary analyses of democracy are facing the assignment of looking into problems such as equality, justice and participation. In this respect, references to values and norms are necessary in order to thoroughly examine democracy, and to discuss strategies for increasing its strength (Rothstein et al. 1995:10f.).

Democracy in the United States has often been taken as a model to emulate, especially during the Cold War when it more or less embodied the very essence of liberal democracy. Today, however, some scholars argue that democracy in many advanced countries (including the US) may be under growing threat. But they also claim that technological and economical development generate not only increased disparities in income, but also a society in which growing parts of the population find it harder to make a decent living (ibid. pp. 11). As a result, to solve such dilemmas ought to be a challenge for democracies, not least because increasing socio-economic gaps produce consequences for the inclusiveness of the democratic system. In this respect, the debate on inequality and how it is believed to affect democratic quality is a rather thrilling topic.

Due to the United State's status as a full liberal democracy, the question is to what extent the country actually lives up to its (liberal) democratic ideals. This question is particularly relevant, since scholars recently have expressed worries about the current quality of American democracy. Their basic concern is the gradual undermining of the long-cherished ideals of equal political voice and democratically responsive governments (APSA 2004:1).

## 1.1 Purpose and Research Question

Indeed, extensive efforts have been dedicated to research concerning the intricate relationship between democracy and socio-economic inequalities (see e.g. Barber 1984, Brandolini & Smeeding 2006, Karl 2000, Midlarsky 1997, Muller 1988, and Verba et al. 1995). Analyses of this relationship have been particularly prominent in the Latin American democratic context, a continent which has had extensive problems with economic inequality (Diamond 1999:80f.). However, we believe that such an analytical perspective also is relevant when it comes to established democracies. The basic reason is that, at the same time as many advanced countries<sup>1</sup> have been among the most successful in becoming liberal democracies, these very states exhibit tendencies of substantial inequality (Dahl 1971:81). This is an apparent contradiction, especially if one applies the theoretical approach of Edward N. Muller (1988), as he claims that democracies are more likely to endure if economic inequality decreases over time (Muller 1988:50). Arguably, the observation also questions Simon Kuznet's old assertion, that increased inequality during the initial phase of industrialisation is followed by a decline in inequality (Bollen & Jackman 1985:442).

Muller's framework implies that economic inequality and political democracy stand in tension to each other, and the main concern is thus to what extent inequality affects democratic quality.

Certainly, one might say that current analyses of the United States are predominantly focusing on the country's foreign policy; democratisation (?) in Iraq, war on terrorism, diplomatic disputes with Iran and North Korea and a whole range of economic and environmental issues, just to mention a few. Less attention, however, has been paid toward the country's domestic democracy, i.e. to its workability (or non-workability) and to its actual quality.

A discussion on the functioning of democracy in the US is thus important, both from a scientific and societal perspective (Esaiasson et al. 2004:29f.).

Consequently, we intend to do a critical analysis of the state of American democracy. More specifically, the purpose is to determine whether inequality (notably economic) actually has increased over time, and if so, how this has affected US democracy. This is done by applying three different gauges (economic and political inequality respectively, and social capital).

Our approach, thus, shows similarities to reports presented on the state of democracy in Sweden, (see e.g. Rothstein et al. 1995 & Petersson et al. 1998).

Accordingly, we seek to answer the following question:

- Where is contemporary American democracy standing and what does its current condition tell us about its actual quality?

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<sup>1</sup> Advanced countries refer to states that are industrialised and democratic.

The starting point for this study will be the mid-1960's onwards. This basic reason is that universal suffrage was not constitutionally stated before the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which makes analyses prior to this period less relevant. In fact, it is highly debatable whether the US actually was a full-fledged democracy before the implementation of this specific act, since millions of people were constitutionally excluded and discriminated. In this respect, we agree with Robert A. Dahl (1971), as he argues that United States was a "polyarchy for whites" (i.e. an exclusive polyarchy) (Dahl 1971:69).

## 1.2 Methodological Considerations

Due to the specific interest in the United States we apply a case study approach. This particular method has several advantages, for example as Arend Lijphart (1971) argues, "[that by] focusing on a single case, that case can be intensively examined..." (Lijphart 1971:691). Another advantage is that this approach can make important contributions to the establishment of generalisations and is, as a result, important to theory-building.

More specifically, the thesis will be conducted as a most-likely study, meaning that a case will be analysed, in which a specific observation is meant to occur. Consequently, if the observation occurs the theory is confirmed (i.e. United States is a full liberal democracy), and if it does not, the theory is infirmed (i.e. United States is not such a full liberal democracy as indicted by the theory). As a consequence, the applied theoretical framework will either be strengthened or weakened (Landman 2003:34f.).

What is more, the three indicators (independent variables) economic inequality, political inequality and social capital are used to examine the condition of contemporary American democracy (dependent variable). More specifically, the independent variables are supposed to explain variation in democratic quality (Esaiasson et al. 2004:53).

Due to the concreteness of the study, the possibilities for making generalisations, are restricted (at least partly), which may seem disadvantageous from a comparative perspective. On the other hand, our qualitative approach makes it possible to examine contextual specificities (of American democracy), which are largely ignored in quantitative studies. In addition, since it is a theory-confirming/infirming study we work within the framework of established generalisations. This is the case since the analysis is a test of an established proposition (of the US as a full liberal democracy) (Lijphart 1971:691f.).

To make the study more methodologically valid, we look at variation in democracy at different points in time, i.e. we measure and control for change over time. This subsequently serves to limit the risks of selection bias, since single-country studies otherwise face the risk of over- or underestimating results because of the one observation-technique (Landman 2003:46f.).

## 1.3 Structure vs. Agency

Implicit in the thesis is the question of structure and agency. This debate has a long history in political science, in which we do not intend to take part, *inter alia* since adopting a strict position (either structural or agency-related) faces the risk of neglecting the complexity of social reality (McAnnalla 2002:291).

However, in the analysis we will use both structural and agential perspectives, but will regard structural contexts as particularly important when it comes to American democracy. Basically, this point of departure builds on the definition of structure as: “*the material conditions which define the range of actions available to actors*” (ibid. pp. 271).

## 1.4 Material

This section seeks to state our critical position toward the material used in the thesis. Such a critical evaluation is of utmost importance in political science (and social science in general) (Esaiasson et al. 2004:303ff.).

First of all, it is important to mention that a multitude of material exists within this field of research, which consequently has made a selection inevitable.

Secondly, the thesis builds on secondary material, both when it comes to theoretical arguments and survey data. Since primary sources generally are considered more credible than secondary, it has been necessary to compensate for this credibility-gap (ibid. pp. 309). Accordingly, data from several different sources have been collected, and methodology carefully examined (e.g. to what extent quality controls on data has been done).

Thirdly, the strategy of using different sources has been used when it comes to the non-data sources as well. As a result, we have been able to include a wide range of material, which makes the analysis more credible and nuanced (nuanced because both strengthening and weakening arguments are dealt with). This way of working, thus, shows similarities to a court procedure, since both exculpatory (strengthening) and incriminating (weakening) material are put forward to make the trial (analysis) as legally secured (credible) as possible (Putnam 2000:26).

## 1.5 Delimitations

A study which deals with the state of democracy and democratic quality can apply several different analytical perspectives. Mainly, we seek to identify patterns and tendencies, indicative of the state of American democracy. First and foremost, our analysis is conducted on an aggregated level, i.e. a state level. As a result, minor pictures (e.g. individual, local or regional levels) and larger pictures (e.g. macro-level) are to a large extent excluded.

