

# Are Competitive Parties More Responsive to Middle-Income Preferences?

## **Abstract**

One of the central tenants of a democratic republic is the representation of citizens as political equals. However, recent research has instead indicated that representation is highly dependent on a constituent's economic standing, with high-income constituents holding inordinate influence over the policies our government adopts. Is this unequal responsiveness also dependent on the institutional context in which decisions are made? This project explores whether the U.S. Senate alters its representational behavior when the two parties are more competitive and ideologically separated. Using data from the 98th-107th Congresses, I find that enacted policies become more broadly representative as the likelihood of a shift in power grows.

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# 1 Introduction

American democracy is founded on the principle of political equality for all citizens (Dahl 2007). However, recent trends in political culture have demonstrated a growing anxiety regarding the treatment of constituents of different incomes. Much criticism of presidential candidates Mitt Romney and Donald Trump revolved around their perceived inability to empathize with the middle-class. Likewise, populist movements such as Occupy Wall Street and the political efficacy of Senators Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren are driven by a perception of political inequality. Studies of representation have demonstrated that these anxieties are justifiable. Gilens and Page (2014) argue that the United States responds nearly exclusively to high-income constituents, and Bartels and Achen (2016) find that representatives rarely have incentives to improve representation in response to constituent opinion.

These findings run parallel with recent research demonstrating that parties alter their representational strategies in response to political insecurity. Lee (2016) finds that parties are more likely to adopt team-like behavior aimed at increasing electoral benefits, and Koger and Lebo (2017) find that majority parties are rewarded for winning controversial inter-party fights. This is consistent with a wide literature finding that parties increase responsiveness in response to increased political competition.

This study joins these two veins by examining how the likelihood that enacted policy will be responsive to constituent incomes changes relative to shifts in party competition. I find that policy becomes more responsive to middle-income preferences as competition increases, but that high-income preferences remain more meaningful across all circumstances. This indicates that party leaders adopt an agenda-setting strategy in order to maximize middle-income votes when competition is highest.

# 2 Literature Review

Are competitive parties a necessary precondition for responsive policy? While the most contemporary accounts of partisan conflict emphasize its undermining effect on policymaking, the representational consequences of partisan conflict are far less clear. Several theoretical accounts have argued that partisan competition has the effect of improving responsiveness to constituent preferences. However, these accounts have not examined whether the gains from increased responsiveness are equally distributed among constituents. Studies of representation distribution between constituents of different incomes have likewise not properly accounted for institutional determinants of responsiveness. This study joins these two bodies of research by examining income-based representation under different levels of partisan competition.

## 2.1 Representatives as Economic Agents

One of the defining shifts in the study of Congress has been the shift from evaluating members of Congress (MCs) from a sociological framework to analyzing their actions from the perspective of economic agents. This shift began with Downs' (1997) work finding that MCs will adopt the policies most favored by the median member of their district. This theory was developed to find that MCs tend to behave in order to maximize the likelihood of their own reelection (Mayhew 1974, Lijphart 1997). Although many scholars have pointed out that representatives have many secondary goals—such as crafting policy or maximizing their own institutional power (Hacker and Pierson 2006)—MCs understand that their reelection is a necessary condition for achieving all other goals.

## 2.2 Voting Power as a Determinant of Representation

If Representatives' primary goal is to win reelection, as the economic theories of behavior suggest, their decisions will be largely designed to maximize their margins of victory. However, not all voters are equally influential in deciding elections. In this landmark work *Homestyle*, Fenno (1978) used extensive interviews and process tracing to find that MCs tend to appeal to four overlapping constituencies: all the citizens in their district, all the voters in their district, the primary voters in their district, and their most dedicated supporters—such as activists, donors, or close family friends.

There is strong evidence that MCs prioritize these constituencies differently. For instance, Lijphart (1997) and Griffin and Newman (2005) found that voters tend to be better represented than non-voters. Likewise, MCs are increasingly responsive to the priorities of their primary voters (Bafumi and Ferejohn 2010). To a similar degree, MCs tend to represent constituents who participate in political action groups (Miller and Stokes 1963; Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995) or who donate directly to their reelection fund (Canes-Wrone and Gibson, forthcoming).

This may lead them to prioritize constituents with higher voting turnouts (Lijphart 1997), higher likelihoods of swing voting (Bartels 2008), or those who are better at communicating their preferences directly or through interest groups (Miller and Stokes 1963; Verba, Schlozman, Brady 1995).

