

Government's Unequal Attentiveness to Citizens' Political Priorities*

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Abstract:

An accumulation of evidence suggests citizens with low incomes have relatively little influence over the policy decisions made by lawmakers in the United States. However, long before elected officials are asked to cast a final vote on a bill's passage, an equally important decision has already been made: the decision for government to focus its limited attention and agenda space on the issue at all. Therefore, it is possible that political inequality is infused earlier in the policymaking process at the agenda setting stage if the issues held important by some citizens are given attention while the issues held important by others are not. To investigate this question, we develop novel state-level measures of citizens' issue priorities and find sizable differences in which issues poor and rich citizens think are most important and deserving of government attention. We then use bill introduction data from state legislatures to measure government attention and uncover evidence that state legislators are less likely to act on an issue when it is prioritized by low income citizens as compared to affluent citizens. These findings have important implications for our understanding of political equality and the functioning of American democracy.

Keywords: inequality, representation, public opinion, public policy, agenda setting, state politics

Political equality is a cornerstone of democratic theory. For example, Sidney Verba (2003, 663) declares, “One of the bedrock principles in a democracy is the equal consideration of the preferences and interests of all citizens.” However, a growing body of research has uncovered evidence that the political opinions of citizens with lower incomes receive relatively little consideration in government policy decisions compared to the opinions of more affluent citizens (Bartels 2008; Flavin 2012; Gilens 2012; Gilens and Page 2014; Hacker and Pierson 2010; Kelly 2009; Winters and Page 2009). These studies suggest that when it comes to the linkage between citizens and their elected officials, the United States exhibits signs of an “unequal democracy.”

To date, scholars of unequal political influence have focused their attention almost exclusively on the relationship between citizens’ stated political preferences and either the roll call voting behavior of elected officials (Bartels 2008) or the aggregated policy decisions made by government (Gilens 2012). When the political opinions of citizens are disaggregated into different income groups, the opinions of affluent citizens tend to be a stronger predictor of government action when compared with the opinions of citizens with low incomes. Yet, long before elected officials are asked to cast a final vote on a bill’s passage, an equally important decision has already been made: the decision for government to focus its limited attention and agenda space on the issue at all (Kingdon 1984). As Jones, Larsen-Price, and Wilkerson (2009, 278) observe, “policymaking consists of a series of stages, from agenda-setting through decision-making to final policy action. If representation is limited, is it because issues are denied access to the agenda or because they fail during decision-making?” In this context, it is possible that political inequality is infused earlier in the policymaking process at the agenda setting stage if

the issues held important by some citizens are given attention while the issues held important by others are not.

In this paper, we attempt to provide a more complete portrait of unequal political influence in the United States by investigating two interrelated questions: (1) Do rich and poor citizens have different priorities about which issues most deserve the government's attention? (2) If so, are elected officials less likely to pay attention to, and take action on, the issues prioritized by citizens with lower incomes? Using nationally representative surveys that query respondents' political priorities and multilevel modeling and post-stratification to impute state-specific priorities for different income groups, we first demonstrate that there are sizable differences in which issues poor and rich citizens think are most important and deserving of government attention. Additionally, we show that the differences in issue priorities between income groups vary from state to state. After establishing that political priorities differ by income group and across states, we then investigate if there is an income bias in whose priorities state governments respond to. Using legislative bill introductions as a measure of government attention/action, we find evidence that state legislators are less likely to place an issue on the agenda when it is prioritized by low income citizens as compared to wealthy citizens. These findings reveal that inequity enters the policymaking process early on in the agenda setting stage and suggest that previous studies (that focus on unequal representation in government policy decisions) understate the degree of political inequality in the United States.

Background and Theoretical Expectations

Political scientists and political observers more generally have long warned that political representation in the United States is tainted by an upper class bias such that wealthier citizens have more influence over government policy decisions than the poor (e.g., Schattschneider 1960;

Dahl 1961). But, as the American Political Science Association Taskforce on Inequality and American Democracy (Jacobs and Skocpol 2005, 124) lamented: “Unfortunately, political scientists have done surprisingly little to investigate the extent of actual inequalities of government responsiveness to public opinion – that is, whether distinct segments of the country exert more influence than others.” A series of recent studies have sought to correct this problem and more fully understand unequal political influence in the United States. For example, Bartels (2008) demonstrates that the opinions of affluent constituents strongly predict the voting behavior of their Senators while the opinions of those with low incomes display little or no relationship.¹ Gilens (2012) collects data from thousands of individual public opinion poll questions and finds that subsequent federal government policy decisions disproportionately reflect the views of the affluent, and this is especially true when the preferences of the rich and poor diverge. He concludes that congruence between the political opinions of the poor and government policy tends to arise only in instances where the poor share similar attitudes with the wealthy. Investigations into unequal political representation at the state level (Rigby and Wright 2011; Flavin 2012) have tended to come to similar conclusions. In short, there is a growing body of empirical evidence that shows the stated opinions of citizens with low incomes tend to receive little attention in government policy decisions.

Studies that assess unequal political representation are built on the fundamental premise that the “haves” and “have-nots” (Key 1949) possess different opinions about what the government should do in concrete policy areas like health care, education, tax policy, and income assistance to the poor. However, this assertion has been the subject of debate. For example, Soroka and Wlezien (2008, 319) compare citizens’ opinions on government spending

¹ Ellis (2012) finds a similar income bias in political representation for members of the House of Representatives.

and find that “differences in preferences across income brackets are in fact small and insignificant,” especially when compared to differences across education levels and partisan identification. Similarly, Ura and Ellis (2008) construct a general measure of ideological policy mood and find that wealthier Americans are more ideologically conservative than poorer citizens but the difference in opinion liberalism between each income quartile is rather modest. In contrast, Gilens (2009) uncovers substantial “preference gaps” between the rich and the poor (defined as citizens at the ninetieth and tenth income percentiles, respectively) that are especially large for welfare spending and the government’s role in income redistribution. Given this ongoing debate, any study that examines unequal political influence must first grapple with the question of whether the rich and poor have noticeably different political opinions to begin with.

Equally important to what citizens profess they want government to do for a particular issue is what issues citizens want government to focus on in the first place. Despite the importance of agenda setting for both the political science and public policy literatures (Kingdon 1984), to date there has been little attention paid to the linkage between citizens’ political priorities and government attention/action. This is an unfortunate omission because the decision about which issues are placed on the agenda and brought up for debate is arguably just as important (and perhaps even more so) as the decision about what government should do about a particular issue. Indeed, some of the seminal works in the study of American politics (e.g., Bachrach and Baratz 1962; Schattschneider 1960) focus on this “second face” of political power – the power to place an item on the political agenda or, conversely, deny it from ever becoming part of public debate in the first place.

Schattschneider (1960) believed one of the more important aspects of agenda control is the ability to limit the scope of conflict, which he viewed as central to the political process.

Those with the capacity to shape the political agenda are able to determine which issues are debated, the way that issues are discussed, and eventually which issues become public policy. The issues that are a part of the political agenda are those considered to be public problems that the government can and should address. Political issues kept off of the agenda are often considered private problems that are outside the scope of government intervention, or they are issues that are simply not important enough to be addressed. For an issue to become important enough to emerge onto the agenda it is often the perception of the problem that has to change rather than a change in the problem itself. For example, Baumgartner and Jones (1993) show that poverty was a relatively minor public issue in the 1950s, but became a central public problem in the 1960s. The reason for the change of importance had little to do with actual changes in poverty. Instead, the shift of focus was due to the change in perception of poverty as being a structural issue that should be addressed by the government (also see Gaventa 1980). Because of the crucial role that agenda setting plays in the American public policymaking process, we contend that it deserves further attention as a possible contributor to “unequal democracy.”

The most prominent empirical study to date (Jones, Larsen-Price, and Wilkerson 2009) on the importance of agenda setting for evaluating democratic responsiveness finds that government is generally attentive to the public’s (aggregated) political priorities and this is especially true for political venues with low levels of “friction” such as committee hearings, State of the Union speeches, and bill introductions (as compared to, for example, enacted legislation). However, the study treats citizens’ priorities as uniform regardless of demographic characteristics. In contrast, with a particular focus on political inequality in American democracy we are interested (1) if rich and poor citizens prioritize political issues differently and (2) if so, whether elected officials are less attentive to the priorities of disadvantaged citizens by

disproportionately leaving the issues they prioritize most off the political agenda. Answering these questions will, we believe, contribute to a more comprehensive understanding about the different ways in which inequality can enter into the American policymaking process.

From a theoretical standpoint, we expect political priorities to differ based on citizens' incomes for three primary reasons. First, people with different incomes have, by definition, different material circumstances and, therefore, different interests in regards to how the government can assist them (Hacker 2002). For example, whereas in a wealthy household there is likely little concern about day-to-day survival and purchasing basic consumer goods, this can become a persisting and daily anxiety for people further down the nation's income distribution. As a consequence, people with lower incomes are likely to prioritize government attention toward the issues of poverty and unemployment. Put simply, different life experiences between the affluent and the poor likely lead them to adopt different political priorities.

Second, political priorities likely vary across income groups because, in general, a person's social networks are closely tied to their own economic status. Living in an affluent neighborhood and socializing in an environment primarily made up of others from affluent backgrounds helps to crystallize similar views about which political issues are more important than others (Baldassarri and Bearman 2007). In the same way, living in a low income neighborhood composed largely of people from disadvantaged backgrounds will have the same crystallizing effect on priorities. If so, then the increasing economic segregation in housing patterns in the United States (Dreier, Mollenkopf, and Swanstrom 2001) may lead to increasing consolidation of political priorities and opinions among citizens with similar economic situations as citizens essentially "sort" themselves by socioeconomic status (Jargowsky 1996; Gimpel and Schuknecht 2001, 2003; Bishop 2009).