The choice of the three indicators inevitable results in a selection of which aspects to illuminate and this thesis do not claim to apply the optimal indicators. However, due to the contextual framework of the study, the indicators have been chosen with regard to our specific case and to our empirical and normative viewpoints on democracy.

It is also worth mentioning, that institutional factors are excluded, even though such aspects are important to discuss when it comes to democratic quality. One example is how legislative-executive deadlocks can paralyse the political system (see for e.g. Scott Mainwaring 1993, for an interesting analysis on this topic). In this respect, the result in the 2006 Congressional Elections indicate a rather interesting development, since the Democrats was given majority in the Senate and the House of Representatives. This certainly increases the risk for legislative-executive conflicts (and possibly deadlocks) between the Democrats and the Republican government.

## 1.6 Disposition

Chapter two constitutes the theoretical body of the thesis, in which theoretical perspectives, different theories, concepts and indicators are discussed.

This particular chapter sets the ground for the third chapter, which is the most extensive part of the thesis, as it deals with the specific research question. Consequently, chapter three includes a discussion on the statistical observations made and what these tell us about the quality of American democracy. Additionally this chapter analyses democratic quality from the perspective of liberal and strong democracy respectively. Furthermore, discussions will be made on the conclusions drawn as well as problematic aspects regarding the indicators.

In the final section our results are summarised and commented on. Some general reflections on and ideas for future research will also be pointed out.

## 2 Theoretical framework

The first section of this chapter deals with issues connected to reality and ideal, and aims to clarify the theoretical perspective from which we analyse the American case. Following this general introduction to the “reality vs. ideal-issue”, our specific empirical and normative viewpoints are dealt with (i.e. liberal and strong democracy).

The third section introduces the indicators (independent variables), and gives an explanation to them and declares why they are interesting when examining democratic quality. Then, the respective indicators are dealt with separately.

### 2.1 Ideal vs. Reality

The aim of this section is to clarify in more detail problems that occur when one speak of democracy, problems that are connected to its empirical (reality) and normative (ideal) viewpoints. The analysis primarily takes an empirical point of departure, but will also utilise normative elements, since the American case is analysed from the perspective of strong democracy.

Naturally, there is a certain discrepancy between reality and theory, so when it comes to empirical standpoints and normative horizons, we do not refer to perfect equality for a democracy in order to be strong. For example, perfect political equality has never empirically existed and can never be obtained since it is connected to so much more than just structural obstacles, such as interest, motivation and skills. In addition, we do not look for perfect economic equality either. In this matter we refer to Dietrich Rueschemeyer (2004), who states that:

*“Structural inequality can never be entirely eradicated and political decision making can never be fully emancipated from the inequality of power resources, democratic equality is [thus] a goal that can only be approximated at a considerable distance”* (Rueschemeyer 2004:88).

This summarises to a large extent our point of departure, and the perspective, from which, we intend to analyse American democracy. Thus, democracy is certainly the vision of an ideal but constitutes nevertheless an achievable polity (Dahl 1989:1).

## 2.2 Empirical starting point and Normative viewpoint

To paraphrase Andreas Schedler (1998), it is important to clarify one's empirical starting point and normative horizon, because the meaning one ascribe to democracy (and democratic quality) depends on the empirical and normative position of the researcher (Schedler 1998:92).

This discussion is also important since the indicators are chosen on the basis of our empirical and normative positions.

### 2.2.1 Liberal democracy

Liberal democracy is the dominant form of democracy in the contemporary world and constitutes the endpoint for many new democracies (Grugel 2002:17). The hegemonic position of liberal democracy is mainly due to its role during the Cold War as the chief counterpart (and the only believed alternative) to communism and fascism (Barber 1984:3f; Grugel 2002:16f.). Accordingly, the US has in many respects embodied the very essence of liberal democracy.

Closely connected to the concept of liberal democracy is polyarchy, a concept introduced by Robert Dahl (1971). Due to its focus on protection of human rights and civil liberties, polyarchy has gradually become the primary concept to describe the empirical characteristics of liberal democracy (Dahl 1989:223; Grugel 2002:20).

Apart from human rights and civil liberties, Dahl's concept is closely connected to the notions of freedom and pluralism. As a result, a state is considered polyarchic when the following institutional criteria are met:

- the election of government officials,
- free and fair elections,
- an inclusive suffrage,
- the right of all citizens to run for public office,
- freedom of expression,
- the right of citizens to source of information other than official ones,
- associational autonomy, and the right to form independent associations or organizations, including political parties and interest groups.

In order to meet these criteria, strong protection of political rights and civil liberties as well as a constitutionally regulated rule of law, is required. Basically a strong rule of law is supposed to secure the political and legal equality of all citizens (Dahl 1989:221; Diamond 1999:11; Grugel 2002:19).

## 2.2.2 Strong democracy

The meaning ascribed to this concept builds on the thoughts of Benjamin R. Barber (1984) and Rune Premfors (2000), and is connected to a whole range of notions such as participatory democracy, radical democracy and populist democracy (Premfors 2000:14).

According to the strong perspective, democracy is not a form, but a way of living and therefore democracy is not constrained to the political sphere (since it runs through society, economy, culture and family)<sup>2</sup> (ibid. pp. 30ff.). This is the reason why the perspective does not see liberal democracy as “the end of history”, but as a good and necessary starting point for increased democracy (ibid. pp. 15f; Fukuyama 1989:1).

The strong perspective also suggests that politics is something done by, not to, citizens, thus emphasising the participatory element of democracy (Barber 1984:133). Other closely connected elements to the concept are individual freedom, civicness, public good, societal interdependence and consensus.

According to the strong perspective, political conflicts (between private and public interests) are to be solved through consent. Thus, commonality and equality constitute further important norms to the strong perspective (Barber 1984:119; Premfors 2000:31f.). Consequently, Barber defines strong democracy as:

*“Politics in the participatory mode where conflict is resolved in the absence of an independent ground through a participatory process of ongoing, proximate self-legislation and the creation of a political community capable of transforming dependent, private individuals into free citizens and partial and private interest into public goods”* (Barber 1984:132).

Strong democracy is both in conflict with, and complementary to, liberal democracy. For example, both notions stress the deliberative element but disagree on several points such as the role of the individual and freedom. Liberal democracy claims to the unlimited potential of the individual and that no external constraints (such as an intrusive state) should exist. Strong democracy, on the other hand, argues that individualism and personal freedom are important elements, but that they ought to be obtained within the limits of the public good (Barber 1984:131ff; Premfors 2000:31ff.). The liberal view means that conflict is intractable, while the strong perspective claims that conflict can be transformed into cooperation (Barber 1984:135).

There are several reasons why strong democracy constitutes our ideal viewpoint. First of all, because attention is not directed at whether the US

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<sup>2</sup> Still the perspective makes clear that the economy mainly should be controlled by markets and that the family belongs to the private sphere.

qualifies as a minimalist liberal democracy, but rather to its actual quality (see Rothstein et al. 1995:13, for a similar approach). Secondly, because it is desirable, this line of thought is consistent with two arguments; Diamond, who sees democracy as a developmental phenomenon, meaning that all democracies, new and established, can become more democratic and Barber, who argues that “*effective democracies need great citizens*”, thus making extensive civic participation necessary (Barber 1984:xvii; Diamond 1999:18).

Thirdly, since values central to strong democracy, also are important to the liberal democratic ideal. For example, strong democracies highly celebrate equal voice and participation and by looking at the pluralist-element of liberal democracy, one finds a similar approach (Grugel 2002:20; Rotberg 1999:342).

Fourthly, we agree with Rueschemeyer, who argues that: “*democracy [even] as minimally conceived is only possible if political decisions are to some extent separated from the system of class, status, and power*” (Rueschemeyer 2004:88). Arguably, applying the strong democratic ideal is fruitful in order to make this possible.

