Wealthy and poor citizens in the United States are not miles apart politically. Differences between the policy views of rich and poor are usually at the margins, a matter of degree rather than magnitude. But when it comes to American policy change, as we will see, the margins are what matters. Even minor shifts in the distribution of public opinion can have substantial consequences for who is elected to office, and what they do once they get there. And while the policy views of rich and poor do have much in common, it is also true that class is alive and well as an important dividing line in American politics. The magnitude, importance, and even ideological direction of opinion differences between rich and poor vary across political contexts. But, in nearly every context, income matters: wealthy and poor citizens send different messages to policymakers regarding what they would like government to do.

This chapter turns to the issue of representation of these views in policy choices: the degree to which wealthy and poor citizens exert unequal influence on the actions of their members of Congress. As we have noted earlier, the topic of unequal influence has long concerned both normative theorists and policy scholars, as much of representative democracy’s appeal is based on its perceived ability to segregate financial power from political power (Walzer 1993; Verba and Orren 1985).¹

The presence of large representational inequities between rich and poor call into question the basic legitimacy of American democracy (Winters and Page 2009). But even more subtle inequities in representation can
have substantial consequences for policy processes and outcomes (Griffin and Newman 2008; Stimson 2011).

The meaning of “representational inequality,” like that of “representation” itself, is a complex, multidimensional concept. A deep exploration of any aspect of this concept therefore must narrow this definition down somewhat. As a perhaps simplistic shorthand, scholars have divided the concept of “representation” into four different dimensions (see Eulau and Karps 1977; Harden 2015): policy representation (the connection between what citizens want, and what legislators do, when it comes to issues and policies), descriptive representation (the degree to which officeholders look, demographically and socially, like the people they represent), service representation (the assistance that policymakers provide for those who require assistance from government), and allocative representation (the securing of funds for projects and services relevant to constituents).

When it comes to descriptive representation of the poor, we know that vanishingly small numbers of policymakers in any national representative body come from working- or lower-class backgrounds (Carnes 2013). Policymakers, overwhelmingly, “look” like the rich. Service and allocative representation are, by and large, valence issues: there are few constituents regardless of income who would prefer a representative who is unresponsive to their requests and concerns, or who is not interested in making sure that a district gets a fair share of the federal pie (Fenno 1978; Serra and Moon 1994).²

In this chapter, then, we narrow our focus to the issue of policy representation: the degree to which a citizen’s preferred view of what policymakers should do with respect to salient policy matters corresponds to what policymakers actually do on these matters. When wealthy and poor citizens want different things from their policymakers, whose views do those policymakers represent? “Inequality” in representation exists, according to this definition, if the policy preferences of some citizens are more congruent than others with the choices that elected officials make—if, in this case, MCs make decisions that are more consistent with the views of the rich than the views of the poor. This definition is commonly used in studies of political representation, and provides an oft-employed standard for those examining the degree to which government treats its citizens as “political equals” (Griffin and Newman 2008; Ura and Ellis 2008; Soroka and Wlezien 2010; Gilens 2012; Ellis 2013; Flavin 2012, 2013).

The goals of this chapter are to shed light on the magnitude, consequences, and causes of economic biases in policy representation. Accordingly, following the dyadic framework laid out in chapter 2, we will examine the correspondence between what individual citizens say that they want
and what their congressional representatives actually do. The dyadic relationships between individual citizens and their MCs are among the most critical links between citizens and policymaking, and such relationships have been the focus of substantial amounts of research on political representation in the United States (e.g., Miller and Stokes 1963; Achen 1978; Burden 2004; Bartels 2008).

The dyadic framework is particularly useful here in that it provides a clear standard to assess representational equality and inequality. Myriad factors— constituents’ views, party leadership, interest groups, their own ideologies, an analysis of the information available to them— affect the choices that MCs make and the degree to which these choices are representative of their constituents’ views. We should not expect a perfect relationship between constituents’ views and what MCs do. But evidence of equality in representation would mean that a citizen’s level of income should not, on average, affect the degree to which his or her views are reflected in their MC’s choices. A system with “equal” levels of representation, put simply, would not systematically privilege the preferences of one group over another’s.

In this chapter, we will focus on one specific, highly important aspect of dyadic representation: that reflected in the final votes taken by Congress members on specific pieces of legislation. To be sure, this definition leaves much out. It does not, for example, address other ways in which MCs might use their political influence to influence policy outcomes—by helping to set the political agenda, or making public pronouncements in favor of or against specific types of policy proposals. But, at the same time, it provides a straightforward baseline from which to examine political equality on perhaps the most critical aspect of representation: the degree to which elected officials behave in a way consistent with their constituents’ views regarding what direction policy should take. I assume that citizens prefer that their views be reflected in the actions of their elected officials, and they want government to make decisions with which they agree. As such, representation as reflected through congressional voting behavior provides a useful way to develop the idea of representational inequality in a straightforward and critically important way.

Measuring Representational Inequality

This chapter examines dyadic representation in two ways. First, I examine representation of a general, ideological sort, via an analysis of the general
tenor of what MCs do across a significant period of time and across a wide variety of issues. Are MCs’ actions consistent with what their constituents want, and do these actions tend to correspond more closely with the views of certain constituents over others? Second, I examine representation at the level of specific, concrete policy issues. When it comes to issues of particularly high salience and importance, do MCs tend to vote in a way that reflects the views of certain constituents over others?

Accordingly, I develop two measures of dyadic representation, both based on the votes of members of Congress and subsets of the 2012 CCES data discussed in chapter 3. The first of these measures is a broad measure of the ideological proximity between citizens and representatives in the 112th (2011–12) Congress. This measure simply relates the ideological leanings of citizens to the ideological positions of the MCs who represent them, examining, in a rough sense, the “distance” between a citizen’s ideology and that of his or her representative.

Congress members’ ideologies are operationalized using first-dimension W-NOMINATE scores for the 112th Congress (McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2006). Most political conflict in the United States, at least at the level of elites and policymakers, generally falls onto a single left-right dimension. Some policymakers vote in a way that places them very far to the left on this dimension, some are closer to the center, and others are very far right. NOMINATE scores provide an intuitive way of quantifying where individual MCs’ ideological leanings fall on this dimension. First-dimension NOMINATE scores, which essentially scale all contested roll-call votes in a given congressional term onto a single scale, are typically interpreted as reflecting members’ positions on the liberal-conservative continuum that drives most elite political conflict in the United States. They thus provide a useful summary measure of the general ideological location of members of Congress.

