Voting Power, Policy Representation, and Disparities in Voting’s Rewards

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Abstract

Reelection-minded officials have motivations to represent some of their constituents more than others when casting roll call votes. In particular, reelection seekers have incentives to appeal to those with greater “voting power” (Bartels 1998): those who are likely to vote, are not strongly predisposed to vote for one of the parties, and are members of large groups within a particular constituency. We present two novel findings stemming from these incentives. First, we find that those with greater voting power tend to enjoy better policy representation. Second, the rewards of voting are greater for those belonging to groups with more voting power. Since voting power varies across racial/ethnic and income lines, these findings hold significant normative implications.

Key words: dyadic representation; voting power; political inequality; turnout; race and politics; income inequality
The United States operates on the legal principle of “one person, one vote.” Despite the legal equality of citizens’ votes, electoral competition creates incentives for incumbents to prioritize some voters over others. Constituents who are likely to vote, are “swing” voters, and are members of large groups within a constituency tend to be most important to an incumbent’s reelection effort (Fiorina 1974; Bartels 1998). Therefore, office holders have incentives to pay attention to these constituents’ policy preferences more than other constituents.

Using a measure of “voting power,” which “quantifies the inequalities in the electoral influence of individuals or groups” resulting from incumbents’ strategic incentives (Bartels 1998, 43), we argue that electoral motivations point to two hypotheses with significant normative implications for politically-relevant groups in American politics: African Americans, Latinos, and whites; men and women; and low, middle, and high income earners. First, individuals with more voting power should enjoy better policy representation from their Member of Congress (MC). Bartels (1998) described the concept and measure of voting power; we apply the measure to see if it is consequential, asking if those with more voting power are better represented. Second, although voters are generally better represented than nonvoters (e.g., Griffin and Newman 2005), elected officials’ strategic incentives to appeal to some voters more than others may make the rewards of voting systematically unequal across groups. Our analyses uncover support for both hypotheses, raising questions about the state of political equality in American politics, the utility of voter mobilization to alter the balance of who gets what they want from government, and the continued political involvement of groups with little voting power.

**Theoretical Expectations**

We examine policy representation, which we define as the extent to which a citizen’s
preferred course of action is consistent with the policy direction their elected representative subsequently supports. We recognize that representation is a broad and multifaceted concept and that we are examining only one aspect of it (e.g. Canon 1999). However, we consider policy representation important, following Key’s (1961, 7) declaration that “unless mass views have some place in the shaping of policy, all the talk about democracy is nonsense.”

Theoretical accounts of legislator behavior suggest that MCs have incentives to provide policy representation to their constituents. However, MCs’ incentives push them to attend to some constituents’ concerns more than others’. Assuming that MCs are reelection seekers (e.g., Mayhew 1974), the potential of electoral punishment for deviating from constituents’ policy preferences provides an incentive to cast roll call votes in line with constituents’ wishes (Fiorina 1974). In fact, the threat of electoral punishment is the primary basis of policy representation: “we believe that constituents’ preferences are reflected in a representative’s voting (if at all) primarily through his concern for his electoral survival” (Fiorina 1974, 31). However, not every constituent affects MCs’ probability of reelection equally (Bartels 1998). Therefore, MCs must focus their reelection efforts on those with the greatest potential to reelect them.

Only those who vote can influence the reelection or rejection of the incumbent (Bartels 1998). Reelection-oriented MCs have little incentive to spend scarce resources like money, time, or roll call votes in attempts to garner the favor of constituents who probably will not vote. Such resources will be focused on likely voters. Furthermore, all else equal, MCs have greater incentive to appeal to undecided or “swing” voters than to those who have already decided who they will support. This is not to dismiss an MC’s need to attend to his or her “base” supporters; however, “swing” voters will receive disproportionate attention from a calculating politician. If an MC does not win over undecided likely voters, they will vote for the challenger, while the
dissatisfied among the base are more likely to stay home than to cast a vote for the opposition. Finally, all else equal, candidates have an incentive to appeal to larger groups of likely voters.

It is fairly easy for MCs to consider these factors. MCs and their staffs tend to know the demographic profile of their district, the general propensity for members of various groups in the constituency to turn out to vote, and whether those groups typically vote for the member’s party, or the opposition party, or swing between them. For example, Fenno (1978, 2) observed that “House members describe their districts’ internal makeup using political science’s most familiar demographic and political variables: socioeconomic structure, ideology, ethnicity, residential patterns, religion, partisanship, stability, diversity, etc. Every congressman…sees his geographical constituency in terms of some special configuration of such variables.”

MCs’ electoral incentives suggest two hypotheses. First, constituents with greater voting power, (i.e., likely voters, swing voters, and members of larger groups) should enjoy more policy representation than those with less voting power. According to Bartels (1998, 48), “disparities in the force of [candidates’ strategic imperative to compete for individuals’ votes] can produce disparities in electoral influence.” If reelection concerns are the primary motivation for policy representation and if roll calls are a resource to gain support (Mayhew 1974), when casting roll call votes MCs should try to appeal to those with the greatest influence over their reelection.

