Research Statement

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My research asks how the distribution of economic and political resources determines who holds political power, and how this shapes what the state provides and who benefits. These questions matter today because most politicians come from far wealthier and otherwise advantaged backgrounds than the people they represent. More generally, my research lies at the intersection of political economy, economic history, and public economics.

To answer these questions, my co-author Ellen Munroe and I have measured the wealth at death of every adult who died in England and Wales between 1858 and 1990, linking 17 million probate records to the civil registration of every death, so that those who left no property are also observed. We place every Member of Parliament, their fathers, and the electorate of every constituency in this distribution across Britain's democratic transition. We also link 5.9 million parliamentary speeches to MPs to observe their legislative behaviour. Over more than a century of institutional change, these data allow us to test foundational theories of political economy.

1. Wealth and Political Power

Job Market Paper. Standard political economy models assume that once poorer people are given the right to vote, politicians compete for their votes and policy moves toward them. In **How Enfranchisement Led to Representation** we show that this demand is not always enough, because representation also requires a supply of candidates from poorer backgrounds. We study Britain, where we show that the wealth gap between MPs' fathers and the population fell from 2,900 times in the 1860s to 7 in the 1980s. We use the four Acts that extended the vote between 1867 and 1928, each of which made some constituencies' electorates much poorer than others, and reached some generations of politicians before they began their careers and others only after. Comparing cohorts of politicians who began their careers under different franchises, we attribute about a third of the change in MPs' wealth backgrounds to enfranchisement. The demand for poor politicians came early. Wherever candidates from poorer backgrounds stood, poorer electorates voted for them. But standing was expensive and MPs were unpaid. Candidates from poorer backgrounds stood only where the trade unions, and later the Labour party, financed them. Building that organisation took time. Before 1918, Labour stood in at most one constituency in five, and poorer electorates elected MPs from poorer backgrounds only where it stood. Once Labour stood nearly everywhere, MPs' backgrounds followed their electorates about one for one. In Parliament, MPs from poor backgrounds advocated for the poor, and Parliament began to pass what they argued for. MPs already in office did not change what they advocated when their own voters became poorer. Enfranchisement changed policy by changing who was elected. Who can afford to become a political candidate, not only who can vote, determines who is represented and so who is likely to benefit from government policy.

Other working papers. Political power is passed down through generations in many democracies, and a common concern is that dynastic politicians behave differently. In **Wealth and Political Dynasties** (draft) we ask whether dynasties matter for access to office and for behaviour in it, and show that the answer depends on what they pass on: economic or political capital.

The children of MPs reach Parliament far more often than the children of equally rich fathers who were not MPs, and the two kinds of capital are inherited differently. The children of rich non-politicians enter politics once the father's wealth passes to them, whereas the children of MPs enter while the father is still alive. The share of dynastic MPs has fallen over 150 years, but relative to the population they come from, their advantage is as large as in the 1860s. In office, however, dynastic MPs act like equally wealthy MPs, take up the father's issues, and are no more likely to argue for restricting access to politics.

Candidates are usually assumed to weigh the pecuniary benefits of office against costs. In **Why Become a Politician? Pecuniary Incentives and Selection** (in progress) we ask whether people enter politics because office is lucrative or because they want to change policy. We observe the wealth at death of winning and losing candidates since 1832, across the introduction of MPs' salaries and campaign cost reforms. Comparing winners and losers of close elections, we find that office paid only for Conservatives after 1945; for everyone else politics was not lucrative. A Roy model of political entry then tells us who should have entered after each reform under each motive, and who did enter is consistent with candidates seeking to change policy.

The JMP shows that the poor were represented once they had organised to finance candidates, but not what made them organise. In **How Do Political Movements Form?** (in progress) I ask whether it was the prospect of representation that turned an industrial movement of trade unions into a political one. Voting rights and unfavourable judicial outcomes increased what the poor could gain by standing as candidates. I follow every trade union, trades council, Independent Labour Party branch and union affiliation to Labour from 1869 to 1920, by constituency, to see when, where and why unions entered politics.

2. Inequality and Public Goods

My second agenda asks how inequality in wealth becomes inequality in other outcomes, whether public goods narrow these gaps, and who decides what is provided. In **Wealth is Health?** (in progress) we ask whether the rise in life expectancy since the mid-nineteenth century came from economic growth or from public health, and who gained from each. We estimate the average age at death by the wealth of the family a person was born into, for everyone, from 1858. Gains in life expectancy were mostly due to a shift of the whole curve, with people at every level of wealth living longer, which suggests that the gains in health went to everyone because they came from what was provided to everyone. We then ask which public goods did this and who demanded them.

3. Future Research

My future work will continue to study the relationship between economic policy and democratic institutions. I will study which barriers beyond financial constraints, such as party selection, screening and social networks, persist once formal and financial barriers fall, and why; for example, why women's descriptive representation rose only decades after they gained the vote. I also plan to study how political constraints shape optimal policy. Public finance asks what a benevolent planner should provide, but policy is chosen by those in power, so the optimal policy may not be politically viable. I would like to quantify the gap between optimal and politically sustainable policy, and how it changes as political power shifts, starting with the expansion of local public goods in Britain.