## 2.3 Demographic Differences in Representation

Although likely unintentional, these priorities reinforce racial and economic biases. Voters, both in primaries and the general election, tend to be whiter, richer, and more

conservative than the average citizen (Griffin and Newman 2005; Burnham 1987). Likewise, white voters are more likely than black or Latino voters to switch parties—thereby increasing the potential consequences of breaking with constituent opinion (Bartels 1998). These preferences tend to create selective incentives for MCs to prioritize demographic constituencies differently (Rosenstone and Hansen 1997, Verba and Nie 1972, Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980).

These divisions lead to differences in ‘voting power’—the ability for a constituent to influence policy through their preferences. For example, black and Latino voters experience poorer policy representation than do white voters (Griffin and Newman 2008). Women are likewise less likely to have effective representation than men (Griffin, Newman, and Wolbrecht 2012), and homosexual constituents are less likely to have their preferences enacted into law than heterosexual constituents (Lax, Phillips, and Krimmel 2009). Although there are minimal differences in voting turnout or political activism based on gender or sexual orientation, both women and homosexuals tend to overwhelmingly favor the Democratic Party. This gives Republicans little incentive for strong outreach and implies few consequences for poor representation for Democrats.

The same principles apply to constituents of different incomes. Numerous studies have found that low-income constituents are less likely than high-income constituents to have their preferences enacted into law. For example, Gilens and Page (2014) found that low- and middle-income constituents are routinely ignored by MCs except in extreme circumstances. This can be explained in terms of voting power: low-income constituents are less likely to vote (Griffin and Newman 2005) and are unlikely to donate to political campaigns (Gilens 2005).

There are also broader factors behind lackluster responsiveness. Flavin (2012) attributes the lack of low-income representation to the decrease in the political power of labor unions, while Rigby and Wright (2011) note the absence of low-income voters in formal party structures. Likewise, Carnes (2013) notes that nearly all MCs come from white-collar backgrounds—potentially biasing their evaluations of policy decisions. While empirical evidence for this effect is limited, some studies have found that MCs of higher incomes are more likely to support policies that benefit them personally (Griffin, Newman, and Wolbrecht 2012).

Many of these institutional factors rely on historical explanations—such as the decline in labor union power or the increasing role of money in politics. While nearly all use quantitative methodologies, these are restricted to cross-sectional comparisons. However, there is substantial evidence that representation is partially dependent on dynamic variables in the political context (Canes-Wrone, Brady, and Cogan 2002). By incorporating dynamic institutional variables—such as the relative importance of the filibuster and political competition—this paper seeks to add further nuance to the factors underlying income-based representation.

## 2.4 Mechanisms of Improving Representation

This is not to say that there have been no dynamic studies of representation in a social context; however, much of the previous work has focused on exogenous influences in representation. For example, Piven and Cloward (1988) found that increases in low-income voter turnout may lead to more responsive behavior in Congress. This would indicate that the representative's responsiveness to low-income constituents is dependent on the expected turnout in the next election, which is consistent with Gilens' (2011) finding that low-income representation tends to be more responsive in the year proceeding a presidential election.

Likewise, MCs are more likely to represent constituents whose preferences are clearly and consistently articulated. Those constituents who are more effective and likely to communicate their preferences should enjoy better representation. Numerous studies have pointed to this mechanism as another contributor to income-based representational inequality, as upper-class constituents are likely to be better informed and more effective at communicating their preferences (Miller and Stokes 1963; Verba 2003; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995).

In support of this claim, Flavin (2012) found that states with more active labor unions—one of the few interest groups specifically focused on low-income preferences—tend to be more representative of low-income voters. Therefore, increases in organized political action by low-income constituents are likely to carry policy implications.

Another factor influencing representation is fundraising. Donors have become an essential aspect of modern political campaigns (Powell 2015). Representatives are forced to constantly fundraise to fend off challengers and prepare for an expanded and costly election cycle (Heberlig and Larson 2014). This creates an incentive for Representatives to prioritize campaign donors, which gives higher-income constituents an intrinsic advantage in donorship.

Because the ability to donate is by its nature dependent on disposable income, lower-income constituents experience a distinct disadvantage. This disadvantage, however, is not absolute. While much of the popular focus has been on dubbed 'megadonors,' Bonica (2013) finds that the trend has been toward individual donors with average amounts under one hundred dollars. Additionally, Canes-Wrone and Gibson (forthcoming) have found that MCs in competitive elections tend to be less responsive to out-of-state donors. This implies that representation can be partially interpreted as an interaction between donations and political risk.

