Are the Rich Always Better Represented than the Poor?
Income- and Party-Stratified Policy Representation in the U.S. Senate

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ABSTRACT

Given the stark differences between our polarized parties, many conclude that the parties represent distinct income constituencies—with the Republicans serving as the party representing the rich and the Democrats serving to represent the poor and/or middle class. We challenge this assumption given both the resource-dependent nature of both parties and the existence of wealthy donors to both parties’ campaigns. We develop a theory in which both parties align with the preferences of rich voters—but the issues on which the rich are better represented differs for Democratic and Republican senators. We then test this theory using six waves of CCES data (2006-2014) that map policy positions held by the public to 21 specific roll call votes taken in the U.S. Senate. We find that Republicans better represent the rich on a wide range of economic policy issues, while less income skew is found for moral policy issues in which rich and poor Republicans tend to agree with one another. Conversely, Democrats better represent the rich on a smaller set of moral issues, but not on economic policy issues on which rich and poor Democrats generally agree. By representing the preferences of the wealthy co-partisans, each party adopts more extreme policy positions than would be expected under more equal policy representation. But, this polarization is not symmetrical—but driven by the Republicans moving rightward on economic policy while the Democrats move leftward on moral issues.

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The historic growth in income inequality over the last few decades has been the focus of significant scholarship, as well as public discussion and heated political debate. A significant contribution from political scientists has been a willingness to grapple with important normative questions about how the growth of economic inequality may challenge, if not undermine, our norm of political equality in which citizens should be treated as political equals, even if holding vastly different levels of resources. To date, the empirical work on this topic suggests that this norm is not upheld—with policymakers and policymaking more aligned with the preferences of the wealthy than of the poor who have almost no independent influence over the policies enacted or votes taken by their elected officials (e.g., for a detailed review of this literature and its debates and controversies see: Erikson 2015).

But complicating this notion that policymakers represent the wealthiest Americans are the increasingly polarized political parties, which seem to be representing vastly different constituencies rather than converging on the policy preferences held by the rich. In fact, a number of scholars have identified partisan differences in policy representation—with Republicans more often found to represent the rich, while Democrats are often found to align with the preferences of less affluent voters. This paper further explores these partisan differences—questioning the simple conclusion that Republicans represent the rich and Democrats represent the poor on both theoretical and methodological grounds.

First, we know that the resource-intensive nature of American politics has led both parties to focus their campaign mobilization and fundraising appeals on wealthy donors. Therefore, it seems unlikely that Democrats would consistently ignore the distinct preferences of the rich, particularly given the natural fundraising advantage enjoyed by Republican candidates and parties. And, from a methodological perspective, we know that the degree to which the rich can
even be better represented relies on the existence of a substantial gap between what the rich and poor want from their elected officials. Since the nature of these gaps is known to vary across policy domains and issues, we adopt a policy-focused lens to capture the ways that the specific issue under debate may determine the size and direction of the income gap, and therefore the degree to which it is even necessary to choose between representing the rich or the poor.

We expect resource-dependent politicians and parties to take advantage of differences in income-preference gaps to appeal to wealthy constituencies on those issues in which the distinct preferences of the wealthy best align with the general ideological orientation of the party. This means that Republicans will better represent the views of their wealthy constituents on those issues in which the rich are more conservative than others (typically economic policy issues), while the Democrats will represent the rich on those issues in which the rich are more liberal (typically moral policy issues). Specifically, we posit that the way Democrats represent the rich is different than how Republicans do, primarily as a function of the different policy priorities of rich Democrats and rich Republicans.

In this paper, we develop this theory in more detail and then test it using data from even-numbered years of the 2006 through 2014 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES) Common Content. A particular strength of these data is that, in each survey, respondents are asked about roll call votes currently or recently on the agenda in Congress. After describing the relevant legislation, respondents are asked if they support or oppose the issue; these positions can then be matched to the associated roll call records published on the CCES Dataverse. Across these five surveys, we focus on 21 contentious votes taken in the U.S. Senate that represent a range of highly-salient and visible policy issues. We focus on these 21 issues to examine differences in both the distribution of policy preferences among rich and poor respondents, as
well as the degree to which one’s income impacts the likelihood of having one’s senator vote the way one wants her to vote. We take an issue-specific approach to representation, and examine policy-making across these 21 issues individually.

As expected, we find that the income gap in policy preferences varies across issues and party identification, as does the degree to which the rich are better represented. Specifically, wealthy Republicans are more conservative on economic issues and wealthy Democrats are more liberal on moral issues. Similarly, Democrats are more likely to represent the rich (vs. poor) on moral issues, while for Republicans it is on economic policy issues where this differential responsiveness is most pronounced (primarily due to the greater similarity in co-partisans’ opinion on most other issues). By drawing these distinctions between parties and issues, we help explain how the notion of both parties representing the preferences of the rich can co-exist with the high levels of party polarization we are experiencing. In particular, if these findings apply broadly, prioritizing the preferences of the rich would move Democratic politicians even further to the left on issues such as gay marriage and move Republican politicians even further to the right on issues like the capital gains tax, while underrepresenting poor Democrats and poor Republicans who hold more moderate views on these issues.