Third, the two major political parties in the United States at least partly target their policy messages and mobilization efforts based on demographic characteristics like income status. Given that Democrats traditionally receive greater support among citizens with lower incomes while more affluent individuals tend to give greater support to the Republican Party (McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2006; Bartels 2008; Gelman, Park, Shor, Bafumi, and Cortina, 2009), the two parties do what we would expect vote-maximizing agents to do by identifying this preexisting support and targeting their electoral messages accordingly. To the extent that the political signals sent by campaigns and elected officials help to shape and inform the political priorities and opinions of the public (Hill and Hurley 1999; Hurley and Hill 2003), these targeted efforts by political parties may serve to further reinforce and even exacerbate differences in political priorities across income groups.

Moreover, we expect that elected officials will, in turn, be unresponsive to the priorities of the poor, for several theoretical reasons. First, the most common explanation for unequal political representation is the fact that the more affluent tend to participate more in politics—whether it be voting, volunteering for a campaign, contacting elected officials, or any other participatory act—compared to disadvantaged citizens (Verba and Nie 1972; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980; Rosenstone and Hanson 1993; Verba, Scholzman, and Brady 1995). If elected officials are more responsive to citizens who actively get involved in politics (Martin 2003; Griffin and Newman 2005) and affluent citizens are significantly more likely to get involved than citizens with low incomes, then the fact that elected officials are more responsive to the political priorities and opinions of their high income constituents should come as little surprise.

Second, it is well established that wealthier citizens (and the groups that represent their interests) are more likely to contribute to political campaigns than citizens with low incomes

(Bonica, McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2013; Schlozman, Verba, and Brady 2012; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). Although political scientists have uncovered little evidence that campaign contributions can outright “buy” the roll call votes of policymakers (for a review, see Ansolabehere, de Figueiredo, and Snyder 2003), there is ample evidence suggesting contributions exert sway behind the scenes by influencing who legislators agree to meet with, what issues they focus on, and how they allocate their scarce time while in office (Langbein 1986; Hall and Wayman 1990; Schram 1995; Makinson 2003; Witko 2006; Baumgartner et al. 2009; Powell 2012). Therefore, the vast disparities in campaign contributions are most likely to manifest themselves not at the policy decision stage (which tends to receive the most attention from political scientists) but, instead, early on in the policymaking process when elected officials decide which issues they will place on the political agenda and devote their attention to while in office.

Third, a series of studies over several decades have documented the high proportion of business and other for-profit interests among lobbyists, interest organizations, and political action committees (Schattschneider 1960; Schlozman and Tierney 1986; Thomas and Hrebemar 1990; Gray and Lowery 1996), leading Gray, Lowery, Fellowes, and McAtee (2004, 412) to conclude that, “It is clear that the distribution of interests represented before government is not isomorphic with the distribution of interests in society.” Because these organized interests tend to over-represent the political priorities and opinions of affluent citizens compared to citizens with low incomes, this “unequal chorus” likely plays an important role in exacerbating political inequality by ensuring that legislators are keenly aware of the political priorities of high income citizens and can then act on them in office. In contrast, citizens with low incomes typically do

not enjoy these organizational advantages and, as result, elected officials will be less attentive to the issues they prioritize as important.

Fourth, previous studies of the news media's impact on the agenda setting phase of the policymaking process suggest that media outlets disproportionately focus attention on political issues prioritized by more affluent citizens and business interests (Entman 2007; McChesney 2015). This focus, in turn, likely has some influence on which issues legislators decide to focus their attention on while in office because media reports are often consequential in calling both the public and political elites' attention to a given issue (Kingdon 1984). Simply stated, an upper class bias in media coverage likely contributes to an upper class bias in agenda setting among politicians.

Fifth, recent research reveals that citizens from working class and low income backgrounds are strikingly underrepresented both in Congress and in state legislatures across the nation (Carnes 2012, 2013). From a political equality standpoint, this underrepresentation is important because legislators from these backgrounds are the most likely to pay attention to issues that are important to, and prioritized by, disadvantaged citizens. Simply put, because elected officials tend to be of higher socioeconomic status than the public at large, it should come as no surprise that they are less likely to focus on issues prioritized by citizens with low incomes.

Measuring Citizens' Political Priorities

To examine whether the issue priorities of the rich and the poor differ and if government is less responsive to the priorities of the poor, we need a viable measure of public issue priorities. For a number of reasons we use aggregate estimates of public priorities at the state level to assess our two central research questions, each of which is related to our theoretical expectations for

why issue priorities are likely to vary across income groups. First, within each of the American states are 50 unique political and economic environments that can potentially shape the perceptions of their respective residents. Variation in material circumstances may not only differ across income groups, but the experiences of the rich and poor can also vary from one state to another. For instance, the political and economic context of one state might create an environment where it is particularly difficult for those with few resources to access health care while the disadvantaged in another state are much more concerned about unemployment, creating two distinct sets of political priorities.

The unique economic settings of the states can also influence the development of social networks among the rich and the poor. One particular reason to expect variations in interpersonal contact across the states is the very different levels of economic segregation in U.S. communities that has been well documented in recent years (e.g., Bishop 2009; Reardon and Bischoff 2011; Watson 2009). Individuals living in relatively segregated neighborhoods are likely to have different political and social experiences than those living in less segregated areas, which can lead to contrasting issue priorities. Finally, the various economic and political environments of the states are likely to produce variations in priorities among party organizations and interest groups (Berry et al. 1998; Brown 1995; Gray and Lowery 1996; Rigby and Wright 2013; Witko and Newmark 2005). These priority differences among political elites will in turn lead to distinct priorities across the states. In other words, while we can think of commonalities among the issues addressed by Democrats and Republicans and economic interest groups, for instance, the focus of these groups varies from one state to another, potentially leading to distinct public priorities.

Measuring the issue priorities of the American public at the state level presents at least two challenges. The first is identifying a survey question (or set of survey questions) that appropriately captures the concept of a political priority. For the purposes of our study, we conceptualize the public's political priorities as simply those issues that are most important to the residents of a given state. Measuring issue importance may seem relatively straightforward, but concerns about some of the most common survey questions designed to assess political importance have been called into question (see Wlezien 2005). One of the more established questions used to examine the priorities of the public asks respondents what they view as the "most important problem" facing the nation. Although this particular question has been asked by a number of polling organizations dating back to the 1940s, it is not necessarily clear what concept this question actually measures since it conflates the two potentially separate ideas of political importance and political problems (Wlezien 2005).

Additionally, the "most important problem" question typically asks for open-ended responses. This is not inherently problematic from a survey research perspective but in this case the open-ended responses tend to be very broad in nature, with most people stating that the most important political problem is either the economy or foreign affairs (Jones et al. 2009). The main obstacle to assessing priorities with such vague responses is that most individuals likely have opinions on the importance of a variety of more specific policy issues that are directly relevant to how government addresses public issues. For example, it may not be particularly informative to know that most people think the economy is an important issue. If the public has differing opinions on the importance of taxation and the importance of unemployment, however, we may be more inclined to expect a relationship between public priorities and whether politicians focus on the cost of health care or cutting taxes.

We address this first obstacle to measuring priorities by identifying two survey questions that (1) ask about the importance of specific political issues and (2) only ask about the importance of the issue without obscuring answers by asking respondents to consider multiple concepts (e.g., whether the issue is an “important political problem”). The first set of questions was asked on four separate surveys conducted in 2006 and 2007, and the second set of questions were asked on three surveys in 2011 and 2012. The questions asked in 2006-2007 ask about the following issues: same-sex marriage, immigration, abortion, the economy, taxes, and health care. The second set of questions also ask about the importance of same-sex marriage, immigration, and abortion, while additionally asking about poverty, the minimum wage, and crime.²

The second measurement problem we face is producing accurate estimates of issue priorities at the state level. Most surveys, including the polls described above, are designed to be representative of the U.S. and typically obtain sample sizes of around 1,000 to 1,500 respondents. Using traditional disaggregation techniques to measure issue priorities—that is, estimating priorities by calculating the mean responses from state subsamples—would be problematic since we would not have nearly enough respondents from each state to construct legitimate estimates of state opinion. To compound the issue, we are particularly interested in examining the priorities of the rich and the poor, which would require us to further disaggregate opinion within each state by income groups.

Fortunately, advances in the estimation of public opinion allow us to create more precise estimates of state public priorities using available survey data. Multilevel regression and post-stratification (MRP) is a measurement strategy that allows for the estimation of aggregate state opinion using typical national surveys and multivariate regression. Research has shown that

² See Appendix Table A.1 for details about the surveys including question wording, sample size, and coding.

MRP provides accurate estimates of state opinion even when using a single national survey (Lax and Phillips 2009a; 2009b; 2012; Park et al. 2004, 2006). This is the approach used here to create unique measures of state public priorities for the rich and the poor.

Estimating priorities using MRP involves two steps. The first is to model individual responses to the survey question of interest—in this case, for instance, whether individuals think health care is an important issue—using multilevel regression. In all instances the dependent variable, which will be one of the several questions asking about issue importance described above, will be modeled as a dichotomous variable using logistic regression. The covariates in these models include basic demographic and geographic characteristics of the survey respondents. Similar to previous work, our study uses the following individual characteristics to model issue importance: income (quartiles), race (three categories: black, white, or other), gender (two categories: female or male), age (four categories: 18-29, 30-44, 45-64, or 65+), education (four categories: less than high school graduate, high school graduate, some college, or college graduate), and state of residence. Additionally, state unemployment is included as a level-two (or macro-level) covariate in the regression models.³ Simple categorical representations of these characteristics are used in the models to allow for weighting after the models are estimated. This is the post-stratification step, which is discussed below in more detail.

