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A Tale of two captures: *two theses on state capture and their normative assumptions and implications*

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Introduction

It is widely recognized that in the social sciences, it is impossible to fully separate positive and normative theories – no positive theory is entirely free of normative assumptions, and no normative theory is completely devoid of positive claims. In political science, even rational choice theory, often considered the epitome of positive theories, could – or should – be understood as normative, and normative theories also depend on the positive claims of rationality made by rational choice (Ferejohn; Pasquino, 2001).

We do not intend here to reduce positive theories to normative or moral claims, nor vice versa. Rather, we aim to highlight the inherent "ethical embeddedness" within positive theories, which risks being overlooked if they are treated solely as descriptive frameworks. The political science and political economy literature on state capture provides a compelling illustration of this ethical embeddedness, as it places the interplay between economic and political inequality at the forefront of analysis.

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By state capture, we mean the use of public power to serve private or particular interests, in ways that distort policymaking and harm the broader public interest (Bagg, 2024, p. 08).[2] Within this literature, two distinct approaches to the problem of state capture emerge, each tied to different and potentially opposing normative claims about the relationship between economic and political inequality. These approaches also reflect divergent views on how these inequalities shape the trade-offs between economic and political liberties, including which should take precedence and which might be compromised.

The first approach is the *unequal responsiveness thesis*, which examines whether governments disproportionately respond to the preferences of affluent citizens. Rooted in egalitarianism, this perspective views economic inequality with deep skepticism, arguing that such inequality undermines democratic equality by privileging the preferences of the wealthy over those of middle- and low-income groups, particularly when their interests diverge. The second approach, *the rent-seeking thesis*, emphasizes that the government's ability to grant privileges – such as subsidies, tariffs, exclusive licenses, and regulatory barriers – creates strong incentives for individuals and firms, usually producers, to engage in lobbying and other efforts to secure these advantages. These activities divert resources from productive economic endeavors toward wasteful competition for political favors, distorting markets and creating significant inefficiencies. Over time, this process undermines societal welfare and exacerbates economic and political inequality by privileging concentrated interests over the broader public. However, unlike the unequal responsiveness thesis, which is rooted in egalitarian concerns, proponents of the rent-seeking thesis are typically skeptical of egalitarian arguments, defending markets and economic inequality on moral or efficiency grounds and advocating for limiting the government's capacity to grant special privileges.

The main objective of this paper is to examine two distinct approaches to state capture, analyze their perspectives, explore their normative claims, and address common criticisms in the literature. Despite their differing objects of research – one focused on representation, the other on the various ways through which special interests gain political privileges –, after describing each theory, we will turn to their normative or moral differences, which we believe are the

2 See also Crabtree and Durand (2017) for an historical and conceptual introduction to the term "political capture".

main reason these perspectives have not yet been integrated into a unified conceptual framework on state capture.

More specifically, the paper unfolds in four main steps. First, it outlines the unequal responsiveness thesis, examining its core claims, connection to egalitarian principles, and key criticisms. Second, it turns to the rent-seeking thesis, highlighting its distinct understanding of state capture and its normative foundations. Third, it explores the normative assumptions and implications of both approaches, emphasizing how their ethical commitments shape their views on the relationship between economic and political inequality. Finally, the conclusion argues that although these perspectives are rooted in contrasting normative frameworks – egalitarian in one case, classical liberal or libertarian in the other – and although they have in fact developed largely in isolation, without meaningful dialogue between their proponents, this separation is not logically necessary. Each perspective can draw insights from the other to address dimensions of state capture it might otherwise overlook. This paper aims to clarify those differences and serve as a first step toward a more integrated and comprehensive understanding of the problem.

Lastly, although it is impossible to avoid such discussions entirely, it is important to bear in mind that this is not a review of the methodological tools used in the literature. Some discussion will be necessary to highlight certain criticisms, but it is not our aim to engage with these issues in depth. Also, it is not our aim to provide a systematic review of the literature. While it will be discussed, the goal is to help us understand its normative implications, not to offer a comprehensive assessment of its conclusions.[3]

The unequal responsiveness thesis

In 2004, the *American Democracy in an Age of Rising Inequality* report by the Task Force on Inequality and American Democracy of the American Political Science Association examined how economic inequality reinforces political inequality, undermining democratic ideals of equal political voice and government responsiveness. It highlighted how affluent citizens and well-organized interest groups exert disproportionate influence through

3 For a systematic review of the literature, see Elkjær and Klitgaard (2024). They review 25 studies on political responsiveness, identifying a bias favoring affluent citizens influenced by methodological differences and mechanisms like information gaps, turnout disparities, and underrepresentation. Surprisingly, income-based biases are more pronounced in Europe than in the U.S., accentuating the need to explore more contextual factors.

mechanisms like campaign contributions, lobbying, and higher voter turnout, while lower- and middle-income citizens face systemic barriers to political engagement. According to the report, these dynamics perpetuate a cycle of unequal representation, with public policies increasingly reflecting the interests of the wealthy.[4]

After the 2004 report, political scientists began examining more rigorously whether there is a bias in government responsiveness favoring the preferences of affluent citizens over middle- and lower-income groups. The notion of responsiveness, distinct from congruence, is central to this analysis. While congruence measures the static alignment between citizens' preferences and the positions of their representatives (e.g., Giger; Rosset; Bernauer, 2012; Lupu; Warner, 2022; Rosset; Stecker, 2019), responsiveness examines whether changes in public preferences influence policy outcomes. This perspective stresses the role of influence in policymaking, revealing how governments adapt to and prioritize preferences across income groups, shedding light on potential biases in whose voices are heard (Burgoon *et al.*, 2022; Lupu; Pontusson, 2023).

This leads to the question: does the government respond more to the preferences of affluent citizens than to those of the majority in shaping policy outcomes? Martin Gilens and Larry Bartels, two of the most important authors in the field, answer in the affirmative.

For example, Gilens (2005) shows that U.S. policymakers proportionately respond to the preferences of affluent citizens, primarily those at the 90th income percentile, while largely ignoring middle- and low-income groups, especially when their preferences diverge. Analyzing nearly 2,000 federal policy questions from 1981 to 2002, he finds that public preferences only moderately influence policy outcomes, with mechanisms like campaign contributions, lobbying, and limited mobilization among lower-income groups exacerbating disparities.[5] Gilens (2012) builds on this analysis, revealing that government policies remain heavily skewed toward affluent preferences, particularly in areas

4 The report relies on a handful of data presented at that point, such as the study by Piketty and Saez (2003), which shows that income inequality in the U.S. increased more sharply than in countries like Canada, France, and Germany. Other sources are referenced throughout the report.