BACKGROUND

As discussed earlier, recent empirical investigations have illustrated uneven responsiveness of policymakers to citizens from different income groups (Bartels 2008; Druckman and Jacobs 2011; Gilens 2005; Gilens and Page 2014; Hacker and Pierson 2010; Jacobs and Page 2005; Rigby and Wright 2011). Together, these studies suggest that American democracy is falling far short of its ideal of political equality due to policymakers’ heightened attention to more affluent constituents and political elites at the expense of the poor. In a seminal
work—also examining the US Senate—Bartels (2009) found a strong relationship between the voting records of US Senators and the ideology of their more affluent constituents; this relationship was weaker for middle-income constituents, and nearly non-existent for opinions held by the poorest groups. Later, Hayes (2013) examined this question across multiple Congresses and also found consistent responsiveness of upper income constituents over lower income ones in the voting records of Members of Congress.

To assess the consequences of differential representation across income groups, the question becomes whether the preferences of some income groups are more closely aligned with policy than the preferences of other income groups. Gilens (2009; 2012) examined the odds of thousands of proposed policy change based on the level of support among Americans at the 10th, 50th, and 90th income percentiles. Gilens finds that when the views of low- or middle-income Americans diverge from those held by the affluent, there is virtually no relationship between the policy preferences held by those less advantaged and the rate or direction of policy change adopted at the federal level. Flavin (2012) examined this relationship at the state-level across income groups and found that citizens with low income receive little substantive political representation in the policy decisions made by their state government compared to affluent citizens who are represented in policy decisions. This was found for an overall measure of policy liberalism, as well as for specific policies like the death penalty and abortion.

A number of studies have identified greater differential responsiveness among Republican parties, Republican policymakers, and Republican-controlled government. For example, Bartels (2008) found differential responsiveness for both parties; yet, the greatest skew was among Republican senators. Further research has reinforced this notion that Republicans are the party more likely to represent the wealthy—with Democratic parties either representing the
rich and poor more equally or in some cases better representing poorer Americans (Brunner, Ross, and Washington; Ellis 2013; Griffin and Newman 2016; Rhodes and Schaffner 2017). In fact, Rhodes and Schaffner (2017) characterize these party differences as one in which Americans represented by Republicans experience an “oligarchic mode of representation,” which they contrast with the “populist model” experienced by those represented by Democrats.

The fact that Republicans seem more likely to represent the rich is often understood as a function of their generally-wealthier constituency (Stonecash 2000) and the heightened representation received by co-partisans (Clinton 2006). Griffin and Newman (2016) compared the income distribution among partisans grouped into the three income groups often used in research on differential representation and found that while 38 percent of Republicans were in the highest income third, only 28 percent of Democrats were. And most relevant to the question at hand, they found that the difference in the percent of high- and low-income earners is only 4 points for Democrats compared to 5 points for Republicans.

Yet, some other research contradicts this finding. In general, at the state level at least, Republican parties seem better able to provide more equal responsiveness to opinion differences across income groups (Hayes 2013; Rigby and Wright 2011). And another reason to suspect greater responsiveness to the rich from Democrats as well is what we know about the resource-intensive nature of American politics. Both parties need the wealthy to finance campaigns – so it is unlikely that Democrats would completely ignore the distinct preferences of wealthy Americans. This increased reliance on support from wealthy citizens provides greater incentive for parties to assess and understand the priorities of their wealthy donors. In addition, today’s party activists are no longer motivated by prospects of a patronage job, but instead prioritize candidates who share deeply-held values and specific policy preferences (Cohen et al. 2008).
In fact, we have seen parties increasingly focus their mobilization efforts on the wealthy who are in a position to make donations, as well as the most predisposed to vote (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1992; Schier 2000). Indeed, Campbell (2007) documented a sharp increase in both Republican and Democratic parties’ efforts to mobilize high-income voters over the last few decades, which has resulted in a world in which both parties depend on the wealthy to finance their campaigns. Since Republicans have a natural fundraising advantage given the higher average income of their party backers, these resource constraints may be most consequential for Democratic parties (Rigby and Wright 2013). For example, Rigby and Wright (2013) found representation to be particularly skewed among Democratic parties in states with high levels of income inequality—states where campaign contributions are more likely to be reliant on a smaller but wealthier share of the citizens in the state. These findings inform our second expectation:

*Expectation #1 – Both parties will exhibit a tendency to over-represent their wealthy constituents—particularly the wealthy among the parties’ co-partisans who are likely to be viewed as potential campaign donors.*

