

Does Higher Voter Turnout Among the Poor Lead to More Equal Policy Representation?

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Abstract

The belief that elected officials are most responsive to the opinions of the wealthiest members of society is often assumed but has only recently begun to be tested. This paper examines a common explanation for why this disparity in political representation occurs: wealthy citizens vote at much higher rates than citizens with low incomes. Utilizing variation across states in voter turnout levels among the rich and poor, there is little evidence that increased voting among citizens with low incomes improves representation of their political opinions in the Senate. These findings cast doubt on the proposition that increased voter turnout among the poor is an avenue for promoting greater political equality in the United States.

1. Introduction

The linkage between citizens' opinions and their elected officials' policy decisions is the cornerstone of a representative democracy. As V.O. Key (1961, p. 7) states, "Unless mass views have some place in the shaping of policy, all the talk about democracy is nonsense."

Accordingly, several studies assess the extent to which constituents' preferences are reflected in their elected officials' roll call voting behavior (Achen, 1978; Ansolabehere, Snyder, & Stewart, 2001; Miller & Stokes, 1963).

But are citizens' opinions equally represented? This is an important question if, as Robert Dahl (1971, p. 1) contends, "A key characteristic of a democracy is the continued responsiveness of the government to the preferences of its citizens, considered as political equals." However, previous studies suggest an upper class bias in political representation in the United States, demonstrating that citizens with low incomes are less likely to have their political opinions reflected in their representative's voting behavior (Bartels, 2008; Ellis, 2012) and in subsequent public policy outcomes (Gilens, 2005) when compared to more affluent citizens.

One of the most important mechanisms by which citizens can influence their elected officials is through voting – the electoral connection (Mayhew, 1974). Citizens who vote are able to sanction representatives who are out of step with their preferences (Canes-Wrone, Brady, & Cogan, 2002) and select representatives who are like-minded (Miller & Stokes, 1963) and will support policies they desire. Conversely, citizens who do not vote do not enjoy these advantages because "the blunt truth is that politicians and officials are under no compulsion to pay much heed to classes and groups of citizens that do not vote" (Key, 1949, p. 527).¹ Later studies

¹ Walter Dean Burnham (1987, p. 99) puts it even more bluntly: "If you don't vote, you don't count."

largely affirm this prediction in various ways, finding that voting brings representational rewards (Griffin & Newman, 2005; Martin, 2003).

One likely reason that citizens with low incomes are underrepresented by their elected officials is that this group votes at significantly lower rates than more affluent citizens (Lijphart, 1997; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995). Therefore, the upper income bias in political representation might simply be an artifact of the reality that (1) elected officials focus their energies on representing the opinions of citizens who vote and (2) wealthy citizens turn out to vote at higher rates than citizens with low incomes. As Sidney Verba (2003, p. 663) put it, “Equal activity is crucial for equal consideration since political activity is the means by which citizens make their needs and preferences known to governing elites and induce them to be responsive.”

If elected officials listen to those who show up at the polls and make their preferences known, are low income constituents better represented by their elected officials when this group votes at a higher rate? Put another way, when the well documented voter turnout gap between rich and poor constituents is narrowed, are elected officials more likely to represent their constituents as political equals? This paper examines the extent to which the opinions of low and high income constituents predict their Senators’ roll call voting given different relative levels of voter turnout across the American states. It finds little evidence that increased voting among low income citizens (relative to their high income counterparts) improves representation of their opinions in the Senate, casting doubt on the proposition that voters are equally rewarded for providing inputs into the political system by casting their ballot on Election Day.

2. Background

Political scientists have long been interested in dyadic representation – the relationship between constituency opinion and the behavior of the elected officials who represent them (Achen, 1978; Ansolabehere, Snyder, & Stewart, Miller & Stokes, 1963). Most of these political representation studies compare the aggregated preferences of an entire district or state to their elected official’s behavior in office. Fewer studies, however, examine whether elected officials are more responsive to some constituents compared to others, as the American Political Science Association Taskforce on Inequality and American Democracy (Jacobs & Skocpol, 2005, p. 124) recently lamented: “Unfortunately, political scientists have done surprisingly little to investigate the extent of actual inequalities of government responsiveness to public opinion – that is, whether distinct segments of the country exert more influence than others.”

