To this point, we have seen that whether “policy representation” is con-
ceived in broad ideological terms, in terms of salient policy matters across a
number of domains, or in terms of specific, concrete policy choices, poorer
citizens are less well represented than the wealthy. These differences are
often modest, but can have significant consequences. More important,
these differences persist after controlling for individual-level political
resource disadvantages among the poor. The fact that the poor vote less,
donate less, and pay less attention to politics matters, in other words, but
income itself, and the related political and social visibility that it brings, is
important to representation even when taking these things into account.

The persistence of these representational biases might be thought
of as endemic to the American political system: after all, a system with
few restrictions on how one’s private resources can be used to influence
policy outcomes might generally be thought to favor the wealthy and the
resource-rich. But though a tendency to cater to the views of the wealthy
might be a logical outgrowth of such a system, there are circumstances in
which the preferences of poor citizens are better represented than others.
Indeed, we have already seen evidence of this in chapter 5: though MCs in
general tended to side with the views of the wealthy over those of the poor
on the specific issues highlighted, there were a number of MCs on every
issue examined where MCs’ votes corresponded to what their poor, and
not what their wealthy, constituents wanted.

This chapter explores the issue of heterogeneity in representational
inequity more broadly, using the data and measures developed in chapter 5 to illustrate, and explain, variance in representational bias across areas of the country. I draw from research into political representation in the United States and in other democracies to develop a model of contextual variation in representational inequality. This model explains how contextual factors might work to enhance (or detract from) both the political visibility and political relevance of the poor relative to the rich. Given the many competing pressures facing them, MCs have neither the time to understand what all of their constituents want nor the ability to represent all of their constituents equally. They thus must make choices when deciding who to represent. I argue that MCs, all else equal, will better represent constituents whose preferences are both easy to perceive and deemed to be particularly relevant to electoral success. The views of the poor will thus be better represented in contexts that make their views more visible and relevant to policymakers—when they reside in contexts that are more likely to give voice to their views.

**District-Level Differences in Representational Inequality**

We have seen that, on average, wealthier citizens are better represented by their MCs than poorer citizens. When the views of wealthy and poor constituents conflict on specific, highly salient issues, MCs more often than not choose to act in a way that corresponds with the views of the wealthy. And, in the aggregate, wealthy citizens hold political views that are ideologically closer to their MCs than those of the poor. These representational biases persist after controlling for a number of politically relevant correlates of income. But this general tendency for the wealthy to enjoy better representation than that of the poor masks considerable heterogeneity in how much better the wealthy are better represented—or even whether they are better represented at all.

Figure 6.1 illustrates this heterogeneity, showing the representation gaps between the top and bottom income terciles for each of the 435 congressional districts on the two measures of policy representation—ideological distance and key vote representation—described in chapter 5. The message here is clear: the modest but significant representation gaps that we observed when aggregating across all 435 congressional districts mask significant differences across districts in how large such gaps are. There is substantial variation across districts in how well upper- and lower-income groups are represented: in many districts, wealthier constituents are far
better represented than the poor; in others, the differences are modest or not statistically meaningful. And in still others, poor citizens are actually more likely to get what they want from their representatives. I can easily ($p < .001$) reject the hypothesis that the representation gaps between the top and bottom terciles are equal across districts.

This chapter works to explain the sources of this heterogeneity in representation. The general argument that follows is intuitive: poor citizens will
be better represented when their representatives are likely to both know and care about what they want. Though disadvantages in the individual-level political resources of the poor make it less likely that MCs will either hear from the poor or feel they need to take their views into account, I argue that contextual factors can also influence the political voice of the poor in a way that bears on how well, and how equally, their views are represented.

**Subgroup Representation in American Politics**

Most classic theories of MC behavior assume goal-oriented policymakers first and foremost seek to maximize their chances of reelection. Given these motivations, MCs should not systematically ignore the preferences of any segments of their constituency unless there is compelling reason to do so (Soroka and Wlezien 2010; Erikson and Bhatti 2011). Accordingly, many influential studies of the dyadic relationships between MCs and constituents (e.g., Miller and Stokes 1963; Denzau, Riker, and Shepsle 1985; Erikson 1978) explicitly consider representation as a connection between a member’s actions and the preferences of a “district,” broadly defined. “Representation,” in this sense, is grounded in the correspondence between an MC’s actions and the preferences of the median member of his or her constituency.