We expect that the parties will prioritize the views of the rich in different ways on different issues. To some degree these differences will be driven by the degree to which the rich and poor disagree on different policy issues. This point was made eloquently by Soroka and Wlezien (2008) after finding a great deal of similarity in preferences for increasing or decreasing spending across income groups in the General Social Survey they concluded that this congruence of average opinion across socio-economic groups places a “healthy limit” on the representation inequality that can occur, since even if the poor are totally ignored by their elected officials, they will still get what they want—to the degree that their preferences and interests overlap with those
groups that are better represented in the political system. Bartels (2008) showed a similar congruence in opinion on the estate tax. Gilens (2005) acknowledged the same reality by restricting his analysis to only those policy issues on which the poor and rich disagree. While Rigby and Wright (2013) distinguished between alignment and influence—with alignment capturing any association between the income group’s preferences and parties’ positioning and influence indicating a relationship even after accounting for the opinion of the other income groups.

Notably, Gilens (2009) addressed the discrepancy between his findings of persistent differences in opinion across income groups with Soroka and Wlezien’s (2008) finding of congruence. Through a series of rigorous replications and comparisons, he illustrated that the differences in findings were due to differences in the range and type of policies considered—differences are much greater for foreign policy, health care reform, and social/moral policy issues. Further, across studies identifying income-group differences in opinion (using a variety of data sources and analytic methods), a consistent pattern emerges. Specifically, wealthier individuals are less likely to support more liberal redistributive or spending programs (e.g., increased spending for schools, reduced differences between rich and poor), but are more likely to take liberal stands on social or moral issues (e.g., abortion, stem cell research, gay rights; Ansolabehere, Rodden, and Snyder 2006; Bartels 2008; Flavin 2009; Gilens 2005, 2009). This informs our second Expectation:

**Expectation #2 - The nature of the income gap in policy preferences will differ across issues with the wealthy conservative on economic issues and liberal on moral issues.**

As Hacker and Pierson (2010) explained, “The art for policy makers is not to respond to the median voter; it is to minimize the trade-offs when the desires of powerful groups and the
desires of voters collide.” We expect elected officials, in making these strategic calculations, to capitalize on opportunities provided them by the cross-cutting opinion structure in which higher-income Americans tend to be more conservative than the poor on economic issues, but more liberal on social and moral issues. These cross-cutting income-opinion gradients open up issue- and party-specific forms of representation that may be driving much of the political inequality we see. And they inform our final two expectations:

Expectation #3 – We expect that the overall pattern in which the rich are more conservative on economic issues and more liberal on moral issues actually represents two separate groups in the electorate: rich Republicans who are conservative on economic issues and rich Democrats who are liberal on moral issues.

Expectation #4 – We expect that the most pronounced representation of the rich over the poor will be for Republican senators on economic policy votes and Democratic senators on moral policy issues.

We test all four of our expectations in the following empirical sections.

**Data and Methodology**

To determine whether the rich and poor have different policy preferences and whether the rich are better represented in the U.S. Senate, we utilize data from even-numbered years of the 2006 through 2014 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES) Common Content. In each survey, respondents are asked about roll call votes currently on the agenda in Congress. After describing the relevant legislation, respondents are asked if they support or oppose the issue. A record of each senator’s position on the associated roll call vote is published on the CCES Dataverse. These data provide a useful tool for assessing representation since the respondent and the Senator are asked about the same policy proposal—allowing for examination
of actual congruence rather than simply a correlation between two measures such as individual-level ideology and roll call ideology. That said, we acknowledge the complexity within these roll call votes and the fact that a senator may vote for or against a policy proposal based on reasons beyond those included in the short description of the bill provided to survey respondents.

Across these five surveys, the respondents were asked about 25 policy proposals that were then matched to their senators’ vote on the bill in the corresponding CCES Dataverse files. From this list of 25 issues, we removed four votes in which a majority in both parties supported the legislation and more than 80% of all senators supported the legislation.\(^1\)

**[TABLE 1 HERE]**

This provides us with 21 different policy issues on which to compare respondents’ policy preferences and the votes taken by their Senators. Notably, these span five survey years and include Congresses with unified Democratic party control, unified Republican party control, and divided government. Further, for the purpose of testing our expectations about economic versus non-economic policy, the 21 policy issues ranged from votes taken on a range of issues – including free trade agreements, abortion access, capital gains taxes, and the Affordable care Act. Table 1 presents a list of the 21 issues we investigate in this paper. CCES surveys are large internet surveys, where between roughly 75,000 and 100,000 individuals respond. And the vast majority of these respondents were willing to express a policy position on these highly-salient policy issues, with the lowest response rate for support for the Central American Free Trade Agreement (77 percent held a position) and federal funding for stem cell research (84 percent held a position).

