Putting Inequality in Context

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The economic gap between rich and poor is an enduring and deeply important feature of American politics. Its steady increase over time has been identified as a cause or consequence of nearly every other major economic, political, or sociodemographic shift in American politics over the past 40 years—changes in immigration patterns, changes in educational and public health outcomes, and increasing party polarization, to name just a few (Wilkinson and Pickett 2006; McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2006; Berube 2014; Bonica et al. 2015). But how does this growing income gap map onto the choices that ordinary citizens make—how, in other words, does one’s income position affect how one thinks about politics? And how do these effects translate into the sorts of actions that representatives take?

There is, of course, a wealth of national-level data documenting growing income inequality, and documenting differences in the lived experiences of the rich, poor, and middle class. These data often form the starting point for scholarly and media-driven conversations about income disparities in the United States. But citizens are, generally speaking, not terribly well informed when it comes to national economic conditions, or even their own standing in the country’s broader class structure (Vanneman and Pampel 1977; Gorman 2000). This lack of understanding of one’s economic “place” is often cited as an argument for why class interests do not neatly map onto political conflict in the United States: If citizens cannot understand basic facts about economic inequality and their own social status, then how can they connect their own interests to politics in a meaningful way?
Citizens, are, however, somewhat better at identifying economic and social conditions in the communities in which they live (Newman, Johnston, and Lown 2015), and use local conditions as a way to inform their estimates about national conditions (Ansolabehere, Meredith, and Snowberg 2014; Hansford and Gomez 2015): citizens’ evaluations of what is going on in the nation are driven largely by their evaluations and perceptions of what is going on immediately around them. Further, it is these experiences with, and concerns about, local conditions that ultimately informs how citizens translate economic evaluations into political choices (Cho and Gimpel 2009; Rogers 2014). When understanding how economic divisions map onto political attitudes and behaviors, in other words, focusing on what is happening in the nation at large might matter considerably less than focusing on what is happening in the particular contexts in which citizens live, work, and interact.

The goal of this chapter is to offer a contextual explanation of how economic differences manifest themselves in political choices. The general argument is that neither citizens nor legislators view income inequality in abstract, nation-centric ways, but rather through experiences in their communities, districts, and social environments. The ways that citizens experience both income inequality and their own economic position in society is driven not by national trends or statistics, nor by a comparison of how one is doing compared to “Americans” broadly defined. It is, rather, driven by how they see themselves, and how they perceive economic divisions, in the environment around them. I expect that these “lived experiences” to matter to how wealthy and poor citizens make political choices and make the decision to participate in political life. They should also matter to the ways in which legislators view their rich and poor constituents, and the ways in which they choose to represent (or not represent) their interests in policymaking.

Why Does Context Matter?

The rationale for a context-driven model of political behavior is simple: people do not live or make decisions in isolation, but rather as social beings embedded in particular environments. Myriad individual-level attributes—family socialization, personality, race and ethnicity, gender, economic self-interest, and religious beliefs, to name just a few—have obviously important effects on political behavior. But we also know that people who are demographically similar, but live in different places, often make starkly different political choices. How one’s personal attributes map to specific choices is at least a part a function of contextual experience.
Contextual effects on behavior—defined broadly by Huckfeldt (1986) as “environmental influences that arise through social interaction with the environment” are rooted in myriad personal experiences—with the laws and customs of a given area, in formal and informal social interactions with people, and in observations of how people conduct themselves. Together, such factors provide an important way of teaching citizens how to think about the political world, and their place in it. The importance of the role of context has been borne out in a number of studies of political behavior in both the United States and elsewhere, and among both masses and political elites. Political attitudes and political behaviors are spatially clustered: all else equal, people who live near one another hold more similar political attitudes, and participate in politics at more similar rates, than would be expected when considering sociodemographic characteristics alone (e.g., Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954; Huckfeldt and Sprague 1992; Gimpel and Schuknecht 2004; Dalton and Anderson 2011).

