


ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Too Much Democracy? Exploring the Link between Majoritarian Institutions and Disparities in the American States

Julianna Pacheco¹ and Scott LaCombe² 

¹The University of Iowa, Department of Political Science, Iowa City, IA, USA and ²Smith College, Department of Government and Statistical and Data Sciences, Northampton, MA, USA

Corresponding author: Scott LaCombe; Email: lacombe129@gmail.com

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Abstract

In the field of American state politics, the tension between majoritarian institutions and equality has largely been ignored. Do state institutions that empower majority preferences exacerbate disparities in social outcomes? Under what conditions do majoritarian institutions exacerbate inequalities in the American states? Our argument is that equality is most likely to be threatened under majoritarian institutions when (1) there are systemic participatory biases and/or (2) there are widespread prejudices about particular groups in society. We find that more majoritarian institutions are associated with larger disparities between White and Black life expectancy and poverty rates across the American states, but not differences in educational attainment. We also find that this effect is moderated by racial context, with majoritarian institutions being associated with greater disparities for states with diverse racial contexts and smaller disparities in more homogenous states. These findings suggest that majoritarian institutions operate to the benefit of the White majority, while coming at the cost of minority population outcomes when a racial threat is perceived, and presumably, public opinion is biased.

Keywords: Direct Democracy, Population Health, Accountability, Institutions, Inequalities

Introduction

A key benchmark of democratic performance is the extent to which public opinion is reflected in public policy. When responsiveness is lacking, institutional reforms that strengthen the electoral connection between public opinion and elite decision-making are often proposed. Political scientists champion these changes. Yet, institutions that strengthen the electoral connection may conflict with another cherished democratic value: equality. As Abizadeh (2021) writes, “when push comes to shove, majoritarianism ultimately jettisons the democratic commitment to equality” (743). Comparative studies find empirical support for Abizadeh’s (2021) claim;

majoritarian institutions are systematically related to higher income inequality among developed countries (e.g., Birchfield and Crepez 1998).

In the field of American state politics, the tension between majoritarian institutions and equality has almost exclusively focused on how direct democracy affects minority rights (Gamble 1997; Lewis 2011; Schildkraut 2001). While important, ballot initiatives are just one way of measuring majoritarian rule in the American states. Institutions related to campaign finance laws (Barber 2016; La Raja and Schaffner 2015), voter registration laws (Mitchell and Wlezien 1995; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980), and legislative professionalism (Maestas 2000; Squire 1993) in addition to ballot initiatives and popular referendums (Gerber 1996; Matsusaka 2018) strengthen the role of the median voter and increase electoral incentives for elites to follow public opinion (LaCombe 2021).

How are majoritarian institutions related to social inequalities across the states? Under what conditions do majoritarian institutions exacerbate inequalities in the American states? Our argument is that equality is most likely to be threatened under majoritarian institutions when there are (1) systemic participatory biases and/or (2) there are widespread prejudices about particular groups in society. For both reasons – either participatory biases or biased public opinion, increasing electoral incentives may push elected officials toward a less pro-equity stance than would be observed under other institutional designs.

We use a racial equity lens to test our arguments. As explained by Michener (2019), “American public policy is (and always has been) profoundly racialized” (423). We focus on how state institutional designs exacerbate racial disparities in health, educational attainment, and poverty. In so doing, we contribute to the ongoing literature about how institutional designs contribute to the systematic exclusion and marginalization of racial and ethnic minority groups. We find that more majoritarian institutions are associated with larger disparities between White and Black life expectancy and poverty rates, but not differences in educational attainment. In two-way fixed effects models, we also find that this effect is moderated by racial context, with majoritarian institutions being associated with greater disparities for states with diverse racial contexts and smaller disparities in more homogenous states. These findings suggest that majoritarian institutions operate to the benefit of the White majority, while coming at the cost of minority population outcomes when a racial threat is perceived, and presumably, public opinion is biased.

When does responsiveness exacerbate equality?

We argue that who participates, and the popularity of prejudiced beliefs play a critical role in determining the extent to which majoritarian institutions exacerbate inequality in the states. Majoritarian institutions will exacerbate inequality under two conditions: when there are systemic participatory biases in the political process and when the majority public opinion is prejudiced. There are likely other conditions that increase state inequalities, and our analyses include a range of other variables. However, for determining whether majoritarian institutions translate into gross disparities in social outcomes, who participates and the extent to which constituents are prejudiced play a crucial role in pushing elected officials toward more particularized policies that, years later, widen inequalities on key social outcomes.

Participatory bias

If there are systemic biases in who participates in politics, then majoritarian institutions are more likely to lead to larger social inequalities. Politicians strive to respond to their constituents (Miller and Stokes 1963), yet the messages they receive may very well be distorted if there are systemic participatory biases. A long strand of research finds that the American electorate is indeed biased toward wealthy, educated, politically interested, and healthy citizens (Burden *et al.* 2017; Pacheco and Fletcher 2016; Schlozman *et al.* 2018; Verba *et al.* 1995; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980). This participatory bias extends to the 50 states as well although there is variation in the size of these biases (Avery 2015; Avery and Peffley 2005; Hill and Leighley 1992; Pacheco 2021).

Participatory biases are of less concern if the political preferences of active citizens are representative of the electorate as a whole. While some research suggests marginal differences in preferences between voters and nonvoters (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980), more recent research finds that Republicans and conservatives are overrepresented by voters (Leighley and Nagler 2014). Differences in opinion are even bigger when looking at political acts beyond voting; those who made large campaign contributions are considerably more conservative on economic issues compared to all citizens, all voters, and even all contributors (Schlozman *et al.* 2018). Because politically active individuals are less likely to need government support, public officials hear less about issues related to basic human needs (Schlozman *et al.* 2018), which may encourage less pro-equity policy proposals, which eventually lead to more social inequality.