These studies have demonstrated that there are substantial exogenous variables influencing the degree of representation. Curiously, however, these studies have not incorporated endogenous influencers of congressional behavior, such as political parties, party leaders, committees, and collective electoral context. Contemporary studies of

legislative behavior have similarly ignored the representational consequences of institutional arrangements, despite the fact that many of these arrangements such as the filibuster or seat allocation in the Senate were created with an articulated representational intent.

Some evidence exists suggesting a link between income-based representation and institutional variables. For example, Enns (2013) found that there is a strong correlation between top-income shares in the U.S. and the degree of partisan division in the Senate, and McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal (2008) found strong correlations between political polarization and income inequality.

However, many economists do not accept political variables as the primary driver of income inequality (for example, see Piketty 2014) and the strong regressions demonstrated in these studies are likely partially driven by a spurious time-series relationship. By avoiding macro-level variables such as income shares and inequality in favor of measures of direct policy enactment, this study attempts to discern a more direct relationship between institutional variation and policy responsiveness.

## **2.5 Policy Responsiveness from Party Competition**

The lack of policy responsiveness stands in contrast to the well-developed literature on representational strategies of competitive parties. Because parties have incentives to favorably differentiate themselves from their competitors, majority parties in fear of losing their control of their institution have incentives to become more broadly representative. This is not a new theory: writing in eras of undifferentiated parties, Schattschneider (1942) argued that a functioning democracy is “unthinkable” in the absence of competitive parties. Aldrich (1995) argued that parties are necessary to provide voters with a frame of reference for holding their representatives accountable, and Dahl (2003) argues that parties provide an organizing principle for voters to understand the policies their government enacts. Therefore, increases in party competition would be expected to lead to increased policy responsiveness.

The past forty years have seen a dramatic increase in competition for legislative institutions at the federal level (Lee 2009; Lee 2016). Noting that control of national institutions has become increasingly competitive, Lee views partisan conflict as a symptom of parties’ efforts to favorably differentiate themselves to gain an electoral advantage. This argument is consistent with previous literature on strategic disagreement, in which political parties refuse compromise to transfer blame to the opposition (Groseclose and McCarty 2001; Gilmour 1995).

As recent trends have increased, individual members have an electoral incentive to uphold the party line (Abramowitz and Webster 2016) even when this behavior carries

personal costs (Ansolabehere, Snyder, and Stewart 2001, Wright 1978). Because constituents are likely to hold their Representatives accountable for these votes (Erickson 1971; Canes-Wrone, Brady, and Cogan 2002), there is an incentive for party leaders to shift strategies to create a positive party brand.

However, recent studies have treated competition as a categorical variable—congresses with ‘low competition’ versus those with ‘high competition’—which ignores the possibility that congressional leaders approach electoral insecurity. Such a strategy would be consistent with theories of congressional behavior viewing representatives as dynamic actors (Lebo and Koger 2016). Even studies based on seat advantages (see: Gilens 2011) ignore the fact that only a third of the Senate runs for reelection every two years, and that the likelihood of victory varies widely from state to state.

This study advances this literature in two ways. First, I develop a new variable as a better measure of political competition. By incorporating measures of individual political risk, I am able to create a cumulative measure of chamber insecurity. This is a more nuanced measure of competition which is more reflective of the variables most relevant to party leaders. Second, by incorporating institutional comparisons between constituents of different incomes, this study expands the literature of both party competition and representation. This fills a significant gap in the literature by examining relative gains from political competition for constituents of different incomes and has substantial potential for expanding our understanding of institutional factors in representational strategies.

## **3 Theory and Expectations**

### **3.1 Income and Responsiveness**

Numerous studies have indicated that MCs display preferential voting behavior in favor of their high-income constituents. This is a multifaceted effect: high-income constituents are more effective at communicating preferences (Verba, Schlozman and Brady 2013), are more likely to vote or donate to the MCs reelection bid (Bonica 2013), and are more likely to have similar social backgrounds with their representative. Several studies have indicated that high-income constituents yield strong influence over the policy-process (Gilens 2011, Bartels 2008). Therefore, I expect responsiveness to be higher for constituents with higher incomes.