Some studies lend initial credence to this hypothesis by showing that voters are better represented than nonvoters (e.g., Hill and Leighley 1992; Martin 2003; Griffin and Newman 2005; but see Ellis, Ura, and Ashley-Robinson 2006). Such findings relate to part of Bartels’ notion of voting power (that pertaining to turnout), but are silent on the question of whether swing voters and voters in large groups are especially well represented. We provide the first test of the hypothesis that those with greater voting power, writ more broadly, are better represented.
A second empirical hypothesis stems directly from citizens’ unequal voting power. If elected officials value some individuals’ votes more than others, within groups whose votes are less valued the policy rewards of voting will be lower than the rewards within groups whose support is more sought after. To see this, assume that elected officials do little to appeal to the preferences of nonvoters regardless of the voting power of the groups to which they belong. Assume further that officials’ roll call decisions are shaped more by the opinions of voters who belong to groups with more voting power than by voters with less voting power. Then, we should expect the policy representation of voters and nonvoters to be less distinguishable within groups with less voting power. That is, the rewards of voting will be unequal across groups.

Inequality in the policy representation rewards for voting has important normative implications. If voting’s representational rewards vary by voting power, MCs’ incentives may reinforce group differences in policy representation. Bartels notes that the groups with lower voting power are generally groups that have been economically, socially, and politically disadvantaged in U.S. history, namely members of racial/ethnic minority groups, women, and low income earners. If groups with less voting power obtain less of a representation boost from voting, group differences in voting power may contribute to gaps in the degree to which Americans get what they want from government. Thus, the franchise may have limited power to change the degree to which different groups find their preferences reflected in government action. Turnout may be uniquely qualified to ameliorate political inequalities given its profoundly egalitarian nature (Verba, Scholzman, and Brady 1995). Other modes of political participation like campaign contributions can be large or small; the wealthy can participate much more than the poor in this way. Since every citizen wields but one vote, the vote holds the potential to equalize political influence that other modes of political activity do not.
Consequently, it is a real problem for achieving equality in representation if voting confers a limited representation benefit for some groups and larger benefits for others.

**Data and Method**

Our analyses require measures of policy representation and of voting power. To measure policy representation, we compare constituents’ policy preferences, as measured by the 2004 National Annenberg Election Study (NAES) Rolling Cross Section to roll call votes cast by their member of the U.S. House of Representatives in the 109th Congress (2005-2006). The NAES provides us a sample of almost 37,000 respondents, meeting our need for a measure of preferences on a number of specific policies, some of which came to a vote in the 109th Congress. Congressional Quarterly identified 24 “Key Votes” for the 109th Congress, 9 of which occurred in domains for which the NAES included a sufficiently comparable item (see online appendix). This strategy of measuring representation via direct comparisons of constituent preference and MC roll call votes has been the basis of several recent advances in the study of representation (Ansolabehere and Jones 2010; Herron and Bafumi 2010; Jessee 2009).  

For each constituent and each vote, we scored whether their MC voted as the constituent would prefer. If the MC voted as the constituent preferred on a particular vote, we coded the constituent a “winner” (1) on that vote. If the MC voted against the constituent’s preference, we coded the constituent a “loser” (0) on that vote. For example, if a constituent favors the federal government negotiating more free trade agreements and her MC voted for CAFTA, we coded this constituent a winner for this vote. If her MC voted against CAFTA, we coded the constituent a loser for this vote. We then determined the proportion of roll calls on which each constituent was a winner and term this the constituent’s *win ratio*.  

We multiply this ratio by 100
and use this 0-100 scale as our measure of policy representation and our dependent variable. As we show below, this appears to be a valid measure of policy representation.6

To measure voting power, we adapt Bartels’ (1998) measure, estimating an individual’s probability of voting along with a probability of voting for a particular party, given that the citizen votes. He estimated these probabilities via a model of turnout and a model of vote choice as a function of various individual-level traits using American National Election Studies (ANES) data. Although there are a few differences between the items Bartels used from the ANES and the 2004 NAES, we can largely replicate his models, estimating a probability of turnout and a probability of being a swing voter for each individual (see online appendix). The turnout model is reasonably straightforward and follows Bartels (1998). To estimate the probability of being a swing voter, we determined each 2004 NAES respondent’s probability of voting for John Kerry, then took the absolute value of .50 – pr(Kerry) so that those virtually certain to vote for Bush or Kerry would have scores close to .50 and those more equally likely to vote for Kerry or Bush would have scores close to 0. We then inverted the scale so that swing voters have higher scores. Finally, we multiplied each individual’s probability of voting, their probability of being a swing voter, and the percentage of the population the individual’s group makes up in her congressional district (using Census data).7 For ease of interpretation, we standardize this value so that a shift from 0 to 1 represents a shift from the mean value to a standard deviation above the mean.