To summarize, each dependent variable y is modeled as a function of individual (i) and state (j) characteristics using the following multilevel structure:

³ In some cases, the importance of an issue was asked about more than once in given time period. For example, each of the four surveys from the 2006-2007 period asks about the importance of immigration (see Appendix Table A.1). When this is the case, the responses from all of these surveys are pooled prior to estimating the multilevel model.

$$\Pr(\text{Priority}_{ij} = 1) = \text{logit}^{-1}(\gamma_{00} + \gamma_{10}\text{race}_{ij} + \gamma_{20}\text{gender}_{ij} + \gamma_{30}\text{age}_{ij} + \gamma_{40}\text{educ}_{ij} + \gamma_{10}\text{income}_{ij} + \gamma_{01}\text{unemp}_{1j} + u_{0j} + u_{1j}\text{income}_{ij} + e_{ij})$$

where the variable *Priority* represents each of the importance of each political issue being evaluated. The model nests respondents within states and the state estimates are also modeled as a function of state-level unemployment rates. The γ estimates can be thought of as the fixed portions of the model while the u terms can be considered random effects. The u_{0j} term simply indicates that the model intercept can vary by state. The second random term included in the model, u_{1j} , allows the effect of income on issue priorities to also vary by state (this is estimated as the difference from the overall average effect of income, which is provided by the γ_{10} term). Modeling income as a random component is essential for our research since this will allow us to determine not only whether issue priorities are different for low and high income groups, but also if these differences are more pronounced in some states as compared to others.

The results of each model are then used to predict the probability of viewing each issue as a priority. These probabilities are used in the second step of the estimation, which is post-stratification. Post-stratification is the process of weighting each individual type probability estimate by the proportion of each type in the population using the 5% Public Use Microdata Samples from the U.S. Census. This part of the procedure adjusts for any differences between the individuals surveyed in each state and the true state population.

Income Group Differences in Issue Priorities Across the States

The result of the MRP procedure is estimates of state public priorities by income quartile for each of the nine issues described above.⁴ A first look at our measures is presented in Tables 1 and 2 for the 2006-2007 and 2011-2012 periods, respectively. The tables show the average percentage of residents across all states that view each issue as a priority. These averages are shown for those with low incomes (the bottom quartile) and those with high incomes (the top quartile) with the difference between the two groups (Low – High) listed in the final column of each table.

[Table 1 about here]

Overall, both tables suggest potentially important differences in issues attitudes between the rich and the poor. When examining Table 1, for instance, we can see that for the issues of same-sex marriage, abortion, and health care, those with lower incomes are around ten percentage points more likely to view these topics as priorities. Consistent with our discussion above related to the general importance of the economy as a political issue, there is close agreement between the two income groups that the economy is a priority. The results found in Table 2 are similar to those in Table 1 for the issues that were asked about in both time periods (i.e., same-sex marriage, immigration, and abortion), but we also see relatively large differences in opinion on poverty, minimum wage, and crime when comparing the rich and the poor. In each

⁴ Since nearly none of the surveys used to calculate issue priorities sampled individuals from Alaska or Hawaii, estimates are not available for these states. Additionally, some surveys did not reach respondents living in other states with small populations. When this is the case estimates were not calculated for the states that were not represented in the survey.

case those with lower incomes are more than 20 percentage points more likely to see the issue as a priority.

[Table 2 about here]

This initial evidence indicates that differences do exist in how the poor and the rich prioritize political issues. Now we ask whether these income differences in priorities vary across the states. This is important to demonstrate before we move on to an analysis that assesses whether the government is unequally responsive to public priorities because unequal responsiveness will be virtually impossible to detect if there is not state variation in the priorities gap. Figures 1-4 provide plots of the extent to which the poor and rich view each issue as a priority. For the 2006-2007 period, some issues clearly produce a wider range of disagreement about their importance than others when comparing the states. The variance of the poor-rich gap in priorities is quite large for same-sex marriage and abortion, for example, with some states having very small differences of opinion on the issues (close to a difference of zero) and others having relatively large disparities of over 15 percentage points (see Figure 1). Alternatively, the issue of taxation (see Figure 2) produces mostly similar differences between the poor and rich across all of the states with the highest levels of disagreement only reaching around seven percentage points.

[Figure 1 about here]

[Figure 2 about here]

Similar variations in the poor-rich priorities gap among the states can be found for the 2011-2012 period. One difference is that the variances in the priorities gaps are relatively

substantial for all of the issues with the exception of same-sex marriage (see Figures 3 and 4).⁵ Altogether, we demonstrate two important findings regarding state public priorities. The first is that the priorities of the poor and the rich can be quite different depending on the issue being considered. For an issue like taxation, the public is mostly in agreement about its importance without much difference across income groups. There is a much larger contrast between the poor and rich, however, when examining the importance of issues like poverty and the minimum wage with lower income groups being much more likely to view these issues as priorities. Second, the gap in priorities between the poor and the rich can vary substantially across the states. Again, the

⁵ When comparing the three issue areas that are examined in both time periods under analysis—that is, same-sex marriage, immigration, and abortion—we can see that the variation in state priorities can be somewhat different from one period to the next. For example, the differences in priorities for the issues of immigration and abortion appear to be greater in 2011-2012 than they are in the 2006-2007 period. It is possible that some of this variation is the product of differences in the question wording used to estimate public priorities in the two periods. The earlier period asks respondents if each issue is “extremely important” or “very important” while the later surveys ask whether people think the issues are “critical issues” (see Table A.1 in the Appendix for full question wordings). However, we also believe it is likely that these deviations reflect real over time changes in the public’s perceptions of these issues as being important. There is some indication, for instance, that the importance of issues related to immigration and abortion changed for some states between 2007 and 2011. In 2010, Arizona passed a bill that was viewed as the most stringent anti-immigration law in the country at the time (Archibold 2010), which was followed by a number of states passing similar legislation. A number of states were also particularly active in adopting restrictive abortion policies after 2010. In fact, more restrictions were enacted between 2011 and 2013 than in the previous 10 years combined (Boonstra and Nash 2014). The point here is that these differences in state activities are likely linked to the public’s priorities and, more generally, that we can reasonably expect priorities across the states to change over time.

extent of this variation depends on the issue under consideration, but some issues produce poor-rich priority gaps that differ by as much as 40 percentage points when comparing the states.

[Figure 3 about here]

[Figure 4 about here]

It should also be noted that for nearly all of the issues we examine our estimates show that the poor are more likely than the rich to view these issues as priorities (the economy in some states is the only exception). This finding is likely due to the nature of the issues that are asked about on the surveys we identified, with many of the issues being more consequential to those with lower incomes. It is not surprising, for instance, that the poor would view political issues like poverty and the minimum wage as being priorities since these issues typically have the most direct influence on those at the bottom of the income ladder. Similarly, considering issues related to crime and health care, those in poverty tend to experience higher rates of crime, social disorders, health issues, and higher mortality rates than the rest of the population (Dreier, Mollenkopf, and Swanstrom 2001; Soss and Jacobs 2009). Even issues that are thought of as having mostly social or cultural characteristics can have economic dimensions. Some have argued, for example, that the recent restrictions placed on abortion access in a number of states are disproportionately having an effect on low income women (Bassett 2014). The main point is that those with lower incomes are more likely to view the limited number of issues we are able to study as priorities when compared with the opinions of the rich. This means that in the analysis below we are mostly limited to making inferences about agenda setting and the poor-rich priorities gap for situations where public priorities diverge and the poor are more likely than the rich to view an issue as important.

Government Responsiveness to Citizens' Political Priorities

Given that political priorities differ across income groups, whose priorities do state governments focus on? As discussed above, for a variety of reasons we expect politicians to be less likely to act on issues when they are important to those with fewer resources. We test this hypothesis in this section by examining the priorities of state legislatures. To understand the link between the priorities of citizens from different income groups and the issues focused on by state elected officials, we use data on the types of bills introduced in state legislatures. Examining bill introductions is a common way to assess the priorities of state (Bratton 2002; Bratton and Haynie 1999; Gray et al. 2005; Lowery et al. 2004) and U.S. lawmakers (Baumgartner and Jones 1993). We use a searchable database maintained by LexisNexis State Capital—which provides a consistent collection of all state legislative bills introduced in the 50 states—to collect bill introductions that address issues that correspond to our measures of citizen priorities.⁶

The number of bills introduced for each issue during the same time periods we measured citizen priorities (i.e., 2006-2007 and 2011-2012) are used as the dependent variables in the following analyses. Since state bill introductions represent traditional count processes we model the introductions as count variables. All of our results are estimated using negative binomial regression models in order to account for overdispersion in the dependent variables (overdispersion was found to be significant for all of our variables). Finally, because some state

⁶ The search terms used to identify bills related to each issue can be found in Appendix Table A.2. Additionally, Table A.3 in the Appendix provides summary statistics for the state bill introductions for each issue and each time period.

legislatures tend to introduce a higher volume of bills than others, we include the total number of state bill introductions in each of the models as an exposure term.⁷

The main explanatory variable used in each of our models is a measure of the extent to which the issue priorities of the poor and rich diverge, which we refer to as the poor-rich priorities gap. Specifically, using the state priority estimates presented in Figures 1-4 our priorities gap variable is created by simply subtracting the percentage of the rich who view an issue as a priority from the percentage of the poor who see the same issue as being important. For instance, Figure 2 demonstrates that around 91% of the poor in Tennessee view health care as priority while 75% of rich Tennessee residents view the same issue as a priority. Our measure takes the difference between these two estimates (i.e., poor minus rich), in this case giving us a value of +16%. Looking at how residents in California prioritize the issue of the economy as

⁷ It should be noted that using bill introductions to account for agenda setting by state government is certainly not the only approach to measuring agendas and does have its limitations. Mainly, any state legislator can introduce a bill without a substantial amount of time or effort, suggesting that the measure cannot account for the degree to which legislators are devoted to the issues included in their bill proposals. An additional way to assess the priorities of state governments would be to study the types of issues addressed by a state's governor, who is another pivotal actor in the policymaking process. We attempted to consider the possible link between the priorities of the public and state governors by examining available data on the issues mentioned in State of the State addresses from 2012 and 2013 (Gehl and Willoughby 2013). However, data limitations prevented us from using governor speeches as an additional indicator of government priorities. The first limitation is that for the time period where speech data are available, only two issues mentioned in governor speeches matched our available measures of public priorities (i.e., immigration and crime). Second, the governor speech measures only indicate whether a state's governor mentioned a particular issue, as opposed to accounting for the amount of attention devoted to the issue in the speech. For the two issues that are available, we did not find a relationship between the poor-rich priority gap and governor issue mentions in the State of the State address.

another example, about 80% of the poor view the economy as important and 86% of the rich see it as a priority. Taking the difference between these two estimates gives us a preference gap of -6%. More generally, this measure allows us to test whether larger priority gaps between the poor and the rich lead to more (or less) government responsiveness.

