

Government's Unequal Attentiveness to Citizens' Political Priorities*

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Abstract:

An accumulation of evidence suggests upper-class citizens have a disproportionate 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 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 rich and poor citizens think are most important and deserving of government attention. We then use bill introduction data from state legislatures to measure government action and uncover evidence that state legislators are more likely to act on an issue when it is prioritized by affluent citizens as compared to citizens with low incomes. 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 if the issues held important by some citizens are given attention while the issues held important by others are not.

In this paper, we examine 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 more likely to pay attention to, and take action on, the issues prioritized by citizens with higher incomes? Using nationally representative surveys that query respondents' political priorities and multilevel modeling and poststratification to impute state-specific priorities for different income groups, we first demonstrate that there are sizable differences in which issues rich and poor 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 more likely to act on an issue when it is prioritized by affluent citizens as compared to citizens with low incomes. These findings suggest that inequity enters the policymaking process early on in the agenda-setting stage and have important implications for our understanding of political equality and the functioning of American democracy.

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 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

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

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.

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), there has been little attention paid to the linkage between citizens’ political priorities and government action. This is an unfortunate omission because the decision about which issues are brought up for attention and debate is arguably just as important (or even more so) as the decision about what government should do about a particular issue. On this question, the most prominent study to date (Jones, Larsen-Price, and Wilkerson 2009) finds that government is generally attentive/responsive 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 opposed 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 more attentive to the priorities of more affluent citizens.

From a theoretical standpoint, we expect political priorities to differ based on citizens' incomes for three 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 low 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 more attentive to the political priorities of citizens with higher incomes for four 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, Schlozman, 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. As Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995, 14) predicted in their seminal study of political participation, “inequalities in activity are likely to be associated with inequalities in governmental responsiveness.”

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

incomes. For example, Schlozman, Verba, and Brady (2012, 160) find that citizens in the top income quintile are ten times more likely to donate to a campaign than citizens in the bottom income quintile. The disparity in the amount given is even more striking; nearly three-fourths of total campaign contributions come from people in the top quarter of the income distribution while only two percent come from people in the bottom income quintile (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995, 194).² 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 but, instead, early on in the policymaking process when elected officials decide which issues they will 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

² Bonica, McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal (2013) also point out that 40% of all contributions to federal candidates in the 2012 election came from the top .01 percent of income earners in the voting age population.

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.

Fourth, 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. As Carnes (2013, 16) observes, “Business regulations are more relaxed, tax policies are more generous to the rich, social safety net programs are stingier, and protections for workers are weaker than they would be if our political decision makers came from the same mix of classes as the people they represent.” We argue that this sentiment can be extended to earlier on in the policymaking process when legislators decide which issues they will focus on. 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 more likely to focus on issues prioritized by affluent citizens.

Measuring Unequal Priorities in the States

To examine whether the issue priorities of the rich and the poor differ and if government is more responsive to the priorities of the rich than to those 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 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.³

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 people. 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 poststratification (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 MRP provides accurate estimates of state opinion even when using a single national survey (Lax

³ See Appendix Table A.1 for details about the surveys including question wording, sample size, and coding.

and Phillips 2009a; 2009b; 2012; Park et al. 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. Additionally, state unemployment is included as a level-two (or macro-level) covariate in the regression models.⁴ 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:

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

⁴ 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.

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.

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.

State Differences in Issue Priorities

The result of the MRP procedure is estimates of state public priorities by income quartile for each of the nine issues described above.⁵ A first look at our measures is presented in Tables 1

⁵ 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 states

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 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 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 rich and the poor 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—unequal responsiveness

with small populations. When this is the case estimates were not calculated for the states that were not represented in the survey.

will be virtually impossible to detect if there is not state variation in the priorities gap. Figures 1-4 provide plots of the differences between the priorities of the rich and poor for each issue. 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 rich-poor 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 rich and poor across all of the states with the highest levels of divergence only reaching around seven percentage points.

