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Representatives as the Source of Bias

In 2004 the American Political Science Association's task force on inequality and American democracy released a report highlighting how the United States was failing to provide political equality in representation. This report is alarming because equality in representation – the degree to which politicians act evenhandedly in pursuing each citizen's preferences and interests – is a standard that is widely used to measure a democracy's health. Citing a variety of academic studies, the report noted the tendency of the U.S. government to systematically enact the policies preferred by the wealthy.

The members of the task force blamed the existing inequality on differences in political activity.

> Citizens with lower and moderate incomes speak with a whisper that is lost on the ears of inattentive government officials, while the advantaged roar with a clarity and consistency that policy-makers readily hear and routinely follow. (APSA Task Force 2004, 1)

The task force went on to suggest that increasing all citizens' various forms of political participation would be the most effective way to end inequality. In this sense, the APSA task force report joins the bulk of political science research, which assumes that bias in participation is the source of bias in representation. Scholars argue that if all citizens exhibited similar levels of political activity we would achieve equality in representation.

While commonplace, this view is wrong. Equality in participation does not guarantee equality in representation. In this book I argue and present evidence showing that even if all voters participate (and donate money, contact their representatives, etc.) at equal rates, we will still observe bias in representation.

Bias in representation, at least in part, traces its roots to the people who are elected to office. We have underestimated the importance of this bias because

our dominant paradigm of representation implicitly assumes that politicians are blank slates when they come to office. Politicians are not blank slates, and the information, opinions, and attitudes that they bring to office lead to significant bias in representation.

Further, politicians' backgrounds can lead to bias in representation in two different ways. First, their personal preferences lead them to exhibit bias in favor of some constituents. Second, their background makes it less costly to work on issues that are important to people like them. Because reelection-motivated politicians are interested in winning the most votes with the least amount of resources, the information they bring to office will, ceteris paribus, cause elected officials to work more on the issues important to people like them. As a result, politicians will as a whole give less attention to the issues that are important to the groups that are numerically underrepresented in office.

Evidence of Bias in Representation

Understanding the source of bias in representation is important because a growing literature documents the severe degree of political inequality. For example, on issues that are important to high-income earners (taxes, government spending, and Social Security), President Reagan's public positions were much closer to the preferences of high-income Americans than to those of low-income Americans as measured by Reagan's own internal polling data. In fact, when controlling for the opinions of high-income earners on these issues, the preferences of ideological conservatives no longer predict President Reagan's positions (Druckman and Jacobs 2011). Similarly, for the issues on which the wealthy disagree with either poor or middle-income individuals, the preferences of the wealthy strongly predict policy change while the preferences of their poor counterparts are uncorrelated with policy change (Gilens 2005, 2009, 2012). The same pattern holds even when you look at legislators' overall ideology; the preferences of the low-income constituents do not predict legislators' positions after controlling for the preferences of middle-income and wealthier citizens (Bartels 2008; see also Jacobs and Page 2005; Rigby and Wright 2011; Ellis 2012; cf. Ura and Ellis 2008; Stimson 2009; Wlezien and Soroka 2011). The views of the wealthy, whatever those views might be, tend to prevail.

Scholars have also raised concerns that racial minorities' interests are similarly underrepresented. Recent studies, for example, document how the gap between legislators' voting records and the ideological preferences of their constituents is larger for Latinos and blacks than for non-Latino white constituents (Griffin and Newman 2007, 2008). Further, the numerical underrepresentation of minorities in office leads to numerous ways in which minority constituents are disadvantaged relative to their white counterparts (see also

Cameron, Epstein, and O'Halloran 1996; Lublin 1997; Whitby 1997; Haynie 2001; Tate 2003; Wallace 2010; Minta 2009, 2011).

Could This Bias Simply Arise from Differences in Turnout?

The conventional view within political science is that this political inequality stems purely (or at least predominantly) from differences in who votes, donates money, and otherwise politically participates (e.g., Verba and Nie 1972; Piven and Cloward 1988; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; Lijphart 1997; APSA Task Force 2004; Schlozman, Verba, and Brady 2012). The reason for implicating differences in political participation is, as Sidney Verba puts it, that "equal activity is crucial for equal consideration since political activity is the means by which citizens make their needs and preferences known to governing elites and induce them to be responsive" (2003: 663). However, even when constituents send the same message, their messages might not be given equal weight.