It is important to note that if voters and nonvoters in a district hold similar preferences, finding that voters have higher win ratios than nonvoters may not mean that MCs are disproportionately responsive to voters (see Soroka and Wlezien 2008). Consider a hypothetical district where 80% of voters prefer a yea vote on some issue and 60% of nonvoters also prefer a yea vote. If the district’s MC votes with a majority of voters, the MC will also side with a
majority of nonvoters. However, a higher percentage of voters will be winners. Since the MC in such a district is maximizing representation for both groups, we could not simply look at the percentage of winners and conclude that this MC is more responsive to voters’ preferences. The same is true for constituents with high voting power and those with low voting power.

A more conclusive test of which group MCs are more responsive to would examine districts where voters prefer a yea vote and nonvoters prefer a nay vote, or vice versa. In these districts, MCs must choose which group to represent best. If we see a higher percentage of winners among voters in such districts, we can conclude that MCs are more responsive to voters’ preferences. Therefore, when we analyze turnout’s relationship with policy representation we first examine all respondents and then restrict our analysis to only those districts where voters and nonvoters disagree. The second approach provides a measure of win ratio based only on districts where MCs must choose a side. We adopt the same two approaches when testing whether those with higher voting power are better represented.

Focusing on districts with conflict between constituents with high and low voting power provides a sample of over 19,000. Restricting the analysis to districts with conflict between voters and nonvoters yields a sample of over 22,000 constituents. We recognize that focusing some of our analyses on districts where voters and nonvoters or those with high and low voting power conflict in some way stacks the deck in favor of finding that voters or those with high voting power enjoy policy representation rewards. However, we consider the potential for drawing the false conclusion that voters are better represented solely from a sample including all constituents a significant research design problem. Ultimately, we utilize both samples for purposes of complementarity and draw the same conclusions from each sample.

Estimating the relationship between voting power and policy representation requires
controlling for additional factors that shape a constituent’s policy representation. Research has pointed to a variety of individual-level factors that shape representation, finding that copartisans (constituents identifying with the same party as their MC) are especially well represented (e.g., Bullock and Brady 1983; Clinton 2006), high income earners are better represented than low income earners (Gilens 2005; Bartels 2008), non-Hispanic whites are often better represented than African Americans and Latinos (Griffin and Newman 2008), men are sometimes better represented than women (Griffin, Newman, and Wolbrecht 2012), and voters are better represented than nonvoters (Martin 2003; Griffin and Newman 2005). Reflecting this, our models include household income and indicator variables for copartisans, those who voted in the most recent presidential election, African Americans, Latinos, and women.11

In addition, constituents holding ideologically consistent preferences are more likely to be represented well because MCs tend to vote in fairly ideologically consistent ways (Poole and Rosenthal 1997). We generated a measure of preference consistency by first calculating the percentage of the policy items for which the respondent took the same position as the president’s stated position. We then calculated the absolute value of .50 minus that percentage (multiplied by 100) so that someone who always supported George W. Bush’s position and someone who always opposed it have the same degree of consistency. Higher values denote greater consistency, so we expect a positive relationship with policy representation.12

Results

We begin by describing the distribution of our measure of policy representation (win ratio) across the groups under study. Doing so will allow us to observe baseline disparities in representation across groups and permit us to assess the validity of our measure of policy
representation. If our measure provides a picture that matches extant research, we can have more confidence in its validity. In addition, we will see below that the same groups that have less policy representation also have less voting power on average, which suggests the two are related.

Figure 1 shows that politically relevant groups in the U.S. experience different levels of policy representation. The figure shows the mean win ratio for each group, along with 99 percent confidence intervals, scaling the Y axis to make the differences across groups evident. Because we are comparing various groups, we use Bonferroni adjusted levels of statistical significance. Whites enjoy significantly better policy representation than African Americans (p = .02 with Bonferroni adjustment, all tests two-tailed). Whites’ win ratios also exceed Latinos’ on average, though the difference is not statistically significant. Men and women experience similar levels of policy representation. High and middle income earners enjoy better policy representation than low income earners (p < .01 with Bonferroni adjustment for both comparisons). These results fit nicely with the findings of prior studies cited above, supporting the validity of our policy representation measure.

Perhaps the best way to gauge the magnitude of these differences is to compare policy representation gaps across groups. Recent studies have demonstrated a significant, and for many troubling, gap between the policy representation enjoyed by the rich and poor in the U.S. (e.g., Jacobs and Page 2005; Gilens 2005; Bartels 2008; Hacker and Pierson 2010; Ellis 2011; Rigby and Wright 2011). In fact, the issue is so significant that the American Political Science Association formed a task force to examine it (see Jacobs and Skocpol 2005). We therefore take income differences in representation as a benchmark to judge other observed differences. According to Figure 1, the average level of policy representation for low income earners is about 4.5 points lower than the mean for high income earners. We will return to this 4.5 point
benchmark throughout our analysis, but for now we stress that this gap appears to be a sizeable disparity using our data.