**Hypothesis 1:** *Under normal circumstances, the majority party will be more responsive to the preferences of high-income citizens.*



## 3.2 Competition and Responsiveness

There is also a rich literature indicating that parties become more responsive when competitiveness increases. Parties are generally viewed as integral to policymaking: Schattschneider (1942) believed that a functioning democracy is impossible without strong political parties and Aldrich (1995) believed that democracy is “unworkable” without strong political parties. Lee (2016) found that competitive parties will focus on issues likely to positively differentiate them from their competitors, and Lebo and Koger (2017) find that competitive parties experience electoral benefits for winning contentious policy fights. Because marginal members expect electoral consequences for the policies they support (Canes-Wrone, Brady, and Cogan 2002) and consequences for losing the majority are severe (Connelly and Pitney 1994), I expect responsiveness to improve as the likelihood of a shift in majority increases.

**Hypothesis 2:** *Intra-chamber competition will be positively correlated with responsiveness for all income levels.*

Likewise, there is some evidence suggesting that the gains from improved responsiveness will accrue primarily to the middle-class. Gilens (2011) found that Congress tends to slightly improve its middle-income responsiveness in the year preceding a presidential election. Likewise, formal theories of voter prioritization suggest that the most effective strategy will target the middle voter (Downs 1957, Krehbiel 1998). Economic studies of tax policy have likewise suggested that congressional elections bias policy toward the middle class (Stigler 1970, Przeworski and Stokes 1999). Therefore, when competition is the highest, I expect policy to become more reflective of middle-income interests.

**Hypothesis 3:** *As intra-chamber competition increases, majority party responsiveness will tend to increase for middle-income constituents at a higher rate than for other income levels.*

## 3.3 Ideological Distance and Responsiveness

Political polarization also likely has an effect on representation, given that policy enactments are more difficult when party leaders must appeal to a broader coalition (Enns et al. 2013). I therefore make the assumption that responsiveness will decrease as ideological distance grows.

**Hypothesis 4:** *Ideological division will be negatively related to responsiveness for all groups.*

## 4 Methodology

I will test these hypotheses by examining policy enactments in the U.S. Senate from 1981-2002. The Senate is in a unique position for examining the intersection of representation and competition. First, because all policy must pass the 60-vote filibuster, the Senate can be considered the limiting factor in whether a policy is enacted. Therefore, changes in policy are likely to be most dependent on institutional circumstances in the Senate. Second, the Senate is elected to six-year terms, meaning that only one-third of Senators are up for reelection every year. Because Senate elections increasingly occur as national ‘waves’ (Campbell 2011), the need to defend more seats at the end of the six-year term often creates an artificial advantage for one party. Therefore, in contrast to the House’s two-year elections, the Senate class designations mean that simple seat advantages may not be truly reflective of a majority party’s advantage. Finally, in contrast to the vast institutional control that House leaders hold over their members, Senators are considered free to vote without fear of party coercion. This allows for a clearer view of individual decision-making, and provides for a more credible theoretical claim should competitive parties be found to alter representational strategies.

### 4.1 Constituent Preferences and Policy Outcomes

The most consistent question in studying representation in Congress is how to define effective representation. The norm in recent research has been to measure representation as the agreement between constituent preferences and their individual representative’s roll-call voting record (see: Griffin and Newman 2005). However, given that this study examines behavior of political parties as collective units, a more appropriate measure would be policy outcomes enacted by the entire chamber.

In order to measure the link between constituent preferences and policy outcomes, I will use survey responses on specific policies considered by Congress for the years 1981-2002. These questions ask for constituent approval of specific government policy, and are weighted according to income quintiles at the time of the survey’s administration. These questions are then assigned a binary value indicating whether the policy was subsequently enacted by Congress.<sup>1</sup>

There is also a control variable, ‘Ideological Disagreement’, which measures the difference in 1st dimension DW-Nominate scores between the median Senator and the Senator at the 60th percentile from the majority party. As the 60th Senator is the last required vote to sustain a filibuster, policy change should be representative of their

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<sup>1</sup> Thank you to Dr. Martin Gilens at Princeton University for providing this data. It can be accessed at <https://www.russellsage.org/economic-inequality-and-political-representation>

ideology relative to the median (Krehbiel 1998). Although an imperfect measure, controlling for this score should reduce the influence of ideological gridlock on policy outcomes.

The comparative influence of citizens is measured as the likelihood that an increase in support will result in the policy’s enactment. This is denoted with the following logistic regression model:

$$\text{Logit}(\text{Policy Enactment}) = \beta_0 + \beta_1(\text{Preference}) + \beta_2(\text{Ideological Distance}) + u \quad (4.1)$$

Therefore, the logit regression coefficient will be a measure of the elasticity of policy change to change in preferences. This model will be run for each income quintile, yielding five scores at the 10th, 30th, 50th, 70th and 90th predicted income percentiles.