[Figure 1 about here]

[Figure 2 about here]

Similar variations in the rich-poor 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). Altogether, we demonstrate two important findings regarding state public priorities. The first is that the priorities of the rich and the poor 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 rich and poor, 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 rich and the poor can vary substantially across the states. Again, the extent of this variation depends on the issue under consideration, but some

issues produce rich-poor priority gaps that differ by as much as 40 percentage points when comparing the states.

[Figure 3 about here]

[Figure 4 about here]

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 more likely to act on issues when they are important to those with more 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

⁶ The search terms used to identify bills related to each issue can be found in Appendix Table A.2.

(overdispersion was found to be significant for all of our variables). Finally, because some state 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 the rich-poor gap in public issue priorities described in the previous section. 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, which could lead to ambiguous results that are difficult to interpret. Using the difference in priorities between the rich and poor allows us to determine whether disagreement among the public about which issues should be prioritized (in this case, the gap between low and high income groups) leads to more or less legislative responsiveness.

⁷ 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 rich-poor priority gap and governor issue mentions in the State of the State address.

Tables 3-6 present the results of the negative binomial regression models examining the influence of the rich-poor citizen priorities gap on the attention given to issues in state legislatures. For each issue we estimate a straightforward bivariate regression between bill introductions and the priorities gap, as well as a second model that includes additional covariates to account for other factors that may influence bill introductions in state legislatures. The control variables included in the multiple regression models include the partisan balance of state residents, state citizen ideology, government ideology, union membership, and each state's poverty rate.⁸

[Table 3 about here]

The results suggest that during the 2006-2007 period, state legislatures were more likely to focus on the issues of abortion and health care when the affluent view the issues as more important relative to the poor (see Tables 3 and 4). This is apparent from the statistically significant and positive coefficients on the rich-poor priorities gap measures for both issues. The results can alternatively be interpreted to mean that when those with lower incomes are more likely than the rich to see abortion and health care as priorities, lawmakers are less likely to address these issues. The findings related to the other four issues under analysis during this time

⁸ 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.

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.

[Table 4 about here]

We find similar results for the 2011-2012 period, which can be found in Tables 5 and 6. Similar to the 2006-2007 period, state legislatures are more likely to give attention to the issue of abortion when rich citizens are more likely to view the issue as a priority when compared with the poor. Comparable results are also found for the issues of immigration and poverty. The estimated effects of the rich-poor priorities gap for these three sets of models are all significant and positive. The state priorities gap on the issue of same-sex marriage is also marginally significant ($p < 0.10$) in the bivariate model, but the statistical uncertainty grows slightly larger when controlling for other factors. For the remaining issues, 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 5 about here]

When considered together, our findings provide evidence of unequal government responsiveness to citizens' political priorities. For several political issues, when the affluent are comparatively more likely than those with lower incomes to view an issue as a priority, state legislators are more likely to focus on those issues by introducing new legislation. These results suggest yet another aspect of the policy process where those with greater economic resources have a political advantage.

[Table 6 about here]

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 body of research shows that politicians are much more attentive to the policy preferences of the rich when compared with the attitudes of those in other income groups (Bartels 2008; Flavin 2012; Gilens 2012; Gilens and Page 2014; Hacker and Pierson 2010; Kelly 2009; Winters and Page 2009). In this study, we ask whether similar disparities in responsiveness exist when examining citizen issue priorities and the corresponding priorities of state governments. This leads to two questions that are central to our research: (1) do the priorities of the public vary along income lines, and (2) if so, is the government more responsive to the priorities of the economically advantaged? 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 more likely to respond to the priorities of the affluent. Our findings demonstrate that there are considerable differences in priorities between the rich and the poor for a variety of political topics, and state legislators place more emphasis on issues that are viewed as important by wealthy citizens relative to the importance placed on the same issues among those who are less well off.