5 By analyzing nearly 2,000 survey questions on proposed policy changes, Gilens estimates levels of support among respondents at the 10th, 50th, and 90th income percentiles. He believes this allows him to identify how preferences vary across income groups and to assess which group's views are more strongly reflected in policy outcomes. As we will briefly discuss in the paper, this method has been criticized for potentially capturing coincidental representation, cases where income groups agree, rather than clear bias toward the affluent.

like taxation and welfare, while middle- and lower-income groups see minimal influence. Social welfare policies, such as Social Security and Medicare, offer a partial exception, though responsiveness here is uneven and largely depends on alignment with organized interests.

Bartels (2008) provides further evidence of this inequality, focusing specifically on senators' roll-call votes to illustrate how legislative decisions disproportionately reflect the preferences of affluent constituents. He reveals significant disparities showing that senators prioritize the views of affluent constituents while giving considerably less weight to those of middle-income groups and entirely disregarding the preferences of low-income citizens, underscoring a fundamental aspect of unequal responsiveness in the legislative process where policymaking disproportionately reflects the interests of the wealthy and marginalizes broader democratic representation.

Further research has expanded the unequal responsiveness thesis by examining its implications across state-level and cross-national contexts. At the state level, policymakers prioritize the preferences of affluent citizens, particularly on economic issues in poorer states where income-based divisions are more pronounced. In wealthier states, low-income citizens sometimes receive relatively better representation on social policy matters (Rigby; Wright, 2011). At the federal level, business leaders and experts dominate foreign policy decisions, with public opinion exerting limited impact except in specific circumstances (Jacobs; Page, 2005). State governments also show greater responsiveness to middle- and high-income citizens, while low-income groups face consistent underrepresentation, with mechanisms like participation inequality and institutional biases exacerbating these disparities (Flavin, 2012).

However, this literature is not without its critics, including those of a methodological nature. Although we won't examine them fully, the following are particularly relevant, as they address issues such as multicollinearity, the possible overstatement of ideological differences between income groups, and the problem of nonattitudes in survey responses. Bhatti and Erikson (2011), for instance, revisited Bartels's findings on unequal Senate representation and argued that the extent of ideological differences across income groups may be less significant than initially suggested. While they do not directly contradict Bartels, they highlight that newer, broader surveys revealed a high degree of similarity in the ideological views of different income groups across states, which raised the issue of *multicollinearity*. That is, because group preferences were so closely aligned, it became statistically difficult to disentangle which group influenced policy outcomes, leading to higher standard errors and complicating efforts to detect unequal responsiveness.

The problem of overstating the ideological differences between income groups, which calls into question the extent of elite dominance, also was pointed out by Branham, Soroka and Wlezien (2017). They argue that Gilens' analysis risks conflating correlation with causation by not fully accounting for how rarely major disagreements emerge between income groups across most policy areas. When preferences across groups align, it becomes difficult to tell whose views are actually being represented. In such cases, even if policies match the preferences of affluent citizens, this may not indicate unequal responsiveness but simply reflect convergence. The poor, meanwhile, appear to be less effective at shaping policy outcomes directly, though they are somewhat more successful at blocking changes they oppose. In the end, what *really* needs to be explained, according to them, is why the poorest and richest Americans so often agree on policy preferences despite having seemingly different interests. This supposedly puzzling convergence appears consistently across studies and may be more important than marginal differences in political influence.

Or, as Stimson (2011) puts it, perhaps the problem is due to what he calls *nonattitudes*: when survey respondents give answers without fully considering the questions, often resulting in random or neutral responses. This randomness introduces noise that weakens the observed connection between public preferences and policy outcomes. Crucially, the effect of this noise is not evenly distributed: wealthier individuals, who are typically more educated and politically attentive, tend to provide more stable and coherent opinions. In contrast, lower-income respondents are more prone to nonattitudes, making their preferences appear less consistent in the data. As a result, even if political representation were equal across income groups, the data might misleadingly suggest that upper-income preferences are better represented simply because they are expressed more clearly.

Even Bartels (2023) has acknowledged several of these methodological challenges. First, measuring public preferences is far from straightforward.

Survey responses often depend on how questions are phrased: terms like "welfare" and "assistance to the poor" can evoke very different reactions, even if they refer to the same policy. Preferences can also be vague or inconsistent, making it difficult to identify what the public actually supports. Second, there's the issue of causality: while public opinion may shape policy, policy can also shape opinion. In countries with long-standing welfare systems, for example, public support for government benefits may reflect adaptation to the status quo rather than influence over it. Third, Bartels notes that responsiveness varies across policy areas – governments may follow affluent preferences more closely in some domains, like taxation, than in others. He also mentions the problem of multicollinearity, which, as we've seen, refers to a situation in which explanatory variables are so strongly correlated that it becomes difficult to isolate the effect of any one factor. Finally, the overlap in preferences across groups makes it difficult to determine whose influence is actually being reflected, as policy convergence with one group may result from broadly shared views rather than unequal responsiveness or a systematic bias in favor of the affluent.

This distinction between *convergence* and *responsiveness* is particularly important for our purposes, because it questions whether significant differences in policy preferences exist across income groups, with an emphasis on the role of convergence and coincidental representation. This critique points to not only the theoretical difficulties present in this debate but also, more importantly for our purposes, some implicit questions of normativity in democratic theory, such as whether policy outcomes reflecting shared preferences across groups truly address the issue of unequal representation.[6]

For example, Soroka and Wlezien (2008, 2011) argue that in most policy areas, such as government spending and taxation, preferences across income groups converge broadly, with welfare spending being a notable exception. This convergence limits the scope for income-based disparities in representation, suggesting that policymakers may respond to shared preferences rather than disproportionately favoring wealthier citizens. As such, they challenge the unequal responsiveness thesis, particularly the works of Bartels and Gilens, by arguing that these studies may overstate the issue by not adequately accounting for this *convergence*. Along similar lines, Enns (2015a) challenges

6 For a similar discussion, see Bartels (2023, p. 94-95).

the unequal responsiveness thesis by arguing that policy outcomes often reflect the preferences of middle-income citizens due to *coincidental representation*, even when policymakers prioritize the wealthy.[7] He shows that preferences between middle- and high-income groups align significantly across a broad range of policy areas, such as fiscal responsibility, education and healthcare, which reduces the visible impact of unequal representation.

Both Bartels and Gilens have addressed each of these criticisms, and their responses are particularly important as they clarify and elaborate on the distinction between convergence (or proximity) and responsiveness, a distinction previously discussed in this paper.