Recent studies have made progress toward correcting this omission. Bartels (2008) assesses whether the preferences of constituents with low incomes predict the voting behavior of elected officials to the same extent as the preferences of more affluent constituents. Using the National Elections Studies’ 1988-1992 Senate Election Study to measure citizens’ political opinions, he finds that Senators are most responsive to the preferences of wealthy constituents and, most importantly, that the preferences of low income constituents seemingly bear no statistical relationship with their Senators’ roll call voting record (but see Erikson & Bhatti, 2011). In a related study, Ellis (2012) finds that members of the House of Representatives are similarly more responsive to their most affluent constituents and that the representation gap between rich and poor is not fully explained by differences in education, political sophistication, or race/ethnicity among citizens. These studies seem to confirm what has long been suspected:

the opinions of more affluent citizens are better represented in the policy decisions made by elected officials.²

Why are citizens with low incomes underrepresented relative to their high income counterparts? One common explanation is the sustained upper class bias in voter turnout (Lijphart, 1997; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995). If elected officials are more responsive to those who turn out to vote, and affluent citizens are significantly more likely to vote than citizens with low incomes, then the fact that elected officials are more responsive to the preferences of their high income constituents should come as no surprise. As Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995, p. 14) predict in their seminal study of political participation, “inequalities in activity are likely to be associated with inequalities in governmental responsiveness.”

Recent studies empirically demonstrate that elected officials are more responsive to those who turn out to vote. For instance, Griffin and Newman (2005) find that the preferences of voters consistently predict the roll call voting behavior of their Senators while the preferences of non-voters do not.³ To explain these findings, they demonstrate that voters are able to elect like-minded representatives (Miller & Stokes, 1963) and are more likely to communicate their

² There is also unequal representation in terms of whose opinions are reflected in federal policy outcomes. Using data from nearly 2,000 individual public opinion poll questions, Gilens (2005) finds that the federal government is more responsive to the preferences of affluent citizens in the public policies it enacts, and this disparity is especially large when citizens with high and low incomes have divergent preferences on a particular issue. He concludes that congruence between the political opinions of the poor and government policy arises only in instances where the poor share similar attitudes with the wealthy.

³ One source of this responsiveness is that voters make up an “attentive public” that is more likely to monitor an elected official’s behavior in office and sanction that representative at election time if they become out of step with the district (Arnold, 1990).

preferences to elected officials by other means as well (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995).⁴ In a related study, Martin (2003) finds that counties with higher voter turnout are rewarded by their elected officials with more federal grant money when compared to counties with similar demographic characteristics that have lower voter turnout. These findings suggest that elected officials pay attention to who votes among their constituents and adjust their in-office behavior accordingly.⁵

There is also evidence at the state level that elected officials enact policies supported by low income citizens when the voter turnout gap between them and affluent citizens is narrowed. For instance, a series of studies document that higher voter turnout among low income citizens is associated with more generous state welfare policies (Hill & Leighley, 1992; Hill, Leighley, & Hinton-Anderson, 1995). Taken together, there are several reasons to expect that increasing voter turnout among the poor as a group is an important avenue for securing a more equal weighting of political opinions in the policymaking process.⁶

⁴ Similarly, Verba and Nie (1972) show that local elected officials' policy priorities tend to correspond to the preferences of politically active constituents as opposed to the inactive.

⁵ The expectation that voters are better represented than non-voters does not, however, receive universal support. For example, in his models of ideological proximity between citizens and their Member of Congress, Ellis (2012) finds that non-voters are actually better represented than voters after controlling for an array of demographic characteristics.

⁶ The possible political implications of higher turnout among the poor are, of course, subject to ongoing debate (Highton & Wolfinger, 2001). Most notably, it is possible that current nonvoters might change their preferences in the process of preparing to vote as they become more informed about the candidates and the issues in an election. If so, it is difficult to forecast the hypothetical results of higher turnout elections based on current opinion and voter turnout data.

Although it has been a topic of much speculation, there are few empirical efforts to date that attempt to clarify the relationship between differential voter turnout levels and unequal policy representation. In his models of Senator responsiveness between 1988 and 1992, Bartels (2008, pp. 275-80) accounts for differences in voter turnout by adding a measure of turnout weighted constituency opinion and finds that unequal policy responsiveness remains prevalent. However, he does not directly examine whether Senators are more equally responsive to their constituents in states with a small gap in voter turnout between rich and poor compared to states with a larger gap. These measured differences in turnout among groups of potential voters better approximate the state political conditions that Senators may be aware of and take into account when making important policy decisions while in office. Therefore, I further probe the relationship between voter turnout and unequal policy representation by examining if higher voter turnout among the poor leads to better representation of their political opinions by elected officials.