## 2.3 Measuring the State of Democracy

Examinations of democracy are, basically, a methodological issue, since democracy can be measured in a variety of ways. Different dimensional levels determine on the one hand what one is looking at, and on the other, what one ought to look at empirically and normatively.

Without doubt, democracy is strong in America from a constitutional point of view, since political rights, civil liberties and equal citizenship are controlled by law. However, it is, debatable whether such indicators are inclusive enough, in order to fruitfully assess democratic quality in an established democracy. Arguably it is not, and therefore, we suggest three different indicators (level of economic and political inequality respectively, and social capital) to illuminate socio-economic and political constructions in American society. These are constructions that shape democracy and affect its quality.

### 2.3.1 Economic Inequality, Political Inequality and Social Capital

There are several reasons why economic inequality, political inequality and social capital are relevant indicators for examining the quality of American democracy. First of all, as the indicators correspond to the two democratic ideals we apply in the thesis. For example, both liberal democracy and strong democracy cherish the value of equality.

Support is also found in Rueschemeyer, as he argues that: “*democratic equality is a critical dimension of the quality of any system of democratic rule. It stands in tension with the structure of social, economic, and cultural inequality*” (Rueschemeyer 2004:88).

There is an apparent interrelation between the three indicators, as they mutually affect each other. Economic inequality tends to create political inequality, because of the risk that economic resources turn into political resources. Under such circumstances, political equality and representation becomes skewed (Dahl 1971:82; Hadenius 1994:76; Rueschemeyer 2004:88).

Furthermore, unequal distribution creates less identification and interdependence between social classes (especially the upper and lower), thus reducing the sense of community (social capital) and legitimacy on which democracy rests (Bollen & Jackman 1985:440). This line of thought is consistent with the ideas of strong democracy, since this perspective emphasises the intricate relationship between individuals and the social community (Premfors 2000:30). Consequently, social capital is important for such a democracy to function, as reciprocal trust is crucial for the workability of society (Putnam 2006:9; Rotberg 1999:339).

In addition, the level of income and education correlate with the level of participation (Rotberg 1999:355). Concentration of income and education creates economic inequality as well as inequality in knowledge. This, in turn, is negative from a democratic point of view, because educational attainment and level of income are connected to both political participation and social capital (e.g. since acquisition of higher education generally make people more tolerant, trust willing and prone to engage politically) (Hadenius 1994:75).

There is also a close connection between social capital, political inequality and the way the political system works. For example, if more political voice is given to people that are the well-off (i.e. if the democratic system does not work properly), the risk for declining levels of social capital increases. This way of reasoning is based on the argument that political participation nourishes trust and cooperation (Putnam 2000:288f; Rotberg 1999:339).

### 2.3.2 Measures and indicators

#### *Economic inequality*

This indicator consists of three different measures to control for the level of economic inequality; first of all, distribution of household disposable<sup>3</sup> income among individual income (measured by the Gini Coefficient<sup>4</sup>), secondly, household income inequality (also measured by the Gini Coefficient) and thirdly, percentage of median income (P 50) for high-income (P 90) and low-income people (P 10)<sup>5</sup> respectively. We will, thus, cover wide spectra of data. In order to

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<sup>3</sup> Disposable means that figures are taken post-tax.

<sup>4</sup> The Gini Coefficient is a number which has a value between zero and one; a higher coefficient indicates a higher level of economic inequality.

<sup>5</sup> P 10 signifies those people that have a relative income which is less than for 90% of population but higher than for 10% of the population. P 90, on the other hand, signifies the opposite, i.e. people that have a relative income which is higher than for 90% of the population but lower than for 10% of the population. In addition, the so-called decile ratio will also be included in the analysis, and this is a ratio of the income of the rich percentile to

generate a methodologically valid result, such a procedure is crucial, since different measures of inequality can give different indications on both levels and changes in inequality (Förster & d'Ercole 2005:14; Smeeding 2002:184; Bollen & Paxton 1997:20).

It is, first of all, necessary to discuss some general issues on economic inequality-data. First of all, these kinds of data are rather heterogeneous since sources and methods tend to vary between, but also within, countries. This sometimes produces different results making observations less comparable and long-term trends hard to identify (UNU/WIDER 2005:4).

The diversity is, for example, connected to different concepts (do we measure income, consumption or expenditure?) and income sharing units (is the measure concerned with households, families, tax units or individuals?).

Using household<sup>6</sup> as point of departure is relevant since it is a more comprehensive unit (US Census Bureau, Definitions and Explanations). Connected to this is the fact that living conditions have changed considerably in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as a smaller percentage of the population live in families, than was the case in for example the 1940's. Consequently, the household-measure is widely used (Jones Jr. & Weinberg 2000:3).

Furthermore, focus is on income rather than consumption, because of the relative ease of measurement and comparability, which is an important aspect when looking at change over time (Smeeding 2002:182).

Income is defined as disposable household income, i.e. income after direct taxes and transfers. This is a rather inclusive measure since it contains earnings from work as well as taxes, transfers, pensions, and capital income (Brandolini & Smeeding 2006:21).

We use three different measures, taken from OECD, and US Census Bureau<sup>7</sup> on the one hand, and figures from Luxembourg Income Study (analysed by Brandolini 2006, Gottschalk & Smeeding 1997 and Smeeding 2002), on the other.

Despite the same unit of aggregation (household), the measure from OCED and the one from US Census Bureau differ in one respect. This is so, as the OECD-gauge measures income among individuals, which means that it takes size and composition into consideration<sup>8</sup> (Förster & d'Ercole 2005:33; Smeeding 1996:46f; Smeeding 2002:183). The US Census Bureau-measure, on the other hand, excludes this division and measures inequality regardless of household size and composition (Jones Jr. & Weinberg 2000:3).

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the poor percentile. Basically, this means that the income of a typical high-income person is X times the income of a typical low-income person.

<sup>6</sup> A household consists of all the people who occupy a housing unit (such as a house, an apartment or other group of rooms, or a single room). A household includes the related family members and all the unrelated people (such as lodgers, foster children, wards, or employees) who share the housing unit. The count of households excludes group quarters.

<sup>7</sup> US Census Bureau is a part of the U.S. Department of Commerce, and serves as the leading source of quality data on the American people and economy.

<sup>8</sup> The incomes of all household members are aggregated and then divided to arrive at individual income. This is done by taking the square root of household size (i.e. using a so-called equivalence scale).

In order to be able to relate the level of US inequality to a specific rank, we apply two different scales, one for the Gini coefficient and one for the median income-measure. Concerning the Gini coefficient we use Muller's three level-division; the first level signifies relatively low income inequality (a Gini Coefficient of  $\leq .35$ ), the second level is the intermediate level (a Gini Coefficient of  $.36$  to  $.45$ ) and the third level denotes very high income inequality (a Gini Coefficient of  $\geq .46$ ) (Muller 1995:970).

When it comes to the median income-measure, the concern is the relative poverty level; a percentage of the median income below 40 to 50% indicates relative poverty (Smeeding 2002:197).

### *Political inequality*

Participation is logically a prominent indicator of political inequality and we look at the voting disparity in presidential elections between different socio-economic groups. This discrepancy is measured through two interrelated socio-economic elements; education and income<sup>9</sup>. The educational element covers the period from 1972 to 2004 and the income element the period from 1984 to 2000.

This operationalisation is rather narrow since political inequality can take several forms. On the other hand, voting is the most effective, and common, way to participate in (liberal) democracies and can thus give a reliable indication of the level of political inequality. This is the case, since individuals and groups differ significantly in terms of whether they vote or not (Verba 1995:5).