[Figure 1]

Figure 1 established which groups are best represented; Figure 2 displays the average voting power for the groups under study, along with 99 percent confidence intervals. According to our data, whites possess more voting power than Latinos and African Americans. In the case of African Americans, this result is largely due to a consistent pattern of voting overwhelmingly for Democrats, providing a degree of evidence that the group is “captured” by that party (Frymer 1999). Bartels notes that the strong tendency to vote for Democrats makes African Americans “by far the least pivotal group in the American electorate” (1998, 65). Although Latinos as a group tend to support Democrats more than Republicans, more Latinos than African Americans are swing voters, giving Latinos more voting power on average. Men are slightly more likely to be swing voters than women, giving men a small voting power edge. Finally, middle and high income earners have more voting power than low income earners. These patterns square nicely with Bartels’ analysis of data spanning the period 1952-1992 (1998, 57-8).

[Figure 2]

In this section we have seen that racial and income groups are not equal in terms of policy representation and that racial/ethnic and income groups possess disparate voting power. Meanwhile, gender groups possess fairly similar levels of policy representation and voting power. This is suggestive evidence that policy representation and voting power are linked and points to which groups are disadvantaged by this relationship. Next, we directly test our theoretical expectation that those who have more voting power are better represented.
Voting Power and Policy Representation

To estimate the relationship between voting power and policy representation, we model policy representation as a function of voting power, race, ethnicity, gender, household income, ideological consistency of reported preferences, turnout, and copartisanship. We first estimate a model that includes all our respondents, and then focus on the subset of respondents residing in districts where high and low voting power constituents hold conflicting preferences.

Using all of the data, we note three important categories of results, presented in Table 1, column 1. First, and most important to our purposes here, we observe the hypothesized positive relationship between voting power and policy representation (p < .001). Voting power is indeed closely linked to policy representation. All else equal, a constituent with voting power one standard deviation above the mean would have a win ratio 5 points higher than a constituent with voting power one standard deviation below the mean. Note that this 5-point difference is on par with the 4.5-point difference between high and low income earners we saw in Figure 1. Voting power matters as much as income for policy representation. This finding demonstrates empirically the substantive and normative significance of the electoral incentives MCs face under the current party system captured in the concept of voting power. Bartels (1998) theorized that some groups would benefit from the party system’s incentives to attend to particular groups. Our results bear out this hypothesis.

Second, the parameter estimates of our control variables square with our expectations. Copartisans enjoy significantly higher win ratios than non-copartisans (p < .001). African Americans and Latinos experience lower levels of policy representation than do whites (p < .001), and women are not as successful as men in this respect (p < .01). Citizens with more consistent preferences also experience higher levels of policy representation (p < .001). On the
other hand, in this full model which incorporates potentially mediating factors, wealthier citizens do not experience better policy representation than less wealthy citizens.13

Finally, at first glance there does not appear to be a policy reward for voting, reflected in the statistically insignificant estimated effect of turnout. This may be because the representation gain associated with voting varies across groups as we have hypothesized. We will see below that turnout is indeed related to policy representation, at least for some groups. For now, we focus on the key finding that those who possess more voting power are better represented.

[Table 1]

When we re-estimate an identical model while limiting the sample to districts where citizens with high and low voting power disagree about policies, we again see that voting power is significantly related to policy representation (p < .001, see Table 1, column 2). Citizens with more voting power are better represented than those with less voting power in locales where the two groups prefer public policy to go in different directions. We note that the estimates for demographic characteristics are no longer statistically significant, presumably because focusing on districts where conflict exists reduces some of the variation in these variables and the standard errors of the estimates rise as the sample narrows. Again, the main finding is that citizens with more voting power are clearly better represented.

Disparities in Voting’s Rewards

If citizens with more voting power enjoy better policy representation, then by extension we anticipate that groups receive disparate policy rewards from voting based on their voting power. Before we compare groups’ rewards from voting, though, we compare the degree to which all voters and nonvoters see their views represented in roll call decisions. Recall that in
making these comparisons, we focus on districts where voters and nonvoters hold conflicting preferences. As Figure 1 shows, in these districts, there are clear policy rewards for voting. Voters’ average policy representation is 4.3 points higher than the average for nonvoters (p < .01 with Bonferroni adjustment), a gap virtually identical to the gap between low and high income earners (see Figure 1). This finding corroborates the results of prior studies showing that voters are better represented than nonvoters (e.g. Martin 2003; Griffin and Newman 2005).