\(^1\) Questions on raising the minimum wage to $7.25, North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the Korean Free Trade Agreement, and a bill providing assistance to victims of the housing crisis were removed from the final list of issues because more than 80% of senators were in support and they were near-unanimous votes.
We recoded each policy issue so that the more conservative policy position was coded one and the more liberal policy position was coded zero. We validated our assessment of the more conservative versus more liberal position by looking at the association between preference for the policy proposal and self-identified ideology. Further, we cross-checked these positions with the proportion of Republicans voting for the more conservative position and found that to be the case in all but one case: the vote on a bill, which extended the Bush tax cuts for middle class (rather than for all) families. Democratic Majority Leader Harry Reid offered a compromise plan to extend the Bush Tax Cuts to those making less than $200,000 per year. On this plan, conservatives in the electorate were more likely to support it than liberals in the electorate so therefore supporting the Middle Class Tax Cut Act is treated as the more conservative position. Yet, almost all Democratic senators supported the bill as it was viewed as a compromise position and a more liberal alternative to the Republican tax cut proposal under consideration.

Unlike previous work, we will examine and present CCES data on every issue which was polled, not scaling or pooling together issues of differing policy domains. We argue that representational inequality is best understood as an issue-specific (or at least policy-domain-specific) phenomenon and analyses of representational inequalities should understand representation gaps as an issue-specific phenomenon. Similarly, Hacker and Pierson (2014) have argued for a policy-centric political science.

**Defining the Rich and Poor**

The CCES asks each respondent for their family income, providing response options that typically span $10,000 to $20,000. For example, a respondent whose family’s annual income was $68,000 would respond that their family income was between $60,000 and $69,999, the seventh income category. From these data we generated state- and year-specific income
quintiles. First, we assigned each respondent the income in the middle of their income category. For example, if a respondent chose the seventh income category ($60K to $70K), we assigned them an income of $65,000. We then transformed these monetary values into percentiles for each survey year and state. This allowed us to isolate income quintiles for each Senator (within their state) rather than aggregating across states with different levels of income and income distributions. From these percentiles, we defined the poor as the bottom income quintile (less than the 20th percentile) and the rich as the top income quintile (more than the 80th percentile). The state and year adjustments ensured that we are not conflating differences in the cost of living (between states or years) and that the Mississippi poor are only compared to the Mississippi rich, and not the Maryland rich.

We present the income gap in preferences between the rich and poor in the right-most columns of Table 1. It is clear that even without any control variables, the rich and poor do indeed have different policy preferences. These are most stark on economic issues – with the largest gap in policy preferences regarding the capital gains tax and expansion of the Children’s Health Insurance Program (22 percentage point difference for each issue).

**Dependent Variables**

Throughout this paper, we utilized two distinct dependent variables: (1) Preferences operationalized as support for the conservative policy position, and (2) Representation operationalized as Respondent-Senator agreement. This allowed us to test our expectations regarding income-stratified policy preferences and income-stratified representation respectively. For policy preference dependent variables, on each of the 21 issues, the variable took the value of 1 if the respondent supports the conservative position on the issue and 0 if the respondent does not. If respondents did not have an opinion on the issue, they are treated as missing data.
For the representation dependent variables, on each of the 21 issues, the variable takes a value of 1 if the respondent’s policy preference matched how their senator voted and 0 otherwise. For example, if the respondent supported the increase of the minimum wage to $6.25 and their senator voted for this increase, then they are considered to be represented and receive a value of 1 on the minimum wage representation dependent variable. To be clear, for analyses with the representation dependent variables, there are actually two observations per CCES respondent, one for the dyadic relationship between the respondent and their junior senator and one for the dyadic relationship between the respondent and their senior senator—leading to twice as many observations as we have respondents.

**Modeling Strategy**

For both the policy preference and representation dependent variables we use the same model and independent variables. Since the dependent variables are all dichotomous, we utilize logistic regression models; for the representation dependent variables, we cluster standard errors by senator. Notably, our results are substantively similar when using a logit model with clustered standard errors, a survey-weighted logit model, or a mixed effects (multilevel) logit model.

As discussed earlier, we divided respondents into income quintiles within each state. In multivariate models, we include dummy variables to allow for non-linearity and omit the first income quintile to allow for clear comparison of preferences or representation between the top and bottom or rich and poor. What we present in this paper is the marginal effects (change in probability) between the first and fifth quintiles. For the policy preference dependent variables, this means that we are graphing the difference between the rich and poor in likelihood of supporting the conservative position, or the “preference gap.” For the representation dependent
variables, this means we are graphing the gap between the rich and poor in likelihood of holding the same policy position as the one voted for by their Senator, or the “representation gap.”

Since we wanted to isolate differences based on respondents’ income, we decided to control for a range of other variables likely to impact both policy preferences and representation. These included controls for female gender, education (a 6-point scale), age, and frequency of church service attendance (a 4-point scale). For race/ethnicity, we add variables for black racial identification, Hispanic identification, and “other” capturing those identifying as Asian, as well as non-black, non-Hispanic, non-white, and mixed-race identifiers. The base category for race is therefore whites, and so the black, Hispanic, and other variables capture the preference or representation gap between each minority group and whites. Finally, included are control variables for party identification (a 7-point scale) and ideology (a 5-point scale), where higher values indicate that the respondent is more Republican or conservative, respectively. The use of these control variables provides a more conservative test of income differences in preferences and representation than those commonly used in this literature.