Other work, however, has made it clear that while this sort of representation is an integral part of what an MC does, the MC’s job—and the idea of “constituency”—is far more complex than this. MCs do not and cannot see their constituency as a simple undifferentiated mass, and must make choices when trying to represent a number of diverse subconstituencies and trying to achieve a number of diverse goals.1 These choices make it highly likely that MCs will represent certain constituents more strongly than others.

First, substantial time and resource limitations prevent MCs from being able to even perceive the preferences of all constituents within their districts: it is well known that ordinary citizens rely on heuristic cues when making political decisions on topics that they do not know that much about. But we also know that when trying to gauge what their constituents desire, MCs rely on many of the same cognitive techniques that citizens do when trying to make decisions in the context of limited time and imperfect information. Congress members simply do not have the ability to know or understand what all of their constituents want (Kingdon 1989).
Given this, MCs must make use of informational shortcuts in order to develop an understanding of what their constituents—and various subsets of constituents—want. How MCs perceive their districts is thus central to understanding how they represent their districts.

What sorts of heuristics do MCs use when trying to gauge what their constituents want? Much as citizens often make political decisions based on information that is most immediately accessible at the time a decision is required (Zaller 1992), MCs tend to rely more heavily on information about their constituency that is regularly accessible to them (Hall 1996). MCs’ perceptions of their districts—and, in turn, their perceptions of how their districts should be represented—are thus based not on the universe of all possible information about their constituents, but rather on the nonrandom subset of information that they perceive and hear most prominently. This information, while it can provide a useful working guide to what citizens are thinking and saying, is often if not always an imperfect and nonrepresentative subset of all possible information that exists about an MC’s constituency. The nonrepresentativeness of these cues has consequences: as Miller (2010, 6) notes, “Legislators and their staff do not see all, or even a large percentage, of the relevant constituents to whom [an] issue at hand is unimportant. This ultimately can lead to many constituents’ interests going unrepresented.” Constituents’ views that are more accessible to their MCs, in other words, are generally better represented than views that are not as accessible.

We also know that even above and beyond these cognitive limitations, MCs must balance many competing pressures—their own ideologies, the preferences of interest groups, national party interests, the views of important political subconstituencies, and the like—when deciding how to act (e.g., Kingdon 1984; Fenno 1978; Burden 2007). When these pressures conflict, MCs must make choices in deciding whom to represent. In these contexts, policymakers seek to represent the constituencies that are deemed to be most important to the goals that they wish to achieve (Jusko 2008).

Reelection is the most proximate of these goals, as it is the goal that must be achieved “if other ends are to be attained” (Mayhew 2004, 16). If an MC cannot secure enough votes to stay in office, after all, then many of his or her second-order legislative goals become irrelevant. But other goals—the desire to wield influence in one’s party or in Congress, or to achieve one’s own desired policy outcomes, for example—matter as well (Fenno 1973; Aldrich and Rohde 2001).

These motivations can conflict with one another in fairly straightforward ways: an MC in a relatively centrist “swing” district may need
to moderate his or her positions or otherwise pay closer attention to the preferences of his or her general election constituency in order to secure reelection. But pursuing these goals may make the member behave in a less party-centric way than his or her party leaders want. Those in safer districts, free from the most dire general election pressures, may choose to focus on behaving in a way desired by primary constituencies (in order to fend off a strong primary challenge) or party leaders (in order to curry favor with important legislative leaders).

This general discussion leads to two fairly intuitive points. First, MCs represent more strongly the views of constituents that are more visible and easier to perceive, and thus more salient in shaping the MC’s perception of what his or her district looks like and what it wants. Second, MCs represent more strongly the views of constituents that are deemed more relevant to furthering the MCs goals, whether proximate (reelection) or second order.