Next, we compare the policy representation of voters and nonvoters within subgroups to probe for unequal rewards of voting. Based on Figure 2, which shows disparities in groups’ voting power, we expect unequal rewards for voting such that whites and Latinos gain more from voting than African Americans, men gain slightly more than women, and middle and high income earners gain more than low income earners. Figure 3 shows the difference between the win ratios of voters and nonvoters in each group, along with 99 percent confidence intervals. The figure clearly shows unequal rewards for voting across groups. Voters are significantly better represented than nonvoters among whites, with win ratios about 3 points higher (Bonferroni adjusted p < .01). The evidence is not as clear cut for Latinos. The estimated difference between Latino voters and nonvoters is actually greater than for whites (about 4.5 points), but the much larger 99 percent confidence interval crosses zero. Although the difference is statistically significant at the .05 level, once we apply a Bonferroni adjustment, the difference between the groups is not statistically significant. Thus, while there is a hint that Latino voters may be better represented than nonvoting Latinos, we cannot be certain that this is the case. In stark contrast, voters are not better represented than nonvoters among African Americans. The difference in the means of the two groups’ win ratios is only trivially positive, and the 99% confidence interval spans zero. Finally, the confidence intervals for each of the groups overlap,
so we cannot be certain that the voting gap is bigger for some groups than others.\textsuperscript{14} However, we \textit{can} conclude that white voters are significantly better represented than white nonvoters, while it remains unclear whether African American or Latino voters are any better represented than nonvoters from these groups.

[Figure 3]

Turning to income groups, low income voters may not be better represented than nonvoters from this group. The difference between them is significant at the .01 level, but not significant once we apply a Bonferroni adjustment. In contrast, middle income voters have win ratios about 8.5 points higher than nonvoting middle income earners (p < .01 with Bonferroni adjustment). High income voters had win ratios about 10 points higher than high income nonvoters (p < .01 with Bonferroni adjustment).

These income differences in voting’s rewards persist in the multivariate context, although they are somewhat attenuated. Table 2 presents the models from Table 1, but includes interaction terms to allow turnout to have different effects for different income groups. Specifically, we include indicator variables for middle and high income earners (1 if in the particular group, 0 otherwise), with low income earners serving as the comparison group. We created a middle income * turnout interaction and a high income * turnout interaction. This means the turnout coefficient reflects the estimated effect of turnout for low income voters. The impact of voting for middle income voters is the estimated effect of turnout for low income voters plus the estimate for the middle income * turnout interaction. Turnout’s estimated effect for high income earners is calculated in a parallel way.\textsuperscript{15}

As Table 2, column 1 shows, the middle income * turnout interaction term is positive and statistically significant at the .01 level (p = .006). The high income * turnout interaction is
positive and statistically significant at the .05 level. In contrast, the turnout coefficient, which represents the difference in policy representation between low income voters and nonvoters, is statistically insignificant. Although Figure 3 shows that low income voters are better represented than low income earning nonvoters, once we control for the various factors shaping policy representation, low income voters were actually worse off than low income nonvoters. This is largely because copartisanship mediates the impact of turnout.16

To illustrate the substantive effects, consider the differences between voters and nonvoters across income groups. The predicted win ratio for a low income respondent with mean or modal values on other variables is 52 for nonvoters and 50 for voters. For middle and high income earners, the estimates are 50 for nonvoters and 53 for voters. Some of the income differences in voting’s rewards seen in Figure 3 are due to other variables in the model.17 However, even when we control for these factors, the estimates in Table 2 show that middle and high income earners who vote gain more from voting than do their low income counterparts.

The hypothesized effects are even more pronounced when we limit the analysis to districts where voters and nonvoters disagree (see Table 2, column 2). In this model, both interaction terms are statistically significant at the .001 level, indicating that turnout has a bigger effect for middle and high income earners. This model estimates that, at mean or modal values on other variables, low income nonvoters have a win ratio of 47, while low income voters have a win ratio of 45. In contrast, middle income voters are estimated to have win ratios 7 points higher than middle income nonvoters (50 vs. 43) and high income voters have win ratios over 8 points higher than high income nonvoters (52 vs. 44).

To get a sense of the magnitude of the 7 or 8 point difference between voters and nonvoters in the middle/high income groups, consider the effect of copartisanship, which is
widely found to exert a powerful effect on policy representation (e.g., Stone 1982; Powell 1982; Bullock and Brady 1983; Clinton 2006). If a constituent is a Republican and is currently represented by a Democrat, the constituent will generally have a relatively low win ratio given the partisan difference. If that same constituent were to be represented instead by a Republican, her win ratio would jump by almost 15 points (see Table 2, column 2). This is the biggest effect we observe in any of our models. The difference in policy representation between nonvoters and voters among the middle and high income groups is half as big as the effect of being able to choose the party of one’s MC. In contrast, there is no statistically significant gain for voters among low income earners. We view this as a sizeable and important difference.