Work at the local level suggests that participatory biases can lead to greater inequalities. Hajnal and Trounstine (2005) find that racial turnout disparities in local and off cycle elections lead to lower rates of representation for Latino, Asian American, and African American voters. Sances compares towns in New York with direct elections compared to appointed tax assessors and finds that the influence of participatory biases on inequality was substantial; by one estimate, the difference in effective tax rates between the richest and poorest homes were 26 percentage points higher in towns with elections (2016). In the case of New York towns, the reality of unequal participation led to incentives that made elected assessors more biased in their decision making than they would have been if appointed. Sances (2016) points out that inequality in effective taxation existed in all towns regardless of how the assessor was selected. However, the bias was exacerbated by the presence of elections.

Prejudiced public opinion

Even if there were no participatory biases, we suspect that majoritarian institutions will lead to more unequal outcomes if the majority of citizens oppose equality for all. This opposition may arise because of explicit or implicit prejudices or a general belief system that inequality is caused by individual behaviors instead of institutional structures. In reality, it is difficult to separate the two factors since prejudices are often intertwined with beliefs about attributions of blame. For instance, Americans who score high on the racial resentment scale tend to explain racial inequality in terms of individual behavior instead of structural inequalities (Kam and Burge 2018). In regards to health disparities, individuals are more likely to blame poor health on individual behaviors instead of biological or systemic factors when groups suffering

ill health are defined in racial, class, or gender terms (Gollust and Lynch 2011). Individualism (Cozzarelli *et al.* 2001; Feldman 1983; Smith and Stone 1989) and racial animus (Rabinowitz *et al.* 2009) are also significant factors explaining public opinion toward poverty and welfare programs.

The argument that majoritarian institutions might exacerbate inequalities – precisely because of prejudiced public opinion – is at the core of the debate over direct democracy. Critics of direct democracy suggest that minority rights are endangered when citizens vote directly on legislation. Unlike institutions of direct democracy, a representative democracy holds elected officials accountable for their decisions – both through electoral incentives and nonelectoral constraints – which provides a check on a powerful, prejudiced majority. In the case of minority rights, elected officials are less likely to make outwardly biased decisions than voters, even if they are no less prejudiced (Hainmueller *et al.* 2015). While some studies find little evidence that direct democracy hurts minoritized groups (e.g., Hajnal *et al.* 2002), others find that states with direct democracy have anti-minority policies, such as laws defining English as the official language (Preuhs 2005), affirmative action bans (Chavez 1998), same-sex marriage bans (Lewis 2011), and are also more likely to have the death penalty (Caron 2021; Gerber 1999). Gamble (1997) looks at patterns across three decades of referendums/initiatives on five major civil rights areas, including housing for racial minorities, school desegregation, gay rights, English only laws, and AIDS policies; she finds that voters approved over three-quarters of these laws, providing strong evidence that direct democracy promotes majority tyranny on civil rights. These policies, in turn, have obvious implications for the equality of social outcomes.

Using a racial equity lens

We use a racial equity lens to test our arguments. Race is a fundamental factor in American public policy generally (e.g., Michener 2019) and specifically in state politics (e.g., Hero and Tolbert 1996). Devolution since the 1980s has only heightened the role that states play in exacerbating or eliminating racial disparities across a variety of outcomes including health (e.g., Rodriguez 2019), education (e.g., Meier and Rutherford 2016), incarceration (e.g., Yates 1997), housing (e.g., Michener 2023; Michener and Brower 2020), poverty (e.g., Soss *et al.* 2008), and so forth. Most of the research on the determinants of racial inequalities in the American states has focused on policy design and implementation (e.g., Soss and Schram 2007), party control and electoral competition (e.g., Rodriguez 2019; Yates and Fording 2005), as well as racial/ethnic diversity (e.g., Hero and Tolbert 1996; Matsubayashi and Rocha 2012). We contribute to the ongoing literature about how *institutional designs* related to *majoritarian rule* are associated with the systematic exclusion and marginalization of racial and ethnic minority groups, which in turn contributes to racial disparities.

Hypotheses

We suspect that strengthening majoritarian institutions in the American states will lead to racial inequalities in and of itself, but in states where the inputs are biased either because of who participates or prejudiced opinions, elected officials will have even greater incentives to promote proposals with particularized benefits. In turn,

racial inequalities widen. This provides us with specific hypotheses about conditions under which equality is threatened under majoritarian institutions.

Majoritarian Hypothesis: States with strong majoritarian institutions have larger racial disparities than states with weak majoritarian institutions.

Participatory Interaction Hypothesis: The influence of majoritarian institutions on state racial inequalities will increase as the amount of participatory bias increases.

Opinion Interaction Hypothesis: The influence of majoritarian institutions on state racial inequalities will increase as the prejudice of state residents increases.