All of these factors are relevant to understanding the representation of the poor even without taking into account context. Miler (2010) makes the intuitive argument that the use of these decision-making strategies tends to favor resource-rich constituents. MCs, of course, are more likely to hear from those who donate money, are politically active, correspond with them, vote in general and primary elections, and so on. Such citizens hold views that are more accessible when MCs are forming perceptions of what “the district” wants, and also hold views that are more relevant to what MCs want to do: after all, there are many reasons for MCs to care a great deal about what donors, influential interest groups, or politically active constituents want, and few reasons to care about those who don’t vote or follow politics. Since there are strong positive relationships between income and essentially every form of political participation, it stands to reason that poorer citizens will be less well represented because they are simply not as visible, or not perceived as relevant, to their MCs.

But above and beyond these individual-level activities, there are also reasons to consider contextual variation in how visible and how relevant the poor are to elected officials. In some contexts, we might think that the views of the poor are more visible and relevant to MCs than in others, either because the proportion of poorer citizens is simply larger or because the poor are vocally represented by organizations that have their interests at heart. Similarly, we might think that the votes of the poor might be more “pivotal” (Jusko 2008) to the formation of winning electoral coalitions in some contexts than in others: in some contexts, in other words, MCs’ electoral success may depend more strongly on satisfying the political interests of the poor than in other contexts.
Context and Unequal Representation

All of this suggests that contextual factors can either enhance or detract from the political visibility of the poor relative to the rich, and can make poor citizens’ views more or less relevant to MCs’ electoral and career success. In the following section, I isolate contextual factors that I expect to either enhance or detract from the political visibility and relevance of the poor and, in turn, affect how equally rich and poor citizens’ views are represented.

Income Inequality

Comparative research on the political consequences of inequality generally supports the view that large income disparities have a negative impact on the political influence of poorer citizens. Larger concentrations of wealth provide the resources and motivation for wealthier citizens to exert greater control over the political process, and to make their views more strongly heard by policymakers relative to those of the poor (e.g., Goodin and Dryzek 1980; Solt 2008). In more unequal societies, financial resources play a larger role in shaping the decisions of policymakers and legislative bodies (Petrova 2008; Rosset, Giger, and Bernauer 2013). We have also seen evidence that, both in the United States and elsewhere, high levels of localized income inequality can dampen the political activity of the poor.

Because income inequality tends to amplify the political visibility of the wealthy while depressing it among the poor, greater economic inequality in a given democracy is generally associated with greater political inequality (Solt 2010; Rosset, Giger, and Bernauer 2013). This research is relevant here, because we have seen in chapter 2 that while inequality is increasing in the United States over time, there is also considerable cross-sectional variance in income inequality: some congressional districts have far more uneven distributions of income than others. I thus expect that poorer citizens will be less well represented relative to the rich in districts with high income inequality.

Electoral Competitiveness

Congress members in marginal districts face different incentives than those in electorally safe districts (Mayhew 2004). Though the effects of electoral safety on the behavior of MCs remains a subject of debate, one potential result of safety is that it, at least at the margins, might affect the incentives
that elected officials have to be responsive to their constituents. When representatives have less fear of electoral reprisal, they are more able to act according to their own ideology (or the preferences of party leaders or other pressure groups), at the expense of their constituents’ views (Fiorina 1989; Ladewig 2010). In safe districts, we might expect MCs to give more weight to the views of wealthier citizens, since such citizens have the resources that are more likely to further the MCs career goals—the desire to wield influence in his or her party or in Congress, for example—in ways that go beyond reelection (Fenno 1973; Winters and Page 2009).

In addition (and though there is controversy on this point) MCs in districts where the partisan balance is heavily tilted in his or her party’s favor might also have incentives to pay closer attention to the preferences of primary electorates, given that serious electoral challenges in these districts tend to come from primaries, not general elections (Mann and Ornstein 2006). Since poor citizens are less likely to participate in primary elections than wealthier ones, this stronger focus on primary constituencies would also lead to weaker representation of the poor.