Another way to gauge the political import of these findings is to consider policy representation inequalities among nonvoters. Put simply, there are no income-based inequalities among nonvoters. In fact, as we saw above, among nonvoters, low income earners are, if anything, slightly better represented. If all controls are set at mean or modal values, estimated win ratios are 47 for low income nonvoters and 43 and 44 for middle and high income nonvoters, respectively. In contrast, among voters, the differences in policy representation are substantial, both statistically and substantively. Middle income voters are estimated to have win ratios 5 points higher than low income voters and high income voters enjoy win ratios 7 points higher than low income voters. Nonvoters start with a more or less equal baseline (or even one that slightly advantages low income earners). Voters end with significant inequalities in policy representation. If voters in each group were rewarded the same, we would not see a 7-point difference in the policy representation of low and high income voters. This result suggests that increasing political participation among low income earners may not do much to mitigate the representation gap between the rich and poor (see also Ellis 2011).
Conclusion

Reelection minded office holders have incentives to represent the policy preferences of their constituents. However, as Fiorina (1974) and Bartels (1998) note, these incentives can create inequality in representation. Despite legal equality among voters, constituents hold varying degrees of voting power. Our analysis provides novel evidence showing that those with more voting power enjoy better policy representation. In so doing, we extend to the nondistributive realm prior arguments and evidence that swing voters within electoral districts are targeted to receive distributive benefits (Dahlberg and Johansson 2002).

In addition, we found that some groups enjoy greater policy rewards from voting. African Americans and low income earners, two historically disadvantaged groups, gain virtually nothing from voting in terms of policy representation. If voting brings few policy rewards to groups with limited voting power, voter mobilization efforts may provide only a limited avenue for these groups to level the degree of policy representation among the American public.

One potential consequence of these findings is that voters may be aware of the differences in the extent to which they have a say in government action, which could itself have ill effects. If voting provides few rewards, some citizens may decide not to vote. Although a full exploration is beyond the scope of this study, preliminary evidence suggests that African Americans and low income earners may be sensitive to the limited policy representation gains voting provides these groups.¹⁸ Thus, even those predisposed to be politically active among these disadvantaged groups may be tempted to disengage from politics. A growing body of research has found that political outcomes can mobilize or demobilize affected constituencies (e.g., Flavin and Griffin 2008). If African American and low income voters sense the narrow
gains voting holds, there is a real potential for these groups to drop out of political life altogether. Future research should examine this issue.

Far from concluding that African Americans and low income earners simply should not vote, we make two observations. First, if low income earners or African Americans were to stop voting altogether, their MCs would have little choice but to cater to groups that vote. Second, the patterns we observed can change. Turning out to vote is among the easiest ways to participate in American politics and as turnout increases within a group, the group’s voting power increases. Moreover, although African Americans and low income earners are relatively non-pivotal, this could change. For instance, women’s tendency to vote for Democrats at higher levels than do men is a relatively new phenomenon. Prior to Bill Clinton’s presidency, women were more likely to be swing voters than men (see e.g., Kauffman and Petrocik 1999). So-called Reagan Democrats (many of them low income earners) were, at least by some accounts, important to the Republican president’s electoral success. Some have argued that low income earning white voters may prove decisive in the 2012 presidential election (Teixeira 2011). Whether such prognostications are correct is another question. The point here is that low income voters can become more pivotal in the context of the current party system.

African Americans could also become more pivotal, at least in theory. As a group, African Americans’ preferences on several policies have become more moderate over time (Tate 2010), perhaps making support for GOP candidates less a stretch. Republicans at least occasionally offer rhetorical invitations to leave the Democratic fold. In the 2010 election, 32 African American candidates ran for seats in Congress as Republicans (Steinhauer 2010). When Republicans appeal to African Americans, they often do so explicitly with the reasoning that Democrats have no incentive to maintain African Americans’ support and do little to maintain it.
Most famously of late, George W. Bush challenged the Urban League by asking:

“Does the Democrat party take African American voters for granted? It's a fair question. I know plenty of politicians assume they have your vote. But do they earn it and do they deserve it? Is it a good thing for the African American community to be represented mainly by one political party? That's a legitimate question. How is it possible to gain political leverage if the party is never forced to compete?”

The prospect of African Americans beginning to vote for Republicans seems unlikely at present, yet the point is simply that the patterns we see here are not immutable.

Before closing, we point to two additional avenues for future research. First, many of the roll call votes in our analysis were on salient, “hot-button” issues. This is due to our use of CQ Key Votes and the NAES. By definition, CQ is less likely to select run-of-the-mill votes as “key votes” and large N surveys typically spend precious time asking respondents about issues that the polling organization deems important for voters or policy makers. However, patterns of representation may differ in other issue domains (see Miller and Stokes 1963; Hurley and Hill 2003; Wlezien 2004; Griffin and Newman 2008). Future research should examine whether this is so. Such an examination will have to deal with the difficulty that polling data may be sparse and, more importantly, the public may not have well formed preferences on issues that are less salient (see Manza and Cook 2002). If preferences are not well formed, MC behavior may affect constituent preferences (Hill and Hurley 1999), a research design conundrum that dyadic representation scholars should continue to try to solve.

