1

Responsiveness Beyond Roll Calls

Sydney Carlin has a challenging job. Since 2003 she has served as a Democratic state representative in Kansas, a decisively red state where Republican presidential candidates typically receive 60 percent of the popular vote. Rep. Carlin does represent the university town of Manhattan, which gives her something of a Democratic base. But in the 66th House District even Democratic presidential candidates have only managed 41 percent (2000), 41 percent (2004), and 51 percent (2008) of the vote in recent years. Simply put, her Democratic voting record is at odds with the preferences of many of her constituents. So it is not surprising that she consistently faces Republican challenges for her seat during election season. In an era when many state legislative districts are dominated by one party or the other and many races are not competitive, a big part of Rep. Carlin's job involves interacting with people who disagree with her policy views.

Yet despite this political environment, Rep. Carlin is well known and well liked in her district. Prior to serving in her current office she was commissioner, then mayor, of the city of Manhattan. She won the election for District 66 in 2002 with a 41 percent plurality, defeating a Republican and a Libertarian. Since then, she has won reelection over a Republican challenger six times with an average of more than 60 percent of the vote – an impressive feat when compared to the performances of Al Gore, John Kerry, and Barack Obama in the same district. Indeed, Rep. Carlin's experience yields an important question for understanding representation in American politics: How can a representative seem "out-of-step" with perhaps many of his or her constituents, yet still consistently win elections?

One reason for Sydney Carlin's success is the work she does for her constituents and her district outside of the roll call votes she casts in Topeka. With the attitude of doing "whatever is needed," Rep. Carlin has developed a reputation as someone who is willing to listen and respond to a variety of

constituents' problems. For example, she has helped people obtain driver's licenses, deal with the aftermath of flooding, and get access to medication that they need. She assists businesses, churches, and homeowners threatened with losing their properties. Once she even brought together volunteers from the medical community to provide expensive treatment for a constituent who had no health insurance. She has also been an advocate for women with problems related to child care, health, and well-being. Her website lists dozens of resources for people who need help, including assistance with the Division of Motor Vehicles, taxes, Social Security, mental health, and unemployment.

Rep. Carlin also promotes development in her district. Her website mentions that she "pushed for the reconstruction of K-18 highway," a state highway that runs through Manhattan. She supports construction and infrastructure improvements in Manhattan, but in a way that promotes fairness in eminent domain laws for homeowners and businesses. She constantly works to support Kansas State University through direct funding as well as through incentives to research companies for moving to the school's research park.

These activities provide Rep. Carlin with a great deal of support, as shown by her electoral success. Enough people in the community know to "just call Sydney" with problems that she even receives requests for assistance from people who live outside of her district. She works hard to get to know Democrats and Republicans alike so that she can establish common ground with all of them. In fact, one prominent Republican even refers to her as his "favorite representative." In a district that is not particularly wealthy – the median income in 2000 was nearly $15,000 below that of the median house district in the state – Rep. Carlin's work shows constituents that she is looking out for them.

Of course, this does not mean Sydney Carlin neglects policy issues. In her 2010 and 2012 campaign advertisements she listed public education as her top priority. In 2013 she cosponsored a bill requiring the use of American-made materials for public buildings. Nearby Fort Riley brings a strong military presence to the area, so she works to support tuition assistance for service men and women and tax credits to businesses who hire Army Reserve and National Guard members. But this work in the legislature is just one part of Rep. Carlin's job; she focuses a larger proportion of her time in the district itself. She made this clear in one campaign advertisement from 2010: "[a]s your state representative I spend 90 days every year at the capitol, working for you. The other 275 days I'm available to help you with your concerns from Manhattan."

Rep. Carlin's approach to representation is consistent with her goal of winning reelection. When asked about the many different ways she represents her constituents beyond just focusing on policy issues, she replied, "That is the way I retain this seat – a [Democratic] woman in a red state." The help that Rep. Carlin gives to her constituents undoubtedly emanates from a genuine concern for the people she represents. However, it is also no accident that doing so helps her build her base of support in an otherwise hostile political climate. Her interactions with constituents show that the many activities that make up her job can all contribute to her chances of staying in office.