In addition, Dahl argues that apathy and resignation can be consequences of economic inequality, which subsequently make differences in voter turnout among societal groups an even more apparent indicator of political inequality (Dahl 1971:95f.). Low levels (or absence) can consequently be indicative of an unequal political position of the disadvantaged (Rueschemeyer 2004:88).

When measuring political inequality we depend on surveys made by the US Census Bureau. The data from US Census Bureau have primarily been chosen for methodological reasons, since it serves as the leading source of quality data on American citizens and economy. In addition, the Census Bureau is one of few survey institutes that can provide continuity in its surveys, which is essential as we compare over time.

### *Social capital*

The conceptual debate on social capital is definitely a core matter in contemporary political science, a debate mainly connected to its meaning, measurement and validity (Rothstein 2003:95f.). However, we define social capital in terms of the commonly used elements of interpersonal trust and participation (civic

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<sup>9</sup> The socio-economic elements will be measured as follows: The *Educational* element uses a 5-category variable which is divided into the following categories: Less than 9<sup>th</sup> grade graduate, 9<sup>th</sup> to 12 grade graduate, high school graduate, college graduate (bachelor's degree) and advanced degree. The *Income* element measures annual family income and is divided into 2 categories, families with annual incomes under \$10.000, and families with incomes over \$50.000 respectively.

engagement). Discussions on the causal relation between the two elements are prominent, for example, to what extent trust promotes participation or participation promotes trust, or if the causation flows in both directions. Still, the basic argument is that trust and participation are equivalent elements to the conceptual meaning of social capital (ibid. pp.98).

The definition is divided into two parts; the attitudinal and the behavioural dimension respectively. The attitudinal aspect refers to the level of interpersonal trust (the basic element of social capital), denoting the level of general social trust among people in the society (Rothstein 2003:15;98). This will be measured by using data from General Social Survey (GSS) and World Values Survey (WVS) on the statement “*to what extent most people can be trusted*” (Wuthnow 2002:70f; [www.worldvaluessurvey.org](http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org)). Figures from GSS cover the period from 1972-1994, whereas WVS-figures cover the period from 1982-1999.

Secondly, we will use general voter turnout as a measure of participation, thus focusing on the formal part of political activity. This means that several other forms of activity, such as membership in voluntary associations and attending political meetings, are excluded (Putnam 2000:291). However, as the focus of this thesis is on a liberal democracy, in which voting is the most effective way to participate, this operationalisation is workable. In addition, since voting generally is higher among those who belong to one organisation than those who do not, voting tell us more than just the percentage of people voting (Wuthnow 2002:2002).

Consequently, the behavioural dimension will be measured by looking at the general level of participation in Presidential elections<sup>10</sup>. Figures are collected from US Census Bureau.

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<sup>10</sup> According to Putnam, local, congressional and presidential elections show similar tendencies when it comes to the level of participation. Thus, our results are not constrained to one type of election, but indicate a general participatory pattern.

## 3 Analysis

This chapter constitutes the most essential part of the thesis, as it deals with the specific research problem.

The first part deals with the results found in the indicators respectively, while the second discusses what the statistics tell us about the state of American democracy. Thirdly, we account for weaknesses in the analysis and for other (intervening) indicators.

### 3.1 The State of American Democracy

This section focuses on the basic statistical findings and relates them to the context of American democracy.

#### 3.1.1 Economic Inequality

The three measures on economic inequality made the following observations: According to figures from OECD, the first period of observation (ranging from mid 1980's to mid 1990's) indicates a moderate increase in the Gini coefficient, i.e. an increase of more than 2% but no more than 7% (see Appendix 1, Table 3.1). On the other hand, the period between mid 1990's and 2000 indicates no change of significance (a score of +/- 2% is considered as no change) (Förster & d'Ercole 2005:14). The level of inequality, using Muller's ranking system, is thus close to the intermediate level.

Regardless of this rather limited level of inequality, all the figures are over average for OECD countries (0.338, 0.361, and 0.357 for the US, compared to 0.293, 0.309, and 0.310 for OECD countries in general).

By looking at the US Census Bureau-measure one finds a clear tendency for increased inequality in the United States. This is particularly evident for the period of 1992 to 2001, which indicates an increase of 3.2% in the Gini Coefficient, compared to the earlier periods of 1967-1977 (0.3%) and 1977-1987 (2.4%) (see Table 3.2). Moreover, for the whole period, ranging from 1967 to 2001, inequality increased by 6.7 % (from a Gini Coefficient of 0.399 to 0.466), which is a significant increase. Due to its 2001-figure the US, thus, qualifies as a high income inequality country according to Muller's ranking system (i.e. a Gini Coefficient of  $\geq .46$ ).

Nevertheless, the measure neither takes size nor composition of the households into account. As a result, counting households as one unit, regardless of its size, may have affected the accuracy of the result.

**Table 3.2 Household Income Inequality for every fifth year 1967-2001**

Year	Gini Coefficient
1967	0.399
1972	0.401
1977	0.402
1982	0.412
1987	0.426
1992	0.434
1997	0.459
2001	0.466

(Source: US Census Bureau, Current Population Survey).

The pattern for the third measure is basically one of status quo, since during this period, the gap between low-income and high-income groups remained rather stable. Judging from the figures, there has been a statistically insignificant decline in inequality (from a decile ratio of 5.78 in 1991 to an equivalent ratio of 5.45 in 2000, see table 3.3.). This decline is due to an increase in the percentage of the median income for low-income people (from 36% of the median income in 1991 to 39% in 2000), whereas the percentage of the median income for high-income people increased from 208% in 1991 to 210% in 2000. However, it should be noted once more that these changes are merely cosmetic.

Nonetheless, the percentage of median income for low-income people in the US, for all the observed years, indicate a score which is below the relative poverty level (a percentage below 40 to 50 signifies relative poverty) (Smeeding 2002:197). This observation is even more interesting since a low-income American has a lower percentage of the median income than low-income persons in other advanced countries. At the same time, high-income Americans have a higher percentage of the median income than the average high-income person in other advanced countries (Brandolini & Smeeding 2006:22f; Gottschalk & Smeeding 1997:44f; Smeeding 2002:184f.). This observation is further supported by Timothy M. Smeeding (1996): *“the best evidence shows that the distribution of income in America is now the most unequal among advanced countries”* (Smeeding 1996:45)

However, one methodological restriction is important to mention; due to the rather short observation period (nine years), this measure is the weakest of the ones used here, since more persistent changes are hard determine.

**Table 3.3 Percentage of Median Income for Low-income (P 10) and High-income (P 90), 1991-2000**

<b>Gauge</b>	<b>1991</b>	<b>1997</b>	<b>2000</b>
Percentage of Median Income for P 10	36	38	39
Percentage of Median Income for P 90	208	214	210
Decile ratio (P 50)	5.78	5.57	5.45

(Source: Brandolini & Smeeding 2006; Gottschalk & Smeeding 1997; Smeeding 2002).

The large discrepancy between the OECD Gini Coefficient (0.357 in 2000) and the one from US Census Bureau (0.466 in 2001) is important to give notice to. This variation is confusing, but the most reasonable explanation is that it is due to differences in methodology (e.g. different definitions and sample compositions). As a result, it is hard to determine the exact level of inequality, but still, the general observation is that inequality, according to both measures, increased over time (both measures display a higher Gini Coefficient at the endpoint of the observation period than at the start).