Indeed, the most extensive studies on inequality and representation cast doubt on this solution. Bartels (2008), for example, explores whether differences in participation or knowledge might explain the favoritism that wealthier constituents enjoy. He analyzes this question by weighting constituents' opinions by the differences in their levels of knowledge and political participation. He concludes that "allowing for differences in turnout, knowledge, and contacting reduces only modestly the substantial income-based disparities in responsiveness" (p. 279). Similarly, Griffin and Newman find that "voters are better represented than non-voters, but that this mainly applies to whites" (2008: 194). I add to this evidence by conducting experiments that show that bias in representation exists even when groups ask the same question and exhibit the same level of effort.

If differences in participation alone cannot explain bias in representation, what does?

The Missing Piece of the Puzzle: Politicians' Backgrounds

Bias arises because politicians are not adaptable blank slates when they come to office. The information, opinions, and attitudes that they bring to office lead to significant bias in representation.

Politicians' Personal Preferences as a Source of Bias

One way in which politicians are not blank slates is that they have personal preferences that lead to bias. Put simply, elected officials do not exhibit neutrality. They come to office with attitudes and preferences and may be willing to lose votes in order to exhibit bias in favor of their preferred constituents.

While I am not the first to observe that politicians' personal backgrounds affect representation, I make two important contributions.[1]

First, I design experiments that control for the nature of constituents' requests and the efforts they put into those requests (i.e., the demand side of representation). As noted in the earlier discussion, much of the research has focused on differences in constituents' participation to explain inequality. I design experiments in which the putative constituents are all using the same language to make the same requests. While holding constant the requests that are made, the experiments vary some aspect of the person asking for help (either race, gender, or socioeconomic status [SES]). For example, Chapter 6 presents the results from an experiment in which legislators are asked for help in navigating some aspect of the government bureaucracy (e.g., registering to vote). The results of the experiment show that legislators from both parties are more likely to respond to these requests for help when they come from a constituent from their own racial group: white legislators are more responsive to white constituents and minority legislators to minority constituents. This pattern emerges even though the constituents are asking for the same type of help. In other words, politicians exhibit significant bias even after controlling for demand-side considerations.

Second, I test whether politicians' bias affects racial minorities, women, and low-income constituents in different ways. In Chapter 4, for example, I look at whether politicians exhibit a bias against any of these groups when they evaluate constituents' opinions. I look at bias in the way politicians evaluate constituents' opinions because this is a key part of the input stage of the process, when politicians gather information about voters' preferences. In Chapter 6, I then look at whether they exhibit a bias against any of these groups when they decide whether to help constituents. These studies allow me to examine the role of bias directly at the output stage of the process, when politicians are deciding

[1] Burden (2007), for example, argues in favor of the "personal roots of representation," showing that tobacco use, religious affiliation, and choices with regard to using public schools all predict legislators' behavior in office. Legislators' demographics also strongly predict their behavior. Women vote differently on gender-related issues such as abortion and women's health (Tatalovitch and Schier 1993; Burrell 1994; Dolan 1997; Swers 1998), and legislators from working-class backgrounds are more liberal and more likely to support issues important to organized labor in their roll call votes (Carnes 2012). Cameron, Epstein, and O'Halloran (1996) found that black legislators are more likely to support civil rights issues (for voting differences between blacks and whites, see also Whitby 1997; Lublin 1997), which may be explained by blacks' sense of linked fate (Dawson 1994). Descriptive representation (see Pitkin 1967; Reingold 2008) also affects the bills that legislators sponsor (Bratton and Haynie 1999; Haynie 2001; Sinclair-Chapman 2002; Swers 2002; Wolbrecht 2002; Bratton 2005; Orey et al. 2006; Burden 2007; Gerrity, Osborn, and Mendez 2007; Rocca, Sanchez, and Uscinski 2008), how much they participate in committee activities of interest to voters (Gamble 2007; Minta 2009, 2011), how they perform constituency service (Canon 1999; Grose 2011), the symbolic benefits that constituents receive (Tate 2003; Sinclair-Chapman and Price 2008), and the types of federal spending they bring to the district (Grose 2011).

what actions to take. I find that politicians exhibit a direct bias against racial minorities when deciding to help them with simple requests and a bias against low-SES voters when evaluating their opinions, but not vice versa. Politicians do not exhibit either of these biases against women.[2]

Showing that different groups face different biases provides insights into what can be done to help underrepresented groups. If we understand when bias occurs, we can design political institutions that mitigate that bias. In the conclusion I discuss some potential institutional fixes to help politically disadvantaged groups in light of my results.