3. Data and Method

To evaluate policy representation, this paper uses a responsiveness method (Achen, 1978; Bartels, 2008; Griffin & Newman, 2005) that examines whether as public opinion becomes more conservative across the states, elected officials' voting behavior also become more conservative. Specifically, Senators' roll call voting behavior is modeled as a function of the preferences of their high income constituents, the preferences of their low income constituents, and an indicator for a Senator's party. If Senators respond more to the preferences of their high income constituents, then the regression coefficient for high income preferences should be positive and larger than the coefficient for low income preferences, and the difference between the two

greater than zero at conventional levels of statistical significance. This paper then assesses if increased voter turnout among low income constituents increases political equality by examining whether the responsiveness gap between rich and poor citizens changes as a function of the voter turnout gap within a state. To submit this question to empirical scrutiny, three sources of data are required: (1) a measure of Senators' voting behavior in office, (2) a measure of constituency preferences disaggregated by income group, and (3) a measure of voter turnout disaggregated by income group.

Senators' roll call voting behavior is measured using their W-NOMINATE coordinates (McCarty, Poole, & Rosenthal, 1997). These coordinates range continuously from -1 to +1 with a higher score indicating a more conservative voting record. These scores are usually interpreted as measuring a legislator's general social welfare ideology, given their revealed preferences. Other studies of congressional voting use various versions of NOMINATE scores as a dependent variable (Ansolabehere, Snyder, & Stewart, 2001; Bartels, 2008; Jenkins, 1999) and these scores are highly correlated with similar summary measures of legislator roll call behavior such as interest group ratings and Heckman-Snyder scores (Burden, Calderia, & Groseclose, 2000). This analysis uses Senators' W-NOMINATE coordinates for the 106th (1999-2000), 107th (2001-2002), and 108th (2003-2004) Congresses.

Acquiring a reliable measure of constituency opinion at the state or congressional district level is perhaps the most difficult task in the study of political representation because of data limitations (Achen, 1978; Erikson, 1978). To combat this data problem, previous studies have used various techniques to measure district preferences such as the presidential vote share in each district (Ansolabehere, Snyder, & Stewart, 2001; Canes-Wrone, Brady, & Cogan, 2002), simulating district opinion using its demographic characteristics (Erikson, 1978; Jackson &

Kingdon, 1992), or using referenda voting results (Kuklinski, 1977; McCrone & Kuklinski, 1979). At the state level, the task is equally difficult because most surveys are designed to draw a random national (not state) sample, which often leads to a small number of cases in states with a small population. Moreover, for this current study there is a further limitation because it requires enough respondents in each state to disaggregate preferences by income group.

To address this problem, this paper uses the 2000 National Annenberg Election Survey (NAES), a randomly sampled rolling cross-section telephone survey conducted during the months leading up to and immediately following the 2000 presidential election. The attractiveness of the NAES is its large sample size, over 60,000 respondents, which allows for a more reliable measurement of constituency preferences in each state compared to other widely used surveys.⁷ Using this data, an ideology score is generated for each respondent using principal components factor analysis for three policy items (all coded conservative position higher): federal spending on Social Security, federal spending on health care, and whether poverty is a serious national problem.⁸ It is important to note that the social welfare focus of

⁷ The 2000 NAES sampled a low of 160 respondents in Wyoming and a high of 7,612 respondents in California. Unfortunately, no respondents were surveyed in either Alaska or Hawaii, so the analyses reported in this paper are confined to the remaining 48 states.