In some cases, context is important because of the laws and institutional arrangements it imposes on people. We know, for example, that electoral rules affect both the number and type of political choices offered to citizens, and how citizens respond to such choices. These factors, in turn, affect citizens’ decisions about who to vote for, the decision to participate in politics at all, and even attitudes toward the fairness and efficacy of the political system itself (e.g., Jackman 1987; Janda 1993; Blais 2006; Dalton 2008). Put simply, contexts matter because they provide a vehicle for social learning, a means of gathering information about the rules and norms under which political conflict is structured, and for forming the social networks that serve as a basis for political understanding (e.g., Mutz 2002; McClurg 2003).

Contexts also matter because of their psychological effects on citizens. The environment in which one is embedded shapes citizens’ beliefs and values and how they view particular political or social interactions. Discussions narrowly related to politics matter, of course, as the political information that citizens use to make decisions (as well as the deeper political orientations that citizens use to evaluate that information) are distilled and obtained through social networks and opinion leaders within a political context (Huckfeldt, Johnson, and Sprague 2004; Walsh 2004, 2015).

But perhaps most important, context matters because of the importance of the regular, low-intensity, nonpolitical experiences, interactions, and occurrences that citizens experience every day (Cho and Rudolph 2008). Even for apolitical individuals with few close social ties in a given community, basic interactions with people around them in the course of doing mundane tasks—shopping for groceries, walking in their neighborhoods,
commuting to work—have deeply important consequences for shaping one’s perceptions of the broader social world (Huckfeldt 1986). Regular interactions with people in one’s physical environment, regardless of whether such interactions are particularly memorable, or explicitly political, are integral in forming social reference groups, views of what sorts of social behavior or views are considered “normal” or “acceptable,” and beliefs as to what sorts of values, traits, and personal attributes are considered desirable (e.g., Hitlin 2003; Vauclair and Fischer 2011). These interactions need not be overt, or even consciously remembered, to exert a strong influence on one’s views of social norms and community values: subtle and secondary cues (e.g., such as how yards are groomed, the cars that people drive, how people interact with workers in the course of obtaining services) all send messages that can have political implications. What we might think of as “bedrock” individual-level political and social values, in other words, are strongly contextually influenced.1

Contextual factors also matter to the choices of policymakers, not just ordinary citizens. There is, of course, a well-established literature on the role of political institutions in shaping policymaker behavior and legislative outcomes: we know that different rules governing the concentration of power, the processes through which legislation is enacted, the number of veto points in legislative process, and the like, affect the outcomes that a political system produces independent of both citizen and legislator preferences (e.g., Krehbiel 2010; Alesina and Glaeser 2003).4 These outcomes, in turn, affect both how citizens perceive that they are represented by the political system, and the actual distance between citizens’ views and the view of those that represent them (Miller and Listhaug 1990).

And while policymakers certainly have on average more informed and stable belief structures and policy positions than most citizens, legislators face many of the same decision-making challenges—having many competing considerations and pressures to reconcile, and having limited time and information to understand all of them perfectly—as citizens do (Kingdon 1989). Contextual factors—the strength of particular interest organizations or industries, the economic and social compositions of their constituencies, and even the geographic structure of their districts—affect who legislators hear from, how they perceive their constituents, and how they reconcile competing demands on their time, resources, and votes (Hall 1996). Both the manner and the environment in which legislators receive information, in other words, matters to how they use that information to make choices (Miler 2010).
Of course, we might be concerned whether contexts themselves have an impact above and beyond the individual-level attributes of people that live in them. This issue is especially pertinent given that people can, and often do, “self-select” into geographic areas that fit their personal experiences and values (Bishop 2009). People who work in the technology industry, or who are evangelical Christians, or care deeply about the environment, will, all else equal, prefer to live around other technology professionals, evangelicals, or environmentalists, respectively. So it is clearly the case that much of what we see as contextual differences in American politics are simply aggregations of the attitudes and behaviors of people who live in different places. And contextual differences can have a self-reinforcing capacity as well: areas with particular cultures attract people from other places who share the dominant values of that area (Nall 2015).