In sum, rising economic inequality is in no sense inevitable, but the fact is that increasing inequality is occurring in many states, even the most egalitarian and welfare-concentrated (Sweden is one example, see Appendix 1, Table 3.1) (Smeeding 2002:200). Basically, this implies that in order to determine inequality one needs to look not only at the increase but also at the existing level of inequality. In this matter, two measures (the one from US Census Bureau and LIS) indicate that the level of inequality in the US is rather substantial, and two gauges show that it has increased (OECD and US Census Bureau). Despite some disturbing circumstances (mainly methodological ones), we will build the rest of the thesis on this observation, but at the same time be careful not to overestimate it.

### 3.1.2 Political Inequality

In European societies, social class is expected to be a major determinant of the way people vote. Yet, for historical reasons, class is a difficult concept in the context of the United States, since differences in wealth, income and education are indeed so fragmented that one would have to include dozens of classes in the American context (McKeever & Davies 2006:126). Still, many characteristics associated with socio-economic status do significantly affect American voting rates. Consequently, the political inequality-indicator concentrates upon two interrelated elements of socio-economic status (SES) – education and income.

The measures reveal (not surprisingly) that people with higher socio-economic status generally are more active in politics than those with lower socio-economic status (see Table 3.4. and Figure 3.1).

Individuals and groups differ significantly in terms of whether they vote or not (Verba et al. 1995:11). Regarding voting rates in proportion to educational attainment, observations on the matter expose that there is a wide gap in participation between college graduates and those who never finished high school.

According to Table 3.4 below, voting rates increase persistently at each successive level of educational attainment.

Between different elections the decrease in voting rates has appeared differently. Figures, ranging from 1968 to 2004, show that there has been a slow but steady decline in voting among all educational levels, with the exception of the 1972 and 1996 elections. During these two elections, voting rates dropped remarkably (see Table 3.4).

The group with the lowest educational attainment (less than 9<sup>th</sup> grade), shows the most apparent change with a decline of 30.9 %. Meanwhile, changes in voting among those with the most advanced educational degree have been much smaller (a decline of 10.1%). Obviously, there is a trend of a growing participation gap between different educational groups.

**Table 3.4 Reported Rates of Voting (After Registration) by Educational Attainment, in Presidential Elections 1968 to 2004 (In percentage)**

	Less than 9th grade	9th to 12th grade, no diploma	High school graduate	Some college or Associate degree	Bachelor's degree or more
Year					
2004	23,6	34,6	52,4	66,1	74,2
2000	26,8	33,6	49,4	60,3	72,0
1996	29,9	33,8	49,1	60,5	72,6
1992	35,1	41,2	57,5	68,7	81,0
1988	36,7	41,3	54,7	64,5	77,6
1984	42,9	44,4	58,7	67,5	79,1
1980	42,6	45,6	58,9	67,2	79,9
1976	44,1	47,2	59,4	68,1	79,8
1972	47,4	52,0	65,4	74,9	83,6
1968	54,5	61,3	72,5	78,4	84,1

(Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, November 2004 and earlier reports.)

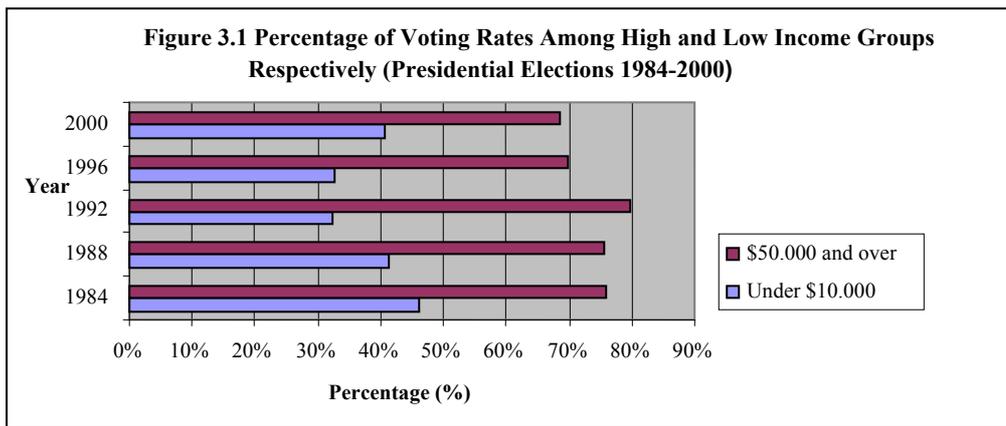
The statistics from the US Census Bureau are somewhat confusing. On the one hand, the past few decades have witnessed a remarkable increase in levels of educational attainment among American citizens, which should suggest simultaneous increases in political activity. On the other hand, statistics reveal the exact opposite, i.e. that (electoral) participation has decreased (for a fuller review see section 3.3.1).

Moving on to the second element of political inequality, statistics indicate that citizens, that are better-off, tend to vote in presidential elections to a greater extent than those less affluent.

When measuring, family income we use two categories; families with an annual income under \$10.000, and families with an annual income over \$50.000. The number of observation years cover a period of sixteen years (1984-2000). This is the case since income measurements stretching over a longer period of time face the risk of providing a skewed comparison, as standards of living and currency rates change persistently. In addition, earlier surveys used different income categories compared to later surveys, and to use statistics from both, would have influenced the reliability negatively.

The figure below indicates a difference in voting behaviour between families with high and low incomes respectively (see Figure 3.1). Those with higher family incomes vote to a larger extent than those with less income. The presidential election of 1992 illustrates the largest gap between the two categories (a gap of 47.5 %).

Between 1984 and 1992 two trends are particularly noticeable; at the same time as voting rates among families with lower incomes steadily decreased, the voting rates among the better-off increased. During the later period of observation (1996-2000), the development is reversed in both categories and consequently the gap has become smaller.



(Source: the US Census Bureau “Voting and Registration in the Election of November 1984 -2000”)

Figures from the two socio-economic elements thus suggest that there is a substantial discrepancy in political and social representation between different groups in society, since the socio-economic groups differ in terms of voting. In addition, this discrepancy has increased between different educational groups, but not between different income groups.

### 3.1.3 Social Capital

The basic finding is that social capital has decreased over time, both when it comes to the attitudinal dimension and the behavioural.

In 1972, 46% of the survey respondents agreed on that “*most people can be trusted*”, while the equivalent percentage in 1999 was 35.8, thus signifying a decline in social trust of 10.2% (see Table 3.4). The loss of social trust has been steady during most of the observation period, with some exceptions. The most noticeable exception was observed between 1982 and 1990 when social trust increased with 9.2%, followed by a decline with 14.1% (between 1990 and 1993). However, from 1993 onwards, the level of social trust has remained rather stable, as changes have been rather modest.

One problematic issue connected to the measure, concerns the timeframe; the latest observation was made in 1999, thus indicating a seven-year gap, which of course is not optimal. This disadvantage is due to the fact that we have not been

able to find later data, but arguably the existing ones still provide a good estimate of the level of social trust in the US.

**Table 3. 5 American Social Capital (Attitudinal Dimension) 1972-1999, in percentage**

Year	Most people can be trusted	One cannot be to careful
1972	46	54
1975	39	61
1978	39	61
1982	40.5	59.5
1986	37	63
1989	41	59
1990	49.7	50.3
1993	36	64
1995	35.6	64.4
1999	35.8	64.2

(Source: General Social Survey and World Values Survey<sup>11</sup>).

The major observation, when it comes to the behavioural dimension, is that the share of people voting decreased with 8.4% from 1968 to 2004 and that the largest drop occurred between 1968 and 1976 (see Appendix 1, Table 3.5). In the last three elections voter turnout has been rather stable, despite a slight drop in 2000, which was also the year that voter turnout was lowest during the period that was observed (63.9%).

