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Is America

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A new study concludes that rich people and organizations representing business interests have a powerful grip on U.S. government policy. After examining differences in public opinion across income groups on a wide variety of issues, the political scientists Martin Gilens, of Princeton, and Benjamin Page, of Northwestern, found that the preferences of rich people had a much bigger impact on government policy decisions than the views of middle-income and poor Americans. Indeed, the opinions of lower-income groups, and the interest groups that represent them, appear to have little or no independent impact on policy.

“Our analyses suggest that majorities of the American public actually have little influence over the policies our government adopts,” Gilens and Page write:

Americans do enjoy many features central to democratic governance, such as regular elections, freedom of speech and association, and the widespread right to vote. But we believe that if policymaking is dominated by powerful business organizations and a small number of wealthy Americans, then America’s claims to being a democratic society are seriously threatened.

That’s a big claim. In their conclusion, Gilens and Page go even further, asserting that “In the United States, our findings indicate, the majority does not rule—at least not in the causal sense of actually determining policy outcomes. When a majority of citizens disagrees with economic elites and/or with organized interests, they generally lose. Moreover ... even when fairly large majorities of Americans favor policy change, they generally do not get it.”

On many issues, people of different incomes share similar opinions. This does get reflected in policy outcomes. Proposals that are supported up and down the income spectrum have a better chance of being enacted than policies that do not have such support. To that extent, democracy is working.

The issue is what happens when some income groups, particularly the rich, support or oppose certain things, and other groups in society don’t share their views. This is what the data shows: when the rich support a given policy change, it has about a 50% chance of becoming law. When the rich oppose a given measure, its chances of becoming law are less than 20%.

The study suggests that, on many issues, the rich exercise an effective veto. If they are against something, it is unlikely to happen.

One of the study’s other interesting findings is that, beyond a certain level, the opinions of the public at large have little impact on the chances a proposal has of being enacted.

Adapted by Mike Presser