But at the same time, a significant body of research illustrates that differences between geographic areas are more than compositional: they influence behavior as well. Cultural differences bind people to local laws, customs, and cultures into which they are socialized (Axelrod 1997; Gimpele and Schuknecht 2004). The environment in which one lives encourages particular norms of behavior and thinking that affect the worldviews of people within those environments, even among people who are not otherwise predisposed to share those norms.

And formal policies and policies matter as well: as Pierson (1993) and others have documented, policies created in particular locations matter not just because of their intended and immediate effects but because their presence also encourages particular interpretations of the social world, and of government-citizen relations. Laws legitimate certain ways of thinking, and delegitimate others (Noelle-Neumann 1993). Places are aggregations of individuals, but also shared social spaces that shape, and reshape, values, beliefs, and behaviors.

Income and the Mechanisms of Contextual Influence

The goal of this book is to understand contextual differences in how income differences matter to political outcomes—both in how citizens approach the political world and in how elected officials respond to those citizens. There is no shortage of reasons to think that the environments in which
citizens and legislators find themselves affect how class differences translate into political outcomes. In this section, I outline some of the mechanisms, both formal and informal, that I expect matter to how contextual differences become relevant to understanding the political divides between rich and poor.

**Reference Group Formation**

As we have discussed, some of the most important aspects of contextual influence on behavior are the regular, informal interactions that citizens have in their communities and surrounding areas. They need not be explicitly political or even particularly social—the life that one sees around one on the road, in the gas station, at the supermarket, or at church matters in large part because they shape citizens’ social reference groups, and citizens’ basis for social comparison with others. Put simply, even these simple and forgettable experiences, because they happen regularly enough, are integral because they provide a cumulatively strong influence on how people view themselves in comparison to others. If someone works or is looking for work in a context near where they live, these sorts of interactions are buttressed by more structured tasks that also illustrate ways in which income and class manifest themselves in social behavior. These sorts of interactions are important in shaping how people view their own economic position, and their relative level of economic success, in relation to others. They also matter in shaping how people view the degree of both connection and discord between people of different economic classes. Do I “fit in” economically with the people around me, or do I stand out? Do I have regular interactions with people who are different than me, or not? Does it appear that it is easy for someone to get ahead, or are peoples’ economic fates more or less static? Do wealthier citizens seem to view poor citizens with sympathy? With condescension? Again, how citizens answer these sorts of questions is in part contextually based. An area in which wealthy and poor citizens live in separate, highly economically segregated enclaves is very likely to engender a different view of class politics than an area where rich and poor live near one another and interact—at least informally—regularly.

**Political Culture**

We know that the political cultures—defined broadly here as the general sets of communal values that shape political behavior—differ in mean-
ingful ways across areas of the country. These cultures create differing sets of expectations, diffused throughout the citizenry in a given area, of what sorts of values and beliefs are prioritized and cherished. These differences are perhaps most obvious when it comes to religious and “cultural” matters. Debates over (for example) the ways that concepts such as evolution and “intelligent design” should be taught in public schools are dramatically different in various areas of the country, and reflect enduring differences in how citizens in different areas view the relationship between religious belief and scientific inquiry. Both proponents and opponents of teaching religious-based theories of creation know that these debates matter because the content of school curricula reflects, in a fairly fundamental ways, the values that will be used to assimilate citizens to a particular way of thinking about the social world. They also make a strong statement about the values that adults within a given community are expected to hold. Even if these values are not universally shared, they serve as basis for understanding what is within the bounds of acceptable belief and behavior, and as a groundwork for structuring social interaction (Beyer and Liston 1996).