Second, future work might profitably examine the voting power of other groups to understand better the behavior of elected officials. Although a full treatment of other groups is beyond the scope of the present analysis, we offer a few preliminary findings. First, to
demonstrate the significance of a group being pivotal in elections, we point to self-identified independents. Although our calculations are preliminary, we find that independents have much higher voting power than self-identified partisans (30 vs. 5, significant at the .001 level).\(^{19}\) Consistent with our first hypothesis, independents (who by definition cannot be copartisans) have win ratios 9 points higher than partisans who also are not represented by a copartisan MC. Further, consistent with our second hypothesis, independent voters have win ratios 4 points higher than independent nonvoters (\(p < .001\)). Among partisans not represented by a copartisan MC, the difference between voters’ and nonvoters’ win ratios was less than 2 points and not statistically significant at the .10 level. These results provide more support for our hypotheses. More importantly, they suggest the significance of being pivotal in elections for policy representation. For now, our finding that voting power is unequal across racial/ethnic and income groups raises significant normative concerns and highlights the importance of who votes and who they vote for in terms of who gets what they want in the American political system.

\(^1\) We thank Larry Bartels, Benjamin Highton, Zoltan Hajnal, and Michael Martinez for helpful comments. An online appendix with supplementary material for this article is available at www.journals.cambridge.org/jop. Replication data will be made available at sobek.colorado.edu/~griffinj/data.html on publication.


\(^3\) In unreported analyses, we tested whether nonvoters with higher levels of voting power are better represented than nonvoters possessing less voting power. They are not.

\(^4\) Hurley and Hill (2003) argue that MC behavior and constituency preference can have reciprocal effects on issues that clearly divide the parties. On such issues, MC behavior can
affect constituency preferences, especially for copartisans. We limit the possibility for 
reciprocation in three ways. First, we measured preferences before the roll call votes in question. 
Therefore, these roll call votes cannot influence preferences. Second, we included several issues 
that cut across party lines at the time of the roll call vote (e.g., stem cell research and 
immigration, votes on which at least a third of Republicans broke ranks) and therefore should not 
exhibit reciprocal effects. Third, MC behavior affects copartisans most, so we include a control 
for copartisanship, which will soak up most of the effects of any reciprocation.

5 We limit our analyses to those who answered at least three issue items that could be matched to 
their MC’s roll call. Results do not change significantly if we alter this threshold. Since party 
influence on roll call voting tends to be greatest in close roll call votes (e.g., Snyder and 
Groseclose 2000), meaning constituency influences of the sort we examine here may be 
minimized in such votes, we examined whether the results were significantly different for votes 
that were close compared to votes that were lopsided. Despite some differences across types of 
votes our conclusions are supported in both (see online appendix).

6 We estimated models of policy representation as the dependent variable via OLS and ordered 
probit. The results are consistent across estimation techniques. For ease of interpretation, we 
present OLS results and report the ordered probit models in the online appendix.

7 \( \Pr(\text{turnout}_i) \times \left[ \left( \frac{1}{2} - \Pr(\text{Kerry}_i|\text{Turnout}_i) \right) \times -1 \right] + .5 \times \text{percent}_i \text{ in district, where } i \text{ is the } \text{individual, } k \text{ is some group (male, female), and } j \text{ is the district where } i \text{ resides.} \) We calculated 
three voting power scores for each individual, one based on the size of the individual’s 
racial/ethnic group, another based on the size of the individual’s gender group, and a third based 
on the size of the individual’s income group in the district. We averaged the three scores, 
resulting in a single measure of voting power for each individual. Averaging the calculations of
an individual’s voting power is, from a theoretical perspective, preferable to using three different measures of voting power for each individual. To see this, consider an African American woman earning a middle income who has a 0.9 probability of turning out to vote and a 0.9 probability of voting for a Democrat. Assume she lives in a district where only 1% of residents are African American, 50% are female, and 50% are middle income. Her voting power based on gender is 0.1 (her high likelihood of voting for the Democrat) times 0.9 (her probability of voting) times 0.5 (the size of her group in the district) times 100, which is 4.5. Her voting power based on income is also 4.5 since 50 percent of her district is comprised of middle income earners. Her voting power based on race, however, is only 0.09 (0.1 * 0.9 * 0.01*100). Although she is in a very small minority in terms of race, it is unlikely that her MC will ignore her given her high voting power when calculated from the perspective of gender or income.

8 We recoded all our preference measures to a 0-1 scale where values below 0.5 indicate opposition to a measure and above .5 support. For each roll call vote, in the restricted model we retained only respondents in districts where the mean opinion of the powerful is on one side of 0.5 and mean opinion of the less powerful is on the other. We then pooled the roll call votes and calculated the percentage of roll call votes on which each constituent was a winner.

9 We limit the analysis to districts where those with high voting power (the upper quartile of the voting power distribution) disagree with those with lower voting power (the lower quartile).