In their responses to Soroka and Wlezien (2008), Wlezien and Soroka (2011), and Enns (2015a), respectively, Bartels (2017) and Gilens (2015a) critique the conflation of proximity (or convergence), which refers to how closely policy outcomes align with citizens' preferences, with responsiveness, defined as the extent to which preferences actively shape policy outcomes. Bartels argues that Soroka and Wlezien's focus on proximity overlooks the causal dynamics of policymaking, failing to determine whether alignment reflects genuine *influenc*e or merely *coincides* with elite preferences. Similarly, Gilens challenges Enns' concept of coincidental representation, asserting that the alignment of middle-class preferences with those of the affluent does not equate to influence. Both are stressing that true democratic *responsiveness* requires that a group's preferences actively shape policy decisions, not merely align with them.[8] In the end, both are also touching on the *normative* insufficiency of coincidental representation, accentuating that the core issue lies in its failure to address systemic inequalities in influence, rendering it an inadequate substitute for genuine democratic responsiveness.

After arriving at a definition of unequal responsiveness, the next question to ask is: what are the fundamental mechanisms driving it? This question is central to the literature, as it seeks to determine whether unequal responsiveness

7 More specifically, coincidental representation refers to the idea that when the preferences of middle- and high-income groups align, middle-income citizens may appear to be well represented, even if policymakers are primarily responding to the wealthy. In this view, policy outcomes reflect middle-income preferences not because those preferences are actively prioritized, but because they *coincide* with those of more influential groups.

8 Enns (2015b) responds to Gilens by insisting that middle-income Americans are almost as represented as the affluent due to similar policy preferences. Using Gilens' data, he shows that even when preferences diverge, policy outcomes align with middle-income priorities nearly as often as with the affluent. He also critiques using preference gaps as a measure of unequal representation, emphasizing shared policy rankings and warning that overstating inequality could harm political efficacy and participation.

is confined to specific countries or reflects broader, systemic patterns across different contexts. While one might expect the issue to be less pronounced in more egalitarian societies, where economic inequality is not as severe, the evidence challenges this assumption. As Lupu and Pontusson (2023) note, income inequality rose sharply in the fifteen years leading up to the 2007–2008 financial crisis in advanced democracies, but trends have been less uniform since, complicating the narrative of steadily rising inequality.[9] Despite this variability, Europe's relatively egalitarian context remains a critical case for examining whether unequal responsiveness persists. Do governments in affluent democracies respond equally to citizens' preferences on social spending, or does a systematic bias favoring affluent citizens endure?

First of all, it is helpful to understand the difference between the types of mechanisms driving unequal representation. The division into *mediating* and *moderating* mechanisms is important and highlights two distinct influences. Mediating mechanisms explain how or why unequal representation occurs by identifying processes in the causal chain where affluence exerts disproportionate power, such as political participation (where wealthier citizens vote, donate, and engage more actively), candidate selection (favoring wealth-friendly candidates), agenda setting (where affluent preferences shape legislative priorities), and policy-making influence (where affluent groups hold greater sway over final decisions). Moderating mechanisms, on the other hand, refer to external conditions that shape the extent of this inequality, such as electoral systems (e.g., majoritarian versus proportional systems), campaign finance rules (the role of private money), and institutional factors like corruption or clientelism, which further amplify affluent influence. In short, mediating mechanisms drive unequal representation through specific processes, while moderating mechanisms determine how strongly these processes affect policy outcomes (Burgoon *et al.*, 2022).[10]

9 Here, we mean to say that unequal responsiveness may persist even in relatively egalitarian societies – not that it *causes* rising economic inequality. The paragraph does not make any causal claim. It raises an empirical question: does unequal responsiveness exist even where income inequality is lower? The reference to Europe and post-crisis trends serves to show that maybe inequality alone doesn't explain political bias. The focus is on whether governments in affluent and more egalitarian democracies still tend to favor the preferences of the affluent.

10 Another way of looking at it is through a distinction between *stages* of the political process: theories of unequal democracy emphasize either *electoral selection* – focusing on factors like campaign finance, descriptive representation, and partisan differences that shape election outcomes – or *postelectoral influence*, which highlights lobbying and other channels of influence after elections (Becher; Stegmueller, 2023).

At first glance, the United States may appear to be the paradigm case of unequal responsiveness, driven by a clear confluence of mediating and moderating mechanisms. The foundational works of Bartels and Gilens reinforce this impression, often leading one to conclude that unequal responsiveness is a uniquely American phenomenon. This impression is reinforced by the dramatic surge in income and wealth inequality in the United States since the 1970s (Piketty; Saez, 2014) and by the prominent role of moderating influences, such as campaign finance, which Gilens (2015b) describes as the "outsize role of money in American politics". Combined with mediating processes – like the disproportionately high levels of political participation among affluent citizens – this creates an income-based bias that entrenches unequal responsiveness. Additionally, corporations and organized interest groups further amplify these disparities through substantial lobbying power, which often aligns with the preferences of the affluent while overshadowing the voices of lower-income groups.[11]

But it was Bartels himself who, in an important paper, began to see that the phenomenon of unequal responsiveness was not limited to the United States. Expanding the unequal responsiveness thesis, he demonstrates that political inequality is a pervasive issue across affluent democracies. Even in countries with strong welfare states and well-established democratic institutions, policymakers systematically favor the preferences of affluent citizens, who often oppose increases in social spending, while the preferences of poorer citizens are largely ignored. This bias reveals that the strength of welfare systems or institutional diversity does little to prevent political imbalances, as the mechanisms of influence – whether through economic power, policy access, or elite alignment – remain firmly tilted toward wealthier groups (Bartels, 2017).[12]

By expanding the analysis to Europe, political scientists began to challenge "Americanist" explanations that link unequal responsiveness

11 In the same way, Gilens (2005) describes four key mechanisms driving unequal responsiveness: campaign contributions, where high-income Americans dominate political donations; lobbying and advocacy, through which affluent individuals and organizations gain disproportionate access to policymakers; status quo bias, where structural features of the U.S. political system favor wealthy interests by resisting redistributive changes; and mobilization, with affluent groups consistently exerting greater influence than non-affluent groups.

12 It must be noted that some, of course, disagree with these premises, arguing that the U.S. case may *not* be generalizable: in most democracies, middle-class preferences remain central to redistribution, while the U.S. is an outlier due to weaker unions, racial divides, limited welfare institutions, and political gridlock, factors that have undermined middle-class influence and reduced responsiveness to both middle- and lower-income groups (Elkjær; Iversen, 2023).

primarily to U.S.-specific factors like private campaign funding, voter turnout disparities, corporate lobbying, and officials' economic backgrounds. In Europe, despite public election subsidies, union counterbalances to corporate power, and higher, less income-stratified voter turnout, similar patterns of unequal responsiveness emerge. Mathisen *et al.* (2023) support this by analyzing Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden, showing that government policies consistently favor affluent citizens' preferences, with income-based biases persisting despite robust welfare states and redistributive policies. They point out several mechanisms: status quo bias, where wealthier citizens' preference for maintaining existing policies reinforces their influence; descriptive misrepresentation[13], driven by the higher-income, well-educated backgrounds of elected officials, which skew priorities toward the affluent; and corporatist intermediation, where union influence has not significantly counteracted these biases. Although Left-leaning administrations were historically more responsive to lower-income groups, particularly on economic and welfare policies, this effect has diminished since the late 1990s.