## 4.2 Measuring Political Competition

Most measures of political competition assume the majority party seat margin as the primary measure of political competition (see: Lee 2016, Gilens 2011). However, in the context of principal-agent behavioral theories, the more relevant measure of political competition is the expected electoral differential—the level of expectation by the majority party that control of the chamber will switch following the next election.

Roughly one-third of the Senate is up for reelection every year. However, only a certain proportion of these seats can be considered competitive—defined here as having an average margin of victory of less than 5 points for presidential candidates in the last two elections. For the majority party to retain control of the chamber, it must win enough of these competitive seats to maintain control of the Senate. It can do this either by successfully defending its own competitive seats or flipping a seat held by a minority party senator. The likelihood that either party will win a seat is assumed to be the percentage approval rating of the incumbent president of the same party (or the disapproval rating for presidents of opposite parties).

This measure can be expressed as a cumulative binomial distribution function:

$$\sum_{k=n(maj)-\pi}^n \binom{n}{k} x^k (1-x)^{n-k} \quad (4.2)$$

In which  $n$  is equal to the total number of competitive seats defended by both parties,  $n(maj)$  is the number of competitive seats defended by the majority, and  $\pi$  is the majority party seat margin. Therefore,  $k$  is the number of competitive seats the majority must win

to retain control of the Senate. Presidential approval rate (disapproval if divided government) is denoted as  $x$ . This is based on findings that one of the primary determinants of congressional elections is the popularity of the incumbent President (Jacobson and Carson 2015).

This measure can be accurately described as a joint probability function: of all possible outcomes, what is the probability that the majority will not win enough state level races to retain control of the chamber? While an admittedly imperfect measure, this variable improves upon the current method of using majority seat margin as a proxy for competitiveness. For the period 1981-2002, the size of the majority had a -0.24 correlation with a shift in control of the Senate; the competitiveness measure described above had a 0.38 correlation with a shift in control.<sup>2</sup> These comparisons are detailed below:

Table 1: Results from Competitiveness Function

Year	Probability of Shift	Seat Margin	Senate Flipped?
1982	96.0%	3	No
1984	0.1%	5	No
1986	64.7%	3	Yes
1988	18.6%	5	No
1990	0.4%	5	No
1992	0.0%	6	No
1994	42.5%	7	Yes
1996	88.0%	2	No
1998	28.4%	5	No
2000	61.2%	5	No
2002	96.3%	1	Yes

Competition is then treated as an intervening variable, in order to test if responsiveness changes depending on political competition. This is expressed in the following logistic regression model:

$$\begin{aligned}
 \text{Logit}(\text{Policy Enactment}) = & \beta_0 + \beta_1(\text{Preference}) + \beta_2(\text{Ideological Distance}) \\
 & + \beta_3(\text{Competition}) + \beta_4(\text{Preference} * \text{Competition}) + u
 \end{aligned}
 \tag{4.3}$$

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<sup>2</sup> Thank you to Jacob F.H. Smith at University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill for pointing out the weak correlations between majority party size and chamber competitiveness.

Finally, in order to investigate potential agenda-setting strategies, I split policies by levels of agreement. Low-agreement policies are defined as one or more quintiles having above a 10-point difference in approval; high-agreement policies are all those below a ten-point difference. Finally, as with differences in income, each regression is run using preferences for each quintile.

## 5 Results

### 5.1 Responsiveness by Income Percentile

The logistic regression model indicates positive results for all income quintiles: as preferences become more positive, the likelihood that a policy will be enacted increases. However, these results were not consistent across all income groups. Most notably, the logistic regression coefficient was larger at the highest income quintiles. This indicates that changes in constituent preferences are more influential on government policy at higher income levels. These differences are expressed graphically in Figure 1.