To measure the ideological locations of citizens, I use responses to the CCES question asking respondents to place themselves on a 0 (extremely liberal) to 7 (extremely conservative) scale. I then can use these data to calculate measures of the absolute ideological distance between individual citizens and their MCs. This measure has several strengths. The first of these is breadth: NOMINATE scores reflect the sum total of MC voting behavior on contested issues, and ideological identification can serve as a simple, if imperfect, summary measure of citizens’ political beliefs. The measure provides a useful way to examine patterns of representation using the widest possible conception of congressional voting. The second strength is a strong grounding in the past work: measures of ideological preferences
based on aggregate roll call voting behavior (for legislators) and ideological self-placement questions (for citizens) have been used extensively in past research, both in exploring patterns of representation more generally and in biases in representation more specifically (e.g., Bartels 2008; Griffin and Newman 2005, 2007; Clinton 2006; Griffin and Flavin 2007; Erikson and Bhatti 2011). Finally, interpretation of this measure is simple: a citizen whose expressed ideological preferences fall very close to that reflected in the voting behavior of his or her MC—a citizen who places him or herself to the far right end of the self-identification scale and is represented by an MC whose NOMINATE score places them to the right of most Congress members, for example—is, all else equal, better represented than one whose ideology is quite distant from his or her MC.

Though this intuition behind this measure is straightforward, constructing it empirically is more difficult because of the long-noted difficulty of placing citizen and legislator ideologies on the same scale. The scaling problem stems from the fact that there is no obvious way to relate a citizen’s ideological leanings (as stated in response to a self-placement question) to the ideological leanings of a Congress member (as measured through an aggregation of the actual choices he or she makes as a legislator).

Scholars have taken three principal approaches to dealing with this problem. The first is to simply rescale ideological identification and roll-call voting measures to the same range (Achen 1978). Others have argued that both measures should be standardized in some way (Wright 1978). Finally, others have argued that Congress members’ ideologies need to be rescaled to a narrower range than that of citizens, given the relative paucity of truly “extreme” legislators (Powell 1982). There remains debate over the appropriate way to deal with this problem. Fortunately, however, the empirical consequences of the choice are relatively minor: all of the results presented in the following tables remain statistically and substantively similar regardless of the method used to map legislator and constituent preferences onto the same scale.\(^6\)

For expository purposes, the analyses to come will use the Wright (1978) approach. To create the measure, I first standardize both citizen and legislator ideologies. I then compute a measure of ideological distance by calculating the absolute distance between a citizen’s standardized ideological preferences and that of his or her congressional representative. To aid in interpretation, I then rescale to a 0–100 metric, with 0 indicating a citizen is as ideologically close to (and 100 indicating a citizen is as ideologically distant from) his or her MC as is possible to estimate with these data. **Lower values thus indicate closer ideological proximity to MCs.**
Though ideological distance measures of representation are well established in the literature, they also have some limitations. First, ideological self-identification is an imperfect, and perhaps misleading, indicator of a citizen’s political outlook: many citizens simply do not understand or misunderstand the meanings of ideological labels, and have difficulty mapping their own political views onto an ideological scale (Ellis and Stimson 2012). Second, the NOMINATE measure aggregates all contested roll-call votes, even minor and highly obscure ones. It thus might be more appropriate to measure representation on a more limited, but perhaps more salient, set of votes that are both of high policy importance and likely to be of particular interest to citizens.

The second measure of representation works to address these limitations, measuring how well citizens’ preferences are represented on a smaller number of specific issues. The 2012 CCES asked respondents whether they supported or opposed five key pieces of legislation voted upon by the 112th House: bills that would (a) repeal the Affordable Care Act; (b) extend NAFTA-type free trade legislation to South Korea, (c) authorize the construction of the Keystone Pipeline, (d) express support for the Simpson-Bowles budget proposal, and (e) enact Paul Ryan’s “Path to Prosperity” budget proposal. Respondents were asked whether they, in principle, “favored” or “opposed” each piece of legislation.

Because respondents were asked about the same legislation on which MCs voted, we can devise a measure of representation that simply relates the proportion of the time an MC’s vote on an issue corresponded to a citizen’s own view on that issue. With this measure, the process of scaling citizens’ and legislators’ preferences together into a measure of “representation” is less arbitrary: if a citizen supported a piece of legislation, and his or her MC voted for it (or vice versa), we can say with some confidence that the citizen’s preference was represented.

I again use survey responses and roll-call data to compute measures of representation for each respondent. First, we code whether a citizen’s preference was reflected in the vote of his or her MC on a particular issue, creating dummy variables coded “1” if a citizen supported a piece of legislation and his or her MC voted for it (or if a citizen opposed the legislation and his or her representative voted against it), and “0” if the citizen supported the legislation and his or her MC voted against it (or vice-versa). I then sum across all issues to compute a measure, which we label key vote representation, that divides the number of issues on which a citizen had his or her preference represented by the number of issues on which there is usable data (i.e., the issues on which a citizen expressed a preference and his or her MC cast a vote). I again scale this measure to a 0–100 metric, where
the highest score indicates a citizen whose preferences were reflected in the votes of his or her MC for all issues on which there is valid data, and the lowest score indicates a citizen whose preferences were opposite of that of his or her MC’s votes on all issues with valid data. Higher values mean that someone’s views are consistent with their MC’s votes a higher proportion of the time.

This measure has some limitations as well. The issues chosen here, while selected for their high levels of policy importance, were not chosen at random. It is possible that a separate selection of “key votes” might yield different results. And congressional votes on all of these issues, like most highly visible issues in the 112th Congress, were heavily party-line votes: only on the free-trade issue did even 15 percent of Congress members cross party lines. Thus perhaps even more than with NOMINATE scores, MC positions on these issues will be quite reflective of the extremely high levels of partisan polarization—and the dominance of party over all other factors that might influence MC behavior—that characterized the 112th Congress. Given the strengths and limitations of each of these measures, employing both and finding consistent results across them can help to validate the findings for each.

Representational Inequality: A Basic Look

Representation biases across income lines can only exist to the extent that there are differences in preferences across income lines. Without relevant differences in what income groups are asking from government, it is the case that all income groups’ views will be represented, even if only “coincidentally” (Enns 2015): it will be functionally impossible for elected officials to ignore the views of any group, even if they wanted to. And consistent with the findings of chapter 3, the differences between rich and poor on the issues used to comprise these measures are more a matter of degree rather than magnitude. Table 4.1 presents a basic illustration of differences in political views across income terciles, showing the opinions of citizens in upper-, middle-, and lower-income terciles on the seven-point self-placement scale and the issues used to comprise the five-point “key vote” scale.

As we have seen in chapter 3, preference differences are small when it comes to ideological distance: citizens in the richest tercile place themselves as significantly ($p < .05$, two-tailed) but modestly (less than two points on the self-placement scale) more conservative than poorer ones. In addition, the relationship between ideological conservatism and income is not linear: the middle-income group is actually the most conservative of
all three terciles. The differences are often larger when it comes to specific policy issues: on three of the five issues, preferences of the top and bottom terciles differ by more than 10 percentage points.