Despite higher turnout compared to the U.S., electoral participation remains crucial in shaping responsiveness. Higher turnout reduces differential responsiveness by reflecting a broader range of citizens' preferences, while low turnout exacerbates the underrepresentation of lower-income groups, limiting their influence on policymakers, as shown in a study of 25 European democracies between 2002 and 2010. Governments disproportionately favor higher-income groups, particularly when the preferences of the rich and poor diverge significantly. This dynamic is driven by one key: the level of electoral participation, with higher turnout enhancing inclusivity and low turnout amplifying exclusion (Peters; Ensink, 2015).[14]

What can we make of all these studies and their implications for understanding unequal representation? One thing that they do *not* do, but that

13 Descriptive representation refers to the extent to which a representative *resembles* those being represented (Dovi, 2018; Pitkin, 1967).

14 However, this is not a necessary cause of unequal responsiveness. The "low turnout" explanation is rejected in places like the Netherlands and Germany. In the Netherlands, despite its low-income inequality, proportional representation system, minimal role of private money in politics, and historical tradition of balancing labor and capital, significant income-based disparities persist. Corporate lobbying emerges as the primary mechanism, with corporations dominating parliamentary hearings and coalition negotiations, shaping policies such as corporate tax reductions to favor affluent interests (Schakel, 2021). In Germany, it is unequal descriptive representation that emerges as the primary mechanism, as parliamentarians disproportionately come from highly educated, affluent, and privileged occupational groups, skewing policy decisions toward elite interests regardless of voter turnout, financial influence, or shifts between center-left and center-right coalitions (Elsässer; Hense; Schäfer, 2021).

warrants further attention, is to question or at least complicate the assumption that the political attitudes of the wealthy are predominantly driven by economic self-interest, often treating economic elites as a homogeneous group. For example, it may be that the political attitudes of economic elites are shaped not only by economic self-interest but also by distinctive predispositions tied to the industries in which they work, as well as by the type of individuals who enter each industry and succeed in it. Technology entrepreneurs, for instance, are a curious group, often combining liberal views on taxation and government spending with conservative stances on regulation, driven by their pro-market orientation and entrepreneurial values (Broockman; Ferenstein; Malhotra, 2019). Or their views on the fairness of inequality may be shaped by whether they achieved their wealth through social mobility, with individuals in this position often showing greater acceptance of inequality (Cohn *et al.*, 2023). And even if we had more comprehensive studies on this subject, we could not simply dismiss the possibility that the public wants *more* political engagement from business leaders, not less (Hersh, 2023).

But what they *do* is reveal a variety of mechanisms driving unequal representation across different contexts, including status quo bias, descriptive misrepresentation, and corporate lobbying, even within more egalitarian systems. Therefore, they complicate what seems to be a clear picture, particularly as drawn by Gilens, who attributes unequal responsiveness primarily to U.S.-specific factors such as campaign finance and voter turnout disparities. While Bartels has extended his analysis to other contexts, this broader perspective reveals unequal responsiveness as a pervasive issue across affluent democracies, transcending national boundaries and institutional contexts, prompting a reassessment of the structural conditions that shape democratic responsiveness.

Nevertheless, the methodological issues discussed briefly above should not be underestimated. As summarized by Elkjær and Klitgaard (2024, p. 320), perhaps the main problem concerns how models are specified: some studies estimate separate models for each income group, while others use a single model for all. It matters because this difference affects whether inequality is interpreted as a distinct influence across groups or merely as variation in how closely outcomes align with preferences, helping to explain why findings in the literature often diverge.

The rent-seeking thesis

In 1776, Adam Smith (1723-1790) published *The Wealth of Nations*, a landmark in economic science and a foundational text for classical liberal and libertarian thought, with its defense of the division of labor – highlighting its role in increasing production, enabling abundant exchanges among workers, and spreading prosperity across all social classes, including the poorest (Smith, 1976a, p. 22) – and, most importantly for our purposes, its endorsement of the "system of natural liberty", in which decentralized and competitive markets, rather than government interventions, should determine choices about production. For this system to be implemented, it was critical that government policies favoring certain groups, regulations that impeded the access to markets and granted monopoly privileges, should be eliminated (Smith, 1976b, p. 687-688).

Smith was no anarchist. He believed that the government was crucial to sustaining the conditions under which the system of natural liberty could prosper, including national defense, guaranteeing justice,[15] and maintaining public works (or, in more contemporary terms, public goods) (Smith, 1976b, p. 687-688). But a government that believes it is more capable than individuals – the "man on the spot", with localized knowledge and expertise in using resources most productively – is clearly overreaching, being one violation of the system of natural liberty. Another type of violation, rampant in Smith's time, occurs when merchants and manufacturers lobby the government for protection and privileges, such as restrictions in the labor market, the imposition of exclusive trading rights, the granting of monopolies, occupational licenses, tariffs, and other mercantilist policies that distort free competition and trade. Merchants and manufacturers, being relatively few and concentrated in cities, were able to organize and form guilds with the aim of reducing competition, whereas rural inhabitants, being dispersed throughout the countryside, were not.[16]

Such a system was not only economically inefficient but also *unjust*, as mercantilist privileges restricted individuals' ability to use their talents and productive capacities while limiting access to cheaper products through tariffs

15 For Smith, justice is primarily a negative virtue, concerned with what individuals must refrain from doing rather than what they ought to do. In his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, justice protects individuals from violence, theft, property invasion, destruction, and fraud in voluntary contracts. Smith contrasts justice with beneficence, which he views as voluntary. Justice, he argues, prevents harm to others but carries little positive merit, as it can often be fulfilled simply by abstaining from harmful actions or "sitting still and doing nothing" (Smith, 1984, p. 82).

16 For a summary of these arguments in Smith, check Paganelli (2022).

and commercial restrictions, thereby exacerbating poverty. This brief detour into Smith's theory is important because it encapsulates, with notable clarity, the argument – both normative and positive – that political economists would later expand upon with the development of the concept of rent-seeking in the 20th century, utilizing analytical tools that were not available to Smith.