Finally, in all our analyses, we differentiate between economic and non-economic policy issues in order to test our expectation that the income gap in preferences and in representation vary for these two types of policymaking. Specifically, we classify 11 policies as economic policy, including: capital gains tax cut, two votes on the Children’s health insurance program, Ryan spending cuts, minimum wage, wall street reform, various tax cut proposals, the stimulus, a free trade deal, and health care reform. In the non-economic policy category we included ten other votes on Iraq troop withdrawal, spying oversees, Keystone pipeline, amnesty for undocumented immigrants, birth control exception in the Affordable Care Act, Don’t Ask Don’t Tell repeal, two votes on stem cell research, gay marriage ban, and a ban on late-term abortions.
Results: Rich-Poor Differences in Policy Preferences

We begin our analysis by examining income gaps in policy preference between the rich and poor. This allows us to identify policy areas in which representation inequality is most likely—since congruence in attitudes between the rich and poor provides what Wlezien and Soroka call a “natural limit on inequality.”

[FIGURE 1A HERE]

Figure 1A presents the estimated difference in support for the conservative position on each policy position. To review, these estimates are marginal effects of the fifth quintile dummy variable (vs. the first quintile dummy variable base category) from models that included all the control variables mentioned in the previous section. The estimates can be interpreted as the difference in probability of holding the conservative position between the rich and poor.

First, of all, we note that the simple fact that the rich and poor have such large differences in public policy preferences—especially after controlling for party identification, ideology, and education—is quite surprising. We identified significant differences for all but four of the 21 policy issues examined. The largest preference gaps, of more than 5 percent of a difference in support for the conservative position, is on CHIP (in both the 109th and 110th Congresses), the capital gains tax cut extension, and the Ryan budget social spending cuts. On these issues, the rich are meaningfully more likely to take the economically conservative position than are the poor. Indeed, on every economic question except for one (Middle Class Tax Cuts Only) the rich were more conservative than the poor. On the other extreme (in the non-economic issues panel), there are differences in public policy preferences where the rich are about 2.5 percent more likely to support the liberal position than the poor are. The trend in policy preferences of the rich and poor are less drastic when it comes to non-economic issues (vs. economic issues). On some
issues, especially those relating to moral issues (stem cell research, gay marriage ban, and banning late-term abortion), the rich are more liberal than the poor. On other non-economic issues, there is no statistically different opinion between the rich and poor. And on another set of issues relating to foreign policy (Iraq troop withdrawal and spying overseas) the rich are more conservative than the poor.

Since we expect a partisan dimension to the income gap in preferences (and therefore later in representation), we also present the policy preference gaps for three sub-groups: Republicans (Figure 1B), Democrats (Figure 1C), and Independents (Figure 1D). Since we wanted to identify the solid base of co-partisans each Senator may experience, we limited the measure of Republicans to those who responded that they are Republican or Strong Republican. Similarly, Democrats are defined as those who responded that they are Democrats or Strong Democrats. Independents are defined as those who responded that they are Independent (including those who lean toward one party or the other). We maintained the same ordering of policy issues as used in Figure 1A. Therefore, issues at the top of each panel are issues in which the rich in the American public are more conservative than the poor. Issues at the bottom of each panel are issues in which the rich in the American public are more liberal than the poor.

As shown in Figure 1B, there is a clear income gap in preferences between the rich and poor among Republican respondents—with the wealthy being more conservative than the poor. Although some gaps are not significant, for Republicans in the electorate, every preference gap is positive, meaning that rich Republicans are always more conservative than poor Republicans. The largest differences in opinion between rich and poor Republicans is on economic policy issues, where, on CHIP, the Ryan budget, and the capital gains tax cut, the Republican rich are more than 10% more likely to support the conservative position than the poor. Even on moral
policy issues, where the rich are more liberal than the poor (for both the average American and for Independent Americans), rich Republicans are more likely to support the conservative position than poor Republicans. When it comes to stem cell research (110th Congress) and Don’t Ask Don’t Tell repeal, the relationship is nearly statistically significant and for the ACA birth control exemption, the relationship is statistically significant and strong. Rich Republicans were nearly 10% more likely to support the birth control exemption than the poor.

Looking across issues, it is clear that—for Republicans—the income gaps are most marked for economic issues in which this gap is significant for all but one of the issues. A similar (but smaller) gap is seen for many of the non-economic policy issues; yet, consistent with other literature, there is no significant income gap in support for most of the moral policy issues (e.g., gay marriage ban). This suggests a Republican voter base in which the income gaps are primarily found on economic policy issues—with the rich holding more conservative positions than the poor. This means that any tension Senators may experience in which they must choose between representing rich or poor Republicans would be on economic policy issues most likely.