An alternative approach to assessing whether state governments respond unequally to citizen priorities would be to include separate measures of issue priorities for the rich and the poor in each model of bill introductions. This would allow us to examine whether there is a stronger relationship between legislature priorities and the priorities of the rich than the priorities of the less well off. The main limitation of testing our hypotheses in this manner is that there is a relatively strong correlation between the priorities of the rich and the poor across the states, which could lead to ambiguous results that are difficult to interpret. Indeed, concerns about high levels of correlation among the political opinions of different groups are common in the literature on political inequality and the literature on political representation more generally (Soroka and Wlezien 2008; Ura and Ellis 2008; Erikson and Bhatti 2011). As one way to address this problem of collinearity, scholars of political representation have combined the two groups' measures into a single variable by taking the difference between them. For example, in an article comparing how well citizens who voted are represented by their U.S. Senator compared to citizens who did not vote, Griffin and Newman (2005, 1215) regressed Senators' voting records on the average ideology of voters in a state minus the average ideology of non-voters in a state and found that "in states where voters are more conservative than nonvoters, Senators tend to be more conservative." Similarly, in our regression models that use the poor-rich priorities gap as the independent variable, we are evaluating if in states where the poor prioritize an issue to a greater extent than the rich, state legislators tend to introduce more (or fewer) bills on that issue.

We use the poor-rich priorities gap measures as the independent variables in a series of regression models with the number of state legislative bill introductions on that issue as the dependent variable. Before even looking to the results, it is important to note that a positive coefficient for the poor-rich priority gap variable would indicate that, across the states, as an issue is prioritized more by poor citizens (relative to rich citizens) there are more bills introduced in the legislature on that issue. Conversely, a negative coefficient for the poor-rich gap would indicate that as an issue is prioritized by more poor citizens there are fewer bills introduced in the legislature on that issue. Finally, a coefficient that is not statistically different from zero would indicate that there is no systematic relationship between the size of the poor-rich priorities gap and the number of bill introductions on that issue.

Tables 3 and 4 present the results of the negative binomial regression models examining the influence of the poor-rich citizen priorities gap on the attention given to issues in state legislatures.⁸ For each issue we estimate a model that includes several variables that are common

⁸ As discussed above, an alternative empirical strategy to using our poor-rich priorities gap measure is to use separate issue priority variables for the rich and the poor. In appendix Tables A.4 and A.5 we report the results of models that replicate our estimates from Tables 3 and 4, but replace the poor-rich priorities difference measure with two separate variables that measure the priorities of the rich and the poor, respectively. These supplementary analyses lead to the same general conclusions as the estimates presented in the main text. That is, state legislators are relatively unresponsive to the political priorities of the poor. The main differences in the alternative model specifications is that the issue of immigration in the 2006-2007 period also shows that responsiveness is better for the rich (the priorities gap measure is not statistically significant in the Table 3 estimates) and results for the issue of the economy (also not statistically different from zero when using the priorities gap measure) suggests state legislators introduce *fewer bills* when either group prioritizes the issue. In any case, we again caution readers that the separate measures of rich and poor priorities are highly collinear, making it more difficult to interpret these results.

in U.S. state politics research to account for other factors that may influence bill introductions in state legislatures. The control variables included in the regression models include the partisan balance of state residents, state citizen ideology, government ideology, union membership, and each state's poverty rate.⁹

[Table 3 about here]

The results suggest that during the 2006-2007 period, state legislatures were less likely to focus on the issues of abortion and health care when the poor view the issues as more important relative to the affluent (see Table 3). This is apparent from the statistically significant and negative coefficients on the poor-rich priorities gap measures for both issues since the poor-rich gap is always positive for these issues (i.e., larger percentages of the poor view these issues as priorities). The results suggest that when the opinions of the poor and rich diverge and those with lower incomes are more likely than the rich to see abortion and health care as priorities, lawmakers are actually less likely to address these issues. The findings related to the other four issues under analysis during this time period are less supportive of the unequal responsiveness expectations, with the estimated effects of their respective priorities gap measures not being significantly different from zero.

For this reason, we use the poor-rich priorities gap measure—which allows us to account for the relative differences in priorities across the states—as the main focus of our analysis.

⁹ State partisan balance is measured as the difference between the proportion of the public identifying with the Democratic Party and those identifying with the Republican Party using the party identification estimates from Enns and Koch (2013). The measures of citizen and government ideology are from Berry et al. (1998; 2010). State union membership estimates were retrieved from the Union Membership and Coverage Database (<http://www.unionstats.com/>), which is described by Hirsch and MacPherson (2003). Finally, state poverty rates were obtained from the U.S. Census Bureau.

We find similar results for the 2011-2012 period, which can be found in Table 4. Similar to the 2006-2007 period, state legislatures are less likely to give attention to the issue of abortion when priorities diverge and poor citizens are more likely to view the issue as important compared with the rich. Comparable results are also found for the issues of immigration and poverty. The estimated effects of the poor-rich priorities gap for these three sets of models are all significant and negative. For the remaining issues, same-sex marriage, the economy, and tax reform, differences in the priorities of the rich and the poor do not appear to influence the number of bills introduced related to each respective issue.

[Table 4 about here]

To get a sense of the substantive magnitude of the effects presented in Tables 3 and 4, Figures 5 and 6 plot the expected percentage change in state bill introductions for a given issue when changing the poor-rich priority gap from a small difference in priorities to a large difference. In other words, how much attention would a state legislature give to a particular issue when the priorities gap is small compared to the amount of attention the issue is expected to receive when the poor are much more likely than the rich to prioritize the issue, holding all other factors constant?¹⁰ Figure 5 shows that when the poor prioritize the issue of abortion more than the rich in the 2006-2007 period, state legislatures are expected to introduce 50% fewer bills than they would if the gap was smaller. The issue of health care in the same period is expected to have a nearly 40% reduction in bill introductions when larger proportions of those with lower incomes, relative to the wealthy, see the issue as a priority. Figure 6 indicates similar estimated changes in state bill introductions for those issues where the poor-rich priorities gap was found to have statistically significant influence on legislative agendas. The expected number of bill

¹⁰ The 5th and 95th percentiles are used to define a “small” and “large” poor-rich priorities gap, respectively.

introductions are nearly identical for the issues of immigration and abortion with a 50% reduction in bills when the poor-rich priorities gap changes from low to high. Finally, an estimated 58% decrease in bill introductions related to poverty is expected when the poor prioritize the issue at higher levels than the rich.

When considered together, our findings provide evidence of unequal government responsiveness to citizens' political priorities. For several political issues and in both waves of surveys, when those with lower incomes are comparatively more likely than the affluent to view an issue as a priority, state legislators are actually less likely to focus on those issues by introducing new legislation. While we only find a significant relationship between the poor-rich priorities gap and bill introductions in state legislatures for a little less than half of the issues we examine, these results are comparable to analyses conducted at the national level. For instance, Jones, Larsen-Price, and Wilkerson (2009) show that average public priorities are significantly correlated with congressional bill introductions for half of the issues they assess (i.e., 9 out of 18). Moreover, none of the regression models report that state legislators are more likely to place an issue on the agenda in response to the priorities of citizens with low incomes. In sum, our results suggest yet another aspect of the policymaking process where those with fewer economic resources are politically disadvantaged.

Conclusion

A series of recent studies suggest that one potential consequence of rising income inequality in the United States is the unequal political representation of the “haves” and “have nots.” This growing body of research shows that politicians are attentive to the policy preferences of the rich in terms of their roll call voting and the content of public policy outcomes while, in contrast, the political preferences of the poor receive little representation (Bartels 2008;

Flavin 2012; Gilens 2012; Gilens and Page 2014; Hacker and Pierson 2010; Kelly 2009; Winters and Page 2009). In this study, we attempt to provide a more comprehensive understanding of unequal political influence by investigating whether similar disparities in responsiveness exist when examining citizens' issue priorities and the corresponding priorities of state legislators. This leads to two questions that are central to our research: (1) do the political priorities of the public vary along income lines, and (2) if so, is the government less responsive to the priorities of the economically disadvantaged? To assess these questions, we develop novel measures of issue priorities for the rich and the poor across the American states, and then ask if state legislatures are less likely to respond to the priorities of the disadvantaged. Our findings demonstrate that there are considerable differences in priorities between the poor and the rich for a variety of political topics, and that state legislators place less emphasis on issues that are viewed as important by low income citizens relative to the importance placed on the same issues among those who are wealthy.

This research makes several important contributions to our understanding of political equality and policymaking in the United States. First, not only do we show that citizen priorities vary across the states, but the measures we introduce also indicate that substantial differences exist in the issue priorities of the poor and the rich. This knowledge may be crucial for those broadly interested in the policymaking process. If different income groups prioritize issues in dissimilar ways, this means that lawmakers potentially have difficult decisions to make related to the issues they decide to focus on. It is likely, we argue, that the political influence of the rich leads politicians to focus on issues that are particularly important to higher income groups while paying little attention to the priorities of those with fewer resources.

Our finding that state legislators pay less attention to the priorities of the poor by leaving those issues off of the political agenda also suggests the need for scholars to better understand the implications of this particular form of unresponsiveness. Seminal work in this area suggests an important aspect of political power is the ability to affect the types of policies considered by lawmakers (Bachrach and Baratz 1962; Schattschneider 1960). Indeed, the issues that never enter the political arena can be just as important to the policymaking process as the creation of a new law. Avoiding a debate or vote on an issue allows those in power to avoid taking a stance on a potentially dividing policy, while also limiting exposure of these issues to the public. From this perspective, it is likely that the current literature on unequal political responsiveness actually underestimates the influence of wealth on policymaking because nearly all of this work focuses only on policy outcomes and neglects the agenda setting stage altogether. By demonstrating that political inequality exists at the agenda setting stage as well, this study provides a more comprehensive understanding about the different ways in which inequality can enter into the American policymaking process.

