Reforms meant to address inequalities may violate other democratic values or social norms.

Is there any hope for ameliorating political inequality? One important finding by the authors is that when voter turnout rises, it is mostly because of increased turnout among lower-SES groups (high-SES groups participate at uniformly high rates over time). This suggests that political mobilization has potential as an instrument of equality. The Internet may help mobilize the young, who are quite underrepresented among the active citizenry, although Internet usage has its own SES gradient and may not mitigate economic inequality among political participants.

In general, finding solutions is difficult. Procedural reforms such as vote-by-mail simply make participation easier for those already active; they do not alter existing inequalities. And reforms meant to address inequalities may violate other democratic values or societal norms: mandating a “participatory floor” through compulsory voting impinges on Americans’ sense of liberty; creating a “participatory ceiling” with complete public funding of elections may run afoul of First Amendment protections of money as a form of free speech. Above all, it is unlikely that those who benefit from the present system would ever be willing to entertain reforms that would truly chip away at their near-hegemonic power.

These esteemed authors, who have devoted their careers to the study of political participation, have assembled in 718 pages the most complete compendium of political inequality we have—its definition, sources, magnitude, and consequences—together with a consideration of changes in participatory processes that might alleviate inequalities in political voice. In the end, it is a troubling story about the state of American democracy. One can only hope that we find the will to secure the political rights of citizenship not just on paper, but in reality.