Developed by Public Choice economists, the concept of *rent-seeking* emerges as a type of government failure that encompasses both legal and illegal activities aimed at obtaining special privileges, such as monopolies, special zoning, import restrictions, protective tariffs, and bribery. This phenomenon involves efforts to acquire wealth and income through political means, seeking benefits like subsidies and regulations that favor specific interests and hinder competition, rather than through economic production and competition. The argument presupposes a dynamic relationship between government and organized interests. Organized interests realize that influencing the government can be more advantageous than competing in the market, which leads to an increase in governmental power over resource allocation. This increased power further encourages more political activity by these groups, replacing economic competition with political competition for privileges (Simmons, 2011; Tullock; Seldon; Brady, 2002, p. 44).

Before Tullock's (1967) seminal paper on the subject, economists believed that privileges and monopolies were not very costly to society. This was because such situations were seen as involving transfers between pressure groups that gained monopolistic profits and consumers who lost income due to higher prices, effectively canceling each other out, as both parties were members of the same society (Tullock; Seldon; Brady, 2002, p. 44). But Tullock (1967, 1971) argued that the social costs of monopolies and regulations extend beyond the traditional "deadweight loss triangle", which represents the loss of consumer surplus due to the monopolist's restriction of production. He argued that the rents earned by monopolists are not simply a transfer of wealth from consumers to monopolists, but also have a significant negative impact on overall welfare. This is because government-granted privileges and monopolies do not appear out of nowhere – individuals and groups must expend resources to obtain these privileges. These efforts, such as lobbying or rent-seeking activities, divert resources away from productive economic activities, compounding the societal costs of monopolies and regulations.

Strictly speaking, mere transfers themselves do not impose any direct cost on society. The real social cost lies in the significant waste of resources invested in attempts to secure or block these transfers. This cost arises because the resources used in seeking transfers could have been directed toward productive, positive-sum activities. Rent-seeking, at best, is a zero-sum activity and, more often, a negative-sum activity due to indirect costs. The true social cost, therefore, is the waste of resources that could have been used to create value elsewhere. As a result, rent-seeking is an unproductive – or even destructive – activity that diminishes value by squandering valuable resources (Tollison, 2012, p. 74).

The waste generated by rent-seeking stems from two main aspects: first, the resources spent by individuals or groups in lobbying, influencing, or otherwise competing to secure rents, such as monopolies or government privileges; and second, the resources expended to protect those rents from being taken or eroded by others. These activities do not contribute to productive economic output but instead divert valuable time, money, and effort away from wealth-generating pursuits. Moreover, rent-seeking contributes to excessive government spending by encouraging individuals and interest groups to treat the public budget as a common-pool resource, accessible to all, yet unguarded against overuse. In pursuing their respective shares, these actors lack incentives to consider the opportunity costs their claims impose on others, leading to a "constellation of special interests" that coalesce around the national budgetary commons (Shughart, 2013, p. 108-109). And while Tullock initially emphasized the protective costs of rents against predatory challenges, Krueger (1974) expanded the discussion by naming the phenomenon and highlighting how government-imposed restrictions in market economies create rents that incentivize unproductive competition for privileges, generating significant allocative inefficiencies.

A formal definition of rents is the portion of payment received by a resource owner that exceeds what the resource could generate in its next best alternative use. In other words, it is income earned above the resource's opportunity cost. From an allocative perspective, a rent is generally considered unnecessary because it is not required to incentivize the resource owner to employ the resource in that specific use. It represents a surplus payment that does not contribute to improving efficiency or productivity (Buchanan, 1999, p. 103). But where rents really are economically necessary or useful depends on the institutional context.

In competitive markets, rents can play important allocative functions (Harsanyi, 1987, p. 347-348). Authors in this tradition generally agree that the pursuit of rents in competitive markets can drive innovation and the efficient allocation of resources, fostering economic growth. Competition for rents, such as higher profits and wages, improves resource distribution and benefits society. Successful innovations create temporary monopolies that reward knowledge and persistence, leading to new products and lower prices for consumers. Moreover, in markets, economic rents naturally dissipate over time as above-cost profits attract new competitors, gradually reducing and eventually eliminating the initial rents (Buchanan, 1999, p. 105; Congleton, 2019, p. 5-6; Munger, 2022, p. 522).

In certain cases, the private pursuit of rents can be economically unproductive, such as when individuals use their talents to form cartels or coordinate prices. In other cases, government policies can have a positive impact on rent generation by improving the definition and protection of contracts and property rights (Congleton, 2019, p. 6-8). But rent-seeking in the political arena is a form of unproductive or destructive entrepreneurship (Baumol, 1996), for it involves the use of resources to secure privileges, such as subsidies, monopolies, or regulatory advantages, rather than contributing to productive activities that create economic value for society.

All of this could be somewhat accommodated by the "unequal responsiveness" authors, but what sets the rent-seeking thesis apart is its emphasis on the idea that the formation of organized interests and their pursuit of rents are primarily *endogenous* to the government's ability to grant privileges through distributive and, especially, redistributive policies, where one group benefits at the expense of another. Here, the very act of seeking government protection already assumes the expectation that it is one of the government's roles to provide it. In other words, organized interests turn to the government because of what it can supply: special privileges, protection, tariffs on competitors, subsidies, exclusive licenses, or favorable regulations.[17] The rent-seeking authors believe that if we eliminate these mechanisms of privilege – such as subsidies, tariffs, monopolies, exclusive licenses, and regulatory barriers – then state capture ceases to be a significant concern.

Authors in this literature also express skepticism towards the government's ability to regulate business. In this perspective, regulation is not seen as fulfilling its traditional role as a *deus ex machina* that corrects market failures in the name of the "public good". Once assumed to eliminate inefficiencies, regulation came under scrutiny, particularly after Stigler and Friedland's (1962) study on electricity prices, which found no regulatory impact. This raised a fundamental question: if regulation fails to achieve its intended outcomes, why does it persist?

According to Stigler (1971), regulation endures because it is often driven by well-organized interest groups lobbying for policies that serve their own interests at the expense of dispersed and unorganized consumers, rather than promoting the "public interest". Far from being a neutral tool for the common good, regulation functions as a market for regulatory favors, where organized interests pressure policymakers to craft rules that benefit the industries being regulated. Instead of being imposed by benevolent politicians to correct market failures, regulation is frequently shaped by the very firms it governs, allowing them to restrict competition, control market entry, and secure competitive advantages. In this view, regulatory intervention serves primarily to protect private interests rather than enhance overall welfare and efficiency.

Following Olson (1965, 1982a), who explains that collective action problems make it easier for small, organized groups to mobilize while larger, diffuse groups struggle to coordinate, the argument holds that government intervention tends to favor these well-organized interests. Stigler builds on this insight, showing how regulation is often shaped by producer groups that successfully overcome coordination challenges. Olson also highlights rational ignorance, where citizens' limited information allows lobbying to dominate policy, as politicians respond to organized groups that offer tangible incentives, such as campaign contributions, rather than the dispersed and uncoordinated preferences of the broader electorate.