Measuring social inequality in the American states

To test our hypotheses, we collected data from a variety of sources on state racial disparities related to the health, education, and income. Due to the challenging nature of finding reliable state-level estimates disaggregated by race, there is significant variation in the sample size depending on the outcome, with some outcomes having over 30 years of reliable data and others only having a decade at most. For all outcomes, our dependent variable is the absolute value of the difference between state-level estimates by race. Larger values indicate larger inequalities between White and Black populations. Due to data limitations, our models for life expectancy only include states with at least 3% of the population being Black.¹

Health

To measure racial disparities on health in the states, we use data from Harper *et al.* (2014) who collect data on life expectancy for Black and White populations from 1990 to 2009. Life expectancy at birth is an estimate of the number of years a (Black or White) newborn is predicted to live based on period life table calculations (see Harper *et al.* 2014). We generate measures of the difference between Black and White life expectancy at birth. Figure 1 shows the overtime variations in all 50 states with values mapped for the first and last year of data available. While the disparity has been shrinking overtime, in 2009, there is still a nearly 4-year gap between White and Black life expectancy with the largest gap being 8.5 years. The states with the largest average disparities are found in the Midwest (Illinois, Michigan, and Wisconsin) and the South/border states (Maryland, Louisiana, Missouri, Florida). The states with the largest gaps tend to have relatively large Black populations, while those with the smallest average gaps tend to have larger White populations (Maine, New Hampshire, Utah, West Virginia). Out of the 45 states with large enough Black populations

¹Given the difficulty in measuring state-level racial disparities, particularly for states with small Black populations, we lack outcome data for some states (see Figures 1 and 3). We therefore estimated parallel models by raising the threshold of the percentage of the population that is Black from 0% up to 15%. We find for Tables 1–3 that our results hold until we constraint the sample to only states above 12% Black (roughly 30% of the sample). For the two-way fixed effects models, the results for the interaction with racial context are more sensitive to the choice of threshold, with the interactions being insignificant for higher thresholds. We argue this is partially due to the construction of the measure, as states with low Black populations are more likely to be categorized as homogenous, so the change of threshold affects the sample size of the interaction.

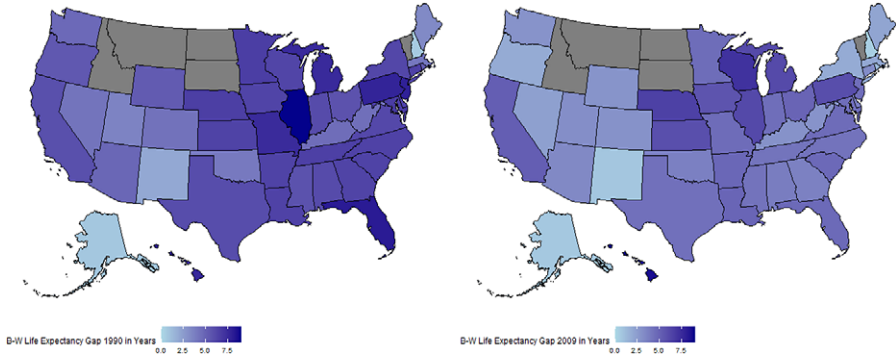


Figure 1. Disparity between Black and White life expectancy at birth in the American states in 1990 and 2009.

to provide estimates, all but Wisconsin and Hawaii saw the disparity shrink, with New York seeing the largest decline (4.2 years) and an average decrease of 1.7 years.

Educational attainment

In addition to racial health disparities, we also estimate racial disparities in educational attainment across the states. We use the CDC’s Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS). This over the phone survey is one of the most comprehensive public surveys with up to 500,000 respondents per year across all 50 states. With the proper use of weights, data from the BRFSS are representative of state populations. We calculate the absolute value of the difference between the percentage of Black individuals in a state with a high school degree and the percentage of White individuals with a high school degree. In our sample, 91% of the White population and 86% of the Black population had at least a high school degree. The BRFSS data spans from 1993 to 2016 and is shown in [Figure 2](#). As shown in [Figure 2](#), which maps the outcome variable in 1995 and 2015, the educational attainment gap between the White and Black populations appears to be shrinking somewhat.

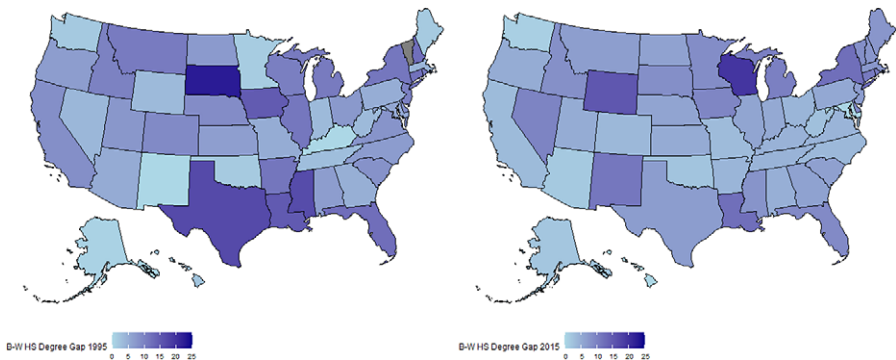


Figure 2. Disparity between Black and White percentage of population with at least high school degree in the American states in 1995 and 2015.

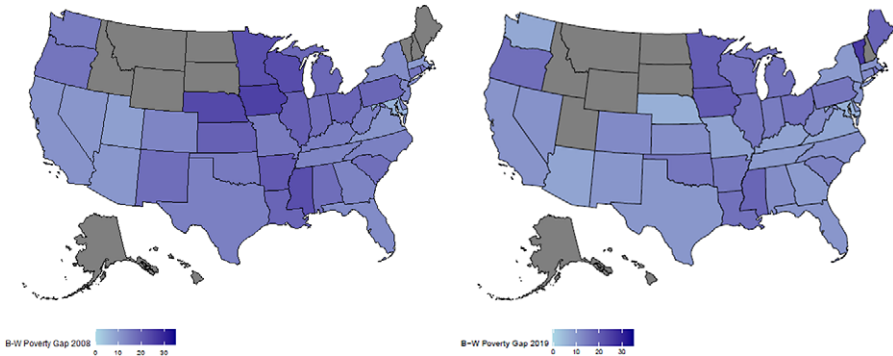


Figure 3. Disparity in Black and White poverty rate in the American states in 2008 and 2019.