This research makes several important contributions. 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 rich and the poor. 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 focus on. It is likely, we argue, that the political

influence of the rich leads politicians to address issues that are particularly important to higher income groups at the expense of those with fewer resources.

Our finding that state legislators do indeed pay closer attention to the priorities of the rich 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 quite possible that the current literature actually underestimates the influence of wealth on policymaking since much of this work focuses on only one aspect of the policy process (i.e., policy outcomes).

Our analysis also raises a number of questions related to our work that will hopefully be addressed by future research. The first is to explain why the priorities of the wealthy are better represented for some issues, but for other issues we do not find biased representation. The most straightforward way to account for these differences in unequal responsiveness is that politicians can only address a limited number of issues at a given point in time. Theoretically, an unlimited number of potential issues can exist among the public but only some of these make it into the political arena. The remaining topics simply go unaddressed for the time being, which leads to a complete absence of representation in the sense that a group of citizens view an issue as a public priority but limited agenda space prevents politicians from concentrating on the issue.

In addition, it is not clear why some issues produce large differences between the priorities of the rich and the poor while the discrepancy in attitudes is much smaller for other

issues. It would be potentially worthwhile to examine variations in state political and economic environments as a starting point in assessing the variance in the rich-poor priorities gaps. Finding a way to measure priorities over time would also contribute to our knowledge of how these differences originate.

Finally, our work only examines how citizen priorities translate into government priorities by focusing on a particular activity of one set of political actors. It is likely that the priorities of different income groups affect a variety of government actors and actions beyond bill introductions in state legislatures.⁹ 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.

⁹ 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 Issue Priorities by Income Group, 2006-2007

Issue	Average Priorities (%), 2006-2007		
	Low Income	High Income	Difference (high - low)
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 Issue Priorities by Income Group, 2011-2012

Issue	Average Priorities (%), 2011-2012		
	Low Income	High Income	Difference (high - low)
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 Rich-Poor Priorities Gap on Government Priorities: Same-Sex Marriage, Immigration, and Abortion (2006-2007)

	Legislature Bill Introductions					
	Same-Sex Marriage		Immigration		Abortion	
	b/(se)	b/(se)	b/(se)	b/(se)	b/(se)	b/(se)
Same-Sex Marriage (Rich - Poor)	-0.053 (0.064)	-0.034 (0.050)				
Immigration (Rich - Poor)			0.057 (0.047)	0.064 (0.056)		
Abortion (Rich - Poor)					0.041+ (0.022)	0.045* (0.021)
Partisanship (Dem. - Rep.)		0.005 (0.026)		-0.002 (0.013)		-0.023 (0.017)
Citizen Ideology		0.017 (0.013)		-0.005 (0.007)		0.003 (0.009)
Government Ideology		0.007 (0.007)		-0.002 (0.004)		-0.011* (0.005)
Union Membership		0.013 (0.028)		-0.001 (0.017)		0.051* (0.024)
Poverty Rate		-0.069 (0.046)		-0.036 (0.027)		0.058+ (0.033)
Constant	-8.198*** (0.634)	-8.780*** (1.050)	-4.192*** (0.330)	-3.358*** (0.731)	-4.295*** (0.240)	-5.107*** (0.712)
N	48	48	48	48	48	48

+ 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. 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 Rich-Poor Priorities Gap on Government Priorities: Economy, Taxes, and Health Care (2006-2007)

	Legislature Bill Introductions					
	Economy		Tax Reform		Health Care	
	b/(se)	b/(se)	b/(se)	b/(se)	b/(se)	b/(se)
Economy (Rich - Poor)	-0.009 (0.019)	-0.019 (0.020)				
Tax Reform (Rich - Poor)			0.089 (0.058)	0.078 (0.060)		
Health Care (Rich - Poor)					0.079** (0.030)	0.062* (0.031)
Partisanship (Dem. - Rep.)		0.003 (0.011)		0.019 (0.025)		-0.007 (0.014)
Citizen Ideology		-0.014* (0.006)		-0.018 (0.012)		0.001 (0.007)
Government Ideology		0.004 (0.003)		0.009 (0.007)		-0.001 (0.004)
Union Membership		0.041** (0.015)		0.027 (0.034)		0.033+ (0.018)
Poverty Rate		-0.024 (0.023)		-0.121* (0.052)		-0.024 (0.027)
Constant	-3.038*** (0.079)	-2.648*** (0.498)	-4.485*** (0.227)	-2.960* (1.157)	-3.197*** (0.360)	-3.472*** (0.689)
N	48	48	48	48	48	48