17 This duality is evident in Hacker and Pierson (2010, p. 172), who discuss the emergence of an activist government in the modern era but do not consider whether this very development is what drives the formation of organized interests, making the process endogenous to the government's expanded role.

This brings us to some of the more pressing problems in this literature. While it is true that a lot of rich theoretical work has been done on the subject (e.g., Congleton; Hillman; Konrad, 2010; Mueller, 2003), there still isn't a precise, empirically verifiable hypothesis regarding the association between growth, rent-seeking, and interest group activities. Even if a clear definition of "government growth" is established, what's exactly the relationship between it and rent-seeking? Does more growth necessarily or generally lead to more rent-seeking? Through what mechanisms? It becomes even more complex when the relationship between them is predicated on micro foundations of interest groups or organized interests. For example, Olson (1982b) suggested his idea of "institutional sclerosis", in which the growth of interest groups impedes economic growth through rent-seeking, based on his analysis of the problems faced by interest groups due to individual rationality and self-interest. But the presumption that we can derive macro phenomena from micro characteristics of interest groups was criticized (e.g., Gray; Lowery, 1996; Lowery; Halpin; Gray, 2015).

Besides, even if we had a clear and empirically verifiable hypothesis, there remains the significant challenge of measuring rent-seeking. The primary difficulty lies in the broad scope of rent-seeking activities and their pervasive integration into economic and political systems, making a comprehensive empirical assessment of their social costs extraordinarily complex. Direct measurement is hindered by the difficulty of disentangling rent-seeking expenditures from those with legitimate productive or consumptive purposes, a persistent identification problem. Indirect measurement, such as assessing economic impacts through GDP, is similarly confounded by the inclusion of goods and services tied to rent-seeking activities. Furthermore, unresolved theoretical issues, such as the relationship between the size of rents and associated resource investments, complicate attempts to quantify rent-seeking's economic toll (Laband; Sophocleus, 2019).

Normative discussion

After describing what each thesis entails, it is time to finally address their ethical embeddedness, accentuating their value-laden assumptions and key points of normative disagreement. We will follow the paper's structure, beginning with the unequal responsiveness thesis and then moving to the rent-seeking thesis.

Based on the findings of the unequal responsiveness thesis, we can derive two important consequences: one theoretical and one normative. Theoretically, these studies serve to undermine the idea that the median voter carries special importance in representative democracy, as governments, to the extent that they react to voters, should be especially responsive to the middle (Downs, 1957).[18] Normatively, they undermine the idea that democracy ensures equal responsiveness to all citizens by showing that government disproportionately responds to the preferences of the rich, challenging the principle of political equality (Dahl, 1971). Consequently, theories emphasizing the significant influence of economic elites and business groups on U.S. politics, while marginalizing the role of the "average" citizen and grassroots interest groups, gain substantial support (e.g., Gilens; Page, 2014).

And while it is true that it is impossible to achieve a perfectly egalitarian political representation, these authors stress that what truly demands explanation is not merely whether government policy reflects public preferences in the aggregate, but *whose* preferences it reflects, and with what consequences for democracy. As we've seen in the discussion of coincidental representation, it is entirely possible for low-income citizens to get the policies they prefer without having meaningfully influenced them. This is why these authors emphasize the distinction between mere alignment and actual responsiveness: for them, democracy requires more than occasional congruence, it requires, as a normative ideal, that the preferences of all citizens, across income groups, exert comparable influence over political outcomes.

When it comes to the voices of low-income citizens, the core concern is that, when their preferences diverge from those of the affluent, they are systematically *less* influential. The result is that the ideal of political equality – the foundation of democracy's self-image – is undermined, which holds that citizens should be equal not only in formal rights, like voting, but also in their real, practical ability to influence government policy. However, there is, admittedly, something vague about the notion of equal responsiveness, for

18 But it is also important to note that, according to Enns and Wlezien (2011, p. 15), there is little theoretical basis for politicians to privilege the poor. So, the key theoretical question is whether the rich receive more attention than the median voter, as this would reveal critical flaws in representative democracy.

it seems to lack a strict operational definition.[19] Nevertheless, these authors defend it as a compelling normative benchmark: a contrast against which we can judge how democratic institutions fall short. So, despite its vagueness, the ideal remains important in its implication that socioeconomic status should not determine political influence.

But most importantly, these theories illustrate the dominance of the economic sphere over the political sphere (Walzer, 1983). They lend substantial support to the Rawlsian idea that significant concentrations of wealth and property undermine the "fair value" of political liberties. By constraining equal opportunities for citizens to influence governmental policy and attain positions of authority, regardless of their economic or social class, such inequalities compromise the foundational principles of political equality and fair participation in democratic processes (Rawls, 1999, p. 197; 2001, p. 45, p. 51-52, p. 148-150). Ultimately, these theories convey the need to reduce economic inequality, demonstrating how the dominance of economic elites in political decisions exacerbates disparities and undermines democratic ideals of equal representation, leaving crucial redistributive measures largely unmet (e.g., Bartels, 2008). This aligns with concerns about oligarchy, where a small elite of wealthy individuals exerts disproportionate political power through lobbying, electoral influence, and opinion shaping, which, as the authors argue, deepens systemic inequalities and erodes political fairness by granting the affluent overwhelming influence while marginalizing the preferences of the poorest whenever their interests clash with those of the wealthy (Scanlon, 2018; Winters; Page, 2009).

Normative theory aligns closely with the arguments advanced by Bartels and Gilens. An egalitarian normative theory emphasizes that political liberties must be both formally guaranteed and substantively realized. This requires that citizens with similar abilities and motivation have comparable opportunities to participate in the political process, including holding public office and influencing electoral outcomes, regardless of their economic status (Rawls, 2001). While it is an ideal, this vision represents a more robust concept of political equality, aligning more closely with equal responsiveness, which

19 Bartels (2023) recognizes some of the methodological problems associated with measuring political inequality through representation.

reinforces the inadequacy of coincidental representation in addressing systemic inequalities in influence.

To achieve a situation resembling effective and equal participation, egalitarian philosophers like Rawls argue that a society's primary political, social, and economic institutions (what he calls the "basic structure") must be regulated over time to uphold the equality – both political and economic – required by justice (Rawls, 2001, p. 10, 52-55). An important aspect of Rawls' philosophy, which resonates with the unequal responsiveness thesis, is that economic liberties must be regulated to prevent the main causes of economic and political inequality, including the mechanisms that allow disproportionate influence of affluent groups over policy decisions.[20] Other liberal egalitarians – who combine liberal principles with concerns about economic inequality – similarly stress how economic disparities translate into political power (e.g., Freeman, 2012, 2018; Murphy; Nagel, 2004).