Placing more emphasis on issue priorities may also provide a more complete understanding of income-based disparities in representation beyond our focus on the agenda-setting stage of the policy process. For instance, public priorities and public preferences might interact in ways that shape policy outcomes. One way to think about how preferences and priorities work together is that elected officials might discount stated policy preferences if the public does not view the policy as an important issue. Take the issue of poverty as an example. Our estimates show that around 50% of those considered low income view poverty as a priority while only 25% of those with high incomes see poverty as an important issue. Now consider how these differences in priorities might influence a legislator's perception of public support for a

policy intended to increase spending on anti-poverty efforts if a policy of this kind happened to make it onto the agenda. Even in a hypothetical situation where the rich and poor have equal levels of support for the policy, say 60% support increased spending in this area, it is possible that politicians give less weight to the expressed support for the policy by the rich since only a small portion of this group believes poverty is an important issue to address. A situation like this could potentially change how we interpret responsiveness (e.g., whether the policy is enacted), largely because the apparently equal levels of rich and poor support for increased anti-poverty spending are actually quite different when priorities are taken into account. In other words, it may not always be appropriate to assume all public preferences are equally important and considering public priorities can potentially offer a more nuanced assessment of the link between citizens' preferences and government responsiveness.

Our analysis also raises a number of related questions that is fruitful ground for future research. First, it is not clear why some issues exhibit large differences in priorities between the poor and the rich while the discrepancy in priorities is much smaller for other issues. Moreover, it is unclear why some states have large gaps in priorities between poor and rich citizens' priorities while other states do not. Therefore, it would be worthwhile to examine variation in state political and economic environments as a starting point for assessing the sources of variance in poor-rich priorities gaps.

Second, future research should investigate why the priorities of the poor are not represented for some issues, but for other issues we do not find biased representation. For example, it is possible that elected officials are particularly attentive to the priorities of affluent citizens for more complex political issues that large portions of the public have little knowledge about. In other words, when only small segments of the public are attentive to an issue and

prioritize it as important, the possibilities for unequal attentiveness among elected officials are heightened. Therefore, future research should attempt to parse out citizens' priorities for even more detailed issue areas than we have done in this current study to discern if unequal government responsiveness is exacerbated for low salience issues.

Finally, this study examines how citizen priorities translate into government attention/action by focusing on a particular activity (bill introductions) of one set of political actors (state legislators). However, it is likely that the priorities of different income groups affect a variety of government actors and actions beyond bill introductions in state legislatures.¹¹ Therefore, future studies should investigate other political arenas and institutions to determine if the same results hold. Answering these questions will provide us with a better understanding of the relationship between the issue priorities of the public and the government, as well as how the concentration of wealth can lead to unequal political influence and policy outcomes.

¹¹ See Footnote 7 for a discussion of our attempt to consider the priorities of state governors, another group of influential political actors.

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Tables

Table 1: Average % of Citizens Who View Issue as a Priority by Income Group, 2006-2007

Issue	Average Priorities (%), 2006-2007		
	Low Income	High Income	Difference (Low - High)
Same-sex marriage	40.2	30.7	+9.5
Immigration	60.8	54.0	+6.8
Abortion	56.6	46.6	+10.0
Economy	81.9	83.9	-2.1
Taxes	71.4	68.1	+3.3
Health care	88.8	76.9	+11.9

Table 2: Average % of Citizens Who View Issue as a Priority by Income Group, 2011-2012

Issue	Average Priorities (%), 2011-2012		
	Low Income	High Income	Difference (Low - High)
Same-sex marriage	30.2	17.1	+13.1
Immigration	36.1	30.7	+5.4
Abortion	36.2	20.7	+15.5
Poverty	50.2	24.5	+25.7
Minimum wage	40.0	18.4	+21.7
Crime	52.8	27.0	+25.8

Table 3: Influence of Poor-Rich Priorities Gap on Government Priorities, 2006-2007

	Legislature Bill Introductions					
	Same-Sex Marriage b/(se)	Immigration b/(se)	Abortion b/(se)	Economy b/(se)	Tax Reform b/(se)	Health Care b/(se)
Public Priorities Gap (Poor - Rich)	0.034 (0.050)	-0.064 (0.056)	-0.045* (0.021)	0.019 (0.020)	-0.078 (0.060)	-0.062* (0.031)
Partisanship (Dem. - Rep.)	0.005 (0.026)	-0.002 (0.013)	-0.023 (0.017)	0.003 (0.011)	0.019 (0.025)	-0.007 (0.014)
Citizen Ideology	0.017 (0.013)	-0.005 (0.007)	0.003 (0.009)	-0.014* (0.006)	-0.018 (0.012)	0.001 (0.007)
Government Ideology	0.007 (0.007)	-0.002 (0.004)	-0.011* (0.005)	0.004 (0.003)	0.009 (0.007)	-0.001 (0.004)
Union Membership	0.013 (0.028)	-0.001 (0.017)	0.051* (0.024)	0.041** (0.015)	0.027 (0.034)	0.033+ (0.018)
Poverty Rate	-0.069 (0.046)	-0.036 (0.027)	0.058+ (0.033)	-0.024 (0.023)	-0.121* (0.052)	-0.024 (0.027)
Constant	-8.780*** (1.050)	-3.358*** (0.731)	-5.107*** (0.712)	-2.648*** (0.498)	-2.960* (1.157)	-3.472*** (0.689)
N	48	48	48	48	48	48
Pseudo R ²	0.084	0.014	0.033	0.021	0.028	0.028

+ p < 0.10, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Note: All results were estimated using negative binomial regression, with total state bill introductions included as an exposure term. The Public Priorities Gap variable is specific to each issue and model. Citizen priorities for some states could not be estimated for a given issue when the survey being used did not sample individuals from those states. As a result, states without public priorities estimates could not be included in the analysis.

Table 4: Influence of Poor-Rich Priorities Gap on Government Priorities, 2011-2012

	Legislature Bill Introductions					
	Same-Sex Marriage b/(se)	Immigration b/(se)	Abortion b/(se)	Poverty b/(se)	Minimum Wage b/(se)	Crime b/(se)
Public Priorities Gap (Poor - Rich)	-0.216 (0.167)	-0.021*** (0.006)	-0.054* (0.022)	-0.111** (0.039)	0.021 (0.024)	0.003 (0.014)
Partisanship (Dem. - Rep.)	-0.035 (0.025)	0.003 (0.010)	-0.017 (0.013)	0.024+ (0.013)	-0.016 (0.014)	-0.003 (0.007)
Citizen Ideology	0.023 (0.016)	0.003 (0.007)	-0.006 (0.009)	-0.011 (0.008)	0.005 (0.009)	-0.002 (0.004)
Government Ideology	0.016+ (0.009)	-0.009** (0.003)	0.003 (0.004)	-0.002 (0.004)	0.000 (0.004)	-0.001 (0.002)
Union Membership	0.010 (0.038)	0.012 (0.017)	-0.002 (0.024)	-0.019 (0.019)	0.072*** (0.021)	0.028** (0.010)
Poverty Rate	0.059 (0.073)	0.007 (0.024)	0.011 (0.029)	0.047+ (0.027)	0.010 (0.028)	0.011 (0.013)
Constant	-7.595*** (1.970)	-4.271*** (0.603)	-3.723*** (0.833)	1.001 (1.255)	-7.172*** (0.851)	-2.148*** (0.542)
N	46	46	46	47	45	48
Pseudo R ²	0.070	0.038	0.027	0.019	0.048	0.013

+ p < 0.10, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Note: All results were estimated using negative binomial regression, with total state bill introductions included as an exposure term. The Public Priorities Gap variable is specific to each issue and model. Citizen priorities for some states could not be estimated for a given issue when the survey being used did not sample individuals from those states. As a result, states without public priorities estimates could not be included in the analysis.

Figures

Figure 1: Issue Priorities of the Poor and Rich for Same-Sex Marriage, Immigration, and Abortion (2006-2007)