A completely different pattern is seen in Figure 1C, which shows the income gap in preferences for Democratic respondents. Differences between rich and poor Democrats are generally substantively meaningless or nonexistent on economic policy (for 6 out of 11 economic policy issues—with the significant gaps going in both directions). Rich Democrats are more conservative than poor Democrats when it comes to capital gain taxes, CHIP (in the 110th Congress/2008 CCES only), and on extending the Bush Tax Cuts to all; but, rich Democrats are more liberal than poor Democrats when it comes to healthcare reform and tax cuts for those making less than $200,000 annually (“middle class” tax cuts). On most non-economic issues, rich Democrats are more liberal than poor Democrats. Especially on moral policy issues, these
preference gaps can be substantial. On the birth control exemption, stem cell research, the gay marriage ban, and late-term abortion ban, rich Democrats are about 5% less likely to support the conservative position—after controlling for frequency of religious service attendance, education, and ideology. In sum, rich Democrats are more liberal than poor Democrats on non-economic issues but are generally as liberal as poor Democrats on economic issues.

Across issues, we find little evidence of income gaps among Democrats in the electorate on economic policy issues—with the wealthy more conservative on some economic policy issues and more liberal on others. Yet, on non-economic policy issues—particularly those tapping moral policy debates—rich Democrats are consistently more liberal than poorer Democrats (significant for all but three non-economic policies). This suggests a Democratic voter base in which the income gaps are primarily found on non-economic policy issues—with the rich holding more liberal positions than the poor. Therefore, any tension that Senators may experience in terms of representing rich or poor Democrats would be on non-economic policies, particularly moral policy issues.

Interestingly, as evident from Figure 1C, the preference gaps among Independents are nearly identical to those among all Americans (Figure 1A). This also means that rich independents mirror both the rich Republican’s greater conservativism on economic policy and the greater liberalism of rich Democrats on social/moral policy issues. This cross-cutting ideological position means that Democrats would most likely be appealing to rich independents on non-economic policy issues, while Republicans would most likely be appealing to rich independents on economic policy issues.

[FIGURE 1B, 1C, and 1D HERE]
Results: Rich-Poor Differences in Representation

We turn now to determining whether there are differences in representation between the rich and poor. The previous section established that there are differences in policy preferences between the rich and poor, but these differences depend upon the issue domain and partisan identify of the rich and poor. The estimates presented in the next set of figures are from models predicting differences in the likelihood of representation (measured as a senator who votes the same way the respondents preferred) between the rich and poor. We use the same method of presenting findings—but this time we plot the difference in likelihood of representation. The easiest way to interpret this is that significant estimates on the right hand/positive side of the figure indicate a greater likelihood of representation for the rich, while on the left/negative side indicates greater likelihood of representation for the poor. Smaller point estimates indicate no differences between the income groups in likeliness to be represented—with this outcome most common on issues in which there was little to no differences in preferences between the income groups (so there’s very little room for any political inequality on these issues).

[FIGURE 2 HERE]

Figure 2 presents the representation gap between the rich and poor for all senators, both Republican and Democrat. The model used to estimate the marginal effects for Figure 2 includes an additional independent variable, a dummy variable for whether or not the senator is a Republican. Once controlling for all these factors, pooling respondents and Senators in each party, we find little evidence that the rich are better represented than the poor, particularly on economic policy issues. On a few non-economic issues, the rich are slightly better represented than the poor, but this only reaches a meaningful magnitude on the issues of spying overseas and gay marriage ban. Figure 2 is striking as it contradicts much of the literature on income and
representation that asserts that the rich are almost always better represented than the poor. We argue that differential responsiveness—particularly on these very salient issues—operates in a more nuanced manner that varies across issues and parties. In fact, evidence of representational inequality emerges once you look at the votes taken by Republican Senators and Democratic Senators separately. This is not surprising given the fact that these votes represent policy proposals often negotiated by party leaders and reflecting deep divisions and polarization between the two parties in Congress.

**[FIGURE 3A HERE]**

**Representation of the Rich or Poor: Differences by Senators’ Party**

Figure 3A presents the same estimates of the gap in representation between the wealthiest and poorest income quintile in each state. Positive values indicate the percentage point difference by which the rich are better represented than the poor, while negative values indicate Senators’ voters were better aligned with their poorer constituents. But it only includes the Republican senators, who exhibit a clear tendency to better represent their wealthier constituents, particularly on economic policy issues (true for 9 of 11 economic issues). This was less common for non-economic policy, particularly for those moral policy issues in which no difference in representation across income groups was found. Figure 3B replicates these analyses but only for respondents who identified as Republican. This illustrates an even stronger skew toward the wealthy on all but a few issues—primarily moral policy issues (e.g., gay marriage ban, stem cell research, immigration). These analyses suggest that Republican Senators votes are more congruent with the policy positions expressed by rich Republicans in their state than with the poor. The exception is for some non-economic policy issues—particularly moral issues which we found earlier to exhibit very little potential for representational inequality because rich and
poor Republicans generally agree with each other on these issues—offering poor Republicans the coincidental representation discussed by Enns (2015).