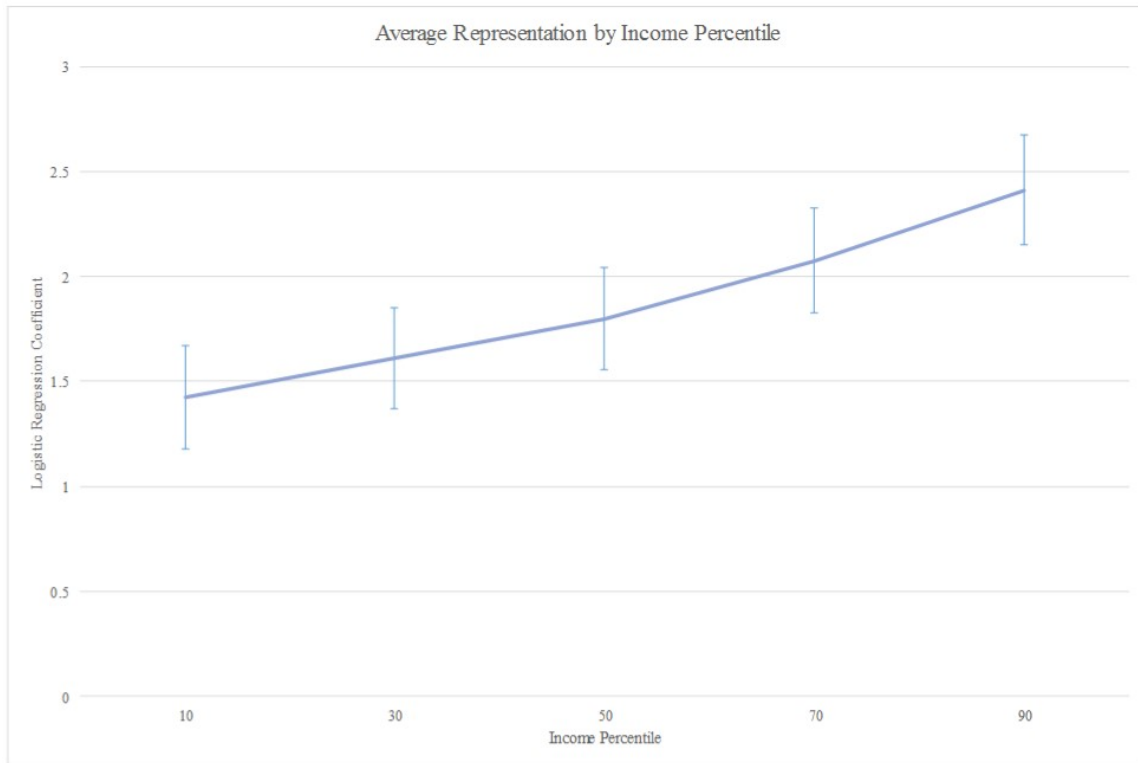


Figure 1: Policy Responsiveness by Income Level

These results indicate that income is a salient factor in a constituent’s ability to shape government policy, with higher income constituents better able to shape policy. However, do these differentials shift in response to increased political competition? I include political competition as an intervening variable, and generate second-degree polynomial predictions for the logistic regression coefficient. These results are expressed in Figure 2.