Differences in Information as a Source of Bias

Another way in which politicians are not blank slates is that they come to office with information based on their personal experiences, which makes it more efficient for reelection-seeking politicians to focus on issues that are important to people like them. Empirical studies of representation have not considered the possibility that differences in information can be an important source of bias in representation. Yet this is an important way in which legislators' backgrounds can influence inequality and is theoretically quite distinct from the effect of politicians' personal preferences. For example, the arguments about politicians' personal preferences assume that they are willing to lose votes in order to exhibit favoritism toward their preferred constituents. In contrast, the information and efficiency argument suggests that bias arises *because they are trying to win votes*. In particular, strategic, reelection-motivated politicians will focus on winning the most votes they can while expending the least amount of resources.

An important way in which politicians win votes is by working on issues important to donors and voters (Fenno 1973). Because working on issues takes time and effort, the strategic politician will be more likely to work on issues about which he or she has personal knowledge and information. It is simply more efficient for politicians to expend their efforts in the areas about which they are most knowledgeable.

Legislators' own backgrounds are an important source of this type of information. Those who choose to send their children to private schools, for example, are likely to know more about the private school system (Burden 2007). Women, on both sides of the issue, may have thought more about issues related to abortion and women's health (Swers 2002).

The information that legislators bring to office can in turn shape how they spend their time and resources. Politicians from a wealthier business

[2] These patterns suggest that at least one important source of the bias that legislators exhibit comes from their social interactions. As Americans we live in neighborhoods that are divided along racial and economic lines. We also are more likely to interact socially with people who share our racial and economic background. In contrast, our social experiences are not so sharply divided along gender lines (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001).

background may spend more time helping constituents and working on issues related to setting up a business because they have more experience in that area. By contrast, a politician from a poorer, working-class background may understand more about what it is like to navigate government programs so as to receive welfare benefits and so may spend more time on that issue. Politicians' personal information incentivizes them to focus on issues that are more important to people who share their backgrounds because it is easier for them to do so.

The results from Chapter 5 show that a politician's drive for efficiency can lead to bias that favors the interests of constituents who share some aspect of his or her background. In one of the experiments, city officials receive a request to learn more about programs at their local high school. Some of the officials are asked about the availability of advanced placement courses while others are asked whether there is a free lunch program. Consistent with the possibility that wealthier mayors are less likely to have personal knowledge about free lunch programs, we find that mayors from wealthier cities are significantly less likely to answer questions related to free lunch programs (and at the same time very likely to answer questions related to their local high school's advanced placement program).

Significantly, the bias in politicians' proactive actions is not driven by animus or even overt favoritism for one's own group. This bias will occur even if politicians do not have any personal biases. Rather, the bias occurs because strategic politicians who are trying to get reelected play to their strengths.

The aggregate consequence of this efficiency-driven behavior is that groups that are numerically underrepresented in office are at a disadvantage. The issues that these groups care about will not receive the time and attention that other issues receive.

Bias in representation cannot be understood simply by looking at differences in participation because bias traces its roots to the people who are elected to office. We can only fully understand bias in representation if we realize that politicians are not blank slates when they come to office. The information, opinions, and attitudes that politicians bring to office lead to the biases we observe. I design a series of experiments to test this argument.

The Experimental Advantage

I contribute to the existing literature on political inequality by conducting experiments that increase our confidence in the empirical regularities I uncover. A major reason that previous studies have not done more to understand when representation breaks down is that previous scholars have raised doubts that bias in representation exists at all (e.g., Swain 1993; Ura and Ellis 2008; Wlezien and Soroka 2011). If there are no inequalities in representation, there is no need to study the question in more depth. Providing convincing evidence that there is inequality in representation is difficult, and so

it is understandable that previous research has focused on trying to establish more confidence in the basic empirical relationship. My experimental research design provides this confidence in understanding potential breakdowns in the representation process.