⁸ Question wordings: (1) “Social Security benefits – should the federal government spend more money on this, the same as now, less or no money at all?” (2) “Providing health care for people who do not already have it – should the federal government spend more money on this, the same as now, less or no money at all?” (3) “The amount of poverty in the United States – is this an extremely serious problem, serious, not too serious or not a problem at all?” The Cronbach's alpha for the three items is .53. The eigenvalue of the first (and only retained) factor is 1.55. The eigenvalue for the second factor is .77.

these three items correspond well with W-NOMINATE scores which primarily capture a legislator's social welfare ideology.⁹

To measure the political opinions of different income groups, the mean opinion of respondents below the 25th and above the 75th income percentile is computed for each state. Using percentiles (instead of using the same income cutoffs for each state) “standardizes” the income distribution across states and accounts for the reality that the dollar amount marking the 75th income percentile in a less affluent state may be different from the dollar amount marking the 75th income percentile in a more affluent state. In practice, this means that the responsiveness of a Senator from a wealthy state and a Senator from a poorer state to various income groups reflects the income distribution of that Senator's particular state.¹⁰ Looking at the

⁹ The results reported in this paper are substantively identical if citizens' opinions are instead measured using a five-point self-reported ideology item (“Generally speaking, would you describe your political views as very conservative, conservative, moderate, liberal, or very liberal?”).

¹⁰ Using income percentiles rather than simply splitting citizens into groups based on whether they are below or above a certain level of income also ensures that each income group is of equal size. This is important for the study of political representation because elected officials are likely to be more responsive to one group compared to another if one comprises a larger portion of the electorate. In most states, the cutoff for below the 25th or above the 75th income percentile does not perfectly correspond with the cutoff point for income categories in the 2000 NAES. To address this problem, I randomly sample from the opinions of the next adjacent income category so the number of respondents makes up one quarter of the population. For example, if 20% of the respondents from a state fall within the bottom three income categories and 10% of state respondents fall within the next highest income category, I randomly sample one half of the respondents from that income category to add to the respondents from

mean political ideology score for each of the two income groups in each state reveals that low income constituents in a conservative state are sometimes more conservative than affluent constituents in a liberal state (Gelman, Park, Shor, Bafumi, & Cortina, 2008). However, when the mean ideology scores of the high and low income groups are compared within each state, low income constituents are more liberal than their high income counterparts in every state.¹¹

Despite reasons to expect citizens with different incomes to adopt different political opinions, the premise has recently come under increased scrutiny (Erikson & Bhatti, 2011; Soroka & Wlezien, 2008; 2010; Ura & Ellis, 2008). These differences in opinion are central for the study of income inequality and political representation because if the rich and poor have

the bottom three income categories to constitute, in total, one quarter of the state's population. A mean ideological opinion score is then computed for that group of respondents.

¹¹ One possible explanation for unequal responsiveness to different income groups is that there are substantial differences in the variance of opinions within income groups in a state. For example, if the opinions of citizens in the high income group are more uniform than the opinions of citizens in the low income group, we would expect the regression coefficient for the high income group to be larger simply because there is less "error" in the opinion measurement (and error in the measurement of an independent variable tends to lead to a downward bias in the slope coefficient). To investigate this concern, I examine the variance of each income group's opinions within each state. The average within-state variances for each income group are not statistically different from one another across the states, so there is little reason to infer unequal political representation is a statistical artifact of different variances of opinions within the two income groups (below the 25th and above the 75th income percentile) in this study. Moreover, when an errors-in-variables regression technique (the "eivreg" command in Stata 11) is used that statistically accounts for measurement error in the independent variables in the model (Jones & Norrander, 1996), the results are substantively identical to those reported in Tables 1-3.

similar ideologies and policy preferences, policy decisions that represent the opinions of the rich would necessarily also represent the opinions of the poor. To evaluate whether the rich and poor have different preferences as a group within states, a difference of means test is computed for each state that compares high income ideology to low income ideology. These tests indicate that in 44 of the 48 states, the mean ideological score for the poor is statistically different than the mean ideological score for the rich ($p < .05$). These results suggest that there are real and substantively important differences in opinion between the rich and poor within states.

Using the assumption that aggregated political ideology remains relatively stable in a four year period (Bartels, 2008; Erikson, Wright, & McIver, 2007), constituency preferences reported in 2000 are compared to Senators' voting behavior in the 106th (1999-2000), 107th (2001-2002), and 108th (2003-2004) sessions of Congress. This paper first examines how responsive Senators are to each income group's mean opinion by modeling their roll call voting behavior as a function of each income group's preferences in that state and an indicator for Senator Republican affiliation. After establishing the extent to which Senators are responsive to each income group, this paper then assesses whether political equality improves as the voter turnout gap between rich and poor is lessened across the states.