In much the same way, cultures matter in shaping how people view the current economic playing field and, in turn, matter to how people think about inequality and political issues pertaining to the divide between rich and poor. Are concepts such as “meritocracy” prized and valued, or are there reasons to think that economic success and failure are often out of an individual’s control? Are the rich to be viewed with admiration for working hard, taking risks, and succeeding, or to be viewed with scorn for benefiting from an unlevel playing field? Is poverty primarily a function of individual failings, or structural factors? The ways in which citizens answer questions such as these differ across various areas of the country (Hopkins 2009). We should expect these differences to be integral to how citizens of all income levels view their own economic position and the positions of others, and approach political issues related to the politics of income differences.

**Shared Norms of Behavior**

The idea that people who live near one another might act similarly is not unique to politics: people who share space also tend to share similar patterns of conduct in all sorts of realms (Crenson 1983). But this tendency for contextually based norms of behavior is particularly relevant in the political realm, given the strong social component to the decision to participate in political life. Through regular formal and informal interactions, citizens
learn the “prevailing norms” (Cho and Rudolph 2008, 276) of their social network, and tend to structure their own behavior accordingly.

Again, people tend to take informal cues from their social environments about what the norms of citizenship and participation are generally, and what they are for people of similar social position more specifically. Is voting, for example, perceived as something that everyone does, or is it something that takes a specific effort and commitment? Is it normal for people to know and care about politics? Do people like me tend to speak up and get involved in political life, or is political conversation limited to those who are more educated, wealthy, or connected than me? Does it appear that participation from people like me will make a difference?

**Distribution of and Access to Resources**

Context also matters because it affects access to resources—both economic and political—that citizens have. In some cases, the presence or absence of these resources is simply a matter of what sorts of individuals live in a given area. Areas with large concentrations of wealthy people, for example, tend to have higher quality public schools and public services than areas with large concentrations of poorer people (Massey 1996; Sampson 2003). These resources, in turn, have meaningful effects on the opportunities and outcomes of citizens that live in these contexts. Living in well-resourced and well-networked areas is associated with a wide variety of positive outcomes, from social capital (Kawachi et al. 1997) to health (Yen and Kaplan 1999) to educational success (Stewart, Stewart, and Simons 2007). These effects, in turn, affect how citizens perceive their neighborhoods and their political systems. And we also know that these benefits tend to extend to people who live in these areas regardless of their own personal economic standing: poor children who attend schools with large concentrations of wealthy students, for example, tend to fare better on a wide variety of educational metrics than poor children who attend schools with large concentrations of poorer students (Roosa et al. 2003; Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn 2000).

The logic here extends to politics as well: citizens who live in well-resourced and well-networked areas should have greater opportunities for meaningful political participation, and should hold different attitudes toward the functioning of the political system, than citizens who live in less-well-resourced areas. This is in large part due to the stronger social infrastructures of these communities, and the resources that they tend to provide in support of meaningful political engagement. But it is also due to the greater attention paid to these communities by policymakers and
political candidates. Parties and candidates concentrate their mobilization efforts on communities with significant political and social resources, for example, simply because they know that these sorts of efforts are more likely to be successful in attracting new participants (Brady, Schlozman, and Verba 1999).

**Laws and Institutional Structures**

Finally, we know that contexts matter because they shape the rules under which political discourse and political engagement is conducted. In the United States, the laws that govern political debate and political participation, the transparency of the political process, and the like vary across the country in ways that have meaningful consequences. Governments structure choices and incentives for citizens, and these incentives, in turn, affect behavior. The ease or difficulty with which citizens can register to vote or cast a ballot, the requirements that citizens must meet to receive means-tested government aid, the availability of resources to train for or look for work, and so on all matter to how citizens view and participate in the political world.