Sydney Carlin's story characterizes that of many legislators across the American states. While the initial motivation to run for office for many may primarily come from the desire to change public policy, legislators soon learn that representing constituents involves more than just introducing legislation and voting on bills. This book is about those different types, or what I refer to as "dimensions," of representation. Scholars of American politics have long recognized that these dimensions exist, but do not typically bring them together in a comprehensive way. Furthermore, this book shows that these dimensions must be examined from both the supply (legislator) and the demand (citizen) perspectives to fully understand how representation works in American politics. Legislators and citizens both display systematic preferences for the different dimensions, and demand for representation influences supply.

Most importantly, in uncovering a relationship between the supply of and demand for representation, this book has implications for understanding how economic and racial inequality can translate into political inequality in America. I show systematic evidence that advantaged citizens generally want their legislators to emphasize policy issues in providing representation, while the disadvantaged tend to prefer representatives who focus on things like constituent service and bringing funding back to the district. Then I show some suggestive evidence that legislators respond in kind: those in wealthy and white districts may focus a bit more on policy while some legislators in poorer districts and districts with large racial minority populations may place additional emphasis on service and/or allocation. Consequently, it should be no surprise that political scientists have found that public officials are more responsive to the policy views of the advantaged and less responsive to the views of the disadvantaged because doing so aligns with those constituents' preferences. Thus, an important element in the persistence of inequality in American politics may, ironically, come from what appears to be normatively "good" representation: legislators doing what their constituents want them to do.

1.1 REPRESENTATION AS POLICY CONGRUENCE

To this point, a great deal (though not all) of scholarship in American politics has focused on mass-elite "policy congruence" as a key measure of representation. This term signifies a responsiveness on the part of political leaders to citizens' policy concerns, such as the extent to which legislators' individual voting behavior matches the policy preferences of constituents. It can also appear when policies enacted by the government reflect popular opinion in the public – if the American people become more conservative or liberal, so to should policy outputs from government. Policy congruence stems from the "Demand Input Model" of representation (e.g., Wahlke, 1971; McCrone and Kuklinski, 1979). In this model, "the public demands policy from its elected representatives, who respond. Citizens are linked to their representatives, who,

motivated by reelection, produce policy that reflects the majority's preferences" (Bishin, 2009, 5).

In their simplest form, most accounts of representation stemming from the Demand Input Model would identify a strong positive correlation between citizen policy preferences and politicians' voting behavior as evidence of representation and a weak or negative correlation as evidence of a lack of representation. Of course, political scientists have added complexity to this framework, and so it might be that a weak correlation is the result of political officials simply not following the "average constituent." In such a case, they may be responsive to the public through political parties (Ansolabehere et al., 2001; Wright and Schaffner, 2002), campaign donors (Miler, 2010), or other "subconstituencies" (Bishin, 2009). Moreover, measures of constituent preferences and legislator behavior are often difficult to compare because they typically are generated out of very different contexts (see Achen, 1977; Jessee, 2012). But the point remains that a dominant theme in this work is that representation occurs or does not occur through legislators' policy behavior.

It makes sense that scholars would focus on policy-based representation. Lawmaking is, of course, a central job of elected officials. However, another reason for the disproportionate amount of work defining representation exclusively as policy-related is that policy behavior is relatively easy to quantify. Access to data allows political scientists to categorize bills introduced to the legislature; count issues mentioned in campaign advertisements or press releases; code party platforms, speeches, and other documents; or summarize responses to surveys of legislators. Poole and Rosenthal's (1997) pathbreaking work has made votes taken at roll call (and the summary measures generated from those votes) a canonical data structure in political science. In short, studying representation through policy provides many options for crafting a research design.