[FIGURE 3B & 4A HERE]

Figure 4A examines the same representation gap among Democratic Senators. Here we see a different pattern in which Democratic Senators are taking votes better aligned with their poorer constituents on economic policy issues, while prioritizing the views of wealthier constituents on some non-economic policy issues—particularly the moral policy issues in which the rich are significantly more liberal than the poor. Figure 4B isolates the representation gap between Democratic Senators and their Democratic constituents. As with Republican Senators, we saw even greater representation of the policy preferences of the rich when looking only at co-partisans. This was most notable on the moral policy issues in which rich Democrats were particularly left-leaning. For economic policy issues, the results were now more mixed with the votes of Democratic Senators aligning with rich Democrats on some issues and poor Democrats on others. This suggests that the earlier consistent finding that Democrats were representing the poor on economic policy issues included representing poor people who were non-Democrats.

[FIGURE 4B HERE]

Conclusion

This paper examined 21 votes taken in the U.S. Senate since 2006—examining the congruence between Senators’ votes and the preferences held by different segments of their constituency. We identify a nuanced pattern in which greater representation of the wealthy does occur—but on different issues for each of the political parties. The issues in which we tended to find the most differential responsiveness were those with substantial differences in the income gap in preferences between the rich and poor—even within each political party. For the other issues, the
parties did not face a constituency divided by income and so there was a natural limit on the level of political inequality by income that could occur (Wlezien and Soroka 2008; Enns 2015).

As expected, we confirmed that the rich are more conservative than the poor on economic issues but more liberal than the poor on moral issues. Yet considering only each party’s core constituency, we find that among Republican citizens the rich are always more conservative than the poor, while greater income group agreement is evident among Democratic citizens with the most notable gaps on moral policy issues for which the rich are more liberal. Given these patterns, it is not surprising that Republican senators seem to best represent their rich co-partisans across most issues but especially economic issues. Democratic senators seem to represent the poor on economic issues, but recall that there is little gap in preferences among Democrats on these issues—leaving little room for differential responsiveness. When considering only Democratic constituents, Democratic senators better represent the rich on the non-economic/moral policy issues in which we found income gaps. By breaking our analysis down to the policy-specific level, we show that both parties only seem to represent the poor on some issues—since these tend to be the same issues in which their rich and poor co-partisans are mostly in agreement. We find that Republicans are over-representing the conservative rich on economic issues, while Democrats are over-representing the liberal rich on moral issues. By better representing their rich constituents both parties move away from the more moderate views of their less affluent constituent on the issues on which the rich and poor disagree—helping to illuminate a process by which differential representation of the rich could co-exist—and even exacerbate—the polarization of political parties.

Our findings suggest that the literature on political inequality is better capturing the way that Republicans over-represent the rich—since this does seem to happen on a wider variety of
issues including the materially-consequential taxing and spending policies that impact the
distribution of income (Hatch and Rigby 2015). Yet, this may simply reflect the greater
likelihood of using economic policy issues in these datasets employed in most studies. In fact,
even in our policy-specific analysis of 21 issues, only 5-7 (depending on where you draw the
line) tap moral policy issues. If we had pooled all these votes together and disregarded the policy
content, these would be a minority sub-set and the findings would be driven by the economic
policy issues in the dataset—likely showing greater responsiveness to the rich among
Republicans.

Generally, our results lend credence to a policy-centric model of congressional decision-
making (e.g., Clausen 1973). While there are certainly trends in the figures that we present,
representation is best understood on an issue-specific basis. The representation gaps between the
rich and the poor vary drastically depending upon the specific issue and the political party of
citizens and senators. For scholars of political inequality, we encourage a focus on the content of
the policies under debate or votes taken because it can help illuminate the political dynamics at
play (Hacker and Pierson 2010).

Our conclusions have implications for efforts to theorize about, analyze, and understand
the Democratic Party. It is important to consider the ways that the more liberal positions of rich
Democrats may have pushed leftward the moral policy stances adopted by their Democratic
elected officials. Given recent debates over the future of the Democratic Party, we have seen
general enthusiasm for pushing the party platform leftward on economic issues, paired with
opposition to the proposal to remove the anti-abortion litmus test for Democratic candidates—
something likely opposed by many of the rich Democrats on which the party is dependent.
References