Notable, state-level variation appears to be shrinking overtime as the gap becomes similar across all states in the sample. We again find that Wisconsin is one of the states with the largest racial disparities, followed by several Southern states (Florida, Mississippi, and Louisiana). The disparity has been reduced on average by 3.8 percentage points, but eight states have seen the gap grow since 1993.

Poverty

Finally, we use data from the American Community Survey 2009–2019 to measure racial inequalities in poverty across the states. Here, our outcome variable is the difference in the poverty rate between Black and White populations across the states. The average poverty rate is much higher for Black populations (27%) compared to the White ones (10%), and Figure 3 shows how stark the geographic variation is in both 2009 and 2019. States with small Black populations see the highest disparities (the Dakotas, Vermont, Idaho) while non-Southern, more diverse states tend to see the smallest average disparity (Delaware, Arizona, New York). From 2009 to 2019, the average difference has shrunk from over 18% to less than 14%, and most states see a downward trend. This measure is much noisier than the other two population outcomes, with some states with small Black populations seeing shifts of up to 10% in a very short period. The national mean never shifts more than 4%.²

Measuring majoritarian institutions

Our first task is to test the *Majoritarian Hypothesis*, which suggests that states with strong majoritarian institutions have larger disparities than states with weak majoritarian institutions. To test this hypothesis, we measure state majoritarian institutions using a latent scale developed by LaCombe (2021). As described by LaCombe (2021), the measure was calculated from a Bayesian factor analysis using institutional data from all 50 states from 1975 to 2016. LaCombe (2021) identifies one of the dimensions from this factor analysis as *accountability pressure*. States high in accountability

²Whether this noise is due to measurement error is unknown. Measurement error in the dependent variable will lead to inefficient but unbiased estimators, thus making us less likely to reject the null hypothesis.

pressure have an easy-to-use initiative process, relatively strict campaign finance laws, and high levels of legislative professionalism. Evidence suggests that many of these institutions – when studied separately – increase the association between public opinion and policy (Gerber 1996; Maestas 2000; Pacheco 2013; La Raja and Schaffner 2015), although the evidence is mixed with others finding null results (Caughey and Warshaw 2018). LaCombe (2021) argues that by combining these institutions into a comprehensive measure scholars can more fully account for the influence of institutions. LaCombe argues that when accountability pressure is high, states have stronger incentives to respond to the majority public opinion. These scores have been made publicly available, and LaCombe (2021) notes that there has been a sizable increase nationally in accountability pressure over the past four decades, but there is still significant heterogeneity across states, with accountability on average being lower in Appalachian states and higher in states west of the Mississippi River (see appendix for a more detailed visualization of the published scores). Scores are normally distributed with a mean of 0 and standard deviation of 1.

The composite scale also matters; states with higher levels of accountability pressure have higher rates of opinion-policy congruence across dozens of policies (LaCombe 2020, 2021) and are more responsive to economic and social policies (LaCombe 2023). Pacheco and LaCombe (2022) use these data to demonstrate that accountability pressure has population health implications with states higher in accountability pressure having lower infant mortality rates.³ Across multiple studies, this measure has been found to be associated with more responsive policymaking, but questions remain whether this comes at the cost of being less responsive to voters outside of a governing majority.

Participatory bias

As described above, there are two conditions under which majoritarian institutions will exacerbate racial inequalities: when there are systemic participatory biases in the political process and when the majority public opinion is prejudiced. We use two measures to test the *Participatory Interaction Hypothesis*. First, we use the Current Population Survey (CPS) to calculate the turnout gap between White and Black voters from 1994 to 2018. We interpolated values if the data were missing using a linear trend for each state to fill in missing values by averaging the previous and following year's turnout bias.⁴ Higher values indicate higher White levels of voting, and the mean across the time-series-cross-sectional data are 4.6% with a standard deviation of 11%. We include this measure in our two-way fixed effect models and interact it with accountability pressure.

We include a second measure of participatory bias based on income because there is evidence that racial differences in turnout are the result of differences in

³LaCombe (2021) finds the accountability pressure dimension is unrelated to the size of a state's Black population. Many of the institutions included in the scale were adopted decades, or even a century ago, so many states have undergone dramatic demographic and political transformations since initially adopting these institutions.

⁴As an additional robustness check, we estimated the models just with the original values, and by using lagged turnout values instead of interpolated ones. In both cases, our conclusions remain unchanged in both significance and direction. We also interpolated using a cubic term and splines, and the estimates are correlated at more than .99.

socioeconomic status (e.g., Leighley and Vedlitz 1999; Verba *et al.* 1995). We include a measure of income bias in voter turnout from 1996 to 2012 (Avery 2015), which is measured using questions about income and turnout in the CPS Voter Supplement file. The measure is the “percent of people in the top fifth of the income distribution who voted divided by the percent of the people in the bottom fifth of the income distribution who voted” (Avery 2015, 962). We use the same interpolation procedure explained above to fill in nonelection years. If the voting population is biased toward higher income individuals, then there is an incentive structure for political elites to craft policies that are favored by wealthy citizens, potentially leading to increased social disparities. We therefore interact this measure with the accountability variable. The two measures of participatory bias are very weakly correlated (.09) suggesting that they are distinct.