## 3.2 Results – How Democratic is the United States?

Democracy, even the most minimalist versions, builds on the values of equality, government responsiveness, inclusiveness, participation and pluralism (Dahl 1989:221f). These values certainly applies for the US as well, for example indicated by the fact that generations of Americans have worked to equalise citizens across lines of income, race and gender (APSA 2004:1)

However, the general trend in American democracy is rather negative as recent observations indicate, since a gradual decline in democratic quality is at stake. There reasons for this development are several:

Unequal distribution combined with strong business leverage has created a situation in which public participation and influence has become more distorted and stratified; people that are socio-economically well-off participate more and influence, to a larger extent, politicians by donating money (e.g. in 2000 95% of substantial financial contributions came from the wealthiest households) (APSA 2004:7).

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<sup>11</sup> As the table indicates, figures from GSS are rounded, whereas figures from WVS are more exact.

It is also important to notice that as the flow of money into politics has grown, donations have become a stronger means of influence and a more common way to participate (Verba et al. 1995, calls this “checkbook participation”) (APSA 2004:7ff; Verba et al. 1995:196). In this matter it is clear how economic resources *de facto* have turned into political resources, leaving affluent people with a powerful political tool, non-existent to the less advantaged. Consequently, an increasing risk exists, that participation becomes a “*public airing of private interests*” (Barber 1984:xxi).

In addition, due to such developments, the type of participatory system becomes more important for democracy. Verba et al. argues that a participatory system based on money, like the one in the United States, is more unequal than, for example, a system based on time. This is the case since free time among the population (regardless of income, sex, race or origin) is more equally distributed than money and wealth (Verba et al. 1995:303). The development of a money-based participatory system is also connected to a more professionalised political climate; in professionalised politics money (e.g. for campaigns and candidates) becomes more important. This also means that increased economic inequality becomes an exacerbating factor.

With respect to the strong democratic ideal, a substantial discrepancy in and a decreasing level of political activity is indeed a negation of democracy, since politics ought to be done by, not to, citizens (Barber 1984:133). The risk is also that politics becomes impoverished, meaning that the democratic system becomes a concern of the few, not the many (Rothstein et al. 1995:14).

Furthermore, political activity is especially important in the American context since civic participation always has been essential to the country’s democratic working<sup>12</sup>, as a crucial way to accumulate social capital (Putnam 2002:402f; Rotberg 1999:341). Indeed, increased economic inequality also influences social capital negatively, since it tends to affect identification and trust between different socio-economic groups. This is due to the enlarged tension between “have” and “have-nots”. In this respect, general decline in engagement as well as in social trust tolls a bell about negative changes in American democracy.

Axel Hadenius (1994) catches developments in the US accurately and give further weight to the interrelation between economic inequality, political inequality and social capital:

*“An unequal economic distribution not only determines people’s social standing and way of living, it also affects the potential to take effective political actions in protecting one’s interests. What is more, economic and political influence in conjunction may give rise to a process of accelerated resource concentration, which increases the inequalities and strengthens the tension and mistrust in society even further”* (Hadenius 1994:76).

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<sup>12</sup> Skocpol uses the term “Civic America”, to signify the importance of commitment and activity in the US. Consider for example the impact of the civil rights movements for promoting ethnic, racial and gender equality.

Hadenius thus points to a very serious problem in American democracy (and in other established democracies), namely the systematically unequal political representation of different social groups. Rothstein et al. (1995) argues that this is one of the most serious defects in contemporary liberal democracies (Rothstein et al. 1995:68).

On the one hand representation has become more equalised, due to the fact that US society has become more integrated across racial, ethnic and gender lines since the 1960s (APSA 2004:2). On the other hand, the representational inequality-problem is still substantial and continues to undermine the credibility and legitimacy of the political process (Rothstein et al. 1995:69).

This exclusion of citizens is not only a negation of normative ideals (central to e.g. strong democracy), but in fact of liberal democratic ones as well. This is the case since, for liberal democracy to be fully implemented, all the different community groups need to participate in the governance of society (Rothstein et al. 1995:68).

Furthermore, Dahl argues that advanced democracies should work actively to reduce inequality (economic, educational, political as well as social) in order to make citizen participation and opportunities more equal, i.e. increase democratic quality (Dahl 1989:324). From this point of view, increased inequality in the US becomes a substantial democratic problem.

So far mostly structural contexts have been touch upon. Even though, American liberal democracy obviously falls short of several central elements (connected to existing structures), it would be unfair not to mention that the inequality-variable cannot fully explain the general decline in participation and political equality. Political engagement (i.e. that people are interested and informed) is also an important (agential) factor<sup>13</sup> (Petersson et al. 2006:44). Thus, for a person to participate not only economic resources need to be available, but a genuine engagement as well. Certainly, opportunities for political activity must be given (i.e. resources must be available), but an interest must also exist. On the other hand, there is a risk that interest diminishes (especially among lower socio-economic groups) as resources become more important for people in order to receive influence. This is arguably the case in money-based participatory systems such as the one in the United States. Consequently, this leads to the conclusion that both political engagement and resources matter for citizen participation. At the same time, resources (the structural context) are, to some extent, superior to engagement (the agential context) due to its constraining effect on individuals' political interest (Verba et al. 1995:364f.). This means that, as money becomes more important in politics, the level of inequality also becomes more important.

The picture is, however, not altogether dark. According to the report from APSA, supported by Skocpol (2002), there has been an actual increase in the number of voluntary and interest group organisations. Among those, there are groups that speak for the disadvantaged, which is a genuinely positive development. Nevertheless, even when the poor are spoken for, they do not speak

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<sup>13</sup> Petersson et al. calls this voter integrity, and a citizen with high integrity is one that is interested and informed.

themselves. Instead their voices are represented by the more privileged, which further undermines the participatory-element of strong democracy (Barber 1984:133).

This, in combination with increased concentration of economic resources, continues to make participation stratified (APSA 2004:8f; Dionne Jr. 2004:25; Skocpol 2002:130).

In some instances, the level of democracy has actually increased in the US since the 1960's, as it is now a universal practice that concerns everybody. However, as the analysis has shown, constitutional guarantees are not sufficient to secure democratic quality.

The causal relationship between economic inequality and democracy has been rather debated over the years (see for example Bollen & Jackman 1985 and Muller 1988; 1995). For example, according to Bollen & Jackman economic inequality has no systematic effect on the level of democracy (Muller 1988:50). On the other hand, as developments in American democracy have shown, the effects of increased and/or substantial inequality should not be left without consideration in discussions on democratic quality.

The main results are summarised in Figure 3.2.

**Figure 3.2 The Democratic Condition in Contemporary United States**

- Inequality levels have become more important since the participatory system has become more money-based. In this respect, persistent and rising economic inequality is an exacerbating factor.
- Different socio-economic groups differ significantly in terms of participation; therefore substantial inequality in representation among different socio-economic groups.
- US society has become more integrated across previous barriers of race, ethnicity, gender and other longstanding forms of social exclusion.
- Engagement (i.e. that individuals are interested and informed) is an important participatory-factor as well, but is inferior to the economic inequality-variable.
- Increase in the number of voluntary associations and interest groups, which are dominated by people that are socio-economically better-off.
- General decline in social capital, both trust and civic participation; disadvantaged people become to a larger degree passive, while advantaged people more often find other ways to participate.
- In theory US democracy is close to its liberal democratic ideals, but in practice a substantial (and increasing) discrepancy, to the actual functioning of the democratic system, exists.

### 3.3 Other intervening variables

This section seeks to analyse how other factors work to influence the state of American democracy, factors that have not been thoroughly examined earlier. The main concern is the general decline in political activity (e.g. why participation has decreased across all socio-economic groups).