### TABLE 1: Description of CCES Roll Call Votes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CCES Survey Year</th>
<th>Congress</th>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Senate Roll Call</th>
<th>Support for Conservative Position in Public</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Public: % Support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Democrat Support</td>
<td>Republican Support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>Late-Term Abortion</td>
<td>Late-term (&quot;partial-birth&quot;) abortion ban</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>94%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>Stem Cell</td>
<td>Approve of federal funding for stem cell research</td>
<td>98%</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>Iraq Timetable</td>
<td>Require Bush to establish plan for Iraq troop withdrawal</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>Immigration</td>
<td>Amnesty; offer a pathway to citizenship for undocumented</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>Minimum Wage</td>
<td>Raise federal minimum wage from $5.15 to $6.25</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>Capital Gains</td>
<td>Extend capital gains (selling investments) tax cut</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>94%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>CAFTA</td>
<td>Approve new Central American Free Trade Agreement</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>Stem Cell</td>
<td>Approve of federal funding for stem cell research</td>
<td>96%</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>Spy Overseas</td>
<td>Enable for spying on foreign terror suspects without warrant</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>Gay Marriage Ban</td>
<td>Amendment to Constitution to ban same-sex marriage</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>87%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>CHIP</td>
<td>Extend and improve State Children's Health Insurance Program coverage</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Session</td>
<td>Stimulus</td>
<td>Economic stimulus (American Recovery and Reinvestment Act)</td>
<td>Support</td>
<td>Oppose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------</td>
<td>---------</td>
<td>---------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------</td>
<td>--------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>Economic stimulus</td>
<td>Economic stimulus (American Recovery and Reinvestment Act)</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>CHIP</td>
<td>Extend and improve State Children's Health Insurance Program coverage</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>Health care Reform</td>
<td>Affordable Care Act healthcare reform</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>Financial Reform</td>
<td>Dodd-Frank Wall Street financial reform</td>
<td>98%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>DADT</td>
<td>Don't Ask, Don't Tell repeal</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>Keystone Pipeline</td>
<td>Approve Keystone XL Pipeline</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012 &amp; 2014</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>Birth Control</td>
<td>Allow for religious exemption to ACA birth control coverage mandate</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012 &amp; 2014</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>Tax Cuts for All</td>
<td>Extend Bush tax cuts for all (not only middle class)</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>96%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012 &amp; 2014</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>Middle Class Tax Cuts</td>
<td>Only extend Bush tax cuts for middle class</td>
<td>96%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012 &amp; 2014</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>Ryan Budget</td>
<td>Paul Ryan Budget; survey question cites Medicare and Medicaid cuts</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>89%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
FIGURE 1A: Preference Gap Between the Rich and Poor (All Respondents)

Higher, positive values indicate the rich are more conservative than the poor. The point estimates indicate the difference in support for the policy issue between the rich and poor, controlling for demographic and political characteristics. All issues are recoded so that a value of 1 indicates that the respondent supported the conservative position.
FIGURE 1B: Preference Gap Between the Rich and Poor (Republican Respondents)

Higher, positive values indicate the rich are more conservative than the poor. The point estimates indicate the difference in support for the policy issue between the rich and poor. All issues are recoded so that a value of 1 indicates that the respondent supported the conservative position.
FIGURE 1C: Preference Gap Between the Rich and Poor (Democrat Respondents)

Higher, positive values indicate the rich are more conservative than the poor. The point estimates indicate the difference in support for the policy issue between the rich and poor, controlling for demographic and political characteristics. All issues are recoded so that a value of 1 indicates that the respondent supported the conservative position.
Higher, positive values indicate the rich are more conservative than the poor. The point estimates indicate the difference in support for the policy issue between the rich and poor. All issues are recoded so that a value of 1 indicates that the respondent supported the conservative position.
FIGURE 2: Representation Gap (All Senators, All Respondents)

Higher, positive values indicate the rich are better represented the poor. The point estimates indicate the difference in likelihood of being represented between the rich and poor. All issues are recoded so that a value of 1 indicates that the respondent or senator supported the conservative position.
FIGURE 3A: Representation Gap (Republican Senators, All Respondents)

Higher, positive values indicate the rich are better represented the poor. The point estimates indicate the difference in likelihood of being represented between the rich and poor. All issues are recoded so that a value of 1 indicates that the respondent or senator supported the conservative position.
FIGURE 3B: Representation Gap (Republican Senators, Republican Respondents)

Higher, positive values indicate the rich are better represented the poor. The point estimates indicate the difference in likelihood of being represented between the rich and poor. All issues are recoded so that a value of 1 indicates that the respondent or senator supported the conservative position.
FIGURE 4A: Representation Gap (Democrat Senators, All Respondents)

Higher, positive values indicate the rich are better represented the poor. The point estimates indicate the difference in likelihood of being represented between the rich and poor. All issues are recoded so that a value of 1 indicates that the respondent or senator supported the conservative position.
Higher, positive values indicate the rich are better represented the poor. The point estimates indicate the difference in likelihood of being represented between the rich and poor. All issues are recoded so that a value of 1 indicates that the respondent or senator supported the conservative position.