Biased public opinion

We test the *Opinion Interaction Hypothesis* using two different approaches. First, we include a measure of state racial resentment (Smith *et al.* 2020). Smith *et al.* (2020) use small area estimation techniques on the American National Election Studies (ANES) data to produce state-level measures of racial attitudes, with higher values indicating stronger levels of racial resentment. We expect that in majoritarian systems designed to maximize the influence of public opinion, these attitudes may have an even stronger effect on increasing racial disparities in population outcomes. On the other hand, if public opinion had low levels of racial resentment, we would expect to see majoritarian institutions lead to smaller disparities between majority and minority groups as elites have fewer incentives to craft policies that cater to voting populations with high levels of racial resentment. We interact this measure with accountability pressure to evaluate if disparities that emerge from majoritarian institutions are larger when racial resentment is high. We again used interpolation using a linear trend to fill in missing values of the resentment score, which were estimated originally in 4-year increments.⁵

Because the state racial resentment measure is unavailable across the timespan, we also measure prejudiced public opinion using a simpler method to proxy a state’s racialized context. Specifically, we use Hero and Tolbert’s (1996) categorization of states based on racial and ethnic diversity. They categorize states as homogenous, heterogeneous, and bifurcated. Homogenous states have low levels of both racial and ethnic diversity, while bifurcated states include those with large minority populations but small White ethnic populations, and heterogeneous states have high levels of both. Growing diversity may be perceived as a racial threat by White voters, which leads to higher levels of biased public opinion. Under this scenario, greater diversity leads the White population to feel threatened by political, economic, and social competitions from non-White voters (Avery and Fine 2012; Huckfeldt and Kohfeld 1989). For example, Avery *et al.* (2017) find that states with a larger Latino population pass more restrictive immigration laws, particularly when Latino voter engagement is low. Tolbert and Grummel (2003) find that Whites living in more diverse census tracts were more likely to support bans on

⁵Smith *et al.* (2020) show the time series cross-sectional estimates are very static. On a zero-to-one scale, all states are found to be between .5 and .76, while no state sees a change of more than .09 across the original time series from 1988 to 2016. We chose a linear trend because changes are small and gradual over time.

affirmative action. In this scenario of racial threat, majoritarian institutions may empower White populations to enact policies stemming that either disproportionately benefit White populations or harm non-White groups.⁶ Similar to the other analyses, we include an interaction term to test for our hypothesis.

Empirical strategy

Proper identification of the modeling strategy requires an understanding about the source of variation in the dependent and independent variables as well as the limitations of the data.

ANOVA analyses indicate the source of variation for the dependent variables differs with some variables (life expectancy and poverty) having a majority of variance between states and others having a majority of variance within states (educational attainment).

Additionally, a major concern is omitted variable bias, either from the omission of systemic factors (e.g., national level policies) or unit-specific forces (e.g., state economics). Systemic factors can be accounted for by using variables that capture time trends (e.g., cubic spline or year fixed effects). State fixed effects may be included to account for unit heterogeneity. Including these variables, however, are atheoretical, may lead to an over-parameterization of the model (e.g., Achen 2005), or even create biased estimates if included with a lagged dependent variable (LDV; e.g., Nickell 1981). A random-effects estimator may be preferable, even in the presence of bias, to reduce variance in cases when predictors change gradually over time (Clark and Linzer 2015).

We report the results using multiple model specifications. First, we model the dependent variables as the 1-year difference and include an LDV to correct for autocorrelation (Beck and Katz 1996). This type of model is called an error correction model (ECM) and we include panel corrected standard errors (Beck and Katz 2011). Modeling our dependent variables as first differences has two benefits. First, these types of models essentially purge the regression of any unobserved state-specific fixed effects. ANOVA analyses on the differenced dependent variables confirm that virtually all the variation is within states. Second, we allow for the possibility that the treatment effect of majoritarian institutions on disparities requires some extended period of time. An ECM allows for the estimation of both the short- and long-term effects of independent variables and tells us how quickly the system returns to equilibrium or the overall mean after being disrupted. Since our measure of political accountability is time varying, we include differenced and lagged versions.⁷ We also include fixed effects of year to capture common trends. For the dynamic

⁶On the one hand, a larger minority population indicates an opportunity for elites to reach new voters by crafting policy solutions that are appealing to this voting bloc. Furthermore, larger minority constituencies could reach a critical size to elect representatives who share their preferences (Lublin 1997). Under this theory, greater levels of racial and ethnic diversity may lead to smaller disparities between White and Black populations.

⁷The coefficient on the differenced independent variable gives the short-term effect on the dependent variable, while the coefficient on the lagged independent variable gives the long-term effect on the dependent variable. To get the estimated short-term effect of a unit change in X, we simply multiply this effect with the coefficient on the differenced independent variable. To get the estimated long-term effect of a unit change in X, we divide the coefficient by the error correction rate and then multiply it by a unit change in X (see De Boef and Keele 2008).

models, we decide against state fixed effects because the differenced outcomes are already purged of the between state variation and because our main independent variables, while dynamic, are slow to change (see Clark and Linzer 2015).

Because not including state fixed effects may result in omitted variable bias, we present a second set of models that describe the between state association of majoritarian institutions and racial disparities. For these models, the estimate of the effect of political accountability is contemporaneous and non-time varying. Like the dynamic models, we still control for common time trends by including fixed year effects and the model includes fixed effects for state to incorporate unmodeled state variation. We cluster standard errors by state.

All dependent variables are the absolute value of the difference between the two groups (White and Black populations at the state level).⁸ For each outcome, we estimate the model without control variables first and then estimate a parallel model that includes a lagged and difference measure for unified Democratic control and the percentage of the population that is Black. We expect for states that are dominated by Democrats to have lower disparities (e.g., Gamm and Kousser 2021) and for states with large Black populations to have higher disparities.

For the interaction models, we primarily move to two-way fixed effects models because our expectations about the interactive effects are non-time-dependent. We use these models to interact accountability pressure with the interactions mentioned earlier on income bias in turnout and our two measures of prejudiced opinion, including racial resentment and the Hero and Tolbert racial/ethnic diversity classification.