One problem with the rolling cross-sectional design of the NAES is that only 18,112 respondents were surveyed after Election Day, providing a less reliable measure of voter turnout by income group for each state. To avoid this problem, this paper instead uses the Current Population Survey's Voting and Registration Supplement for 1998, 2000, and 2002. The survey's sample size of over 130,000 for each year provides a large number of respondents in each state. Similar to the procedure for measuring opinions, each state is split into income groups to derive a measure of voter turnout for respondents below the 25th and above the 75th

income percentiles. Voter turnout among citizens with low incomes is then subtracted from voter turnout among citizens with high incomes to derive a measure of the rich/poor voter turnout gap for each state for the 1998, 2000, and 2002 federal elections such that a larger positive value indicates greater inequality in voter turnout.¹²

[Figure 1 about here]

Figure 1 displays the average magnitude of this gap over the three surveys for each state and reveals two important features of the data: (1) there is significant variation in the rich/poor voter turnout gap across states and (2) in every state affluent citizens vote at a higher rate compared to citizens with low incomes (i.e. the rich/poor voter turnout gap is always greater than zero). Although Senators only stand for reelection every six years, it is likely that they monitor public opinion and assess electoral trends in their state throughout the duration of their term in office. Accordingly, this paper evaluates the effect of the rich/poor voter turnout gap on Senator responsiveness to both income groups' mean opinion for the two year legislative session immediately following the 1998, 2000, and 2002 federal elections.

4. Results

This section first examines whether Senators are more responsive to the opinions of their affluent constituents compared to the opinions of their low income constituents (also see Bartels, 2008). Ordinary least squares regression is used to model Senators' W-NOMINATE coordinates as a function of high income constituents' ideology, low income constituents' ideology, and an

¹² This measure is similar to Hill and Leighley's (1992) "Class Bias Index for State Electorates" except that it uses (1) each state's specific income distribution to define high and low income groups and (2) the raw percentage difference between high and low income voter turnout.

indicator for each Senator's party. Table 1 displays estimations for the three sessions of Congress pooled together and for each Congress separately.¹³

[Table 1 about here]

The results in Table 1 indicate a significant representation bias in favor of the opinions of high income constituents. All four coefficients for high income preferences are positive and statistically different from zero, indicating that Senators' voting records strongly reflect the opinions of their high income constituents. In practice, these positive coefficients indicate that, across the states, as the mean ideology of rich citizens becomes more conservative, their Senators' roll call voting behavior becomes more conservative as well. For low income constituents, however, the relationship between their preferences and their Senators' voting behavior is negative and statistically significant for three of the four estimations. In practice, as the mean ideology of poor citizens becomes more conservative, their Senators' roll call voting behavior becomes more liberal. This is the opposite of what democratic responsiveness requires.¹⁴ As reported in the bottom panel of the table, for all four models the responsiveness

¹³ Because a Senator's voting record is not statistically independent from one session of Congress to another, standard errors clustered by Senator are reported for the pooled models.

¹⁴ This rather unexpected result is mirrored by Bartels' (2008) analysis of constituent opinion and Senator voting a decade earlier and suggests that the negative coefficient for low income ideology is not a statistical artifact. One possible explanation for this result is that the coefficient for low income ideology reports the relationship between ideology and Senator voting after separately accounting for the independent relationship between high income ideology and Senator voting. As Gilens (2005) argues, congruence between the political opinions of the poor and government policy occurs only in instances where the poor share similar attitudes with the wealthy. Therefore, once the attitudes of the wealthy are

gap between rich and poor (the mathematical difference between the coefficient for high and low income ideology) is statistically different from zero ($p < .05$). These findings indicate that, as expected, more affluent constituents enjoy better political representation than the poor.¹⁵

Since voters convey opinions and hold their electoral fate in their hands, elected officials are more likely to be responsive to those who vote (Griffin & Newman, 2005). A widely held presumption in political science is that the rich are better represented by government because they vote at higher rates than the poor (Lijphart, 1997; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995). However, as Bartels (2008, p. 253) observes, “It is striking ... how little political scientists have done to test the presumption that inequalities in participation have political consequences.” Accordingly, this paper next examines whether increased voter turnout among poor citizens relative to their higher income counterparts in their state increases the responsiveness of Senators to their political preferences.

independently accounted for in the analysis, it is not altogether surprising that there is no relationship or even a negative relationship between low income opinion and Senator voting.