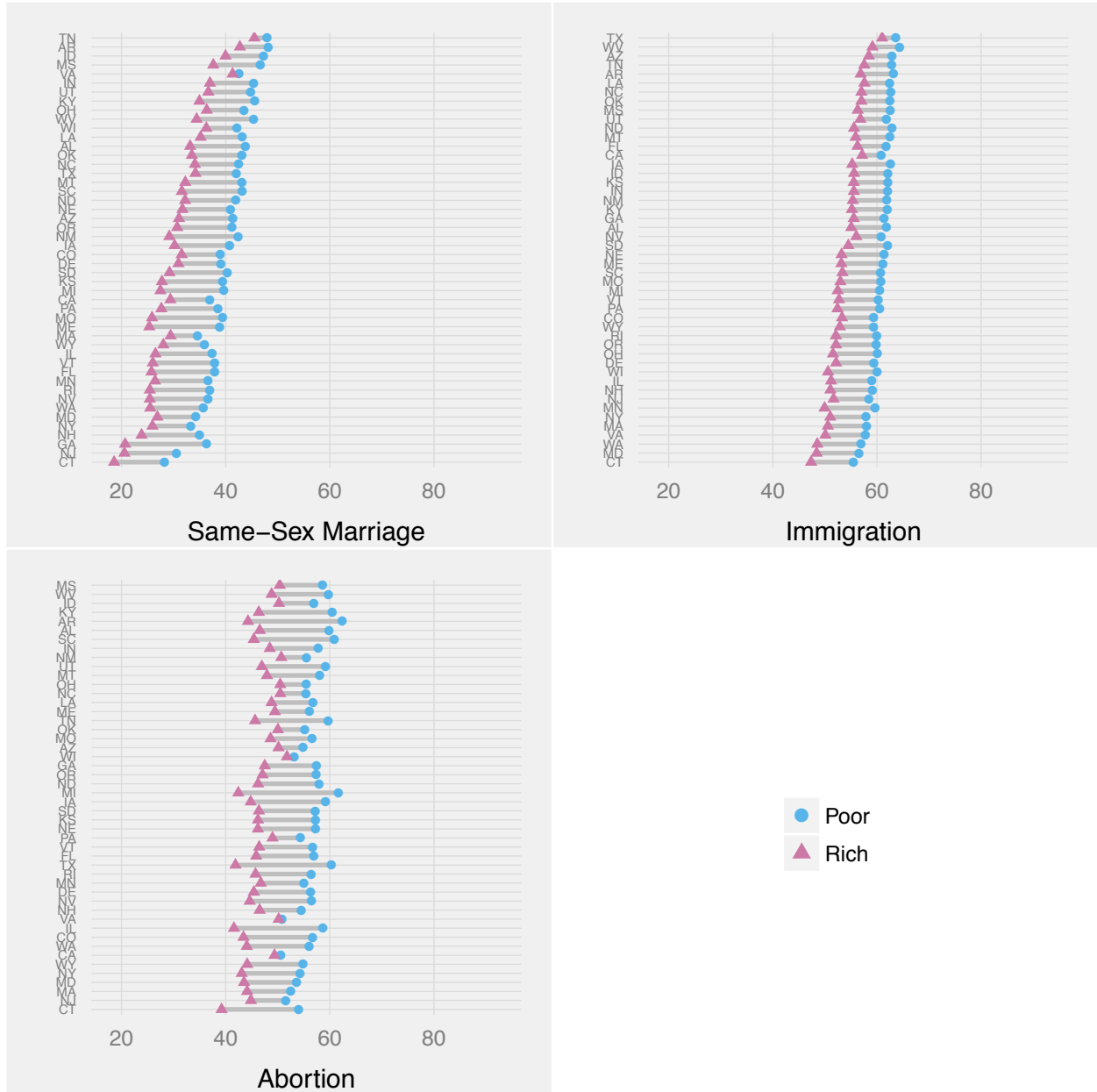


Figure 2: Issue Priorities of the Poor and Rich for the Economy, Taxes, and Health Care (2006-2007)

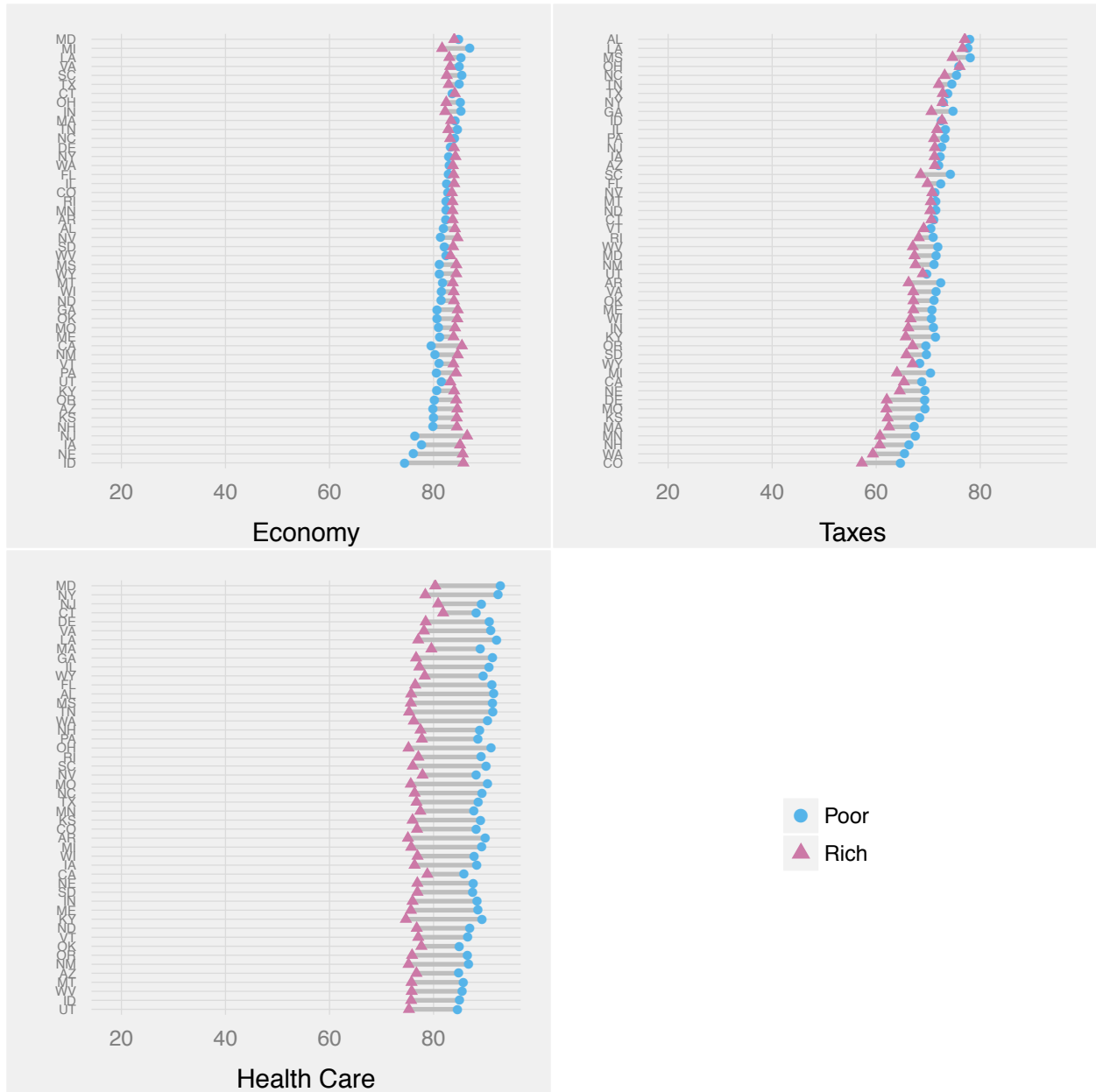


Figure 3: Issue Priorities of the Poor and Rich for Same-Sex Marriage, Immigration, and Abortion (2011-2012)

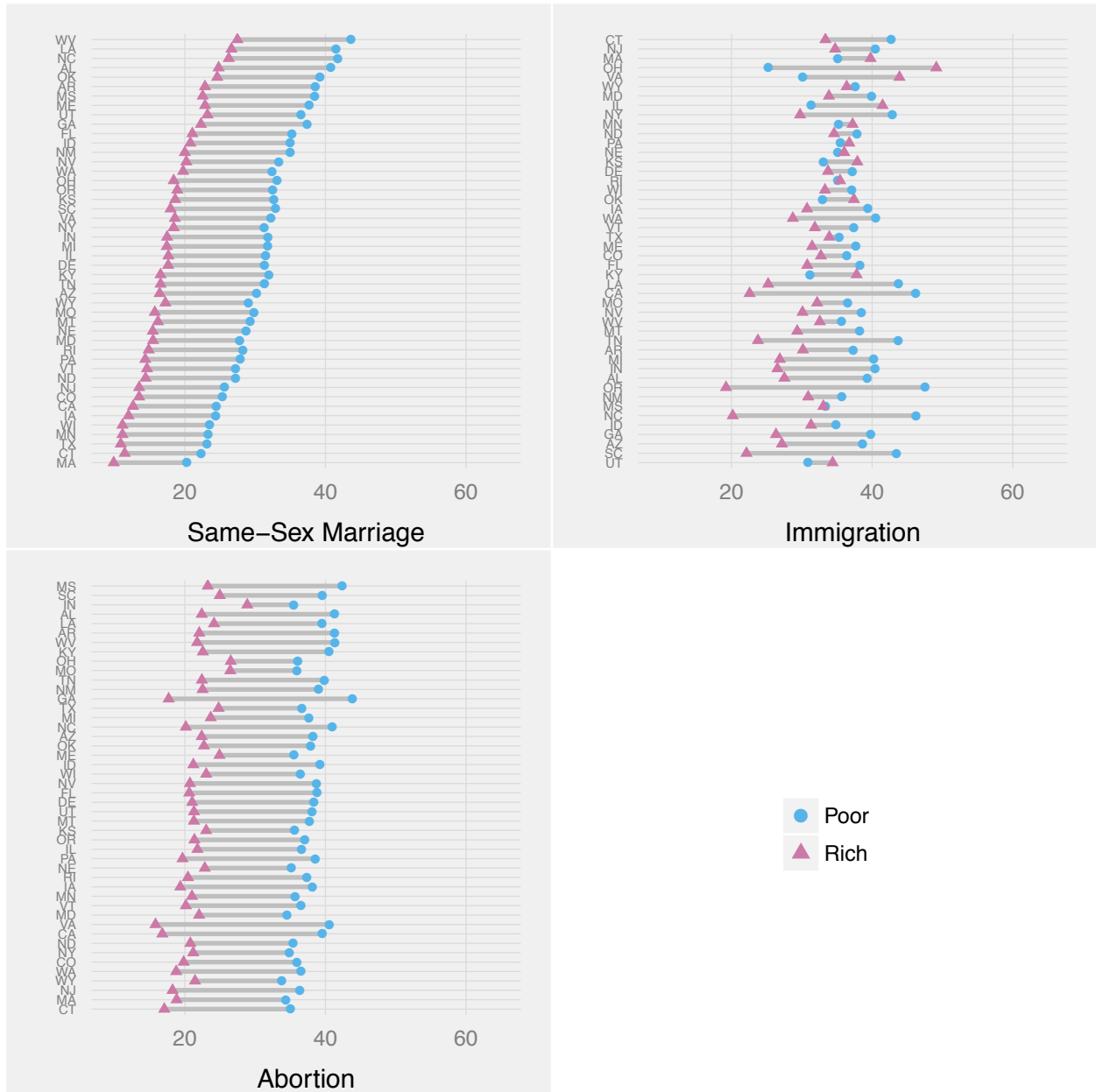


Figure 4: Issue Priorities of the Poor and Rich for Poverty, Minimum Wage, and Crime (2011-2012)