Finally, what are the normative implications that we can derive from applying the studies on unequal responsiveness to affluent democracies that are more economically equal? It's hard to say. One could conclude that even egalitarian welfare states fall short, as Rawls argued against welfare-state capitalism, which he viewed as insufficient to uphold the fair value of political liberties due to "large and inheritable inequities of wealth incompatible with the fair value of the political liberties" (Rawls, 1999, p. xv). This notoriously led Rawls to defend what he calls a "property-owning democracy".[21]

But, at its core, the issue draws attention to the dilemma of how far egalitarians are willing to go in ensuring equal political liberty – specifically, to what extent other liberties should be overridden to achieve equality in political participation and responsiveness. Perhaps this reflects an unavoidable consequence of maintaining even minimal economic inequality rather than strict egalitarianism, as some degree of economic inequality is necessary to drive economic growth – but that same level may inevitably translate into political

20 Specifically, Rawls distinguishes basic liberties from other types of liberties, arguing that only basic liberties warrant strong protection from considerations of economic efficiency, social stability, or general welfare. These liberties have "lexical priority", meaning they cannot be overridden by such considerations and can only be limited to safeguard another basic liberty, not to equalize wealth or opportunity. What's important for our purposes is that only the right to hold personal property, not productive property, is considered a basic liberty. For a summary of the discussion on basic liberties, see De Marneffe (2014).

21 For a summary of Rawls' position on the issue, see Vallier (2019).

inequalities.[22] Or perhaps this reveals a structural issue within democracy itself: rational ignorance[23], as noted by Downs (1957), is inherent to democratic systems, yet it shifts as individuals become wealthier, gaining greater incentives to acquire political information, which subsequently prompts policymakers to prioritize their preferences (Larcinese, 2005). Lastly, the cause may lie in the government's ability to profoundly regulate economic issues, which creates an incentive for its capture. This is the focus of the rent-seeking thesis.

Normatively, authors of the rent-seeking thesis disagree with those supporting the unequal responsiveness thesis in at least two notable ways: their stance on inequality and their defense of limited government. On inequality, they view it as problematic not due to its intrinsic nature but only when it stems from wrongdoing, such as violations of rights like theft, or from forms of political favoritism or privilege, including rent-seeking (e.g., Angelopoulos *et al.*, 2021; Melo; Miller, 2022). Because of that, rather than favoring policies aimed at reducing economic inequality broadly, they focus on institutional reforms that deter exploitative and unproductive behaviors while fostering consent-based, productive activities (e.g., Facchini; Jaeck; Kratou, 2024).

To achieve this, they argue that government should not only be limited in scope but also governed by general rules. The rationale behind this is that general rules, which apply uniformly and impartially to all members of society, reduce the opportunities for specific groups or individuals to lobby for special privileges. By eliminating the discretion that allows governments to grant targeted benefits, general rules are believed to disincentivize rent-seeking behavior, as there is little incentive to expend resources competing for advantages that cannot be granted selectively (Buchanan, 1999, p. 427-429). This perspective aligns closely with Hayek's (2012) argument that general and abstract rules are essential for maintaining social order in complex societies, as they enable individuals to use their unique, localized knowledge freely and contribute to a spontaneous and unplanned social order.

22 The idea that some degree of economic inequality is necessary for growth reflects the role of incentives, as recognized, for example, in Rawls's difference principle. The principle allows inequalities if they benefit the least advantaged, and it explicitly incorporates incentives as a justification – permitting higher rewards when needed to motivate productivity that raises the position of the least advantaged.

23 Very briefly, rational ignorance can be defined as a situation in which remaining ignorant is a rational choice, because the cost of acquiring information outweighs the likely benefit, making it reasonable not to seek out knowledge, especially in contexts like voting where individual influence is minimal. See Caplan (2004).

In this case, *free* markets – with minimal government-backed restrictions on trade and competition – are regarded as a positive force rather than a threat, as they are perceived by egalitarian authors. For one, in the absence of legal constraints on trade and other forms of political protection from competition, the ability to exert the undue influence described by egalitarian authors becomes significantly more limited.

Secondly, there is a more structural defense of markets that pertains to the nature of choice in markets and voting (Buchanan, 1954; Stigler, 1971, p. 10-12). Compared to voting, markets more directly align individual preferences with outcomes, as each transaction has immediate consequences, while political decisions aggregate votes into collective outcomes that dilute individual choice and impose coercion on dissenting minorities. Markets operate continuously and adaptively, whereas voting is infrequent and binding on all, regardless of consent. Public choice theorists argue that while markets may fail due to externalities, politics also generates negative externalities, imposing costs on those who did not support certain policies. In markets, individuals bear more of the direct costs of their choices, while in politics, costs are distributed across society. Moreover, government failures – driven by inefficiencies, rent-seeking, and regulatory capture – further challenge the idea that political decision-making serves the public interest.

Moreover, the rent-seeking authors argue that if we continue to view politics as inherently an arena of distributive conflict – of contentious politics –, where members of dominant coalitions extract resources from those outside these groups, then the Hobbesian “war of all against all” is not eliminated but merely transferred to the political arena (Buchanan; Congleton, 2003, p. 19). If politics is still viewed as a negative-sum game, and the government as an arena for granting privileges and imposing non-consensual costs (negative externalities), then individuals and groups must continue to invest resources to secure privileges or protect themselves from exploitation by others. However, the normative solution to this problem does not primarily come from an economically egalitarian perspective aimed at reducing inequality but rather from rewriting the rules of the “political game” to make them more mutually accepted and beneficial for a broader range of participants, thereby transforming politics into a positive-sum enterprise (Thrasher; Gaus, 2017).

The concept of "politics-as-exchange" illustrates how politics can resemble market exchanges, involving all members of a potential political order. Each participant enters the relationship with the expectation of mutual gains, reflecting a positive-sum perspective where cooperation and exchange benefit everyone, unlike a zero-sum view focused on unequal distribution (Brennan, 2012, p. 352; Buchanan; Congleton, 2003, p. 16). In sum, for authors in this tradition, such as Buchanan and Tullock, collective decision-making in politics should, like market exchanges, generate mutual benefits for all participants, emphasizing the equivalence between political and economic exchange (Buchanan; Tullock, 1999, p. 248).