¹⁵ One possibility is that Senators are only attentive to the composition of voter turnout in their state if they face a close election. To examine this possibility, I create a margin of victory measure that subtracts the second place finisher’s percentage share of the vote from the winner’s share of the vote for every Senate election for 1998, 2000, and 2002. I then split the sample into Senators who are above the median for margin of victory and those who are below and regress Senator roll call voting on high and low income ideology. The sizes of the responsiveness gap between the coefficients for rich and poor ideology for the two models (1.047 vs. 1.603) are not statistically different from one another ($p = .43$). Moreover, when I interact the margin of victory variable with (separately) low and high income ideology, neither interaction term is statistically different from zero. These results suggest that electoral competitiveness, at least in this context, does not have a significant effect on unequal political representation.

To evaluate the effect of the voter turnout gap between the rich and the poor on the equality of political representation, the sample is divided in half between state elections (pooled for 1998, 2000, and 2002) with a rich/poor voter turnout gap greater than the median and state elections with a rich/poor voter turnout gap less than the median. This procedure allows comparison of the responsiveness of Senators to public opinion in the two year session after an election when the rich/poor voter turnout gap is large to responsiveness when the voter turnout gap is small. Table 2 displays these results, comparing to what extent the opinions of citizens below the 25th and above the 75th income percentiles predict their Senators' voting behavior broken down by the voter turnout gap between rich and poor above and below the median in the sample of state election years (1998, 2000, and 2002).¹⁶

[Table 2 about here]

Column 1 of Table 2 indicates that for state election years when the voter turnout gap between the rich and poor is higher than the median, the relationship between low income constituents' opinions and their Senators' roll call voting behavior is non-existent while the opinions of high income constituents strongly predict their Senators' voting behavior. More importantly, Column 2 indicates that even as citizens at the bottom of the income distribution

¹⁶ In addition to splitting state-years into two groups based on the size of the rich/poor voter turnout gap, I also created an interaction between high income ideology and the voter turnout gap and an interaction between low income ideology and the voter turnout gap for each state-year. Senators' W-NOMINATE scores are then modeled as a function of these two interaction terms, whether a Senator is a Republican or not, and the main effects of the interaction terms (i.e. low income ideology, high income ideology, and the voter turnout gap as separate coefficients). The coefficients for both interaction terms are not statistically different from zero, which provides further evidence that the voter turnout gap between rich and poor has little effect on the equality of political representation.

vote at rates approaching those at the top of the income distribution, their Senators are no more likely to reflect their opinions in their roll call voting decisions. In other words, citizens with low incomes remain just as poorly represented when the voter turnout gap between rich and poor is small as compared to when it is large. As the bottom panel of the table reports, the differences between the coefficients for high and low income ideology are statistically different from zero for both models. Moreover, the sizes of the responsiveness gap between rich and poor for the two models (1.220 vs. 1.046) are not statistically different from one another ($p=.81$). In sum, regardless of whether the rich/poor voter turnout gap is large or small, the opinions of the wealthy strongly predict their Senators' voting behavior while the opinions of the poor do not.

To evaluate the robustness of these results, state election years are further divided into quartiles based on the size of the rich/poor voter turnout gap. Doing so allows a comparison of state election years where voter turnout is most unequal to state election years where voter turnout among the poor nearly approaches that of the rich. The results of these four estimations are reported in Table 3. Looking across the four columns which are ordered from most unequal to most equal rich/poor voter turnout, there is little change in the responsiveness gap between rich and poor (see bottom panel). Even when comparing the model where the rich/poor voter turnout gap is the largest (Column 1) and the model where the rich/poor voter turnout gap is the smallest (Column 4), the sizes of the responsiveness gap between rich and poor for the two models (1.695 vs. 1.005) are not statistically different from one another ($p=.56$). Similar to the results reported in Table 2, regardless of the rate of voter turnout among the poor, the degree of unequal policy representation remains about the same.

[Table 3 about here]

5. Conclusion

If Senators' responsiveness to their constituents' opinions is any indication, political inequality is a persistent feature of the American political system. Senators' voting behavior closely reflects the political preferences of those at the top of the income distribution while bearing little relationship to the preferences of those at the bottom. Why does unequal policy representation occur? One prominent explanation for why elected officials overwhelmingly respond to the preferences of the rich is that this group votes at much higher rates compared to citizens with low incomes (Lijphart, 1997; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995). If elected officials reward those who vote, then one plausible way that disadvantaged Americans can secure more equal political representation is by turning out to vote at higher rates at election time.