#### 3.3.1 The Relationship between Education and Participation

As we pointed out earlier, statistics reveal that people with higher socio-economic status generally tend to be more active in politics than those with lower socio-economic status.

When it comes to the level of education and political engagement, developments are rather contradictory. Over time, the average levels of formal education have increased among American citizens and consequently one would expect political engagement to augment with that development. This is not utterly the case, since general electoral participation has declined over time, at the same time as donations and activities in voluntary associations and interest groups have increased (APSA 2004:7f). As a result, this points to a change in participatory behaviour. However, this increase in activity is not without problems since participation still is concentrated to people that are more socio-economically well-off. That is, the increase in the number of voluntary associations and interest groups has not generated a general increase in activity, but rather strengthened already existing patterns of stratified participation in the US (ibid. pp. 9). Thus, when looking at the general decline in electoral participation, we find two specific trends that are important to pay attention to; first of all, disadvantaged people that abstain from voting generally become passive and secondly, advantaged people that stay away from the ballot either become passive or start to participate in other ways.

#### 3.3.2 Race and Ethnic Origin

The US is unique in its context, as it is a melting pot for a multitude of cultures. Therefore, multiculturalism has been, and still is, a central building brick in American society. Consequently, it is rather paradoxical that, even though differences generally have inspired unity among people, racism and xenophobia is widespread within American society. Foremost, attention has been concentrated to the conflict between black- and white people, mainly due to the history of slavery and the segregationist pre-Civil Rights laws (the Jim Crow laws 1880-1960). Nowadays the phenomenon is expressed toward many other groups in the society

as well, for example Muslims (especially after 9/11) and Hispanics (McKeever & Davies 2006:91 ff.).

As mentioned in previous sections, statistics demonstrate that people with more social and economic resources tend to participate in politics to a larger extent than those less affluent. According to measures from the US Census Bureau 1968 to 2004, Anglo-Whites vote more frequently in elections, than any other racial or ethnic group (see appendix 1, Table 3.6). African Americans are only somewhat less active than the White parts of the population, but the large disparities exist between Anglo-Whites, Hispanics and Asian Americans.

The most common explanation for this voting variation is that White Americans (in average) have more social and economic resources. This goes hand in hand with the fact that distribution of income among American families has become more unequal since the end of the 1960s, and the differences are particularly striking when it comes to race and ethnic origin. Figures from the 2004 APSA-report on inequality and democracy, indicates this clearly, since the median white household had an income 62% higher than for the median black household and possessed twelve fold more wealth (APSA 2004:2 ff.).

In this matter, Francis Fukuyama's point (1989) seems relevant, as he argues that the former record of racial discrimination is clearly connected to the racial and ethnic dimension of contemporary inequalities (Fukuyama 1989:7). Arguably, the racial and ethnic dimension complements the inequality dimension in the sense that disparities in participation also seem to be connected to race and ethnic origin.

### 3.3.3 Professionalised Politics and the impact of Media

We have already touched upon the effects of a more professionalised political climate, a point will be more thoroughly examined here.

Closely connected to professionalised politics are characteristics such as market orientation, professional representatives, elitism and competence (Skocpol 2002:134; Petersson et al. 2006:98f). Rothstein et al., for example, refers to this kind of politics as "a spectator sport", meaning that public participation is a rather limited activity. Consequently, media act as the primary communication channel between politicians and citizens (Rothstein et al. 1995:133).

A professionalised political system might be seen as negative for democratic quality, particularly, if one sees democracy as a participatory activity, like the strong democratic ideal do (Barber 1984:133). Barber further supports this view: "*in states defined by watching rather than doing [citizens], like spectators everywhere, may find themselves falling asleep*" (Barber 1984:123). The risk of "falling asleep" is not the only problem however, because political inactivity also tends to blur the connection between representatives and citizens, and thus, between decision-making, responsibility and legitimacy (Rothstein et al. 1995:133f.).

In addition, the elitist- and competence element of professionalised politics has at least two negative effects on democracy; first of all, that the distance

between politicians and ordinary people increases, secondly, that it contributes to an exclusive character of participation since those with less competence-like resources have less possibilities to participate (Putnam 2002:403).

Furthermore, the market orientation of politics means that selling political programmes becomes more important. This means that political agendas, to a larger extent, are formed to be sold to the voter (the consumer), just like a product (Petersson et al 2006:98f.). In such a system, those who are heard most (presumably those more socio-economically well-off) are consequently the people that politicians first and foremost respond to. As a result, segments of the population are excluded from the democratic system (ibid. pp. 95). Enthusiasts, however, argue that professionalised (and media oriented) politics is fundamental to pluralist democracies since it contributes to better communication, greater understanding and more effective decision-making. On the other hand, the question is if efficiency should be superior to participation. Arguably, it should not since citizen activity in politics vitalises democracy (Rothstein et al. 1995:133).

In a professionalised political climate, where contact between representatives and citizens is mainly indirect, media has an important role as communicative channel. Media also has a more powerful role, in terms of what to report and how to report it. This role tends to affect people's views on politics and politicians (Petersson et al. 2006:47; 52). Current research argue that, due to the fact that media to a larger extent depict politics as a polarised competitive business with sneaky political actors, trust in the workability of the political system faces the risk of becoming lower (Peterson et al. Wuthnow 2006:87). In the case of the US, one only needs to look at the most recent Presidential Elections, to realise that the country is turning toward such a situation. For example, political issues have become less prominent in debates. At the same time, messages have become more negative and less concrete and the emphasis on deep-rooted conflicts more salient (Peterson et al. 2006:100). Conflicts in the political life are inevitable and not negative *per se*. However, when they become connected to other (less political) factors, it is much harder to transform conflicts into cooperation and understanding (a transformation the strong democratic ideal claims to be essential) (Barber 1984:135).

Since voting is the primary way for the population to express their views, the level of voter turnout in a professionalised political climate becomes an even more important indicator of how the democratic system works. In this case declining levels of voter turnout do, in fact, indicate less democratic quality, as opposed to the argument put forward by Larry Diamond (1999) (Diamond 1999:68).

In this matter, a more professionalised political climate and the changing role of media together constitute reasonable explanations to the declining levels of political participation in the US (and other established democracies) (see e.g. Rothstein et al. 1995 for the case of Sweden, and Gray & Caul 2000 for the case of other advanced countries).

## 4 Conclusions

In the examination of American democracy we have been able to determine that inequality has increased in the United States and that it has affected its democratic quality.

More explicitly, when it comes to the specific research question posed earlier (“where is contemporary American democracy standing and what does its current condition tell us about its actual quality?”), the following conclusions have been made; First of all, economic inequality has a primary function as explanatory variable, since it affects both political equality and social capital negatively. Economic inequality is indeed not conducive to democracy, for example, because economic resources easily turn into political resources. This is certainly the case in the US since money (e.g. financial contributions) has become an important part of the participatory system, and together with a more professionalised political climate it has contributed to an exclusive character of the political system.

Large differences in participation among different citizen groups (whether racial, ethnic or socio-economic) are problematic, since such differences also indicate inequalities in political output, and thus, variation in democratic quality (Junn 1999:1419).

The lack of equal representation and voice is *de facto* a negation of democracy, and the fact that it has become increasingly so is worrying.

The analysis has also shown that features in society, prominently socio-economic status, form behavioural and attitudinal patterns regarding the democratic system. On the other hand, it has also shown that individual engagement is important for participation, even though it is subordinated to increased economic inequality.