These sorts of laws matter because of their direct effects: making voting comparably difficult will depress voter turnout, and will likely affect certain kinds of citizens more than others. But they also matter because of their feedback effects (Pierson 1993): the effects that they have on shaping how citizens view the relationship between themselves, their communities, and government. As a simple example, some American states place significant restrictions on how low-income citizens can use government benefit money (restricting withdrawal of such benefits to a particular dollar amount per day, or prohibiting them from being used in certain places or on certain “luxury” food items). These laws are not passed at random: they exist because elected policymakers in a given context want them. But such laws do not just affect the fairly specific issue of benefit withdrawal, but also encourage a particular interpretation of how to view beneficiaries of means-tested aid—that they are not trustworthy, that they need paternalistic supervision, and so on—that contexts without such laws do not.

**Context and Class Politics: A General Model**

The above discussion suggests a multifaceted role for political context in shaping how income differences map onto political conflict. In this section,
I outline four general ways in which these contextual factors may become politically relevant. This discussion will serve as a foundation for the more general exploration of these sorts of contextual influences in the remaining chapters of the book.

First, the presence or absence of specific contextual characteristics can prime income as a relevant dividing line in political conflict. Clearly, in a society where most government actions focus on issues of redistribution, regulation, and “who gets what” (Stimson 1999; Kelly 2009), one’s personal income is certainly a factor that can be deeply relevant to forming political opinions. Several prominent economic models of political attitudes, for example, begin by assuming that rich and poor have different preferences for what government should or should not do (Meltzer and Richard 1981). But self-interest is far from the only thing that drives policy opinions, and, generally speaking, class differences in opinions on many highly salient issues are often minimal. On many important policy matters, in other words, the views of rich and poor simply are not that different from one another (Enns and Kellstedt 2008; Soroka and Wlezien 2008; Ura and Ellis 2008), as other factors—religious values, ideology, prejudice, and the like—take precedence over material interest when forming policy views (Sears and Funk 1990; Page and Shapiro 1992).

The degree to which material self-interest is connected to policy positions is driven, in large part, by two general factors: the relative salience of one’s class position to one’s political identity, and the ease with which citizens can connect their own material interests to specific policy positions. I argue here that the degree to which both of these conditions are met is a function, at least in part, of the environment in which one lives.

When it comes to the salience of class to political life, for example, is it the case that one’s immediate environment provides for regular opportunities to interact with people who are from a different economic position? Are such interactions likely to be positive (in that they improve, or at least humanize) perceptions of people who are in a different economic situation, or negative? Do they foster a sense of cooperation or competition with others, or an opportunity to develop class consciousness?

Do the dominant cultural messages in an area suggest that income differences are a natural and perhaps desirable aspect of economic life, or suggest that they are problems that need to be remedied? All of these sorts of factors are important in understanding how someone maps class interests to policy views. A wealthy citizen who rarely needs to interact with other nonwealthy people, and who lives in an area that supports the idea
that wealth disparities are justified, is likely to think about one’s wealth differently than someone who lives in an area where interactions with less well-off citizens are common and wealth is something that is to be viewed with suspicion.

Second, context can either **enhance or mitigate participatory inequalities between rich and poor**. Most models of political participation argue that the decision to participate is driven by political resources: people with more political resources participate more than those with less. These factors help to explain why wealthy people tend to participate in politics more than the poor: wealthy people simply have more resources—skills, time, social contacts, and the like—that they can use to devote to political participation. But the degree to which someone possesses political resources, and the ways in which they can use them to get involved in politics, is at least in part context-dependent. This is especially true for lower-income citizens, who do not have access to many of the sorts of things that make participation by the wealthy more likely.

We know, for example, that being mobilized to participate is critical to determining whether citizens actually participate: as Rosenstone and Hansen (1993) put it, a dominant reason for citizens’ nonparticipation is simply that “nobody asked.” For strategic reasons, mobilization efforts usually are concentrated among the resource-rich. But does a given area also have organizations with a vested interest in educating and mobilizing lower-income citizens? Or are such citizens comparably ignored in the political process? Does the political system in an area make participation comparably difficult (thus increasing the likelihood that resource-poor citizens will not be able to pay the costs of participation) or easy? More broadly speaking, does the political and economic context in a given area make someone feel as if their participation could make a difference? If contextual factors depress feelings of political efficacy, then we should expect them to depress political participation as well—and that these effects will be concentrated most strongly among the resource-poor.