This paper casts doubt on that premise. Using the state-by-state variation in voter turnout rates among the rich and the poor, there is little evidence that increased voter turnout among citizens with low incomes improves representation of their views in the Senate. Even when turnout rates among the poor approach those of the rich within a state, there is little responsiveness to that group's political opinions. Although these results that focus on income inequality are at odds with previous studies that find voting leads to better representation (Griffin & Newman, 2005; Hill & Leighley, 1992), they do comport with Griffin and Newman's (2008) examination of racial inequality that finds the rewards of voting (i.e. securing better policy representation) are mostly confined to whites. Just as voting has its rewards for whites but less

so for African American and Latinos, voting may be a way for the affluent to secure better policy representation but it does not have the same representational rewards for the poor.¹⁷

The findings reported in this paper also suggest that inequality in political representation between the rich and the poor is deeply engrained in the United States and cannot be fully explained by differing levels of voter turnout. From a normative standpoint, this is a troubling finding for those searching for ways to promote democratic inclusion and it ultimately calls into question whether the ballot box is a viable avenue toward achieving greater political equality. However, additional research is needed to understand whether equalizing other forms of more intensive and time-consuming political participation (such as contacting one's elected official) may help to promote more equal political representation.

¹⁷ As Griffin and Newman (2008, p. 194) explicate, “although the ‘one person, one vote’ principle may be met in the sense that each voter has about the same influence on the election’s outcome, the representational benefits of these votes may not be equal.”

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Table 1: Constituents' Ideology and Senators' Roll Call Voting

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	106 th – 108 th	106 th	107 th	108 th
		Congress		
High Income Ideology	0.832* [0.198]	0.652* [0.149]	0.914* [0.185]	0.900* [0.185]
Low Income Ideology	-0.301* [0.127]	-0.180 [0.121]	-0.416* [0.150]	-0.298* [0.149]
Republican Senator	1.362* [0.039]	1.414* [0.035]	1.245* [0.043]	1.439* [0.043]
Constant	-1.037* [0.072]	-1.043* [0.066]	-1.021* [0.082]	-1.047* [0.081]
R ²	0.93	0.95	0.91	0.93
N	288	96	96	96
High Income vs. Low Income Responsiveness Gap	1.133* [0.302]	0.832* [0.239]	1.329* [0.298]	1.198* [0.296]

Dependent Variable: Senator's W-NOMINATE score.

Both Senator roll call voting and constituent ideology are coded conservative higher.

Cell entries in the top panel are OLS regression coefficients with standard errors (clustered by Senator for Column 1) reported beneath in brackets. Cell entries in the bottom panel report the responsiveness gap: the difference between the two ideology coefficients (when subtracting the coefficient for low income ideology from the coefficient for high income ideology) with standard errors reported beneath in brackets.

* denotes $p < .05$ using a two-tailed test.

Table 2: Equality of Representation Unrelated to the Composition of Voter Turnout (Halves)

	(1) Rich/poor turnout gap > median	(2) Rich/poor turnout gap < median
High Income Ideology	0.924* [0.346]	0.751* [0.225]
Low Income Ideology	-0.296 [0.211]	-0.296* [0.130]
Republican Senator	1.355* [0.059]	1.365* [0.044]
Constant	-1.042* [0.125]	-1.030* [0.081]
R ²	0.91	0.95
N	144	144
High Income vs. Low Income Responsiveness Gap	1.220* [0.468]	1.046* [0.277]

Dependent Variable: Senator's W-NOMINATE score.

Both Senator roll call voting and constituent ideology are coded conservative higher.

Cell entries in the top panel are OLS regression coefficients with standard errors (clustered by Senator) reported beneath in brackets. Cell entries in the bottom panel report the responsiveness gap: the difference between the two ideology coefficients (when subtracting the coefficient for low income ideology from the coefficient for high income ideology) with standard errors reported beneath in brackets.

* denotes $p < .05$ using a two-tailed test.