Again, district context is a strong predictor of opinion beyond income, as conservative (or liberal) districts tend to have both upper and lower citizens that are more conservative (or liberal) than average. The district-level correlation between mean top- and bottom-tercile opinion, for example, is 0.43 for self-identification, and 0.55 for a scale of roll-call vote liberalism. But even so, as we have seen in chapter 3, there is significant variation across terciles within districts.

Are wealthier citizens better represented by their Congress members? Figure 5.1 provides a very basic answer to this question, simply showing the mean ideological distance between MCs and citizens in each of the 14 income categories offered to CCES respondents. This graph makes a fairly clear point: wealthier citizens are ideologically more proximate to their MCs than poorer ones. One’s level of policy representation increases in nearly every income category. All told, the proximity gap between the richest and poorest citizens is more than 4 percentage points. When aggregating across income terciles, we see roughly a 1.2 percentage point ideological distance gap between the top and bottom terciles. The gap between the top and middle terciles, however, is significantly smaller according to this measure: only 0.3 percentage points. Policymakers have significant incentives to pay attention to the median voter in American politics, so there is certainly some reason to think that middle-income citizens would be better represented than the poorest ones. But though middle income

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue and Ideological Positions by Income Tercile</th>
<th>Poorest Tercile</th>
<th>Middle Tercile</th>
<th>Richest Tercile</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean ideological self-placement</td>
<td>4.16</td>
<td>4.30</td>
<td>4.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support repeal of Affordable Care Act (2012)</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support extension of free trade agreements to South Korea</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support authorization of the Keystone Pipeline deficit reduction plan</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support Simpson-Bowles deficit reduction plan</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support the “Path to Prosperity”</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
citizens are far better represented than poor ones, there is a small, but real, policymaking bias in favor of the opinions of the wealthy.

The results are a bit less linear when it comes to key vote representation (figure 5.2). But even so, the data reflects the same general trends as with the proximity measure, as higher levels of income translate into a greater propensity to have one’s views reflected in the choices of their MCs. The difference in representation between the richest and poorest
Putting Inequality in Context

income groups is roughly 2.5 percentage points. When looking across ter-
ciles, citizens in the wealthiest tercile, on average, have their views repre-
sented by MCs 1.1 percent more of the time than bottom-tercile citizens.\textsuperscript{12} When it comes to this measure, middle income voters fare no better than
the poor: the gap between the bottom and top terciles is only marginally
larger than the gap between the middle and top terciles.

One way to put these representation biases in context is to compare
them to biases across other important lines of political and demographic
difference known to affect a citizen’s level of political power. Figure 5.3
compares the representational inequities in key vote representation to
MCs across income terciles to inequities across other sociodemographic
lines. The 1.2-point differences in key vote representation between the
richest and poorest terciles, for example, is comparable to or larger in
size to the differences between whites and African Americans (1.5 points),
between whites and Latinos (1.2 points), between those who report voting
and those who do not (0.8 percentage points), between those with a col-
lege degree and those with a high school degree or less (0.7 points), and
between those who are very interested in political affairs and those who are
not at all interested (0.6 points).

The Policy Consequences of Unequal Representation

Both the key vote and ideological distance measure provide evidence that
the views of wealthier citizens are better represented than those of the poor.
Are these differences consequential? Certainly, the answer to this question is in part subjective. Even though differences across income lines rival or exceed differences across other lines of sociodemographic difference, gaps of fewer than two points on a 100-point scale are not overwhelming. And the broad similarity in policy views between rich and poor places a natural “upper limit” (Soroka and Wlezien 2008) on how unequal policy representation can be.

Further, even if the views of rich and poor citizens do differ somewhat, the majority view of rich and poor citizens within districts on many salient issues is the same, so the act of representing one group’s preferences will necessarily represent the other’s. Large majorities of both rich and poor citizens in rural Texas support authorizing the Keystone Pipeline, for example, while large majorities of both rich and poor in Connecticut oppose the repeal of the Affordable Care Act. In these contexts and on these issues, it would be impossible for MCs to represent one group’s preferences to the exclusion of others. And as we have seen in chapter 3, relative levels of public support for different policies are often similar across income terciles (see also Enns 2015; Branham, Soroka, and Wlezien 2016). Though they may differ in their absolute levels of support for these policies, for example, citizens in all groups on average support universal background checks for gun purchases more than they support keeping abortion legal in all circumstances, and on average support both of these policies more than they support increasing spending on welfare. It is not the case that wealthy people get substantial policy representation while poorer citizens get none.

But it is also clear that, given the generally incremental nature of American policy change, even the small biases in representation that we see here can have significant policy consequences. Political change in the United States happens at the margin—both public opinion and public policy rarely change dramatically in the short term. Even minor shifts in public ideology or voting patterns, for example, produce what are usually interpreted as substantial swings in public “mood” or in election results. Further, most policy changes in the United States happen incrementally, as modest changes from the policy status quo. The current state of policy in the United States is determined not just by what is voted on at a given time or in a given legislative session, but is instead an accumulation of all past policy changes. Policies passed at a given point in time provide the basis point for the kinds of policy changes that Congress is likely to consider at future points in time. So even small differences in how rich and poor are represented can aggregate to have much more significant consequences.
if these gaps persist consistently over time. Stimson (2011) addresses this issue with a hypothetical example:

A modest bias that is repeated at every policy opportunity can have quite immodest effects in the long run. Imagine that Congress changes the tax code every year—not too far from reality—and each time has just a minor tendency to bias the result in favor of the influential rich. That would produce substantial and meaningful bias in the long term.

Analyzing the specific substantive consequences of these representation biases for policy is thus a bit of a subjective enterprise, and it is impossible to say exactly what American policy would look like if rich and poor citizens were represented more equally. But even so, we can describe some more general consequences of unequal representation—looking, at least in a stylistic sense, at the real implications of unequal representation for policy outcomes. In what follows, we examine the relationship between income and representation on specific policy issues, paying particular attention to what MCs do when their wealthy and poor constituents’ views on issues diverge from one another. The reason we care about unequal representation is the possibility that policy itself would be different if representation were more equal. In this section, we hone in on a few specific policy examples to examine several different ways through which unequal representation across income lines might matter for what governments actually do.

Understanding Unequal Representation: What Happens When Rich and Poor Diverge?

Under our dyadic definition of representation, MCs represent their constituents when they vote in a way that corresponds to what their constituents want. When rich and poor want basically the same thing, this means representing the views of rich and poor constituents equally well (or equally poorly). What is important from our perspective, then, is not necessarily what policymakers do when their constituents of different income groups share views on a particular issue, but instead what they do when their poor constituents’ views differ across income lines in a meaningful way.