Results: Dynamic models

Table 1 shows the results for racial disparities in life expectancy across the states. Recall that the dependent variable is the difference between White and Black populations. Therefore, negative coefficients indicate an association with smaller disparities while a positive coefficient indicates an association with larger disparities. We find support for our majoritarian hypothesis that higher levels of accountability pressure in the previous year are associated with greater disparities in life expectancy between Black and White populations in the current year. We do not find a significant relationship between differenced accountability pressure and racial disparities in life expectancy. The only significant control variables in the model are that states with larger Black populations in the previous year have smaller disparities, albeit with the difference being substantively small.

We next move to racial disparities in the proportion of the population with at least a high school degree. Unlike the life expectancy models, the lagged term is significantly related to disparities. In both models, we find that both differences in accountability and lagged accountability pressure are strongly related to increased disparities. When institutions are more majoritarian or become more majoritarian, racial disparities in educational attainment are significantly larger. We also find that

⁸Given the small sample size of estimates for Black populations in some states, we constricted the analysis to include only state-year observations with at least 3% of the sample being Black. When we increase this threshold, our conclusions remain unchanged up to 10%. At that point, the sample size is significantly smaller (less than 300).

Table 1. Error correction model predicting difference in life expectancy by race

	(1)	(2)
Lagged DV	-.004 (.005)	-.000 (.005)
D.Accountability	-.011 (.046)	-.020 (.046)
L.Accountability	.011** (.004)	.008* (.004)
D.Democratic Control		-.000 (.014)
L.Democratic Control		-.003 (.008)
D.Percentage Black		-.043 (.048)
L.Percentage Black		-.002** (.001)
Bifurcated		.015 (.009)
Heterogeneous		-.017 (.017)
Constant	.032 (.030)	.039 (.033)
Observations	855	836
R ²	.186	.200

Note: Panel-corrected standard errors in parentheses.

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

Table 2. Error correction model predicting disparities education attainment

	(1)	(2)
Lagged DV	-.789** (.050)	-.807** (.053)
D.Accountability	4.615** (1.659)	4.642** (1.743)
L.Accountability	.890** (.169)	.940** (.193)
D.Democratic Control		.216 (.415)
L.Democratic Control		.620* (.270)
D.Percentage Black		-.076 (.925)
L.Percentage Black		.046* (.019)
Bifurcated		-.792* (.372)
Heterogeneous		.007 (.516)
Constant	6.321** (.775)	5.154** (.950)
Observations	1355	1229
R ²	.427	.433

Note: Panel-corrected standard errors in parentheses.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

Table 3. Error correction model predicting Black–White gap in poverty

	(1)	(2)
Lagged DV	–.247** (.095)	–.307* (.126)
D.Accountability	–.393 (1.991)	.861 (2.344)
L.Accountability	.274** (.104)	.526** (.141)
D.Democratic Control		1.712** (.559)
L.Democratic Control		.340 (.266)
D.Percentage Black		1.789 (1.535)
L.Percentage Black		.043** (.015)
Bifurcated		–2.340** (.895)
Heterogeneous		–2.065* (.860)
Constant	4.229** (1.499)	5.749** (2.155)
Observations	312	228
R ²	.186	.221

Note: Panel-corrected standard errors in parentheses.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

unified democratic control is associated with smaller disparities, and bifurcated states have smaller disparities than homogenous states, while states with larger Black populations see somewhat larger disparities, although the effect size is again much smaller than other coefficients. These results support our majoritarian hypothesis.

Table 3 shows the results of the disparity between Black and White poverty rates (percentage). In both models, we find that accountability pressure is associated with greater differences in poverty, supporting our majoritarian hypothesis. Democratic control is associated with smaller gaps in poverty rates, while bifurcated and heterogeneous states see smaller gaps than homogenous ones. Across all three sets of models, we find that more majoritarian institutions are related to larger disparities in health, educational, and economic outcomes in every specification. We next turn to our two-way fixed effect models to evaluate our interactive hypotheses.

Results: Two-way fixed effects models

Across five of the six models in Table 4, we do not find a significant association between accountability pressure and disparities. Furthermore, we do not find evidence that racial resentment or biases in turnout moderate this relationship. However, we do find support for our hypothesis that racial context moderates the effect of majoritarian institutions on social disparities. According to the model, in homogenous states, more majoritarian institutions are associated with lower disparities in life expectancy, whereas in bifurcated and heterogeneous states, we find a positive interactive effect. This suggests a racial-threat dynamic where majoritarian institutions lead to inequality when White groups feel threatened by a sizable minority population. In the other models, we do not find any significant interaction, and the

Table 4. Two-way fixed effects model of White versus Black life expectancy disparity

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	W/B LE	W/B LE	W/B LE	W/B LE	W/B LE	W/B LE
Accountability	.034 (.239)	-.600* (.224)	-.085 (.306)	-.060 (.318)	-1.431 (2.536)	-.070 (.301)
Democratic control	.014 (.067)	.009 (.066)	.005 (.052)	.005 (.052)	.003 (.053)	.006 (.053)
Percentage Black	-.167 (.096)	-.165 (.096)	-.157 (.091)	-.155 (.090)	-.157 (.090)	-.156 (.090)
Bifurcated	1.684 (1.841)	1.429 (1.853)	.715 (1.920)	.677 (1.907)	.776 (1.930)	.702 (1.905)
Heterogeneous	-3.242** (.216)	-3.574** (.242)	-3.479** (.295)	-3.475** (.294)	-3.442** (.304)	-3.470** (.291)
Bifurcated # accountability		.697* (.292)				
Heterogeneous # accountability		.713** (.227)				
Income bias			-.243 (.201)	-.192 (.201)	-.231 (.208)	-.239 (.203)
Racial resentment			4.267 (4.814)	4.194 (4.832)	3.844 (4.594)	4.328 (4.818)
W-B vote			.159 (.188)	.169 (.189)	.157 (.185)	.289 (.258)
Accountability # income bias				-.108 (.194)		
Accountability # racial resentment					1.991 (3.773)	
W-B vote # accountability						-.286 (.234)
Constant	8.380** (.547)	8.653** (.539)	5.737 (3.283)	5.764 (3.290)	6.031 (3.138)	5.676 (3.284)
Observations	714	714	504	504	504	504
R ²	.944	.945	.970	.970	.970	.970