All of this draws attention to the fact that, beneath the discussion of how rent-seeking distorts the efficient allocation of resources, there is a moral argument about why it is unjust. We mentioned this when discussing how Smith viewed mercantilist privileges as an unfair restriction on individuals' ability to use their economic capabilities on mutually agreeable terms, ultimately harming the poorest in society. Now, the 'politics-as-exchange' concept makes clear that there is a normative view of how democracy *should* function – that it should resemble market exchanges to the extent that they generally occur consensually and to the mutual advantage of the parties involved. So, if there is any opposition to democracy, it is directed at how it has been captured by organized interests and how it responds unequally to certain groups, not at the principle of democracy itself or any a priori objection to it.[24]

Lastly, thinkers in this tradition seem particularly attuned to the idea that as government intervention in the economy increases and raises the opportunity costs of market transactions, a substitution effect may occur, where rational individuals allocate more resources toward securing political transactions instead (Freiman, 2012). This critique is especially relevant to egalitarian thinkers who seek to limit economic inequality to preserve political equality. By restricting wealth accumulation through state intervention, they may inadvertently push those targeted by these policies to engage in rent-seeking and regulatory capture, using political channels to protect or expand their advantages. Rather than curbing inequality, this process risks entrenching

24 However, even without direct textual evidence, one may question whether the authors of the unequal responsiveness thesis would accept this characterization of market exchanges (whether to their disadvantage or not).

it further, as economic resources shift from productive market activities to politically driven wealth preservation, undermining the very goals of egalitarian reforms.

It is these contrasting normative perspectives on inequality and the roles of government and markets, we believe, that primarily ground the divergence between these two perspectives in terms of their ethical embeddedness. Authors aligned with the unequal responsiveness thesis are generally more supportive than those of the rent-seeking thesis when it comes to government measures aimed at addressing the inequality believed to drive unequal responsiveness. This is because their perspective tends to regard economic inequality as morally suspect and likely to translate into political inequality. In contrast, proponents of the rent-seeking thesis, often influenced by classical liberal or libertarian thought, are more skeptical of such measures. They argue that the political capture criticized by egalitarians, including unequal responsiveness, is more endogenous than acknowledged; that is, it results from the government's own ability to redistribute resources, grant privileges, and protect particular interests, as if the very measures defended by proponents of the unequal responsiveness thesis might, in fact, accentuate or even drive the problem.[25]

Conclusion

In this paper, we explored two theses aimed at explaining state capture: the *unequal responsiveness thesis*, which says that governments disproportionately prioritize the preferences of affluent citizens, eroding democratic equality; and the *rent-seeking thesis*, which argues that state capture arises from government-granted privileges that incentivize unproductive competition for economic advantages, thereby also distorting political fairness (even if this argument is not explicitly made).

At first glance, there appears to be no reason to doubt that these two theses can complement each other effectively, as each describes a different facet of the same problem, and both offer significant empirical insights for the debate on economic inequality. However, a plausible and important reason for the lack

25 We believe that there is no necessary connection between the empirical or theoretical insights and the normative or moral perspectives that ground them. More specifically, there is no *a priori* constraint preventing a classical liberal or libertarian from studying unequal responsiveness, nor an egalitarian from studying rent-seeking. However, the contingent link between empirical analysis and normative priors has established this connection as it currently stands.

of interaction between the two lies in their normative or "ethical embeddedness" and how each is rooted in and derives distinct, even contrasting, normative conclusions from their analyses. The first thesis is rooted in or highly aligned with an egalitarian political philosophy, while the second thesis is grounded in a classical liberal or libertarian philosophy, showing greater acceptance of economic inequality when it arises from rights-respecting means, such as voluntary market transactions. Advocates of the unequal responsiveness perspective often cite evidence of high economic inequality (such as Piketty's) to argue that it is the main cause of unequal responsiveness, whereas proponents of the rent-seeking view contend that economic inequality (such as wealth) does not necessarily impede democracy (e.g., Bagchi; Fagerstrom, 2023; Scheve; Stasavage, 2017).

However, by talking past each other, the problem being addressed – state capture – remains significantly incomplete and inadequately understood in its entirety. And even though the two perspectives are rooted in distinct normative arguments, the connection between the analyses and these normative foundations, while strong, is not one of logical necessity. In fact, not only can each perspective draw on the tools of the other, but they should, as doing so compels each to address aspects of the issue or normative arguments that they may otherwise overlook. Unfortunately, this integration has yet to materialize, and this paper aims to serve as an initial step in clarifying these differences and outlining how they could and should be addressed in future research by those seeking to comprehensively study the problem of state capture.

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A tale of two captures: two theses on state capture and their normative assumptions and implications

Abstract: The literature on state capture in political science and political economy illustrates the “ethical embeddedness” of positive theories, revealing how normative assumptions influence their descriptive frameworks. This paper examines two distinct perspectives on state capture: the unequal responsiveness thesis, rooted in egalitarian principles, argues that economic inequality undermines democratic equality by amplifying the preferences of the affluent; and the rent-seeking thesis, aligned with classical liberalism or libertarianism, contends that government-granted privileges incentivize unproductive competition, distorting both markets and political fairness. These perspectives derive contrasting normative conclusions about economic inequality and its impact on democracy. The paper's key objective and contribution is to demonstrate how theories of state capture intertwine empirical claims with normative assumptions, making their ethical embeddedness explicit, and to examine how disentangling these elements allows for clearer dialogue, critique, and theoretical integration. By doing so, it advances a deeper understanding of the interplay between positive and normative theories, between economic and political inequality, and between political science and political theory and philosophy.

Keywords: state capture; unequal responsiveness; rent-seeking; political inequality.

Um conto de duas capturas: duas teses sobre captura do estado e seus pressupostos e implicações normativas

Resumo: A literatura sobre captura do Estado em ciência política e economia política evidencia a imbricação ética das teorias positivas, mostrando como pressupostos normativos moldam seus enquadramentos descritivos. Este artigo analisa duas perspectivas opostas sobre o tema: a tese da responsividade desigual, de base igualitária, argumenta que a desigualdade econômica mina a igualdade democrática ao amplificar as preferências dos mais ricos; já a tese do *rent-seeking*, alinhada ao liberalismo clássico ou ao libertarianismo, sustenta que privilégios governamentais incentivam uma competição improdutiva, distorcendo mercados e política. Essas visões levam a conclusões normativas divergentes sobre a relação entre desigualdade econômica e democracia. O artigo demonstra como as teorias da captura do Estado entrelaçam argumentos empíricos e normativos, tornando explícita sua influência ética, e investiga como distinguir esses elementos permite um debate mais claro, uma crítica mais precisa e uma integração teórica mais robusta, aprofundando a compreensão das relações entre teorias positivas e normativas, desigualdade econômica e política, e ciência política, teoria política e filosofia.

Palavras-chave: captura do estado; responsividade desigual; *rent-seeking*; desigualdade política.

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Data Availability

The entire dataset from this study was published in the article.

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