To examine this, we will look into differences in the opinions of top- and bottom-tercile citizens within particular districts. The use of tercile-
level opinions both here and in some analyses to come is done for practical reasons, but clearly has its limitations. Most notably, people near the bottom of the top tercile are not truly “rich” (people near the bottom of the top tercile, for example, have fared nearly as poorly in terms of wage growth over the past few decades as the poor), and inequality might mean that truly growing political influence is concentrated in a much smaller group—the top 5 percent, top 1 percent, or 0.1 percent of the population (see Page, Bartels, and Seawright 2013). Even so, representational biases between the top and bottom terciles are a significant focus of the literature on political inequality (see, e.g., Bartels 2008; Erikson and Bhatti 2011; Ellis 2012; Griffin and Newman 2013), and thus a focus on terciles allows me to draw parallels between the representational biases shown here and those commonly discussed in the literature.

To illustrate this approach, consider an example from one of the issues used to comprise our “key vote representation” scale: the issue of expanding NAFTA-style trade provisions to South Korea. The public’s views on this bill were nearly equally split between support and opposition, with a majority of top-tercile citizens favoring it and a majority of bottom-tercile citizens opposing it. The bill, H.R. 3080, was introduced by Eric Cantor (R-VA), and passed 278–151. MC votes on this issue were less purely party-driven than others in the 112th Congress, with 59 Democrats joining Republican House leadership in support of the bill, and 21 Republicans voting against it. The bill also had the support of President Obama and the Democratic Senate, and became law in October 2011.

MC votes on this issue, at least in general, reflected their district’s preferences: 274 MCs (63%) voted in a way that corresponded with the majority view within their district. But this general tendency to represent constituents masks the tendency to represent some constituents better than others. For purposes of illustration, we divide congressional districts into four groups based on constituents’ preferences:

- Districts where a majority of both upper- and lower-income constituents (defined here by the top and bottom income terciles) supported the bill;
- Districts where a majority of upper-income constituents supported the bill, while a majority of lower-income constituents opposed it;
- Districts where a majority of upper-income constituents opposed the bill, but a majority of lower-income constituents supported it;
- Districts where a majority of both upper- and lower-income constituents opposed the bill.
Table 5.2 examines the link between constituent opinion and MC votes within these four district types. MCs represented their constituents fairly well, though clearly not perfectly, when both income groups supported the bill, voting in favor of it in 68 percent of cases. They were somewhat less representative when both groups opposed the bill, opposing it 51 percent of the time. This result clearly illustrates that other factors outside of constituent opinion affect what MCs do. But the data shows, at the least, a link between constituent opinion and MC behavior.

Of most interest, though, is what happens when the views of the two income groups diverge. The free trade bill provides a useful illustration of this, because the modal district was one in which its wealthier constituents supported the extension of free trade provisions, while its poorer ones opposed them. In such districts, MCs voted in favor of extending free trade provisions 68 percent of the time, exactly the same rate as when both upper- and lower-income citizens supported such provisions. In a smaller number of districts, wealthy citizens opposed free trade extensions while poorer ones supported them: in these districts, rates of MC support were roughly the same (if anything, perhaps a shade lower) than when both income groups opposed extensions.

The views of the poor, it appears, were given no weight at all in what MCs decided to do: MC votes were sensitive to what their wealthier constituents wanted, but were not responsive, even minimally, to what poor citizens wanted. On this issue, in other words, it appears that any representation that poor citizens received was incidental to whether they happened to share the views of their wealthier counterparts within a district. When the opinions of income groups diverged, MCs essentially ignored the poor entirely.

Unequal representation is not always as easy as to see as it is with the Korea issue. And other factors, well apart from even what wealthy constituents want, drive MC behavior as well. But this sort of unequal representation is not reflective only of free trade. Between 2008 and 2012, the CCES

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Both rich and poor constituents supported</th>
<th>Rich supported, poor opposed</th>
<th>Poor supported, rich opposed</th>
<th>Both rich and poor constituents opposed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of MCs who voted for Iraq withdrawal timeline</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of districts</td>
<td>143</td>
<td>211</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
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asked respondents for views on 18 different roll-call votes—encompassing a wide variety of issue areas—on which their MCs had the ability to cast a vote. On 16 of these issues, when the preferences of top- and bottom-tercile citizens within a district diverged, most MCs sided with the views of their wealthier constituents.

We can say with some confidence, then, that unequal representation is a regular phenomenon. What are some of the ways in which this sort of representational inequality might matter for public policy? Though this list is by no means exhaustive, in what follows we explore data from several recent Congresses (and several recent CCES surveys) to provide a typology of the ways in which unequal representation—again, conceived only through the realm of roll-call voting—can affect the nature of policy debate, and policy outcomes themselves.

Passing a Bill That Otherwise Would Have Failed: Withdrawing from Iraq

Specific bills essentially provide binary choices to legislators and policymaking bodies: either legislators support the bill or they do not, and the bill either achieves final passage or it does not. The most obvious way that unequal representation might have policy consequences, then, is if the ultimate passage or failure of certain policies depended on representing one group’s preferences over another’s. The 2007 resolution to mandate a strict timeline for withdrawal from Iraq provides an example of this.

The 110th Congress considered a number of bills designed to deal with the withdrawal of combat troops and defense contractors from Iraq. Arguably the most important of such bills was H.R. 2237, introduced by Representative Jim McGovern (D-MA). The bill states that troops, with the exception of those engaged in diplomacy, in fighting terrorism, or in a limited number of other activities, must begin deploying from Iraq within 90 days of the bill’s passage, with final deployment to be completed within 180 days. The bill set an aggressive timeline for withdrawal, substantially more aggressive than other bills voted on or passed by the House or Senate. Though it gained some initial momentum and a number of cosponsors, support for the bill waned over time, and it ultimately was defeated in the House, 171–255.

Public support for the bill was lukewarm, but weakly in favor of its passage. In addition, there were substantial differences in support across income lines: 65 percent of bottom-tercile citizens, but only 48 percent of top-tercile citizens, supported this aggressive withdrawal timeline. Fifty-seven percent of MCs voted in a way consistent with the majority prefer-
ence of their district on this issue. But again, when examining constituent representation across income lines, the results provide strong evidence that not all subconstituencies were represented equally.

As table 5.3 illustrates, MCs in general represented their districts well when upper- and lower-income citizens sent consistent cues: the MCs most likely to vote for the resolution were those who represented districts where both wealthy and poor constituents supported it, while MCs least likely to vote for it were those who represented districts where both groups opposed it.

But in the 185 districts where a majority of the poorest constituents supported the resolution while a majority of the wealthiest opposed it, only 46 percent (25%) voted for the resolution. MCs in these districts, in other words, sided with their wealthiest constituents 75 percent of the time, and their poorest constituents 25 percent of the time. If instead 50 percent of MCs in such districts had voted for the bill (thus siding with upper- and lower-income constituents an equal percentage of the time), the bill would have garnered roughly 46 additional “yea” votes, and earned narrow passage. This analysis, of course, is simplistic: among other things, it necessarily neglects all of the other factors that might affect MC behavior on this issue. But at least as an illustration, it does suggest that a more equal representation of wealthier and poorer citizens’ views by MCs would have been enough to change the outcome.