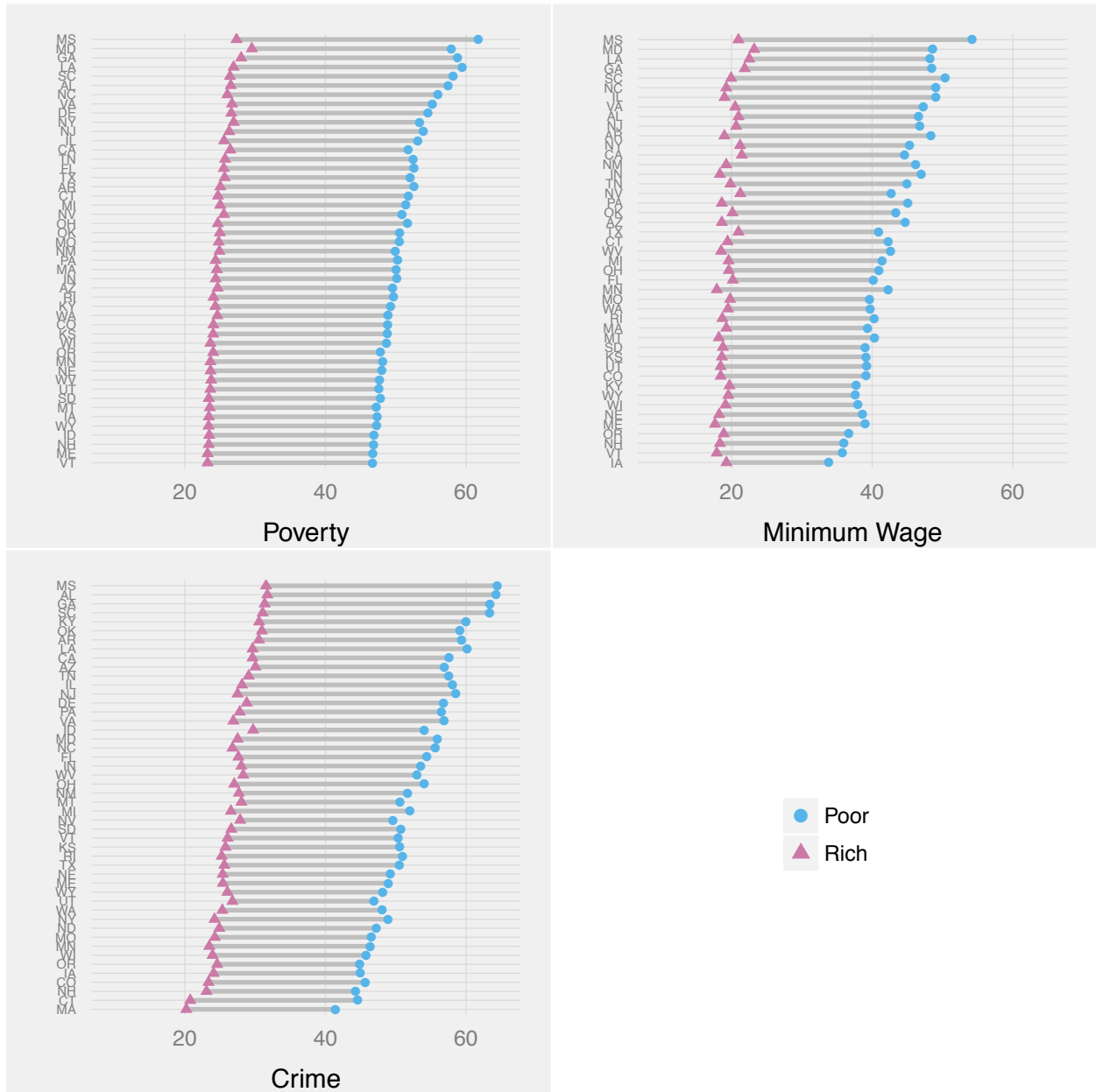
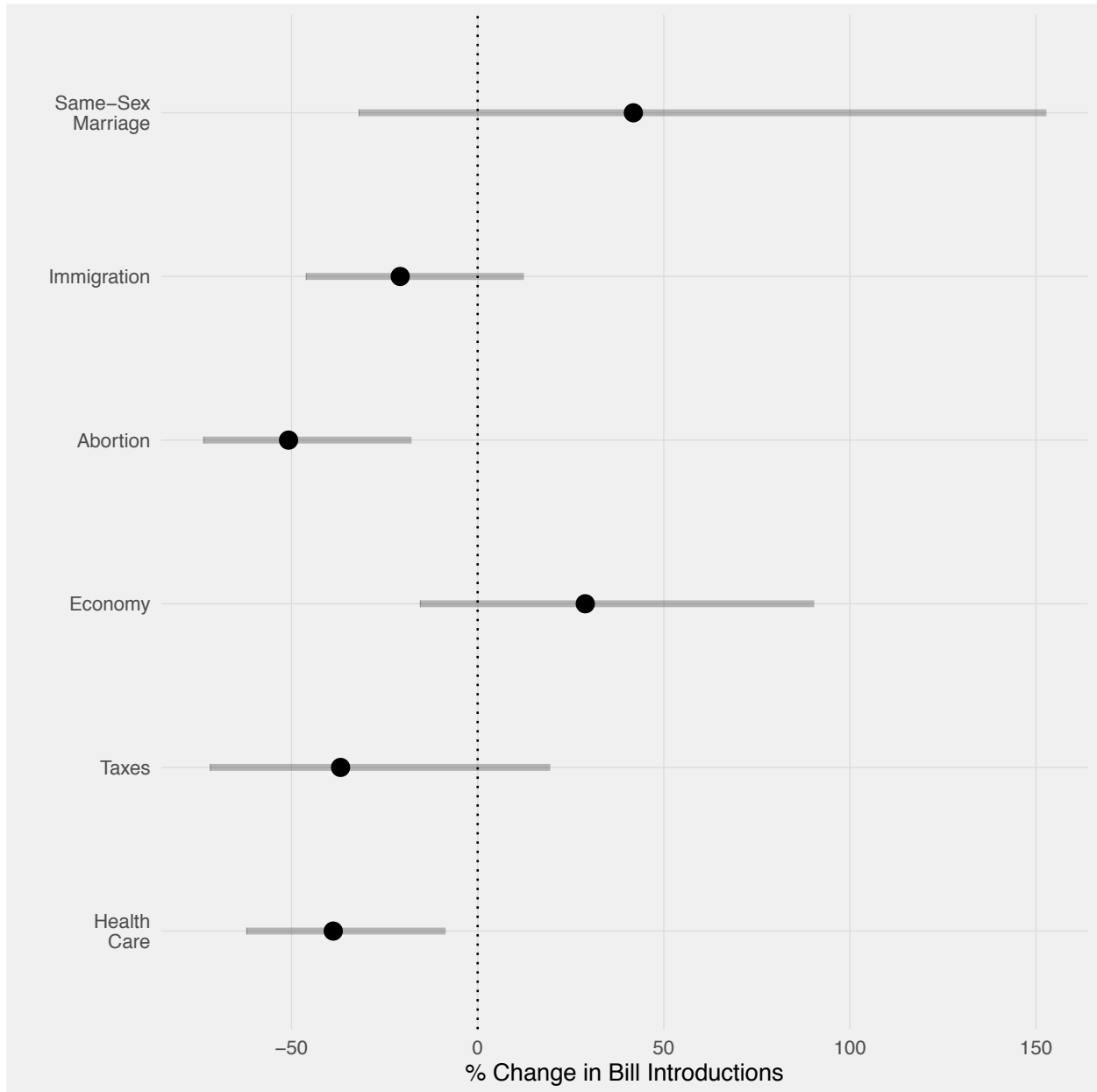
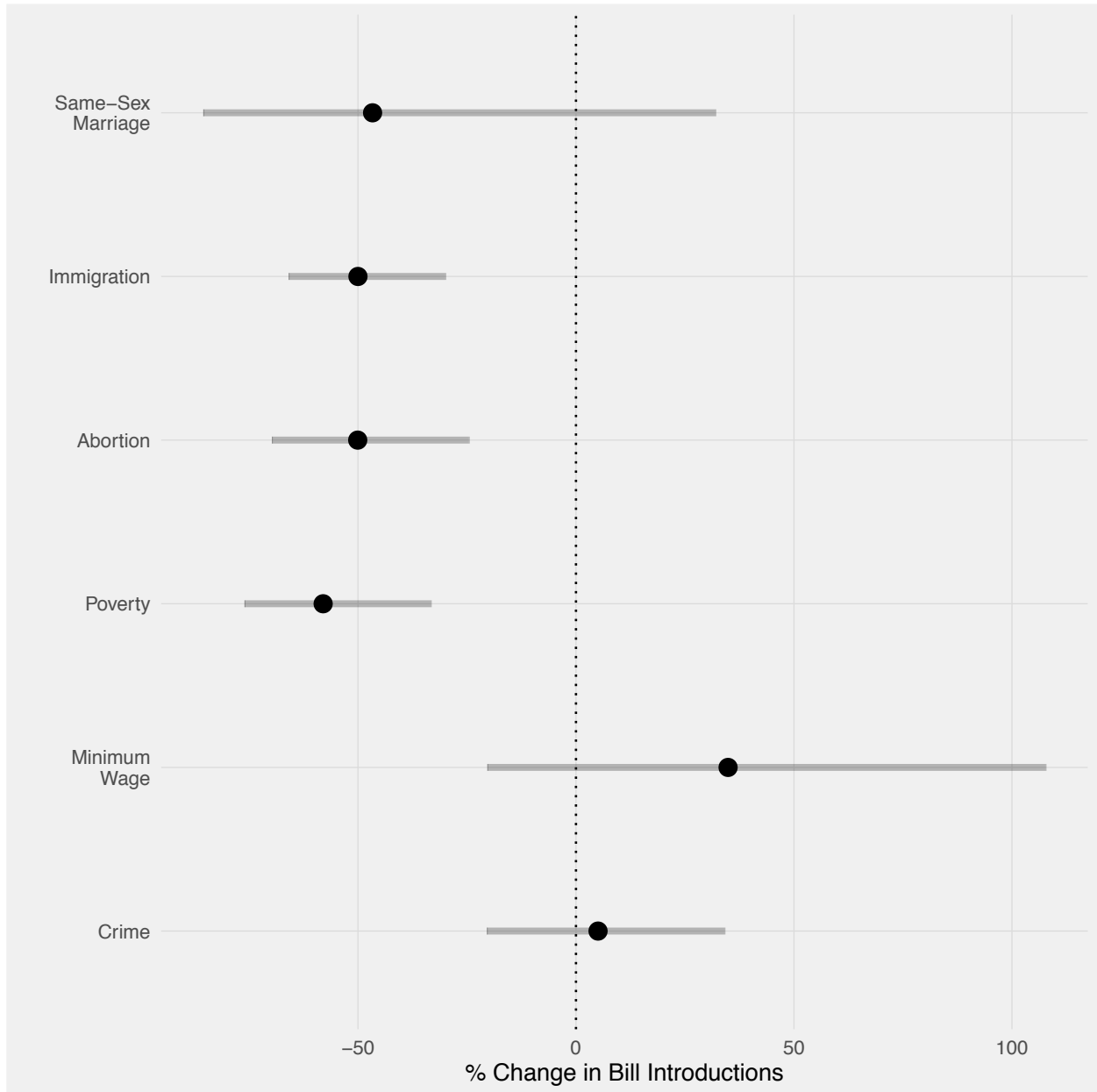