Table 3: Equality of Representation Unrelated to the Composition of Voter Turnout (Quartiles)

	(1) Rich/poor turnout gap LARGEST	(2) ←-----	(3) -----→	(4) Rich/poor turnout gap SMALLEST
High Income Ideology	1.207* [0.526]	0.669* [0.243]	0.685* [0.248]	0.747* [0.230]
Low Income Ideology	-0.488 [0.254]	-0.117 [0.178]	-0.246 [0.182]	-0.309* [0.134]
Republican Senator	1.306* [0.0981]	1.382* [0.0669]	1.365* [0.0551]	1.375* [0.0484]
Constant	-1.113* [0.154]	-0.963* [0.0982]	-0.983* [0.0900]	-1.051* [0.0846]
R ²	0.89	0.92	0.94	0.94
N	72	72	72	72
High Income vs. Low Income Responsiveness Gap	1.695* [0.754]	0.785* [0.345]	0.930* [0.370]	1.055* [0.343]

Dependent Variable: Senator's W-NOMINATE score.

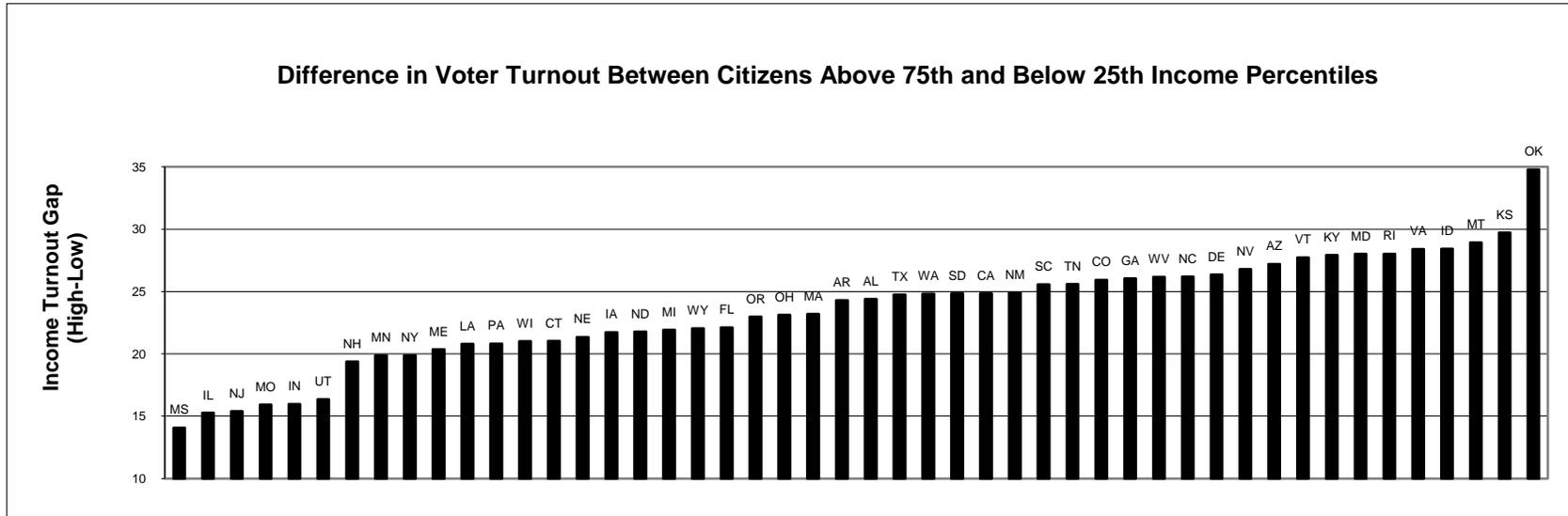
Both Senator roll call voting and constituent ideology are coded conservative higher.

Columns are sorted (from left to right) by the rich/poor voter turnout gap from largest (most unequal) to smallest (most equal).

Cell entries in the top panel are OLS regression coefficients with standard errors (clustered by Senator) reported beneath in brackets. Cell entries in the bottom panel report the responsiveness gap: the difference between the two ideology coefficients (when subtracting the coefficient for low income ideology from the coefficient for high income ideology) with standard errors reported beneath in brackets.

* denotes $p < .05$ using a two-tailed test.

Figure 1: Average Rich/Poor Voter Turnout Gap, by State



Shaded bars are the rich/poor voter turnout gap in each state’s electorate averaged across the 1998, 2000, and 2002 elections.

Rich/poor voter turnout gap = turnout rate (% of voting age population) for citizens above the 75th income percentile minus the turnout rate for citizens below the 25th income percentile. A value of greater than zero indicates rich citizens vote at a higher rate than poor citizens.