+ 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. 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 5: Influence of Rich-Poor Priorities Gap on Government Priorities: Same-Sex Marriage, Immigration, and Abortion (2011-2012)

	Legislature Bill Introductions					
	Same-Sex Marriage		Immigration		Abortion	
	b/(se)	b/(se)	b/(se)	b/(se)	b/(se)	b/(se)
Same-Sex Marriage (Rich - Poor)	0.212+ (0.110)	0.216 (0.167)				
Immigration (Rich - Poor)			0.019** (0.007)	0.021*** (0.006)		
Abortion (Rich - Poor)					0.051* (0.022)	0.054* (0.022)
Partisanship (Dem. - Rep.)		-0.035 (0.025)		0.003 (0.010)		-0.017 (0.013)
Citizen Ideology		0.023 (0.016)		0.003 (0.007)		-0.006 (0.009)
Government Ideology		0.016+ (0.009)		-0.009** (0.003)		0.003 (0.004)
Union Membership		0.010 (0.038)		0.012 (0.017)		-0.002 (0.024)
Poverty Rate		0.059 (0.073)		0.007 (0.024)		0.011 (0.029)
Constant	-4.636** (1.500)	-7.595*** (1.970)	-4.371*** (0.079)	-4.271*** (0.603)	-3.733*** (0.362)	-3.723*** (0.833)
N	46	46	46	46	46	46

+ 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. 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 6: Influence of Rich-Poor Priorities Gap on Government Priorities: Poverty, Minimum Wage, Crime (2011-2012)

	Legislature Bill Introductions					
	Poverty		Minimum Wage		Crime	
	b/(se)	b/(se)	b/(se)	b/(se)	b/(se)	b/(se)
Poverty (Rich - Poor)	0.023 (0.032)	0.111** (0.039)				
Minimum Wage (Rich - Poor)			0.010 (0.023)	-0.021 (0.024)		
Crime (Rich - Poor)					0.003 (0.011)	-0.003 (0.014)
Partisanship (Dem. - Rep.)		0.024+ (0.013)		-0.016 (0.014)		-0.003 (0.007)
Citizen Ideology		-0.011 (0.008)		0.005 (0.009)		-0.002 (0.004)
Government Ideology		-0.002 (0.004)		0.000 (0.004)		-0.001 (0.002)
Union Membership		-0.019 (0.019)		0.072*** (0.021)		0.028** (0.010)
Poverty Rate		0.047+ (0.027)		0.010 (0.028)		0.011 (0.013)
Constant	-1.473+ (0.832)	1.001 (1.255)	-5.215*** (0.542)	-7.172*** (0.851)	-1.692*** (0.290)	-2.148*** (0.542)
N	47	47	45	45	48	48

+ 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. 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: Rich-Poor Priority Differences for Same-Sex Marriage, Immigration, and Abortion (2006-2007)