But policy responsiveness cannot provide a complete explanation of representation. If it could, we would probably not see legislatures that appear unresponsive in the aggregate (Wright et al., 2004) or high legislative reelection rates in the face of obstacles to policy congruence (Lax and Phillips, 2012). Why does Sydney Carlin, whose voting behavior in Topeka places her among the most liberal members of the Kansas House, routinely beat Republican challengers in a district that typically votes for Republican presidential candidates? A more comprehensive account of representation should address all of the various activities to which legislators devote their time and energy. Past work on this perspective would assert that constituency-focused work in the district helps legislators gain trust and develop a "personal vote" (Mayhew, 1974; Eulau and Karps, 1977; Fenno, 1978; Cain et al., 1987). The evidence in this book is consistent with that assertion – to a degree.

However, I also make the claim here that there is more to the story than simply developing a personal vote. Legislators also focus on nonpolicy aspects of the job because that is what some constituents primarily want from their

legislators; policy congruence is not the central evaluation metric for all citizens. Indeed, another important problem in the study of representation is that most research does not look at both the supply *and* demand sides of the relationship (but see Canon, 1999; Griffin and Flavin, 2011; Barker and Carman, 2012; Grimmer et al., 2014). Many studies in the representation literature focus on some form of elite behavior, such as roll call votes (Miller and Stokes, 1963; Bartels, 1991, 2008; Clark et al., 2009; Harden and Carsey, 2012; Carnes, 2013), election outcomes and campaign spending (Canes-Wrone et al., 2002; Hogan, 2008; Birkhead, 2015), bill introductions (Sulkin, 2005, 2011; Miler, 2010), or press release content (Grimmer, 2013; Grimmer et al., 2014).

This leads to two key questions. First, do all constituents want their representatives to provide policy-based representation? Figure 1.1 strongly indicates that the answer is "no." The graph plots the distribution of responses to a question I included on the 2010 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES) about three jobs of a state legislator. Specifically, I asked respondents to rank the importance of giving attention to three of the four dimensions I examine in this book: policy concerns, constituent service, and allocating government funds for the district.[1] Notice that none of the three response options is strongly preferred over the others; the proportions range only from 30 to 36 percent. This shows that there is considerable variation in what people think legislators should be doing to provide representation (see Chapter 3 for further analysis of responses to this question).

Moreover, a second critical question stemming from past work is whether all *legislators* choose the same level of emphasis on policy representation when carrying out their work. I show here that the answer is again "no." Through several analyses I uncover systematic variation in what aspects of the job legislators choose to emphasize. In doing so, I bring new empirical life to an often-forgotten line from a seminal study of policy representation:

> Many students of politics, with excellent reason, have been sensitive to possible ties between representative and constituent that have little to do with issues of public policy For example, ethnic identifications may cement a legislator in the affections of his district, whatever (within limits) his stands on issues. And many Congressmen keep their tenure of office secure by skillful provision of district benefits ranging from free literature to major federal projects (Miller and Stokes, 1963, 46–47).

Indeed, while Miller and Stokes (1963) recognized the existence of other dimensions of representation, they and other scholars paid policy-based

[1] The question's wording was as follows: "Here is a list of some activities that occupy political representatives as part of their job. We want to know how important you think these activities are for state legislators. Please rank these activities in order of importance. (1) Learning about constituents' opinions in order to better represent their views; (2) Helping constituents who have personal problems with government agencies; (3) Making sure the district gets its fair share of government money and projects." I also asked the question for "local officials" and "members of Congress." Results in both cases were similar to those in Figure 1.1.