Figure 5: Percentage Change in State Bill Introductions between a Small and Large Gap in Poor-Rich Priorities (2006-2007)



Note: Estimates are based on the results presented in Table 3. The 5th and 95th percentiles are used to define “small” and “large” poor-rich priority gaps, respectively. Negative values indicate that there are fewer bill introductions related to a given issue when the poor are more likely than the wealthy to view the issue as a priority and this priority gap is large. The bars represent 90% confidence intervals.

Figure 6: Percentage Change in State Bill Introductions between a Small and Large Gap in Poor-Rich Priorities (2011-2012)



Note: Estimates are based on the results presented in Table 4. The 5th and 95th percentiles are used to define “small” and “large” poor-rich priority gaps, respectively. Negative values indicate that there are fewer bill introductions related to a given issue when the poor are more likely than the wealthy to view the issue as a priority and this priority gap is large. The bars represent 90% confidence intervals.

Appendix

Table A.1: Survey Questions Used to Estimate State Public Priorities

Question wording (Ipsos-Public Affairs): How important are each of the following issues to you personally? For each issue, please tell me if it is extremely important, very important, moderately important, slightly important, or not at all important to you personally.

Issues	Date of Survey	Sample	Coding
Same-sex marriage; immigration; economy; taxes; health care	Sept. 2006	1501, national random telephone sample	1 = extremely important or very important; 0 = moderately important, slightly important, or not at all important
Same-sex marriage; immigration; economy; taxes; health care	Oct. 2006	1501, national random telephone sample	1 = extremely important or very important; 0 = moderately important, slightly important, or not at all important
Same-sex marriage; immigration; economy; taxes; health care	Jan. 2007	1005, national random telephone sample	1 = extremely important or very important; 0 = moderately important, slightly important, or not at all important
Same-sex marriage; immigration; abortion; economy; taxes; health care	June 2007	1000, national random telephone sample	1 = extremely important or very important; 0 = moderately important, slightly important, or not at all important

Question wording (Public Religion Research Institute): Thinking about some issues in the country today, do you think that [INSERT; RANDOMIZE] is a critical issue facing the country, one among many important issues or not that important compared to other issues?

Issues	Date of Survey	Sample	Coding
Crime	Aug. 2011	2450, national random telephone sample	1 = critical issue; 0 = one among many important issues or not that important compared to other issues

Poverty; minimum wage	Sept.-Oct. 2011	1505, national random telephone sample	1 = critical issue; 0 = one among many important issues or not that important compared to other issues
Same-sex marriage; immigration; abortion	Jan. 2012	1005, national random telephone sample	1 = critical issue; 0 = one among many important issues or not that important compared to other issues

Table A.2: State Bill Introduction Search Terms

Issues	LexisNexis Search Terms
Same-sex marriage	("same sex" OR "same-sex" OR gay OR homosexual) AND marriage
Immigration	immigra! OR undocumented
Abortion	abortion OR "reproductive rights" OR unborn OR fetus
Economy	"economic growth" OR "growing economy" OR "economic development"
Taxes	"tax reform" OR "lower taxes" OR "tax relief"
Health care	(healthcare OR "health care") w/15 (cost! OR expens! OR bankruptcy)
Poverty	poverty OR homeless! OR "low income" OR welfare OR "temporary assistance for needy families" or "supplemental nutrition assistance program" OR Medicaid
Minimum wage	"minimum wage" OR "living wage"
Crime	crime OR criminal OR murder OR robbery OR rape OR assault OR "illegal drug" OR trafficking

Table A.3: State Bill Introduction Summary Statistics

Variable	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
<i>2006-2007</i>				
Same-Sex Marriage	2.08	2.46	0	11
Immigration	49.04	43.38	3	187
Abortion	36.65	29.32	2	147
Economy	216.90	189.74	17	959
Taxes	43.27	79.10	1	512
Health Care	70.58	53.25	3	242
<i>2011-2012</i>				
Same-Sex Marriage	2.10	2.37	0	8
Immigration	46.60	40.37	1	172
Abortion	37.15	26.81	4	116
Poverty	557.65	1103.60	45	7801
Minimum Wage	16.96	15.99	1	66
Crime	710.65	661.74	98	4038

Table A.4: Influence of the Priorities of the Rich and the Poor on Government Priorities, 2006-2007

	Legislature Bill Introductions					
	Same-Sex Marriage b/(se)	Immigration b/(se)	Abortion b/(se)	Economy b/(se)	Tax Reform b/(se)	Health Care b/(se)
Rich Priorities	-0.038 (0.049)	0.098+ (0.054)	0.177*** (0.031)	-0.570*** (0.173)	-0.003 (0.081)	-0.012 (0.056)
Poor Priorities	0.068 (0.071)	-0.249** (0.088)	0.113** (0.035)	-0.178** (0.064)	0.105 (0.141)	-0.094* (0.037)
Partisanship (Dem. - Rep.)	0.008 (0.026)	-0.015 (0.013)	-0.009 (0.014)	0.022+ (0.012)	0.002 (0.027)	0.006 (0.016)
Citizen Ideology	0.018 (0.013)	-0.004 (0.006)	0.004 (0.007)	-0.017** (0.006)	-0.016 (0.011)	-0.001 (0.007)
Government Ideology	0.007 (0.007)	-0.002 (0.004)	-0.010** (0.004)	0.004 (0.003)	0.010 (0.007)	-0.001 (0.004)
Union Membership	0.024 (0.032)	-0.006 (0.017)	0.054** (0.019)	0.038** (0.014)	0.046 (0.036)	0.031+ (0.018)
Poverty Rate	-0.088 (0.054)	0.013 (0.032)	-0.040 (0.032)	-0.031 (0.020)	-0.148** (0.053)	-0.042 (0.028)
Constant	-9.949*** (2.077)	5.472 (3.451)	-19.322*** (2.903)	59.918** (19.559)	-10.551+ (5.412)	5.392 (5.791)
N	48	48	48	48	48	48
Pseudo R ²	0.087	0.030	0.080	0.037	0.032	0.033

+ p < 0.10, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Note: All results were estimated using negative binomial regression, with total state bill introductions included as an exposure term. The Rich Priorities and Poor Priorities variables are specific to each issue and model. Citizen priorities for some states could not be estimated for a given issue when the survey being used did not sample individuals from those states. As a result, states without public priorities estimates could not be included in the analysis.

Table A.5: Influence of the Priorities of the Rich and the Poor on Government Priorities, 2011-2012

	Legislature Bill Introductions					
	Same-Sex Marriage b/(se)	Immigration b/(se)	Abortion b/(se)	Poverty b/(se)	Minimum Wage b/(se)	Crime b/(se)
Rich Priorities	0.218 (0.280)	-0.076* (0.035)	0.184*** (0.045)	0.167 (0.148)	-0.092 (0.088)	0.062 (0.043)
Poor Priorities	-0.217 (0.234)	-0.148*** (0.045)	0.139* (0.062)	-0.125* (0.052)	0.020 (0.023)	-0.018 (0.019)
Partisanship (Dem. - Rep.)	-0.035 (0.025)	0.025* (0.012)	-0.003 (0.013)	0.021 (0.015)	-0.008 (0.017)	0.000 (0.007)
Citizen Ideology	0.023 (0.017)	-0.001 (0.007)	-0.002 (0.009)	-0.011 (0.008)	0.001 (0.010)	-0.002 (0.004)
Government Ideology	0.016+ (0.009)	-0.010** (0.003)	-0.001 (0.004)	-0.001 (0.004)	-0.000 (0.004)	-0.001 (0.002)
Union Membership	0.010 (0.039)	0.017 (0.016)	0.004 (0.021)	-0.019 (0.019)	0.070*** (0.021)	0.025* (0.010)
Poverty Rate	0.059 (0.073)	-0.041 (0.028)	-0.109* (0.045)	0.047+ (0.027)	0.014 (0.028)	-0.001 (0.015)
Constant	-7.586** (2.306)	4.486 (3.114)	-12.167*** (2.659)	0.248 (2.286)	-5.573** (2.102)	-2.635*** (0.607)
N	46	46	46	47	45	48
Pseudo R ²	0.070	0.058	0.051	0.019	0.051	0.017

+ p < 0.10, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Note: All results were estimated using negative binomial regression, with total state bill introductions included as an exposure term. The Rich Priorities and Poor Priorities variables are specific to each issue and model. Citizen priorities for some states could not be estimated for a given issue when the survey being used did not sample individuals from those states. As a result, states without public priorities estimates could not be included in the analysis.