

Inequality, Democracy, and the Protection of Nature: A Cross-National Analysis

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Abstract

This article offers an empirical test of the inequality hypothesis, which suggests that political and economic inequality hampers environmental regulations, thereby contributing to bad environmental outcomes. Departing from the past contributions, which focused either on theories of environmental behavior or on economic interests, this article accounts for the political mediation of policies meant to promote conservation. A cross-national analysis of the interactions between inequality, democracy, and the legal designation of protected areas (PAs) shows that, *ceteris paribus*, the effects of inequality vary depending on the strength of democratic institutions, including the effective protection of political and civil rights. While greater income inequality is associated with a lower proportion of national territory set aside as PAs in democratic countries, income inequality leads to a larger proportion of land set aside as PAs in non-democratic countries. These effects hold across the entire range of democracy and inequality scores. Through an examination of the political drivers of the distribution of benefits of protected areas in India and Mexico, this article explores the circumstances under which indigenous and other forest-dependent people may benefit from nature protection programs.

Speaker Profile

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