Third, I expect that contextual factors affect the relative **political visibility of rich and poor**. In some cases, visibility is literal: certain types of contextual and geographic arrangements render the lifestyles of wealthy and poor essentially disconnected from one another, with the consequence that wealthy citizens rarely if ever need to see lower-income citizens if they choose not to (Fallows 2000). This economic segregation is known to have significant effects on class politics and policy outcomes (Franko and Livingston 2015).
Visibility here can also refer to the degree to which citizens’ views are perceived, and perceived as important, by the people that represent them. Policymakers have neither the time nor the ability to form a perfect perception of what their district and its various subconstituencies want and value: a policymaker’s view of what his or her district “is” is based on the constituents that are most immediately salient and visible to them (Miller 2010). Who elected officials hear from, in other words, matters. Because wealthy citizens are more likely to participate in politics and be important to elected officials for other reasons, this often means that a policymakers’ perception of what his or her constituency wants is biased toward the views of his or her wealthy constituents. But, again, context can affect these perceptions in fairly fundamental ways. Contexts where poorer citizens are deeply involved in the political process, comprise an electorally valuable mass of constituents, or have organizations that are mobilized to advocate on behalf of their interests, for example, will present a very different picture of what a “constituency” looks like to policymakers than contexts where the poor are silent, and there are few who advocate on their behalf.

Finally, and perhaps most important, context can affect the relative political influence of rich and poor. As discussed in chapter 1, there is a significant body of evidence that policymakers are much more likely to cater to the views of the wealthy when creating policy. Though the precise explanations for this phenomenon vary, the common thread running through them is simple: policymakers need money, and wealthy citizens and groups meet that need—in exchange, of course, for outsized influence. There is certainly a good deal of truth to this statement, as a general statement. But the reality behind unequal representation is more complex: strategic policymakers do not simply represent “the wealthy” as a matter of course, but represent the interests of those who are most likely to fulfill the goals they wish to achieve (Mayhew 2004; Jusko 2008).

Different sorts of policymakers have different constituencies, different external pressures, and different sorts of goals. In some contexts, these factors are entirely consistent with the unequal representation story. But in others, they are not. Some policymakers, in other words, represent constituencies in which ignoring the views of the poor is likely to have significant negative consequences—either because the votes of poorer citizens are critical to getting reelected, or because organizations that mobilize on behalf of the poor are politically powerful. Others can pay less attention to the poor with little potential for repercussions. In contexts where taking the views of the poor into account is of significant concern to policymakers, the poor will be better represented.
Thinking about Political Equality

How does all of this bear on the central substantive theme of political equality across income lines? Perhaps simplistically, political representation in the United States can be thought of through both its “demand side” (What are citizens asking for from government? How loudly are they asking for it, and who is doing most of the speaking?) and its “supply side” (How attuned are elected officials to the wants and needs of citizens? What incentives do they have to represent the will of their constituencies—or subsets of their constituencies—above and beyond other pressures they might have?). The argument to be made in the subsequent chapters is that contexts can affect, sometimes strongly, both sides of this representation equation. They can affect from whom legislators are hearing, and the content of the messages that they are hearing. They can also affect the incentives that legislators have to privilege certain citizens’ views over others when making policy decisions.

When it comes to political equality, the core message that this book will drive home is simple: context matters because it affects how strongly the material and other interests of less well-off citizens are made visible and relevant to policymakers. Political equality, in other words, is likely to be enhanced in contexts where policymakers can see and hear what nonrich citizens want and need from government, and in contexts where the concerns of such citizens are instrumental to other concerns (such as securing reelection) that policymakers wish to achieve.