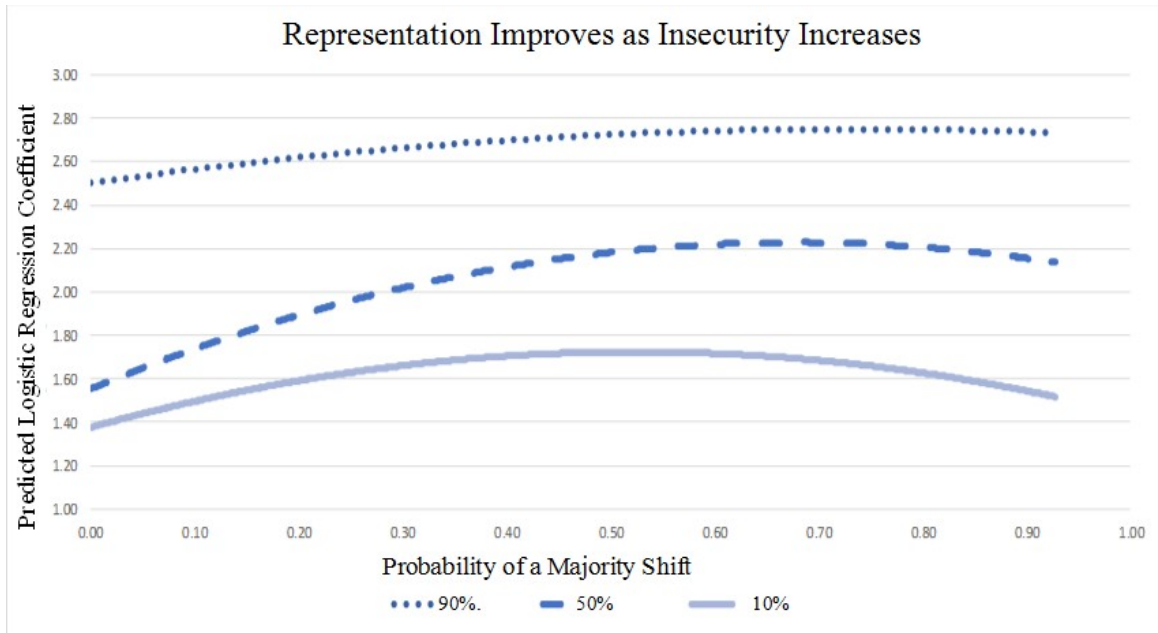


Figure 2: Policy Representation Under Competitive Conditions

Intervening preferences with political competition yields similar differentials to the restricted model, in that constituents at the 90th income percentile experience the greatest influence over government policy, followed by constituents at the 50th and 10th income percentiles. The 90th income percentile improves slightly under greater political competition, but remains relatively stable. The 50th income percentile improves significantly to  $P=0.70$ , at which it decreases slightly. The 10th income percentile experiences a diminished increase before a drop at  $P=0.55$ , but remains largely stable.

Given limits in plenary time and assuming economic policymaking must include tradeoffs between groups. This zero-sum nature of economic policymaking would imply that increases in responsiveness to one group would result in decreases in responsiveness to other groups. This contrasts with the above findings: low- and middle-income preferences increase as political competitiveness increases, but high-income preferences do not decrease.

## 5.2 Agenda-Setting Effects

This finding is subject to potential claims of endogeneity. Because marginal Senators running for reelection are more responsive to middle-income preferences (Flavin 2011) and political competition increases semi-linearly with the number of Senators running for reelection, the observed effects may indicate the cumulative behavior of marginal Senators rather than a party-level strategy.

This claim undoubtedly creates partial effects in responsiveness, but it is still likely that the increase in responsiveness occurs at the party-level. First, the increase in responsiveness is non-linear, which is consistent with party leaders viewing decreasing marginal returns to responsiveness; if this were a cumulative effect, we would expect the increase to occur linearly. Second, due to the decreasing marginal effects, there is a decrease in responsiveness after  $P=0.70$ , which indicates the point at which party leaders may partially decrease responsiveness to focus on policy priorities given the high likelihood of losing power (for a similar discussion of this phenomenon with respect to presidential administrations, see Canes-Wrone and Shotts (2004)). Again, if the results were due to a cumulative effect, it is extremely unlikely that any decrease would occur.

One potential explanation could be found in agenda-setting: majority parties opting to promote more widely popular legislation in place of divisive policy. In order to test this effect, I compare the effects of high-agreement legislation with low-agreement legislation. This effect is detailed in Table 1.

Table 2: Logistic Regression with Interaction Effect

	Low_Policy_Agreement			High_Policy_Agreement		
	[1]	[2]	[3]	[1]	[2]	[3]
90th Income Percentile	2.214*** (0.756)	–	–	1.711*** (0.590)	–	–
50th Income Percentile	–	0.864 (0.661)	–	–	1.444*** (0.557)	–
10th Income Percentile	–	–	0.279 (0.648)	–	–	1.464** (0.584)
Competition	-0.031 (0.734)	-0.178 (0.672)	0.287 (0.645)	-1.120* (0.674)	-0.987 (0.640)	-1.194* (0.667)
Preference*Competition	0.583 (1.264)	0.877 (1.150)	(0.030) (1.145)	2.724** (1.075)	2.493** (1.013)	2.881*** (1.201)
Ideological Distance	-4.217***	-3.59***	-3.425***	-4.517***	-4.275***	– 4.519***

	(1.146)	(1.115)	(1.108)	(1.064)	(1.053)	(1.060)
Cons.	-0.922 (0.526)	-0.315 (0.498)	-0.0219 (0.486)	-0.758 (0.675)	-0.657 (0.445)	-0.599 (0.454)
N	826	826	826	1,010	1,010	1,010

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\* p<0.1; \*\* p<0.05; \*\*\*p<0.001

These results indicate an agenda-setting effect. For low-agreement policy, preferences are only statistically significant for constituents in the 90th percentile—preferences for the 50th and 10th percentiles are insignificant. The interaction effect—measuring the relationship between preferences and competition—is insignificant for all groups.

Areas with high-agreement policy demonstrate statistically significant relationships for preferences at all income levels. Likewise, the interaction effect is statistically significant for all income levels, indicating that preferences on high-agreement policies are more salient under conditions of increased political competition.

## 6 Alternative Approaches

One of the central concepts discussed in studies of Congress—what it means to be well represented—is a topic of hot debate. This study examines the link between a constituent and his or her representative as primarily policy-oriented: defining representative behavior as supporting and advocating for policies most preferred by the majority of constituents.