Without the need for poor citizens’ votes to remain in office, in other words, legislators may disregard the preferences of the poor in the service of other constituency pressures or political goals. I thus expect that poor citizens will be less well represented relative to the rich in districts that are electorally safe.2

**Labor Union Strength**

Lobbyists and interest organizations are pivotal in shaping the voices that Congress members hear, and in helping them to understand the views and interests of their districts (Miller 2010). Though few scholars conclude that organized interests, as a matter of course, explicitly “buy” the votes of MCs, there is reason to expect that views that are voiced more strongly by interest organizations will be given more weight in the behavior of MCs than views that are not voiced by such organizations (Schlozman and Tierney 1986).

The role of interest groups in policymaking poses a problem for the representation of the poor. Though there are many interest organizations that represent trade and economic interests, and many others that represent wide cross-sections of citizens and groups, there are very few that lobby explicitly on behalf of poorer citizens (Schlozman 1984). And in terms of resources, professionalism, experience, and other metrics that determine the likely political influence of an interest group, the most well
organized and connected groups nearly always represent the interests of business or wealthy constituents (e.g., Godwin 1992). To the extent that interest groups make certain types of views visible and relevant to MCs, in other words, they tend to represent the views of the wealthy.

One possible exception to this lack of poor citizens’ representation in the interest group community might be organized labor. Though union members are not always (or even usually) poor, organized labor has traditionally served as a voice for the views of low-income citizens, advocating for the concerns of the poor and giving elected officials reasons to pay closer attention to the concerns of the poor (e.g., Baumgartner et al. 2010). As seen in chapter 3, labor also serves as something of a mobilizing influence for the political engagement of poorer citizens, increasing the clout of the poor further.

Labor is, of course, in a decades-long decline nationally, but it still remains a relatively strong influence on the political process in particular pockets of the country. At the low end, labor is essentially nonexistent as a political force: in a quarter of all congressional districts, labor households are less than 15 percent of all households. But at the high end, labor remains strong: roughly 10 percent of Congress members represent districts where one-third or more of all households are labor households.

It is reasonable to expect that Congress members in heavily unionized districts will be more likely to both hear the views of, and have incentives to respond to, lower-income constituents. I expect that poor citizens will be better represented relative to the rich in districts where organized labor has a strong presence.

**Median Income**

In addition to the income distribution, we might expect that the average level of income within a district will matter as well. Part of the reason for this expectation has to do simply with the presence of a high concentration of lower-income voters: districts with few poor voters by definition give poorer citizens less clout in the electoral process, making it less likely that they will elect a representative that shares their views. Second, even apart from elections, research from other Western democracies shows that elected officials tend to pay more attention to the needs and preferences of poor citizens when they rely strongly on them for electoral support. Low- and middle-income citizens have the greatest political power when the blocs of such voters are large enough to be pivotal to the electoral success of legislators (Jusko 2008). The preferences of poorer citizens are
taken more strongly into account when the votes of the poor are perceived as necessary to forming a winning electoral coalition, and are more likely to be marginalized when their votes are perceived as less necessary. This implies, then, that MCs in wealthy districts are more likely to be elected by an electoral coalition comprised largely of high-income voters, and are more likely to hear from wealthier constituents once in office. Poor citizens in high-income districts, put more directly, are less important to the electoral success of MCs, and less likely to be visible to MCs as well.

Perhaps in contrast to this, though, we have seen in chapter 3 that poorer citizens are more politically active in high-income contexts than in low-income ones: the gaps in political activity that make wealthier citizens more important to the actions of their MCs are not as prominent in these high-income contexts. Wealthier citizens still make up more of a critical mass of constituents in such districts, but the more equal levels of participation across income levels in these districts may help to mitigate these effects somewhat.

**MC Party Affiliation**

Finally, we might expect that MCs from the Democratic Party—which has, historically, been more closely aligned with the interests of the poor—would represent poor constituents better relative to the rich than Republican MCs. In part, this expectation comes simply from the fact that Republican MCs are almost always more conservative than Democratic ones, and so poor citizens—who, on average, are modestly more liberal on many issues than the wealthy—will tend to be less well represented by Republicans.

