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After Equality: Why a Decreasing Turnout Harms Democracy (Armin Schäfer: *Der Verlust politischer Gleichheit*)

Reviewed by Anne Fock

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

society, but if he dislodges the *Citoyen*, then – from a neo-republican point of view – democracy itself becomes impoverished,” Schäfer argues (16). The concept of democracy is closely linked to the concept of freedom. While it is the greatest possible individual freedom for action which characterises 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 republican model of democracy and freedom, known for its focus on political participation as a precondition for individual freedom. 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 willingness 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 democratic 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 understand 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 developing in the same direction, but rather the previously least-regulated countries are liberalising particularly rapidly. At the same time, income distribution is becoming 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 inequality, 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 citizens with lower incomes and less education 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 pushes socially weak and politically inactive citizens more and more into an offside position 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 behaviour of the neighbourhood, for example, is not to be underestimated; and the social segregation facilitated by the rental market 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 protest parties enjoy more “goodwill” among abstainers.

The election campaign is another issue introduced by Schäfer. He begins by focusing 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 academisation of the *Bundestag* as well as of the *Landtage* (state parliaments).

From all these points of critique, Schäfer concludes that the means of citizens to participate need to be expanded. He gives the example of cumulating and splitting votes (German: *kumulieren und panaschieren*), which was introduced in the last two decades 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 government: if only a privileged minority participates in the elections, it is hardly the majority 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 involvement in associations or parties, might not be affected. Based on surveys, Schäfer demonstrates successfully the equalising effect of compulsory voting that is reflected 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 disappointed, he suggests.

In the eleventh and final chapter, Schäfer makes a diagnosis which locates the crisis of democracy in the loss of political equality and succinctly summarises possible reactions to it: from Schäfer’s neo-republican view, it is necessary to identify the appropriate 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 abstinence from voting, for example the German television philosopher Richard David Precht or the former “Handelsblatt” chief editor Gabor 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?”² 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 comprehensibly. 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 undressed. 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

1 OECD (2008): *Divided we stand: Why inequality keeps rising*. Paris: OECD Publishing, 155.

2 Rainer Geißler (1996): *Kein Abschied von Klasse und Schicht: Ideologische Gefahren der deutschen Sozialstrukturanalyse*. In: *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie*, vol. 48 (2/1996), 319-338.

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