Studying the Role of Context using U.S. House Districts

The subsequent chapters will explore these themes, highlighting how aspects from the contexts in which citizens and policymakers interact matter to both public opinion and political representation. To be sure, the argument is not that context is the only, or even the most important, aspect of citizen or legislator behavior. We cannot take a wealthy, ideologically sophisticated person from a conservative, rural place, for example, drop them in a liberal and densely populated one, and expect their political attitudes to change dramatically. Similarly, one cannot take a poor citizen from an impoverished community, drop them into a wealthy one with high-quality political and social resources, and expect them to be as well equipped to take advantage of those resources as the wealthy people around them. One’s own resources, predispositions, and proclivities are too important. But this book will illustrate that contexts do matter, and matter
in important ways that have deeply important consequences for understanding political inequality in the United States.

The contextual unit of analysis in this book will be the United States congressional district. The U.S. House of Representatives, with 435 districts that vary in myriad politically relevant ways, provides an ideal opportunity to explore how contextual experiences inform both how rich and poor think about politics, and how members of Congress (MCs) represent those views in policy action. The assumption that motivates the book is that differences in both the sociodemographic composition and political cultures of these districts affect the experiences that both citizens and legislators have within them.

Certainly, there are limitations to an analysis which uses the congressional district as a unit of analysis. Other, more granular aspects of place—such as the neighborhood (Huckfeldt 1986), county (Newman, Johnston, and Lown 2015), precinct (Gay 2001), or zip code (Pacheco 2008)—perhaps do a better, or at least different, job of capturing the “lived experience” that is so critical to understanding why context matters. It is easier to avoid interacting with people from parts of a congressional district than it is to avoid interacting with parts of a neighborhood.

And in a broader sense, political boundaries of any sort (whether district, county, zip code, or something else) are in a sense arbitrary, and not a flawless proxy for the experiences that all citizens within those boundaries share. Cultures or customs that are common to a particular culture do not necessarily sort themselves neatly into bounded political units, particularly when those units are geographically large or irregularly shaped. Particularly in heavily gerrymandered districts that stretch a long geographic distance, people may often have more in common with those who live in very close geographic proximity to them—even though these people may reside in a different district, or even a different state—than people who live in the very wealthy suburbs that exist in the northern part of the district. So it is important to take these limitations into account: geographic boundaries provide a convenient, though not ideal, way to understand the shared environment in which citizens live.

But after acknowledging these limitations, there is still a good deal that we can learn about how context affects both citizens and lawmakers through the use of congressional districts. Political boundaries such as congressional districts matter for a number of reasons: they affect the choices available to citizens, the representatives they hear from and have access to, and (since congressional districts are confined within states) many of the policies that affect the taxes they pay, the services
they receive, and the laws to which they are bound (Fenno 1978; Flavin 2015b). We have long known that political boundaries are vital in sending signals as to what a particular community is like and the sorts of people that it caters to (Tiebout 1956), and that the rules and norms that are shaped by political boundaries help inform citizens about what their roles are, and what is expected from them (Soss and Jacobs 2009; Hacker, Mettler, and Pinderhughes 2005).

Congressional districts are also integral to the study of political representation: the relationship between constituents and their MCs is one of the most foundational aspects of the American political system. MCs provide both targeted federal dollars, and hours of constituency service, to support projects and concerns that benefit those who reside in particular districts, and citizens (and policymakers) tend to see their specific MCs as the voice of a particular constituency’s interests in the broader federal government (Parker and Davidson 1979; Fenno 2006). This relationship matters for how citizens view the political system: those who approve of the job that their Congress member is doing are also more likely, all else equal, to feel more positively about the broader political system as well (Grill 2007).

The congressional district is also critical to the study of opinion-policy linkages: the relationships between MCs and their constituents are the focus of large bodies of research on representation generally (e.g., Miller and Stokes 1963; Erikson 1978; Bartels 1991; Griffin 2013; Sullivan and Uslaner 1978; Burden 2007) and biases in representation more specifically (e.g., Griffin and Newman 2005, 2008; Griffin and Flavin 2007; Carnes 2013; Grumbach 2015). Knowing how well citizens are represented by their particular MCs, in other words, is integral to our understanding of how well representative democracy is functioning.