Even if the bill had passed, President George W. Bush would have almost certainly vetoed it. But the bill’s passage would have been a significant symbolic victory for those supportive of an aggressive timeline for withdrawal, would have put pressure on the Senate and even the president to change or accelerate postcombat operation strategies in Iraq, and at the least would have more strongly highlighted the differences between President Bush and Congress's plans for Iraq. Whatever the final nature of policy change, it is likely that the fate of this particular resolution would

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 5.3. MC Votes and Constituent Opinion on Iraq Withdrawal</th>
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<tr>
<td>Both rich and poor constituents supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of MCs who voted for Iraq withdrawal timeline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of districts</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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have been different had rich and poor citizens’ views on it been represented equally.

Affecting MC Choices on a “Long-Term” Issue: The Minimum Wage Debate

The Iraq case is perhaps an exception to the rule: it is not always the case that more equal representation would cause the binary outcome to change on particular bills. But even if the passage or failure of particular bills is not always determined by unequal representation, we can imagine other ways in which MC’s tendencies to better represent wealthier constituents’ views might matter not to the passage or failure of particular bills, but to policy more broadly defined.

The federal minimum wage is an issue that clearly bears on the material interests of the poor. The minimum wage is an enduring American policy, having been part of federal law since 1938. There is no formula or regular interval for minimum wage increases, as the wage is altered—either to keep up with inflation or to reflect changing social norms or public demands—by specific pieces of legislation. Though it has seen irregular increases, the real value of the minimum wage has declined since the 1960s, and by 2007 the real value of the wage had declined to a level not seen since the 1940s. The purpose of H.R. 2, one of the first bills taken up by the 110th Congress in 2007, was to provide the first minimum wage increase since 1997, phasing an increase in the wage from $5.15 to $7.25 per hour over two years.

The fate of H.R. 2 was never in serious doubt, and the bill passed easily, 315–116. The strong support for the bill in Congress was reflected in the public as well. Though there were some class-based differences in support for the bill—poorer citizens supported the increase more than wealthier ones—substantial majorities of rich, middle income, and poor citizens supported the increase. The bill also received majority support among ideological conservatives, Republicans, and other groups not traditionally supportive of an active federal government. In fact, there was not a single congressional district in which constituency opinion was, on average, opposed to the increase. A vote against the minimum wage increase, in other words, was a vote against constituent opinion in every district.

The broad support for H.R. 2 is no exception: surveys dating back to the 1970s show supermajoritarian support for increasing the minimum wage in nearly every year that questions about it are posed. Majorities of citizens, in other words, always want the minimum wage to be higher than
Putting Inequality in Context

It currently is. It is natural, then, to ask why the real value of the minimum wage has not increased over time (or at least kept pace with inflation), given what appears to be substantial public support for larger and more regular increases to the wage. A common answer to this question is that lawmakers have other motivations—party pressures, industry lobbyists, the recommendations from economic experts—that lead them to keep the minimum wage lower than the public would, on average, like it to be. All of these motivations are undoubtedly important to some extent. But whatever the origins of opposition to minimum wage increases, it is useful to examine the contexts in which MCs are more likely (perhaps driven by these sorts of other factors) to vote against increases: when, in other words, they vote in a way at odds with their constituents by opposing minimum wage increases.

In this light, and given majority support for H.R. 2 in every district, we examine the relative intensity of support for the minimum wage increase across income lines—the degree to which wealthier citizens supported H.R. 2 relative to the poor. There were 68 districts where support for the increase was greater among the top than among the bottom tercile, and 352 districts where support was greater among the poor than among the wealthy. We see (table 5.4) that MCs voted for the bill at substantially higher rates when support was greater among the upper-income group than among the lower-income group. MCs were least likely to vote against constituent opinion when support for the wage increase was stronger among wealthier constituents.

If we consider the minimum wage policy as something that goes beyond this single vote, but rather as a continuum of possible wages, these differences are consequential for understanding the politics of the minimum wage. Despite the fact that majorities of all income groups express a desire to see the wage increased, poor citizens are more universally supportive of such an increase (and, in general, also place a higher priority on minimum wage increases than do wealthy citizens). But MCs are most likely to oppose wage increases when their wealthier constituents are not deeply supportive of such increases. There are many rationales for MCs to oppose

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 5.4. MC Votes and Constituent Opinion on Minimum Wage Increase</th>
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<tr>
<td>Wealthy supported increases more than the poor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of MCs who voted for minimum wage increase</td>
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<tr>
<td>Number of districts</td>
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</table>
minimum wage increases. But one factor that explains whether members do employ these rationales, at the expense of constituent opinion, is tepid support for minimum wage increases among their wealthiest constituents. Put another way, strong support for minimum wage increases among the poor do not appear to be as relevant to MCs’ decisions as is strong support among wealthier groups. If upper-income citizens tended to support minimum wage increases as much as the poor, it stands to reason that MCs might be more apt to follow constituent opinion when considering minimum wage issues—and that the minimum wage might be higher as a result.

Changing the Nature of Policy Debate: Cap and Trade

The 2009 American Clean Energy and Security Act, more commonly known as the “Cap and Trade” bill, was the United States’ first attempt to enact a system that would place a price on carbon emissions. The Act would have placed a cap on total carbon dioxide output by U.S. industry, and would have distributed permits to businesses that allowed them to emit a certain amount of carbon. These permits would have been able to be bought and sold on the open market, giving companies an incentive to lower carbon outputs in order to be able to sell excess permits (or avoid having to buy additional permits). The end goal of the Act was to decrease total carbon emissions in the United States by roughly 20 percent by 2020. The Act was politically polarizing, with environmental activists arguing that it did not go far enough to curb carbon emissions, and business groups arguing that it would have crippling effects on both energy-intensive industries and consumers. The Act, H.R. 2454, passed the House by the very narrow margin of 219–212. But the bill’s momentum waned as it left the House, and the bill died without coming to a vote in the Democratic Senate.

The climate bill is another issue on which we see clear evidence of unequal representation across income lines. The 2010 CCES asked respondents whether they supported or opposed H.R. 2454. Opinions on the issue diverged a bit along class lines, with 49 percent of top tercile, 54 percent of middle tercile, and 62 percent of bottom tercile respondents supporting it. Again, we see that MC’s votes tended to represent their constituents’ views well when rich and poor held similar views on the issue. But when preferences diverged, members again tended to take the side of the top tercile (see table 5.5). Sixty-nine percent of MCs voted for the bill when these constituents supported it but poor constituents opposed it, but only 36 percent voted for it when the reverse was true. If MCs had sided
with rich or poor citizens an equal proportion of the time, the final vote on the bill would have been much more lopsided, passing by roughly 67 votes instead of the seven votes by which it actually passed.