But party affiliation is important for other reasons as well. Party affiliation affects how MCs perceive their districts: Republicans tend to have stronger ties with corporate interests and wealthier citizens than do Democrats, and as a result the views of wealthy interests are more likely to be front and center in the minds of Republican MCs (Miller 2010). Republican MCs’ perceptions of what their constituents want—and, by extension, which preferences they are more likely to represent—are generally weighted more heavily toward the views of those groups.

**Modeling Contextual Influences on Representation**

To test these ideas, I return to the measures of ideological distance and key vote representation introduced in chapter 5, which showed a modest but persistent representational bias in favor of wealthier citizens. The
goal here is to examine whether these biases vary as a function of relevant attributes of the political context. Accordingly, the models in this chapter estimate representation on these two measures as a function of income, contextual attributes, and the interactions between income and political context. Again, lower values on the ideological distance measure indicate better representation (i.e., closer ideological proximity), while higher values on the key vote measure indicate better representation (i.e., a greater congruence between public opinion and MC votes).

District-level contextual level attributes are the ones detailed above, and are measured as follows. Income inequality (a district-level Gini coefficient) and median household income are operationalized using ACS data, as in chapter 3. I operationalize electoral safety by taking the absolute value of each district’s 2012 Cook Partisan Voting Index. This index, which is based on the district’s presidential vote in the prior two election cycles, is intended to measure how electorally balanced and competitive a district is. Lower values on this measure indicate a more competitive district, while higher values indicate a district that is strongly partisan (in either direction). Union strength is simply the proportion of citizens in a district that reported living in a union household. MC Party is a dummy variable coded “1” if a district’s MC is a Republican.

When it comes to ideological distance representation, the interac-

<table>
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<th>TABLE 6.1. Modeling Contextual Effects on Representational Bias</th>
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<td>Dependent Variable:</td>
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<td>Ideological Distance</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
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<tr>
<td>Income * District</td>
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<tr>
<td>Median Income</td>
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<td>Income * Republican</td>
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<td>Income * Opinion</td>
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N 46,476 46,476 39,138 39,138

Note: Table entries are mixed effects regression coefficients (standard errors are in parentheses). * p < .05
tions between income and inequality, electoral safety, union strength, and Republican representation all are significant and in the expected direction: wealthy citizens are better represented relative to the poor in highly unequal contexts, electorally noncompetitive contexts, low-union contexts, and in districts represented by Republicans. For key vote representation, the interactions between income and inequality, electoral safety, and Republican representation are all significant: the interaction between income and union representation is signed in the correct direction, but is not statistically significant. In all cases, these results show that representational gaps between rich and poor are larger in contexts where the views of the poor are likely to either be less visible to their representatives or less relevant to the goals that their representatives wish to achieve.

The one hypothesis suggested above that is not supported in the data is that for district median income: in the ideological distance model, the interaction between representation and district income is not significant, and in the key vote model this interaction is incorrectly signed. This implies that the equality in participation in higher-income contexts that we saw in chapter 3 matters: perhaps the higher levels of political attentiveness among the poor in high-income contexts help to mitigate some of the advantages that wealthy citizens enjoy in these areas. The fact that high-status areas increase opportunities for political participation among the poor, without necessarily decreasing the quality of the representation that they receive, is notable.

To get a sense of the substantive impact of these findings, figures 6.2 and 6.3 display the expected effect of income on representation in a variety of situations. Figure 6.2 displays the expected relationship between income and key vote representation in four hypothetical contexts: in a high inequality district (operationalized here as a district in with a Gini coefficient in the 90th percentile of all districts) represented by a Republican, a low inequality district (a district with a Gini coefficient in the 10th percentile) represented by a Republican, a high-inequality district represented by a Democrat, and a low inequality district represented by a Democrat.