This measure has its drawbacks. Representation is a multifaceted concept. Constituents think of their representatives as advocates, local celebrities, ombudsmen, and even personal friends (Ansolabehere and Jones 2013). This measure of representation does not include legislation that a representative introduces, nor how much federal funding a representative brings to his or her district. It certainly does not include a representative’s success as a civic or moral leader. However, because the primary goal of a representative body is the creation of policy, it is most suitable to view representation through a policy lens.

This approach too has its controversies. Representation in this study—and as the norm in Congressional studies—is the link between constituent preferences and policy outcomes. Theories of republicanism, however, also emphasize the ‘trustee’ model of representation: in which a representative’s behavior is informed by their own judgment and experience to serve the long-term public interest.



Several recent studies have indicated that representatives often switch between the trustee and delegate models (Fox and Shotts 2007, 2-19) with different policy domains being more suited to a particular mode of action (Woldesenbet 2006). Studies of trustee representation—while carrying interesting implications—are methodologically inaccessible using this data. Policy preferences are point-in-time measurements of a single constituent’s opinion. Data examining a trustee model of representation would need to demonstrate how preferences evolve over time, or provide a measure of the objective impact of policies for constituents’ financial and social well-being. Such a study, while not inconceivable, cannot be carried out with the present data.

There are also methodological concerns over collinearity between the preferences of different income groups. As noted in Branham, Soroka, and Wlezien (2016), preferences on policies rarely diverge between income-groups. Therefore, findings of increased responsiveness—as in this study—would overstate what would only be marginal differences in approval.

This study circumvents this problem by separating policy based on divergence of preferences, thereby examining influence under conditions of agreement and conflict. Because influence is measured dynamically—the likelihood of a change in policy to a change in preferences—examining responsiveness on the margins is a more effective approach.

## **7 Implications and Future Research**

These findings contain significant normative implication. The finding that policy is more responsive to the preferences of the wealthy does not reflect well the status of political equality in the United States. One of the fundamental tenets of a republican form of government holds that representatives should not favor certain classes of citizens when crafting policy (Madison 1788). This study has indicated that, under nearly all conditions, majority parties exhibit bias in policy-making, with substantive implications.

Examining a similar question, Martin Gilens and Benjamin Page (2014) arrive at the conclusion that the United States would be better categorized as an oligarchy. That the preferences of the majority carry less influence than a small and affluent elite undermines basic justifications for representative democracy and contributes to the lack of trust in government.

This finding also has implications for the craft of economic policy, as theories of public finance rely on an assumed impartiality toward constituents. Finally, these findings contain strategic implications for the passage of policy, as they indicate the circumstances under which legislation benefiting low- and middle-income constituents is most likely to pass.

One potential solution to this problem would be to shift from preferences for policy to implications of policy. For example, assuming constant levels of government spending and deficits, changes in tax policy would have preferential effects of select groups. Studying congressional decision-making from a policy perspective would therefore be a more realistic measure of representation.

## **8 Conclusion**

This data indicates that middle-income preferences do improve with increased political competition, but that policy remains preferentially responsive to high-income preferences. Additionally, much of the perceived effect can be accounted for as electorally-conscious agenda-setting by the majority party.

This finding can inform many of the current debates on congressional behavior. Because majorities are unresponsive to middle-income preferences when competition is low, it would follow that stronger and more frequent competition will force behavior toward the majority.

Likewise, many of the mechanisms of representation have intrinsic bias. Although its effects are a subject of continued debate, the modern necessity of campaign fundraising creates incentives for preferential representation. Legal reforms to campaign financing laws would likely dampen this effect.

Similarly, the significant personal and professional time constraints involved with running for political office mean that low- and middle-income constituents do not have the means to directly influence policy. Those who are able to run for political office tend to be from privileged backgrounds, with substantive implications for the policies they champion and support (Carnes 2013).

The work of advocacy organizations such as EMILY's List and WISH have been effective at increasing the number of women legislators in both parties—it is not unreasonable to expect that a similar effort could increase the number of working-class legislators.

Finally, these differences in influence affect the quality and effectiveness of enacted policies. Scholars have already demonstrated that the U.S. Congress cannot effectively address its most pressing issues due to partisan polarization and resistance from wealthy interest groups (Hacker and Pierson 2006).

Understanding how parties may prioritize constituents differently under certain circumstances advances our knowledge of policy-making decisions and improves our ability to shape the institutions tasked with our representation.

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