Did this unequal representation make a difference to the fate of cap and trade? It is difficult to say for certain, of course, as many factors combined to the bill’s eventual demise. But the Senate eventually refused to take up this bill, at least in part because of the lukewarm support, and very narrow passage, that it received in the House (Hulse and Herszenhorn 2010). Perhaps a more clear-cut passage of the bill would have made a difference in how the Senate addressed the bill, or how the media framed and discussed climate change policy in the period between consideration by the House and by the Senate. In any case, a House that represented rich and poor constituents equally would have sent a substantially different message to the Senate regarding this policy, and might have placed the bill in a different context in advance of its consideration by the Senate.

**Bucking Party Pressures: Expanding Funding for Stem Cell Research**

MCs’ votes on all of the issues above, like most other issues that MCs consider in the contemporary House, are subject to considerable pressure from party leadership. Republicans and Democrats in Congress vote differently in part because of their own ideologies and the constituencies that they represent, but in part because of the variety of techniques that party leaders can use to encourage members to act in a way consistent with the interests of their party (Aldrich and Rohde 2000; Cox and Poole 2002). As parties have polarized in recent decades, party cohesion and party leadership have become stronger and more important, and party leadership has become better able to exert more control over how rank-and-file members act.

Still, members defect from their party, even on important pieces of legislation, for many reasons. One such reason is constituency pressure.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 5.5. MC Votes and Constituent Opinion on Cap and Trade</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Both rich and poor constituents supported</td>
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<tr>
<td>Percentage of MCs who voted for Clean Energy Act</td>
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<td>Number of districts</td>
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Though party leaders have considerable power to induce MCs to vote along party lines regardless of what those MCs’ constituents want, MCs are less likely to support the interests of party leadership if their constituents desire them to take a different course of action (Bullock and Brady 1983). In this light, it is useful to consider an example of how the tendency to represent wealthier constituents over poorer ones might affect how likely MCs are to vote against the desires of party leadership.

The 2007 Stem Cell Research Enhancement Act (H.R. 3) would have amended the Public Health Service Health Care Act to allow for medical research, under specific conditions, using embryonic stem cells. The bill passed by a fairly strong margin in the House (247–176) after passing in the Senate by a stronger margin (63–34), but it was vetoed by George W. Bush and never became law. The final vote was a highly partisan one, with House Democrats voting 205–18 for the bill and House Republicans voting 153–38 against it.

To be sure, party pressures mattered more to MC’s eventual choices on this issue than constituency opinion: MCs of both parties were far more likely than not to vote with their party regardless of what constituents of all income groups wanted. But even after taking into account party pressures, though, we see evidence of unequal representation. Table 5.6 shows that MCs of both parties were much more likely to vote against the interests of their party if it meant following the interests of their wealthier constituents. Republicans were most apt to vote for stem cell research, and Democrats most apt to vote against it, when those votes would be consistent with the views of top-tercile constituents. But the views of poorer constituents

| Table 5.6. MC Votes and Constituent Opinion on Stem Cell Research, by Party |
|---------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Both rich and poor constituents supported | Rich supported, poor opposed | Poor supported, rich opposed | Both rich and poor constituents opposed |
| Percentage of Republican MCs who voted to fund stem cell research | 21% | 22% | 11% | 14% |
| Number of districts | 135 | 23 | 26 | 7 |
| Percentage of Democratic MCs who voted to fund stem cell research | 94% | 95% | 78% | 75% |
| Number of districts | 178 | 19 | 18 | 8 |
appeared to not matter at all to the likelihood that a member will vote against his or her party. Both Democratic and Republican MCs, in other words, were as likely to vote against party interests when only wealthy constituents thought that they should do so than when both upper- and lower-income constituents thought they should do so. On this issue (and on many other votes like it), MCs defected from their party primarily when wealthier constituents desired that they do so.

**Guiding MCs in the Absence of Strong Party Cues:**

*Warrantless Eavesdropping*

Finally, unequal representation also matters to how MCs act when party pressures are weak or ambiguous. Though there are few major policy issues on which elite parties do not take clear and divergent stands, H.R. 6304—the 2007 “Protect America” Act—was an instance in which, at least for Democrats, party pressures on rank-and-file members were minimal. This bill amended provisions of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA), which outlines procedures for the surveillance, collection, and use of information gathered from agents of foreign powers in the effort to prevent the United States from attack.

H.R. 6304 was the most substantial update to FISA since the PATRIOT Act of 2001. The bill provided an extension of FISA powers that, among other things, formally allowed the U.S. government to eavesdrop on terrorist suspects without first getting a court order if terrorist communications either originated in or were transmitted to a foreign country. It also granted immunity from litigation to telecommunications companies that assist the government in eavesdropping under a directive of the Act.

Though Republicans in the House supported the bill nearly unanimously (188–1), the bill also had some support among Democrats: 105 Democratic MCs voted for the bill, while 127 voted against it. Party leadership cues for Democrats were ambiguous. The legislation was initiated

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage of Democratic MCs who voted for Protect America Act</th>
<th>Both rich and poor constituents supported</th>
<th>Rich supported, poor opposed</th>
<th>Poor supported, rich opposed</th>
<th>Both rich and poor constituents opposed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of districts</td>
<td>139</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*TABLE 5.7. Democratic MC Votes and Constituent Opinion on Protect America Act*
in response to a request from President Bush, and the most outspoken opposition to the bill came from prominent liberal and Democratic leaders. But Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi voted for the bill, and the primary sponsor of the bill was a Democrat (though its two cosponsors were Republicans). As a result, Democratic Party leaders placed little pressure on members regarding how to vote.

Free from party pressures, how did House Democrats vote on this issue? Again, more often than not, they voted in accordance with the preferences of wealthier constituents. Democratic support for the bill was highest when both top- and bottom-tercile constituents supported it (see table 5.7). But Democratic MCs were far more likely to support the bill when top-tercile constituents supported it and bottom-tercile constituents opposed it (42% of Democratic MCs in this circumstance voted for the bill) than when the reverse was true (only 18% of Democratic MCs in this circumstance voted for the bill).