This figure illustrates the heterogeneity in relative representation across district lines. Though the individual-covariates-only model from chapter 5 shows that, on average, each one-category increase in income translates to a 0.11 percent increase in key vote representation, this relationship varies across political contexts: in low-inequality districts represented by Democrats, for example, each one-category income increase is expected to decrease key vote representation slightly. But in high inequality districts with Republican MCs, the same one-category increase in income
is expected to increase key vote representation by more than 1 full percentage point.

These differences translate into substantively important differences in representation gaps between rich and poor across contexts. In the context most favorable to the poor—low inequality districts represented by Democratic MCs—the poorest citizens’ views are modestly better represented than the wealthiest citizens’ views. In high inequality Democratic districts, all income groups are expected on average to be represented equally. But in Republican-represented districts, the relationship between income and representation is strong: the difference in the relative representation of the poorest and wealthiest groups is roughly 16 points in low-inequality Republican districts and 21 points in high-income ones.

Figure 6.2 shows a similar analysis for Republican and Democratic MCs in safe districts (with an absolute PVI of 24, placing it in the 90th percentile of all districts) and very competitive districts (with an absolute PVI of 3, placing it in the 10th percentile). These results here provide even more evidence of heterogeneity in relative representation. In district contexts that are most favorable to the poor (competitive districts represented by Democratic MCs), poor citizens are better represented than wealthier ones. But this is the only context in which poor citizens receive representational advantages: in all other contexts, wealthier citizens are better than poorer ones. In the context that is least advantageous to the poor (safe districts with Republican MCs) the representation gap between
rich and poor is again stark: nearly 20 points on the 100-point key vote representation scale.

### Representation and Rich-Poor Opinion Gaps

Before moving forward, it is worth noting one other consideration that affects the relative quality of representation that rich and poor receive: the degree to which rich and poor actually want something different from government. As noted earlier, representational biases between citizens of different income levels can exist only if these groups are asking for different things: if rich and poor both want the same policy outcome, it would be impossible for policymakers to represent one group’s views over the others, even if they wanted to. In chapter 4, we saw that the size of these gaps varies across contexts: there is wide variance in the degree to which the opinions of rich and poor are meaningfully discernable from one another.

To get a sense of how much opinion differences matter, I examine the size of representation gaps between wealthy and poor citizens as a function of how different wealthy and poor citizens’ views are from one another. To do this, I create district-level measures of opinion difference, designed to proxy the degree to which rich and poor citizens within a given district disagree with one another on the conception of “opinion” that is to be represented. For the ideological distance model, this measure is the simple
absolute difference between the mean ideological self-placement of top- and bottom-tercile citizens in a given district. For the key vote model, this variable is the sum of the absolute differences between top- and bottom-tercile opinions on each of the five key vote variables. This variable captures (albeit imperfectly) how strongly class divides in opinion are in a given district—and, by extension, how easy it would be for policymakers in that district to privilege one income group’s views over another’s if they chose to do so.

A sense of the substantive importance of this variable is shown in figure 6.4, which segments districts into quartiles based on their values for the opinion difference measure, and provides mean key vote representation scores for top-, middle- and bottom-tercile citizens in these four different types of districts. The results are clear: when there is very little daylight between the views of rich and poor, policymakers, unsurprisingly, represent all groups roughly equally well. But as opinion differences emerge, representation of higher-income citizens generally improves, but representation of lower-income (as well as middle-income) citizens generally gets worse.

This finding holds up to multivariate analysis: the final two columns of table 6.1 extend the previous two columns, adding an additional interaction between income and the opinion difference variable. The results show statistically significant interactions between income and these opinion difference measures for both the ideological distance and key vote models: rep-
representation gaps between rich and poor are larger when the gap in policy views between them is also large. The inclusion of the income-opinion distance interaction does not do much to affect the interactions between income and the other contextual variables: the effect of opinion distance, it appears, is something that is more-or-less orthogonal to the substantive factors that affect the relative representation of the poor. But it does matter quite a bit, and speaks to a perhaps sobering interpretation of the results from chapter 3: the existence of meaningful differences in opinions across class lines may simply mean that the poor get represented less well. At the least, the presence of such differences requires policymakers to choose between representing the views of one set of constituents and representing the views of another set: in the main, at least, policymakers in such situations choose to represent their wealthier constituents.