And importantly to the analysis here, congressional districts in the United States vary in a wide variety of fairly fundamental ways. Figures 2.1–2.6 provide an illustration of this, using data from a variety of sources to map congressional districts in the United States on several factors that are important to the arguments in this book: income inequality (as measured by a pre-tax-and-transfer Gini coefficient); median household income; population density (as measured by persons per square mile); the percentage of citizens that reside in a union household; the percentage of citizens who voted for Barack Obama in the 2012 Presidential election; and the percentage of citizens who view religion as “very important” to their daily lives.

Some of these factors are correlated with one another: table 2.1 dis-
Fig. 2.1. Gini Coefficient, by Congressional District

Source: 2012–14 American Communities Survey.
Fig. 2.2. Median Household Income, by Congressional District

Source: 2012–14 American Communities Survey.
Fig. 2.3. Population Density (persons per square mile), by Congressional District

Source: 2012–14 American Communities Survey.
Fig. 2.4. Union Households, by Congressional District
Source: 2012–14 American Communities Survey.
Fig. 2.5. Obama Percent of 2012 Presidential Vote, by Congressional District

Fig. 2.6. Percentage Who View Religion as Important, by Congressional District

Source: 2014 Cooperative Congressional Election Study.
plays the simple first-order correlations between the attributes mapped in the above figures. Districts that have high levels of citizen religiosity, for example, are also more likely to be Republican than districts that are less religious. Democratic districts also tend to be densely populated (and, interestingly, have comparably higher levels of income inequality). But each of these six factors, as well as many others, are to some degree independent from one another, making the experiences that occur in each congressional district on some level independent from one another.

At the extremes, differences across districts are especially stark: the most equal district (MN-6, encompassing exurban and rural areas northwest of Minneapolis) among those I will study has a Gini coefficient comparable or lower to those of Sweden, Denmark, and Norway: the most unequal district (PA-2, encompassing “main line” suburbs of Philadelphia, as well as majority-minority aspects of Philadelphia city) has a Gini coefficient comparable to the developing economies of Namibia, Haiti, and Zambia. The wealthiest congressional district (VA-10, encompassing suburban Washington, DC) has a median family income nearly twice the national average and a poverty rate of less than 6 percent. The poorest (NY-16, in the Bronx) has a median household income that is below any nation in the developed world; more than 40 percent of its citizens live in poverty. Several congressional districts in New York City have over 25,000 persons per square mile; roughly 25 percent of congressional districts have fewer than 100 persons per square mile.

But even outside these extremes, every congressional district differs in meaningful ways—on the dimensions shown in these figures, but also in their racial and ethnic compositions, in the industries and sectors on which

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<th>Gini Coefficient</th>
<th>Median Income</th>
<th>Population Density</th>
<th>Union Households</th>
<th>Religious Importance</th>
<th>2012 Obama %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gini Coefficient</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median Income</td>
<td>-0.15</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population Density</td>
<td>0.38</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Union Households</td>
<td>-0.16</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>-0.42</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious Importance</td>
<td>-0.06</td>
<td>-0.46</td>
<td>-0.15</td>
<td>-0.42</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012 Obama %</td>
<td>0.33</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.48</td>
<td>0.27</td>
<td>-0.34</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Data from the 2012–2014 American Communities Survey (Gini, Median Income, and Population Density), the 2014 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (Religious Importance and Unionization), and the New York Times Election Database (Obama Vote Share).
they rely for economic activity, in the commuting patterns of their citizens, in what their political cultures are like, in what their schools teach, and so on—that are important to how citizens experience political and social life. In what is to come, we will work to understand the impact of these factors on how citizens of different income levels think and act politically, and how their legislators represent their views through policymaking. We begin in chapter 3 with the study of political participation and participatory equality.