These analyses have focused on differences between the top and bottom terciles. But it is also important to note what happens when opinions of middle and top tercile constituents diverge, given that we might expect middle-income citizens to be better represented than the poor. The evidence here is a mixed bag: on some issues (such as the Iraq War withdrawal or the minimum wage increase) the middle tercile's opinions seem to matter at least as much as the top tercile's; when the opinions of the two groups diverge, policymakers tend to not follow either group's preferences consistently, or exhibit a modest bias in favor of what the middle tercile wants. On others (such as warrantless wiretapping or stem cell research), policymakers tend to favor the rich at the expense of both middle- and bottom-tercile opinions. Part of the reason that middle-income voters tend to, on average, fare better than the poor is because, across districts, the views of middle-income citizens tend to be more strongly correlated with those of the wealthy than do the views of poor citizens (on the Iraq War issue, for example, district-level top- and middle-tercile opinions were correlated at 0.39, while top- and bottom-tercile opinions on this issue were correlated at 0.24). Further, top- and middle-tercile citizens are generally more likely to share the same majority preference on an issue than top- and bottom-tercile citizens.16

All of these analyses are necessarily counterfactual, and there are many loose ends in each. But all reinforce the same general point: when wealthy and poor constituents' views diverge, policymakers tend to represent their wealthier constituents better. These differences can have substantial consequences, not only for outcomes on particular bills, but on the ways that policy is debated and discussed, both in the short- and long-term. The
statistical magnitude of representation differences between income groups is relatively small—less than 2 percentage points, on average, between the richest and poorest terciles. But these differences are consequential for understanding how MCs act and how policy gets made.

**Why Are Poorer Citizens Less Well Represented?**

Now that we have seen that lower income citizens are less well represented by their MCs, the important issue becomes understanding *why* they are less well represented. Low-income citizens are disadvantaged in the political process in many ways that go beyond income: they vote less, participate less, tend to know and care less about policy, and are less likely to have the political “resources” necessary to voice their views. They are also more likely to be members of demographic groups historically unequally represented in politics (e.g., Griffin and Newman 2008). These factors, to the extent that they shape whose preferences legislators hear and whose they deem important to heed, might explain why poorer citizens are less well represented.

Spurred in part by the American Political Science Association’s Task Force on Inequality Report (2004), much prior discussion on this topic implicitly or explicitly points to these sorts of engagement- or resource-based factors as the driving forces behind biases in representation. Proposals to institute compulsory voting (or to at least make voting easier), to limit the amount that private citizens can donate to political campaigns, or to educate and stimulate political engagement among the poor all have their roots, at least to some extent, in a desire to remedy perceived inequalities in political influence across socioeconomic lines (e.g., Piven and Cloward 1988; Lijphart 1997).

There are, then, a number of different pathways through which socioeconomic biases in representation might work their way into the political system. From a theoretical perspective—and from the perspective of those who reform the political system to equalize political influence across income lines—it is important to understand what such pathways are, and which, if any, can explain why poorer citizens get lower levels of representation than wealthier ones.

**Political Engagement and Participation**

As we have seen in chapter 3, lower-income citizens are typically less politically active than their wealthier counterparts. Poor citizens tend to vote less than
wealthier ones: the U.S. Census’s Current Population Study shows that the turnout gap between top- and bottom-tercile citizens in the 2012 congressional election was roughly 20 percentage points. And the gap between the top- and bottom-income deciles was roughly 30 points. As we have seen, income disparities in participation are still larger with respect to more active forms of participation. And gaps are larger still—particularly between the very rich and very poor—when it comes to donating money to political causes.

There are two central reasons to expect participants to be substantially better represented than nonparticipants. First, perhaps the most direct way for a citizen to have its preferences represented is to elect representatives with like-minded views (Erikson et al. 2002). No individual can ensure that he or she is represented by a like-minded legislator, of course. But at least at the margins, those who are active in politics are more likely to be represented by MCs who share their political beliefs than those who do not. By definition, voters are more influential in shaping election outcomes than nonvoters, and political activists are disproportionately influential in selecting candidates and parties that reflect their views (Layman et al. 2010).

Second, political activity and engagement can affect the actions of policymakers even apart from elections. Most classic models of representation of public opinion are driven in large part by the threat of electoral sanction. As Soroka and Wleizen (2005, 666–67) state: “The representation of public opinion presupposes that the public actually notices and responds to what policymakers do. Without such responsiveness, policymakers would have little incentive to represent what the public wants in policy.” Legislators must balance a number of competing motivations when deciding how to act, and it makes little sense to take into account the preferences of constituents (or particular subsets of constituents) when there is minimal threat that ignoring their views will lead to electoral punishment. Those who participate in politics are perceived by lawmakers as posing more of a credible threat of electoral sanction, and are typically better represented as a result (e.g., Griffin and Newman 2005).

Education and Political Sophistication

Income and socioeconomic status are strongly correlated with the possession of political “resources,” particularly education, political knowledge, and interest in politics (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1997; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). Only 13 percent of CCES respondents in the lowest income tercile (and only 6% in the poorest decile) report having a four-year college degree, compared to 48 percent of top-tercile respondents (and 68% of top-
decile respondents). Lower-income respondents are also substantially less likely to say that they are interested in political affairs, and are less likely to know important facts about state and national governments.

The resources of education, knowledge, and interest are critical in shaping citizens’ abilities to form stable, meaningful opinions on policy issues, and in their ability to hold policymakers accountable for their actions. Educated, attentive, and knowledgeable citizens are better equipped to form coherent, stable, and well-developed preferences on matters of public policy, and to send clear signals to policymakers regarding what they would like done. The lack of ability to form and voice coherent political preferences precludes representation, as it is unclear what “representation” of public preferences even means if those preferences are not themselves systematically meaningful (Soroka and Wlezien 2010). If educated and knowledgeable citizens send signals that are less “noisy,” and more systematic, than their less educated counterparts, it is logical to expect that the former will have their preferences better represented than the latter, simply because those preferences will be clearer, more stable, and easier for policymakers to perceive.  

In addition, educated, attentive, and knowledgeable citizens are more likely to be attuned to the political context in general, and to their legislators’ behavior in particular (Husted, Kenny, and Morton 1995; Wolpert and Gimpel 1997). Given the electoral motivations of legislators, a legislator will be more likely to disregard a portion of their constituency’s preferences if that segment of the constituency is unlikely to notice that their preferences have been disregarded. Again, given the association between income and these types of political resources, socioeconomic biases could be driven in whole or in part by the disproportionately low levels of education, political knowledge, and political sophistication among lower-income citizens.

Race, Ethnicity, and Gender

For a variety of reasons, racial and ethnic minorities are typically less well represented in the voting decisions of Congress members than whites (Hero and Tolbert 1995). To a lesser extent, the same may be true of the representation of women compared to men (Griffin, Newman, and Wolbrecht 2012). Lower-income citizens are more likely to be women and members of racial and ethnic minority groups than are upper-income respondents. Since race, ethnicity, and gender are correlated with income, a substantial portion of the representation gap might be explained by these
demographic factors, with socioeconomic biases inexorably intertwined with long-standing issues of racial inequality.