A Closer Look at Partisanship and Ideological Extremity

Perhaps the strongest finding in the models from table 6.1 is that for partisanship: Republican MCs tend to represent their constituents less equally than do Democratic ones. As noted above, this is possibly in part due to ideological reasons, or to the fact that Republican representatives are, in general, more closely connected to higher-income constituents than are Democratic ones (Miller 2010). But if we dig a bit deeper into the reasons behind the strong impact of partisanship, another explanation emerges, one grounded more directly in the role of ideological extremity.

For a number of reasons, the views of poor citizens are less likely to be well represented by ideologically extreme policymakers. The poor are more likely to identify as “moderate” on ideological self-placement measures, and are less likely to support ideologically extreme policy positions than are wealthier citizens. They are also less likely to hold ideologically constrained views—to hold consistently liberal or conservative views on social, economic, and foreign policy issues, for example—and more likely to hold views that might reflect a mix of traditionally “liberal” and “conservative” views. These sorts of views are likely to be less well represented by an ideologically extreme, highly ideologically constrained legislative party.

Consistent with this idea, there is evidence that more extreme MCs, all else equal, tend to represent their poorer constituents less well relative to their wealthier ones. To see this, I estimate simple models of ideological and key vote representation as a function of the interaction between income and their MC’s absolute NOMINATE score (scaled such that
higher numbers mean a more extreme MC, either liberal or conservative). Figure 6.5 presents the results of the ideological distance version of this model (the findings for the key vote model look nearly identical), showing the expected key vote representation gap between the 10th and 90th percentiles of the income distribution as a function of MC ideological extremity. The results make plain the notion that more extreme MCs represent their constituents less equally.

These findings apply regardless of MC party: more extreme Democratic MCs represent their poor constituents worse than moderate Democrats, and more extreme Republican MCs represent their poor constituents worse than moderate Republicans. But while both congressional parties have drifted toward the political extremes over the past few decades, this polarization has been asymmetric, with Republicans becoming both more ideologically homogenous and more ideologically extreme than have Democrats (Butler 2009; Hacker and Pierson 2011).

Figure 6.6 illustrates this asymmetric extremity, using absolute NOMINATE scores to classify all 435 MCs in the 113th Congress into deciles, ranging from most moderate (the leftmost portion of the figure) to most extreme (the rightmost portion of the graph). Democratic MCs are represented in gray, while Republican MCs are represented in black. The point of the figure is clear: nearly all of the most ideologically extreme MCs in Congress are Republicans. If ideological extremity has negative impacts
on the policy representation of the poor, the impact of this extremity will be concentrated in Republican-represented districts. Adding an additional interaction between income and absolute NOMINATE score to the models in table 6.1 does, in fact, dampen the size of the interaction between income and Republican representation: in the ideological distance model, the impact of Republican representation is no longer statistically significant after controlling for MC extremity.

These findings have implications for understanding the impact of party polarization on representational inequality: we will explore this idea in depth in chapter 7. But suffice it to say for now that when trying to understand why Republicans tend to represent their constituents less equally than Democratic ones, a significant portion of the reason is the asymmetric nature of ideological polarization in Congress, and the fact that Republican MCs are, by and large, simply more ideologically extreme than Democratic ones.

Conclusions

This chapter has demonstrated the importance of political context in shaping how well, and how equally, lower-income citizens have their views represented in American politics. I have argued that broad patterns of repre-
sentational inequity in general mask substantively relevant, contextually driven heterogeneity in the relative representation of the poor. I find that poorer citizens are better represented relative to the rich in low-inequality districts, in electorally competitive districts, and in districts with a Democratic MC. I also find some evidence that poor citizens are better represented relative to the rich in districts with a substantial organized labor presence. These findings all support the idea that poor citizens are better represented when they live in contexts that make their preferences more visible and more relevant to policymakers.