American democracy is thus standing at cross-roads, because in order to put its liberal democratic ideals into practice, action must be taken to prevent economic inequality from increasing. This line of thought is consistent with Dahl’s argument that advanced countries need to work actively to reduce inequality, in order to increase democratic quality (Dahl 1989:324). Reduced inequality is a key factor to diminish political inequality and strengthen social capital. Policies that strive toward a participatory system (in which politics is done by citizens, not to them) and that work against professionalised political structures must be implemented as well, as these factors exacerbate the effects economic inequality.

Just as the modernisation theory (among other things) emphasise the need for educational development, for a state in order to democratise, this is needed in the US as well, to make increases in the quality of democracy possible (Grugel 2002:47f.). This could make the democratic system more open to people that today are socio-economically excluded.

The three indicators we applied in order to examine American democracy, could not explain all the observations that were made in the analysis. Basically, problematic aspects and changes over time seem to be multi-faceted and not due to one specific reason. Most notably, increasing economic inequality, in conjunction with the impact of race/ethnic origin, professionalised politics and media, are relevant aspects worth illuminating in the American context.

Despite some positive indications (e.g. the constitutional integration across racial, ethnic, and gender lines), the results from the analysis on American democracy are rather negative. However, this is almost inevitable, since examinations of democracy that sees it as more than just a form and that look for problematic aspects, often convey more pessimistic conclusions. It is, in fact, important to identify such problematic aspects in order to be able to increase democratic strength in the long-run. Thus, to argue that a state is a high-quality democracy, only because ideals are constitutionally protected is not sufficient. We argue that, such a perspective faces the risk of losing sight of opportunities for increasing democratic quality.

Today many actually start to question the constitutional protection of liberal democratic values in the US, i.e. whether the state really lives up to these ideals. The concern is mainly directed at individual freedom, political rights and civil liberties, and the main reason is that these ideals have come under significant pressure due to the war on terror (the imposed *Patriot Act* is one example). This recent development indicates a gradual constitutional undermining of democratic quality, which strengthens the impression that American democracy is under threat in several respects.

Nevertheless, our conclusions should not be seen as ultimate, since they do not cover all aspects of significance. Rather they should be viewed as a tentative attempt to identify patterns that point in a specific direction. Thus, the best we can hope for is not to be right in every aspect of the analysis, but to be wrong in an interesting way<sup>14</sup> (Putnam, 2006:11).

The question of importance, then, is whether our findings also are applicable to a larger population. For instance, due to the fact: “*that income inequality has continued to increase in the large majority of the world’s rich nations over the past decade*” (Smeeding 2002:180), to what extent has this development affected democratic quality in other advanced countries? Arguably, this is a subject of outmost importance for the future.

From a normative perspective the question is whether current democracies can prosper and, at the same time, become more egalitarian in, for example, economic, ethnic, gender, racial and social terms in the future.

According to Bollen & Paxton (1997) Hunter and Gatherer societies have been among the most democratic societies in the history of *homo sapiens*, and they partly credit this democratic quality to the endurance of these societies (70 000 to 80 000 years of the human history, compared to approximately 250 years for

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<sup>14</sup> In this matter we paraphrase Petersson & Rothstein, in the preface to the translated version of Robert D. Putnam’s *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*.

contemporary advanced countries) (Bollen & Paxton 1997:34). Thus, what present-day democracies can achieve in a long-term perspective remains to be seen. At the same time, the plea for more egalitarian democracies needs to be continued in order to increase possibilities for creating democratic systems concerning the many and not just the few, as the term “people’s rule”, implies itself (Dahl 1989:1).

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## 6 Appendix 1

**Table 3.1 Gini Coefficient for Distribution of Household disposable Income among Individual income from mid 1980's to 2000**

<b>Country</b>	<b>mid-1980s</b>	<b>mid-1990s</b>	<b>2000</b>
Australia	0.312	0.305	0.305
Austria	0.236	0.238	0.252
Canada	0.287	0.283	0.301
Czech Republic	..	0.257	0.260
Denmark	0.228	0.213	0.225
Finland	0.207	0.228	0.261
France	0.276	0.278	0.273
Germany	..	0.283	0.277
Greece	0.336	0.336	0.345
Hungary	..	0.294	0.293
Ireland	0.331	0.324	0.304
Italy	0.306	0.348	0.347
Japan	0.278	0.295	0.314
Luxembourg	0.247	0.259	0.261
Mexico	0.451	0.520	0.480
Netherlands	0.234	0.255	0.251
New Zealand	0.270	0.331	0.337
Norway	0.234	0.256	0.261
Poland	..	0.389	0.367
Portugal	..	0.359	0.356
Spain	0.367	0.339	0.329
Sweden	0.199	0.211	0.243
Switzerland	..	..	0.267
Turkey	0.435	0.491	0.439
United Kingdom	0.286	0.312	0.326
<b>United States</b>	<b>0.338</b>	<b>0.361</b>	<b>0.357</b>
<b>OECD average<sup>15</sup></b>	<b>0.293</b>	<b>0.309</b>	<b>0.310</b>

(Source: OECD World Fact book 2006: Economic, Environmental and Social Statistics).

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<sup>15</sup> OECD average includes listed countries for which data are available for mid-1980s

**Table 3.6 Reported Registration Rates in Presidential Election Years, by Selected Characteristics: November 1968 to 2004**

(Numbers in thousands) Characteristic	1968	1972	1976	1980	1984	1988	1992	1996	2000	2004
<b>United States</b>										
<b>Total, voting age</b>	<b>116 535</b>	<b>136 203</b>	<b>146 548</b>	<b>157 085</b>	<b>169 963</b>	<b>178 098</b>	<b>185 684</b>	<b>193 651</b>	<b>202 609</b>	<b>215 694</b>
Total voted	86 574	98 480	97 761	105 035	116 106	118 589	126 578	127 661	129 549	142 070
Percent voted	74,3	72,3	66,7	66,9	68,3	66,6	68,2	65,9	63,9	65,9
<b>Race and Hispanic Origin</b>										
White	75,4	73,4	68,3	68,4	69,6	67,9	70,1	67,7	65,6	(X)
White non-Hispanic	(NA)	(NA)	(NA)	70,3	71,6	70,8	73,5	71,6	70,0	(X)
Black <sup>1</sup>	66,2	65,5	58,5	60,0	66,3	64,5	63,9	63,5	63,6	(X)
Asian and Pacific Islander	(NA)	(NA)	(NA)	(NA)	(NA)	(NA)	31,2	32,6	30,7	(X)
Hispanic (of any race)	(NA)	44,4	37,8	36,3	40,1	35,5	35,0	35,7	34,9	34,3
<b>Sex</b>										
Male	76,0	73,1	67,1	66,6	67,3	65,2	66,9	64,4	62,2	64,0
Female	72,8	71,6	66,4	67,1	69,3	67,8	69,3	67,3	65,6	67,6
<b>Age</b>										
18 to 24 years <sup>2</sup>	56,0	58,9	51,3	49,2	51,3	48,2	52,5	48,8	45,4	51,5
25 to 44 years	72,4	71,3	65,5	65,6	66,6	63,0	64,8	61,9	59,6	60,1
45 to 64 years	81,1	79,7	75,5	75,8	76,6	75,5	75,3	73,5	71,2	72,7
65 years and over	75,6	75,6	71,4	74,6	76,9	78,4	78,0	77,0	76,1	76,9

Note: NA = Not Available.

Note: Because of changes in the Current Population Survey race categories beginning in 2003, 2004 data on race are not directly comparable with data from earlier years.

<sup>1</sup>Prior to 1972, data are for people 21 to 24 years of age with the exception of those aged 18 to 24 in Georgia and Kentucky, 19 to 24 in Alaska,

Source: <http://www.census.gov/population/socdemo/voting/tabA-10.xls>, Internet Release date: May 26, 2005