Modeling Economic Biases in Representation

To explore the degree to which the inequities in representation in income lines are driven by these correlates of income, we turn to multivariate analysis, modeling individuals’ ideological proximity and key vote representation as a function of income and measures of the factors described above. The point of this analysis is to first estimate the effect of income on political representation without controlling for any other factors, then to examine how the independent explanatory power of income changes as we control for its politically relevant correlates.

The first row of table 5.8 presents results from a simple one-predictor model, showing the expected effects of income (as measured by the 14-point CCES income scale) on our two 100-point scale measures of representation. These results, which show significant effects of income on representation, reinforce what is seen in figures 5.2 and 5.3: wealthy citizens are, on average, both more proximate to their MCs and more likely to have their preferences reflected in MC’s votes on key issues. Each one-category increase in income is expected to decrease the distance between citizens and their MC by roughly 0.16 points, and increase the proportion of the time that their preferences on the seven-issue scale are represented by 0.10 percentage points.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 5.8. Modeling Economic Biases in Representation</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Ideological Representation</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Key Vote Representation</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income alone</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income, controlling for race, ethnicity, and gender</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income, controlling for race, ethnicity, gender, education, and voter status</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income, controlling for race, ethnicity, gender, education, interest, voting, political activity and donor status</td>
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*Note: Table entries are maximum likelihood coefficients, with standard errors in parentheses. *p < .05, +p < .10
The remaining rows of this table illustrate what happens to the effect of income on representation when additional variables are introduced to the models. The degree to which the income coefficient shrinks when these additional controls are added to the models shows the degree to which representational biases across income lines are a function of other factors correlated with income. If biases in representation across income lines were spurious, driven entirely by the fact that poorer people also are more likely to vote, donate money, or possess other characteristics that make them less likely to be represented, then we would expect the size of the income coefficient to shrink to zero after other controls are added. Conversely, if income matters above and beyond these other factors, then we would see the income effect remain even after controls for these factors are added.

The second row illustrates the effect of the income coefficient after controlling for the sociodemographic characteristics of race, ethnicity, and gender. The coefficients for these variables (not shown) generally behave as expected—blacks and Latinos are less well represented than whites, and women are modestly (but not significantly) less well represented than men—but the inclusion of these factors does little to change the size of the income effects.

Row 3 adds in controls for respondent’s voter status—whether they reported voting in the most recent national election. Again, though the independent effects of interest on representation are significant in themselves, these results do not markedly change the role of income in representation.

Finally, row 4 adds in several other indicators of political engagement, including a respondent’s level of formal education, level of interest in political news (measured on a 1–4 scale, ranging from “very interested” to “not at all interested,”) a scale measuring the number of high-engagement political activities in which a respondent participated, and a dummy variable for respondents who donated any money to a political cause in the past year. Again, we see that these variables have only a limited effect on the independent effect of income. Income’s negative effects on representation seem to be only modestly a result of poorer people being less active or less likely to contribute to politics.

The results show that income-based biases in representation cannot be explained in whole, or even in large part, by resources, political engagement, or demographic factors. The inclusion of the full list of resource and engagement variables diminishes the independent effects of income by only about 30 percent for the ideological distance measure, and 45 percent for the key vote measure. The fact that poor citizens are less politically
engaged does matter to how well they are represented. But lower levels of engagement only tell part of the story.

Further, the effects of income on representation are unusual in their consistency (at least when compared to resource and demographic factors) across all types of model specifications and across both measures. Variables such as education, knowledge, and participation seem, at least to some extent, to be competing to explain much of the same variance, and thus the role of each is contingent on model specification. But the role of income is unique, largely distinct from all of these factors. Together, these results show that economic biases in representation go deeper than what would be expected from resource- or sociodemographic-based explanations.

Conclusions

Taken together, the results above lead to two conclusions. First, biases in representation across income lines, though often subtle, can have substantial consequences. Second, biases in representation across income lines are nearly orthogonal to biases in representation across other lines of political difference. While the analysis does not definitively rule out all possible resource- or engagement-based factors in explaining economic biases, they do show that explanations of why biases exist need to go well beyond the fact that wealthy people know, donate, and participate more than poorer citizens.

These results raise the question of why income would have an independent effect on representation, above and beyond attentiveness, engagement, or even donating to political campaigns. Wealthier citizens, regardless of their levels of education or political interest, have better access to formal and informal political and social networks that help to set policy agendas and inform public debate on political issues (e.g., Lindblom 1977; Schlozman 1984). Wealthy people are also more likely to have their views voiced by lobbyists and special interest organizations, even if many wealthy individuals do not personally take the time to contribute to such organizations (Baumgartner et al. 2010). At a more personal level, wealthy citizens are also more likely to internalize the behavioral norms that make them apt to have their preferences taken seriously by public bureaucracies and other forms of public and private authority (e.g., Galanter 1999; Beeghley 2007). Further, most Congress members are themselves well-off, and thus might be more apt to interact with constituents who are well-off, or be disproportionately attuned to what wealthy constituents want (Carnes 2013).
All of these factors suggest, consistent with much work in political science, sociology, and other fields, that wealthier citizens are “visible” (Fallows 2000) in American political and social systems in ways that go beyond their education or political engagement. These other factors matter, but income itself—and the greater visibility of high-income citizens to policymakers—remains important after these factors are taken into account.

None of this is to say, of course, that greater equity in resources and engagement across income would not help at all in remediating biases in representation. The models also do not address some of the more complex linkages between income, representation, and political engagement: the likelihood, for example, that poor citizens participate in politics less because they feel (justifiably, given our analysis) that their preferences will be given less weight in policy. But for the purposes of reform, we can say that for those interested in remediating income-based biases in representation, a focus on increasing the political engagement of the poor, or placing restrictions on the political engagement of the wealthy (e.g., by limiting private financing of political campaigns), will be far from sufficient in eliminating income-based biases in representation without a more wide-ranging consideration of the role of wealth in shaping political and social systems.

In general, then, the results here show that an individual’s income, apart from anything else about him or her, seems to confer some representational advantages in the political system. But simply saying that “wealthier people get better representation” greatly simplifies the issue. While inequalities in representation persist even after controlling for income’s relevant correlates, it is also the case that poor people do receive equal representation to the wealthy, or even better representation than the wealthy, in certain contexts. Though in general this was not the case, the above tables reveal many specific instances in which policymakers voted with their poor constituents, and did so even in some cases where poorer constituents disagreed with wealthier ones.

If poor citizens receive better representation on certain issues and in certain contexts, the question then becomes: Why? What factors tend to enhance the political representation of the poor, and what conditions tend to make these factors prominent? I have made the argument that poorer citizens are in general less well represented because they are (in general) less visible or relevant to policymakers. Accordingly, we might expect attributes of the political context in which poor citizens live will affect how visible and relevant they are to their elected officials and, in turn, will affect the quality of the representation they receive.