Note: Clustered standard errors in parentheses.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

only significant coefficient is that heterogeneous states see smaller disparities than homogenous ones. Figure 4 shows the marginal effects of accountability pressure to interpret the interaction term more clearly. There is no significant difference in the effect of accountability pressure on life expectancy between bifurcated and homogenous states, but accountability pressure is associated with lower disparities in heterogeneous states, particularly when accountability pressure is low. As accountability pressure rises, the benefit of living in a heterogeneous racial context with respect to racial disparities weakens. This highlights the conditional nature of institutional effects. Accountability pressure cuts the influence of racial context nearly in half, reducing the difference in disparity between homogenous and heterogeneous states from 4.3 to 2.3 years, a substantively large effect.

Moving to educational outcomes, Table 5 shows the two-way fixed effects results for education disparities. We do not find any significant relationship between accountability pressure and racial gaps in education rates, and we also do not find any significant interactive effects. Again, the only significant variables are for racial context, with heterogeneous states having significantly lower disparities than homogenous states in all models, and bifurcated states seeing lower disparities in model 2.

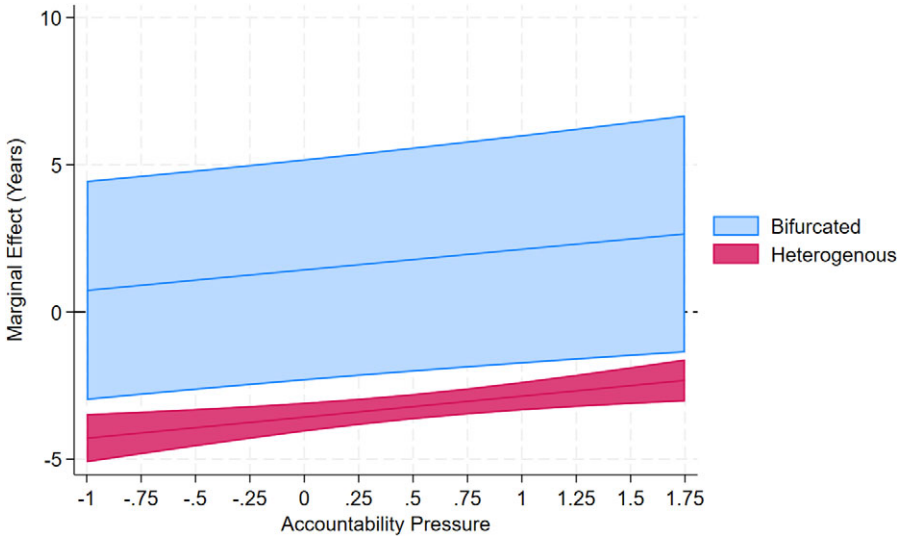


Figure 4. Marginal effect of accountability pressure on life expectancy in years (results from Table 4, Model 2).

Finally, in Table 6, we also do not find support for any of our hypotheses, with accountability pressure being unrelated to racial gaps in poverty. We also do not find any significant interactive effects with heterogeneous states seeing smaller disparities in four of the six models.

Synthesizing results

In sum, in our panel-corrected standard error models, we find strong support for our first hypothesis, with almost every model indicating accountability pressure is associated with higher levels of racial disparities between White and Black citizens along health, education, and economic outcomes. However, our two-way fixed effect models show a very different story, with accountability pressure largely unrelated to racial disparities in population outcomes, with the exception of a significant interactive effect for racial context.

Discussion

Using a variety of model specifications, we find suggestive evidence that majoritarian institutions are associated with racial disparities in health, education, and economic outcomes in the American states. When levels of accountability pressure are high, we observe larger differences between White and Black life expectancy, high school graduation rates, and poverty rates.

One clear pattern is that our empirical decisions about how to incorporate temporal and geographic dependency influence our conclusions. While the panel models demonstrate consistently that accountability pressure is associated with greater racial disparities across all outcomes (five of the six models), we find much

Table 5. Disparity in the percentage of the population with at least a high school degree

	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	M6
Accountability	-.056 (1.447)	-4.559 (3.629)	5.244 (3.899)	4.602 (3.604)	10.162 (12.705)	5.395 (3.977)
Democratic control	-.315 (.270)	-.380 (.269)	.068 (.358)	.077 (.356)	.072 (.361)	.054 (.362)
Percentage Black	.356 (.368)	.365 (.378)	.530 (.394)	.499 (.401)	.532 (.391)	.497 (.385)
Bifurcated	-17.672 (9.456)	-20.804* (10.026)	-14.971 (11.715)	-14.242 (11.981)	-15.068 (11.743)	-13.912 (11.628)
Heterogeneous	-11.393** (1.028)	-16.204** (3.058)	-11.226** (1.857)	-11.093** (1.899)	-11.307** (1.845)	-11.210** (1.851)
Bifurcated # accountability		4.661 (3.762)				
Heterogeneous # accountability		6.832 (3.854)				
Income bias			1.406 (2.657)	.066 (2.440)	1.352 (2.716)	1.300 (2.638)
Racial resentment			19.419 (24.881)	20.957 (25.374)	22.869 (25.553)	19.110 (24.935)
W-B vote			.135 (3.361)	.079 (3.350)	.173 (3.322)	-2.865 (2.412)
Accountability # income bias				2.609 (2.602)		
Accountability # racial resentment					-7.043 (18.722)	
W-B vote # accountability						3.667 (3.187)
Constant	18.639** (1.672)	21.723** (3.109)	-3.053 (16.852)	-3.774 (17.157)	-5.487 (17.138)	-2.665 (16.947)
Observations	1282	1282	832	832	832	832
R ²	.279	.284	.252	.253	.252	.254