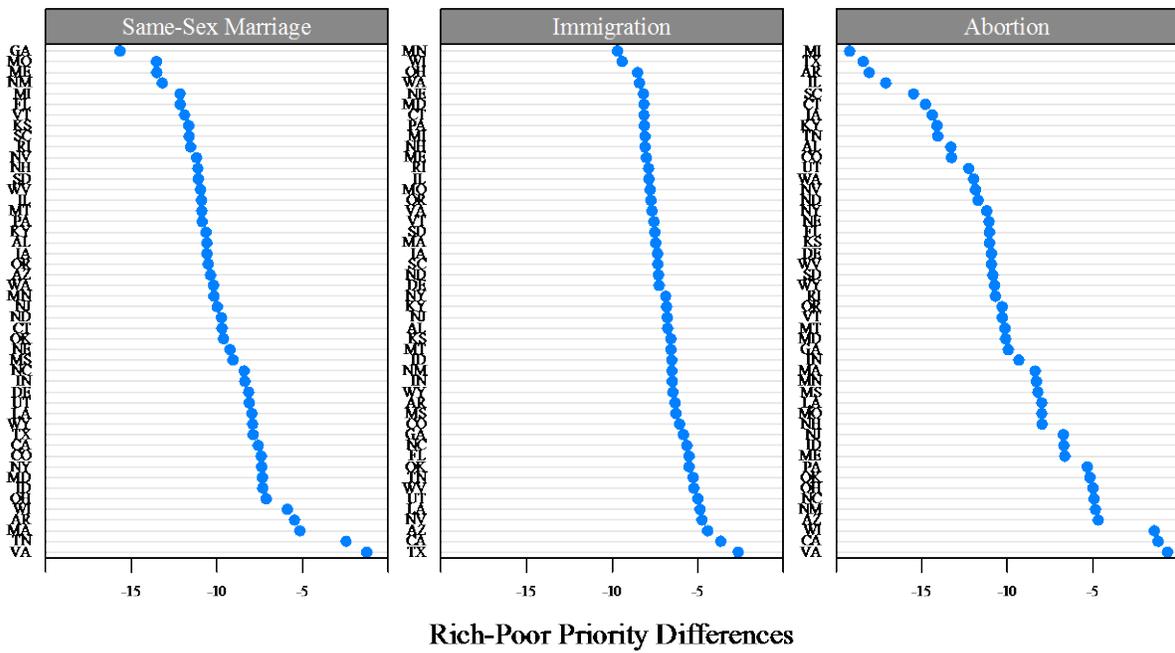


Figure 3: Rich-Poor Priority Differences for Same-Sex Marriage, Immigration, and Abortion (2011-2012)