I make another novel contribution to the study of representation and inequality by using experiments in which *political elites* are the subjects under study. While studies using lab participants – most often university undergraduates – or regular citizens yield valuable insights into voter behavior, there are reasons to doubt that these results apply to elected officials (Sears 1986; Butler and Kousser 2013). My research offers new insights by directly studying the behavior of elected officials.

The experimental approach helps me solve problems that have stymied the potential impact of previous research. Chapter 6, for example, presents experiments on legislators' casework behavior to understand the role of race in determining how officials serve their constituents. A few previous studies on descriptive representation have also considered legislators' casework behavior. Canon (1999) looks at the racial background of staff hired to work in Washington, DC, offices and the racial content of newsletters. Grose (2011) looks at the racial composition of the neighborhoods where legislators locate their district offices and the racial backgrounds of legislative staff members who work in those offices (see also Swain 1993). These studies are important, but they cannot tell us whether the outcomes for constituents are different because white and minority legislators treat minority constituents differently. Black legislators are more likely to locate their offices in black neighborhoods, but this may be driven in part by increased demand from black constituents for help when they are served by a black representative. Indeed, staffers from Harold Ford Jr.'s office reported that black constituents disproportionately sought help from Congressman Ford (Grose 2011, 128).[3] We can only test whether descriptive representation influences the supply side of casework service when the constituents' requests are held constant.

I hold the demand side constant by conducting constituency service field experiments in which legislators are sent similar requests. I vary the race and ethnicity of the putative constituents sending the requests to see whether

[3] This concern is not limited to questions of inequality and race. Sidney Verba (2003) provides an overview of the literature on inequality in politics and notes that while the focus has been on understanding differences in who votes, donates money, and otherwise politically participates (e.g., Verba and Nie 1972; Piven and Cloward 1988; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; Lijphart 1997), we still do not know much about whether groups are treated equally when they communicate with or seek access to public institutions. Verba notes, "The literature on the receipt of messages and the response to them is not as well developed as that on the messages sent" (2003, 666). My constituency service field experiments allow me to see whether race/ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status influence how responsive legislators are when constituents contact them.

legislators are more responsive to requests from constituents from the same racial or ethnic group as themselves.

Existing studies have also been unable to differentiate between the effect of information and other factors, such as preferences, on politicians' behavior. For example, previous studies have found that female legislators in Congress participate more in floor debates on women's issues (Tamerius 1995; Swers 2001) and advocate for women's interests to be incorporated into committee legislation (Dodson 1998, 2006; Swers 2002). Female legislators may do this because they have more knowledge and information about these issues. It is also possible, however, that they simply prioritize these issues more (Thomas and Welch 1991; Reingold 1992; Thomas 1994, 1997; Foerstel and Foerstel 1996).

I isolate the potential differences in knowledge and information by conducting three constituency service field experiments. Again, these experiments involve contacting public officials with a simple request. However, instead of varying the descriptive characteristics of the individual contacting the elected official, I hold those descriptive characteristics constant and see whether varying the message's content affects the level of responsiveness. These experiments allow me to see whether elected officials are more likely to answer questions on topics they are more likely to have personal experience with.

The substantive payoff of these experiments is that they allow me to rule out the possibility that inequality in representation is purely the result of differences in participation. Even when the same requests are made with the same level of effort, some groups face a distinct disadvantage. That is not to say that participation is not important. Rather, the point is that significant bias would exist even if there were no differences in political participation. In other words, even if the rich did not make more political donations and enjoy greater political access, they would still enjoy better political representation. Bias would remain because bias begins with who is elected to office. The information and preferences that politicians bring to office lead them to favor some constituents over others.

Outline of the Rest of the Book

The remainder of this book follows a straightforward outline. Chapter 2 discusses how representation can break down. In Chapter 3, I comment generally on the constituency service field experiments that I conduct. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 present experimental tests of the different forms of bias I outline in Chapter 2. Chapter 7 provides a discussion of the political and policy implications of the results.