Note: Clustered standard errors in parentheses.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

more limited support for our majoritarian hypothesis in the two-way fixed effects models. At the same time, in the 21 models included across the six tables, every model either shows accountability pressure being associated with larger racial gaps in population outcomes or being unrelated. Thus, while more work is clearly needed to better understand the role of institutions on population disparities, there is no evidence that majoritarian institutions are capable of reducing racial disparities.

Our results may appear to lead to a perverse implication: if we want to decrease racial inequalities, we should get rid of majoritarian – and essentially democratic – institutions. Our position is that democratic institutions are always preferred over nondemocratic ones. At the same time, as we suggest in this article, majoritarian institutions are not a panacea to inequality. Under certain conditions – for instance, when there are participatory biases or prejudiced opinions – majoritarian institutions might inadvertently exacerbate inequalities especially for minoritized groups. One solution is to decrease participatory biases in the electorate, perhaps, by easing electoral laws. Unfortunately, many of the laws aimed at decreasing the costs of voting are ineffective at decreasing participatory bias and, in some cases, may

Table 6. Two-way fixed effects Black–White gap in poverty

	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	M6
Accountability	2.210 (2.510)	4.647 (4.718)	3.377 (2.008)	3.950 (2.215)	−3.679 (24.321)	3.049 (1.905)
Democratic control	.807 (.531)	.819 (.544)	.679 (.524)	.677 (.524)	.688 (.513)	.732 (.533)
Percentage Black	1.048 (.781)	1.059 (.796)	1.870 (1.125)	1.779 (1.125)	1.824 (1.164)	2.140 (1.198)
Bifurcated	−26.473 (15.774)	−26.481 (15.685)	−41.431 (22.320)	−39.353 (22.330)	−40.428 (23.171)	−47.165 (23.383)
Heterogeneous	−9.934** (2.343)	−9.730* (4.098)	−9.293 (4.943)	−10.296* (5.065)	−8.923 (5.472)	−7.888 (4.769)
Bifurcated # accountability		−3.346 (6.241)				
Heterogeneous # accountability		−1.277 (5.331)				
Income bias			3.142 (3.487)	4.266 (3.660)	3.256 (3.565)	4.419 (4.107)
Racial resentment			−.656 (110.320)	−18.115 (112.569)	3.032 (116.923)	2.904 (110.424)
W-B vote			6.833 (5.238)	7.000 (5.244)	6.733 (5.391)	12.921 (9.414)
Accountability # income bias				−2.223 (1.991)		
Accountability # racial resentment					10.201 (35.483)	
W-B vote # accountability						−11.792 (9.699)
Constant	16.814** (5.403)	15.629* (6.732)	11.691 (74.588)	23.987 (75.909)	9.427 (78.555)	7.331 (74.179)
Observations	245	245	175	175	175	175
R ²	.846	.847	.864	.866	.864	.869

Note: Clustered standard errors in parentheses.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

exacerbate it (e.g., Burden *et al.* 2014; Rigby and Springer 2011). Another solution is to decrease prejudiced opinions. Here again, the remedy is unclear. Although individuals who are confronted with their own racial prejudices report lower levels of explicit racism (Czopp *et al.* 2006) and less stereotypical attitudes (e.g., Chaney and Sanchez 2018), behavioral change in the form of antiracism action is challenging, especially for White Americans (Davis and Wilson 2022).

Another option might be to focus less on the public and more on factors that incentivize elected officials to prioritize equity, even in the face of participatory bias or prejudiced public opinion. The fear of litigation based on discrimination may be one mechanism that promotes equity among elected officials (e.g., Hainmueller and Hangartner 2019). Officials who are constrained by professional norms of equality may also be more likely to value equity (Sances 2016). We see this as a fruitful avenue for future research.

We see additional critical paths forward for continuing this research. First, due to challenges in data collection, the temporal coverage of each outcome varies from nearly 30 years to less than 10 years. Expanding the time series to incorporate racial disparities over more years will not only allow for more comparable modeling

strategies across outcomes, but also provide an opportunity to further explore how best to incorporate both time and geographic factors as relevant factors.

Taken in conjunction with earlier findings that accountability pressure is associated with lower rates of infant mortality in the overall state population (Pacheco and LaCombe 2022), these results have important implications for how we think about the role of democratic governance in population educational, health, and economic outcomes. Higher levels of democratic governance may result in better population outcomes, but leave a society where benefits are not equally distributed across racial groups.

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Author biographies. Julianna Pacheco is a professor of Political Science and Program Director at the Politics and Policy Research Program at the University of Iowa. Her research interests include political behavior, public opinion, state and local politics, and health policy, widely defined (her subfields include youth voter turnout, dynamic state public opinion, policy diffusion, state agenda setting, dynamic policy responsiveness, and anti-smoking legislation).

Scott LaCombe is an assistant professor of Government and Statistical and Data Sciences at Smith College. He studies the role of political institutions in the American states. His primary research interests focus on institutional design and its effect on state politics, particularly how institutions can strengthen or weaken the influence of public opinion on policy. He also researches state policy diffusion and innovation, with an emphasis on using big data to answer key longstanding questions about why some policies spread quickly across the country while others do not.