10 To identify voters and nonvoters, we used a self-reported measure of turnout in the 2000 election. We also ran the analysis using reports of 2004 turnout whenever possible, coding as voters those who were interviewed before election day and claimed to have voted early in the 2004 elections and those who were interviewed after election day and claimed to have voted in the 2004 election. The results were virtually identical. Although the tendency for some
respondents to say they voted when they did not can confound analyses, we suspect that overreporting of turnout is not driving the results we present. See online appendix.

11 In our sample, 210 individuals said they were both “black or African American” and “Hispanic.” We coded these individuals as Latinos, but the results are similar if we code them as African Americans. The low income group made up 32% of our sample, the middle income group 38% of our sample, and the high income group the remaining 30% of our sample.

12 We also explored controlling for district heterogeneity and the popularity of a constituent’s preferences. Including these controls does not change our main results (see online appendix).

13 We interpret this as evidence that income’s effect on policy representation is mediated by copartisanship and/or voting power.

14 This is also true when we incorporate all of the controls present in Table 1.

15 We do not include interactions for race/ethnicity and turnout because, as noted above, there are no statistically significant differences in turnout’s effects across these groups.

16 In our data, 42 percent of low income voters were represented by copartisans, compared to just 32 percent of low income nonvoters. Controlling for copartisanship alone eliminates the difference between low income voters and low income nonvoters.

17 Middle and high income nonvoters have lower than average win ratios. The average win ratio for low income nonvoters is 49, compared to 46 and 45 for middle and high income nonvoters, respectively. However, we are hesitant to conclude that low income nonvoters are better represented than middle or high income nonvoters. The differences between these groups are significant at the .05 level, but not when we apply the Bonferroni adjustment. For now, we simply note that differences across nonvoters in income groups are slight and may actually advantage low income earners. Consequently, there are two components to the gains middle and
high income earners enjoy (shown in Figure 3). First, high and middle income voters have higher win ratios than do low income voters. Second, middle and high income nonvoters have lower win ratios than low income nonvoters. This lower baseline is partly why voting’s rewards are greater for middle and high income voters. As we will see below, among voters, high income earners are much better represented than low income earners, a point that is all the more significant given the relatively even baseline of policy representation among nonvoters.

18 The NAES asked respondents “Do you agree or disagree that people like me have no say over what the government does,” an item similar to the standard ANES item measuring “external efficacy” (e.g. Craig, Neimi, and Silver 1990). We estimated an ordered probit model for this question as a function of the variables in Table 1 and education, which is correlated with external efficacy (e.g., Finkel 1985; Craig, Niemi, and Silver 1990). Consistent with previous research (e.g., Abramson and Aldrich 1982; Finkel 1985), voters score higher on this scale than nonvoters (p < .001). We also find differences across groups that mirror quite remarkably those we observed above. Whites and Latinos were significantly more positive than African Americans on this measure, while middle and high income earners were both more positive than low income earners (p < .01 for all comparisons). In addition, the differences between voters and nonvoters varies across groups in ways that match our findings, albeit not always at standard levels of statistical significance. We stress that these findings are preliminary. Researchers should take up a full treatment of this issue, taking care to deal with the reciprocal relationship between voting and perceiving that government is responsive to one’s preferences (Finkel 1985).

19 An important limiting factor to our preliminary analysis is our lack of district-level population measures, which constitutes one-third of our voting power measure. We have not collected this information for groups we did not analyze in the main body of our study.
Works Cited


Ellis, Christopher R., Joseph Daniel Ura, and Jenna Ashley-Robinson. 2006. “The Dynamic


*American Political Science Review* 57: 45-56.

Poole, Keith T. and Howard Rosenthal. 1997. *Congress: A Political-Economic History of Roll


Figures and Tables

FIGURE 1
AVERAGE WIN RATIOS ACROSS GROUPS

Note: Bars represent the average win ratio for each group, as calculated by the authors using NAES data. Error bars denote 99% confidence intervals.
FIGURE 2
AVERAGE VOTING POWER ACROSS GROUPS

Note: Bars represent the average voting power for each group, as calculated by the authors using NAES data. Error bars denote 99% confidence intervals.
FIGURE 3
DIFFERENCE BETWEEN AVERAGE WIN RATIO OF VOTERS AND NONVOTERS ACROSS GROUPS

Note: Bars represent the difference between average win ratio of voters and nonvoters from each group, as calculated by the authors using NAES data. Error bars denote 99% confidence intervals.
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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>All Districts</th>
<th>Conflict Districts†</th>
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<td><strong>Voting Power</strong></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>R²</strong></td>
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<td>0.03</td>
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† Denotes districts with conflict between high and low voting power constituents.
Standard errors in parentheses.

** p < .001, * p < .01., + p < .05
<table>
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<td>(1.23)</td>
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† Denotes districts with conflict between high and low voting power constituents.

Standard errors in parentheses.

** p < .001, * p < .01., + p < .05

Low income respondents are the reference income category.