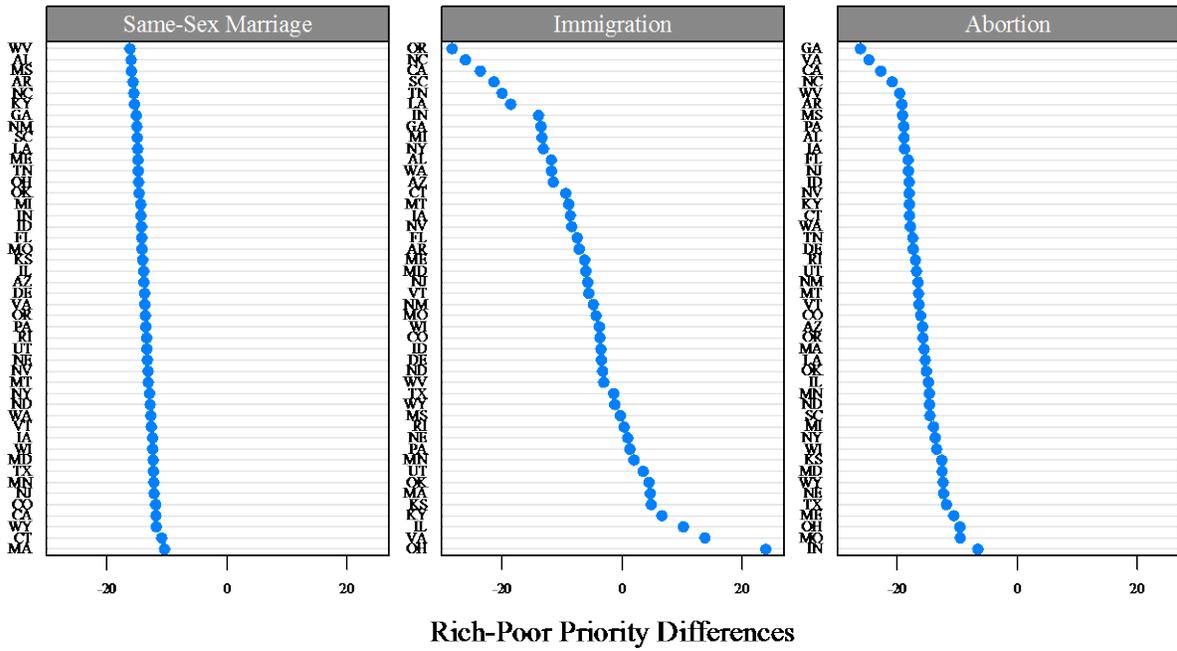
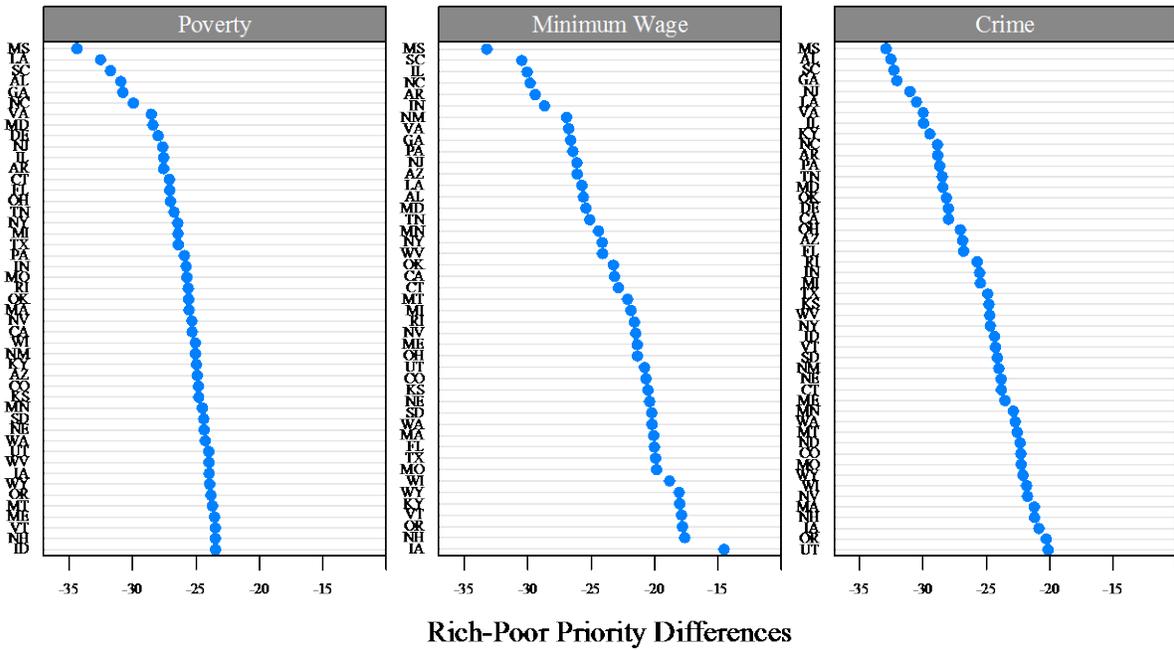


Figure 4: Rich-Poor Priority Differences for Poverty, Minimum Wage, and Crime (2011-2012)



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 Size	Coding
Same-sex marriage; immigration; economy; taxes; health care	Sept. 2006	1501	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	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	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	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 Size	Coding
Crime	Aug. 2011	2450	1 = critical issue; 0 = one among many important issues or not that important compared to other issues

Poverty; minimum wage	Sept.-Oct. 2011	1505	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	1 = critical issue; 0 = one among many important issues or not that important compared to other issues

Table A.2: 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