As in chapter 5, we should keep in mind that these results are from one Congress alone. Though the model of representation developed here is a general one and should not be bound to any particular time period, I cannot say for certain the degree to which the findings shown here are generalizable to other time periods. In addition, this analysis has focused on representation as a general concept, dealing broadly with how citizens “ideological” and “issue” views are represented. This approach provides the ability to abstract away from idiosyncrasies in how MCs represent constituents on particular bills or in particular domains to gain a general understanding of the factors that affect relative representation of the poor. It is possible, however, that there is variation in representation across different types of issues, or that the issues on which wealthy or poor citizens are more advantaged might also vary across areas of the country.

This approach also only considers roll-call voting, one particular stage of the policy representation process (and, as we noted in chapter 5, one in which representation inequalities are likely to be relatively small). There are certainly other forms of representation that are also important to understanding the political influence of the poor. But the general framework—the idea that poorer citizens are better represented when their preferences are visible and relevant to policymakers—is certainly generalizable to other conceptions of representation.

Despite such limitations, these findings have important theoretical and substantive implications. Most important, we have learned that poorer citizens—because of lower levels of political engagement, attentiveness, or generally lower political and social visibility—largely hold views that are harder for policymakers to perceive, and are considered less relevant to the goals that policymakers wish to achieve. These factors combine to explain why lower-income citizens are, on balance, less well represented in the political system. But there are contextual factors that help to make the poor more visible and relevant to policymakers, and these factors increase the likelihood that the poor will have their voices represented.
Certain individual-level factors—the ability to donate large sums of money or communicate with policymakers in other ways, for example—increase the likelihood that individual citizens (whether rich or poor) will have their views heard and taken into account by policymakers. In much the same way, contextual factors—having organized interests ready to lobby on their behalf, or being in a location where their votes or political activity are pivotal to what MCs wish to achieve—can increase the likelihood that citizens’ voices are heard and taken into account as well. In contexts where such factors overwhelmingly advantage the rich, policymakers will respond by favoring the rich. But in contexts where these factors tend to serve, at least in part, the interests of the poor, representational biases will be minimized or eliminated.

More substantively, these findings suggest that unequal representation is not necessarily a fundamental law of American political life. We need not think of representational inequality as something that is necessarily a natural outgrowth of a political system that relies heavily on private financing for campaigns, or that places relatively few restrictions on the amount that moneyed interests can spend lobbying and persuading MCs. Clearly, there is reason to suspect that such factors play a role in shaping an unequal political system (Bartels 2008). But more local contexts matter as well: even though these factors—private financing, constant contact from more resource-rich constituents—apply nearly everywhere, representational inequality is not constant everywhere. Rather, it is either exacerbated or diminished by particular institutional and contextual arrangements that affect the quality of representation that rich or poor citizens receive. The results, for example, point to specific contextual attributes that tend to enhance the political influence of the poor. To the extent that these factors might be considered in debates over districting or the like, they can provide a starting point for thinking about how political institutions can be designed in a way that equalizes political influence across income lines. I return to this point in the concluding chapter.

Still, the results in this chapter also point to two unsettling implications. The first pertains to the finding regarding the importance of rich-poor opinion gaps to representational inequality. Put simply, we see that the poor are less well represented when their views differ most sharply from the wealthy. So variance in representational inequality is driven not just by substantive factors but also by the more straightforward notion that when MCs are presented with a clear opportunity to represent the views of the wealthy over the poor, they tend, consciously or not, to take it.

Second, and perhaps more important, most of the things that we have
seen in this chapter to be associated with higher levels of representational inequality across districts have also been increasing over time. At the national level, labor unions are in a sharp decline, policymakers are becoming more extreme, and income inequality is increasing. To this point, we have looked only at cross-sectional analysis, examining the landscape of opinion and representation at particular, recent points in time. But political contexts vary across time as well as across space. Have such contexts changed in a way that the political system, in general, has become less representative of the poor? It is that question to which we now turn.