Chapter 2

In Chapter 2, I discuss how acknowledging that politicians are not fully adaptable actors who come to office as blank slates can explain why, at some point

between constituents having preferences on an issue and elected officials taking actions on that issue, bias moves the outcome away from the preferences of low-income and racial minorities. Determining where the breakdown occurs depends on understanding the different stages of the representation process. In this chapter, I discuss three stages of that process: (a) when elected officials process constituents' opinions, (b) when they decide what issues to work on, and (c) when they use the inputs they have to create legislative outputs. In later chapters I test for bias in these different parts of the process.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 discusses the issues in designing and interpreting constituency service field experiments. I devote a chapter to discussing these issues because constituency service experiments are powerful tools that have not been widely used in political science.

I also present a pair of constituency service experiments that examine whether retiring legislators become less responsive to requests for help to see if there is evidence that legislators view this type of service as a duty (Fiorina 1989). I find strong evidence that they act as if this type of service is one of their legislative duties.

Chapter 4

In Chapter 4, I use a series of survey experiments to test whether elected officials systematically discount the opinions of some groups when they learn about constituents' preferences. The experiments show that public officials discount the intensity and thoughtfulness of low-income constituents' opinions. They do not exhibit any gender or racial bias in the way they process constituents' opinions. Interestingly, the benefits of descriptive representation do not appear to mitigate the bias against low-SES constituents. If anything, low-income officials exhibit a greater bias in favor of high-SES constituents than their high-income counterparts do.

Chapter 5

In Chapter 5, I present three constituency service field experiments, which show that public officials' personal background, experience, and knowledge make them more prepared to take proactive actions on policy issues related to their background. In testing the role of gender, I find that male legislators are less responsive to questions dealing with women's issues than they are to questions dealing with other issues, while female legislators are equally responsive to questions dealing with women's issues and questions dealing with other issues. Similarly, Shang Ha and I find evidence that city mayors are more likely to answer questions of interest to wealthier individuals than to questions of interest to poor individuals. We believe this reflects the fact that mayors themselves tend to come from wealthier backgrounds, allowing them to have firsthand experience with, say, a high school's advanced placement program

but not with the school's free lunch program. Consistent with this explanation, we find that a mayor's likelihood of responding to our questions was moderated by the wealth of the city. The wealthier the city, the more likely the mayor was to answer a question about advanced placement courses and the less likely the mayor was to answer a question about free lunch programs. Taken together, the evidence shows that descriptive representation can matter because of the knowledge that representatives bring to office. One reason that underrepresented groups are disadvantaged is that fewer public officials have personal experience with, and thus information about, the issues important to them.

Chapter 6

In Chapter 6, two large-scale constituency service field experiments show that legislators exhibit bias against racial minorities when deciding which constituents to help. Further, the experiments show that descriptive representation helps mitigate this bias because state legislators are more responsive to constituents from their own racial or ethnic groups. This result holds across parties. There is also evidence that legislators use the additional information about the senders' likely partisanship and their likelihood of turning out to vote. However, the preference that legislators show for constituents from their own racial or ethnic groups cannot be explained by legislators using race or ethnicity to infer constituents' partisan preferences, likelihood of turning out, or SES. Instead, the increased responsiveness seems to be driven by legislators' preferences.

I conduct a similar experiment to test for gender bias in legislators' output and do not find any. Further, there is no evidence that descriptive representation matters by gender; male and female legislators treat male and female constituents similarly. There is evidence that an in-group preference by race and ethnicity directly affects politicians' outputs, but there is no comparable bias related to gender or SES (shown in Chapter 5).

Chapter 7

My experiments confirm that at least part of the bias in representation is explained by the fact that politicians come to office with information, attitudes, and preferences that drive their behavior. Further, politicians' backgrounds lead to bias both because of the personal biases that elected officials bring to office and because they are strategic actors seeking to be reelected. The information that legislators bring to office incentivizes them to focus more than they otherwise would on the issues of interest to voters like them.

Significantly, the direct bias that legislators bring to office affects different groups in different ways. Officials are more likely to discount the intensity and thoughtfulness of low-income constituents' opinions, but they do not exhibit a direct personal bias against them when creating policy outcomes. The reverse is true for racial and ethnic minorities. Officials do not discount the opinions