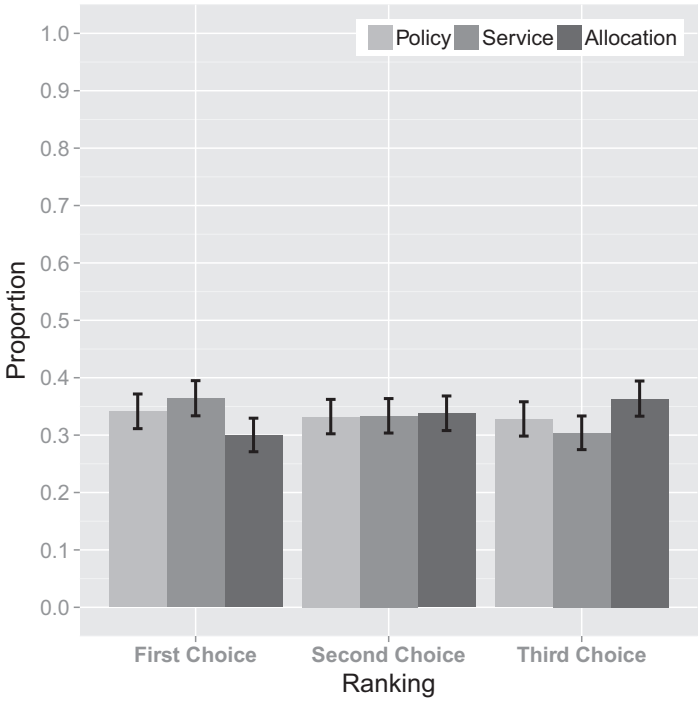

FIGURE 1.1. Rankings of Three Jobs of a State Legislator by a Sample of American Adults

Note: The graph presents the distribution of responses to a question on the 2010 CCES about the relative importance of three jobs of a state legislator: policy, service, and allocation. Brackets indicate 95% confidence intervals. $N = 977$.

representation much more attention. I show here that this choice skews our understanding of the representative process in American politics. Furthermore, I conduct my analyses with careful attention to both the supply and demand of representation. Legislators' perspectives are a critical part of the process, and I devote a substantial portion of this book to them. But legislators' perspectives are not the only ones. I bring both sides of the relationship together here.

1.2 SUPPLY AND DEMAND OF THE DIMENSIONS OF REPRESENTATION

The goal of this book is to conceptualize representation in a comprehensive manner from the perspectives of both those who represent and those who are represented. I advance two central themes: (1) the multidimensional nature of representation and (2) the importance of examining both the citizen and

legislator sides of the relationship. Specifically, I consider the supply and demand of four main dimensions of representation.[2]

- *Policy*: Any activities done in response to constituents' concerns over an issue that affects society as a whole.
- *Service*: Offering or providing assistance to constituents who need help solving problems with government agencies, businesses, and/or other organizations.
- *Allocation*: Securing government funding for projects in the district or money specifically intended for constituents in the district.
- *Descriptive*: A symbolic and/or substantive connection between constituents and representatives through shared identity traits like gender or race.

Scholars have examined all of these dimensions in past work. However, even many of those studies that extend beyond policy-based representation still examine just one of them. This is problematic because by focusing narrowly we miss out on understanding the circumstances that produce variation in the relative importance of each one. This is a problem on the supply side because legislators with limited time and energy are not able to provide all four dimensions at a maximum level. Instead, representatives must make choices regarding which dimensions to emphasize. Consider Nowlan et al.'s (2010) description of life in the Illinois General Assembly.

> Usually there is more to do than time permits. Legislators must shepherd bills of their sponsorship along the winding legislative path; help process legislation in committees and on the floor [and] respond to hundreds of phone calls, letters and emails weekly. They also must read until their eyes blur – bills, staff analyses, interest group position papers, letters, newspapers, and research reports.
>
> Back home legislators serve as advocates for their constituents, for example, with the secretary of state for driver licensing matters; the Department of Transportation for road improvements; the Department of Revenue concerning tax matters. This is the bread-and-butter work of a career politician. Constituents appreciate a legislator who takes care of a problem by guiding them through the bureaucracy of state or local government agencies, and they often show their appreciation on Election Day and, perhaps, at fundraising events (90).

Clearly, there is much more going on in a legislator's work than his or her voting behavior on bills. Studies of only one dimension miss this crucial complexity inherent in the practice of representation. A legislator may be out-of-step on policy issues but still help his or her constituents through casework. Studies focused only on policy responsiveness would miss this fact. Another legislator might symbolically represent people of his or her gender or race, but neglect constituents' problems in the district. Research on descriptive representation might miss this point.

[2] See Chapter 2 for more details on these definitions.

Furthermore, single dimension studies miss important complexity on the demand side of representation. Political scientists, public officials, and journalists are quick to point out that the mass public often lacks a considerable amount of political knowledge and thus is incapable of forming structured, systematic political preferences. There is evidence to support this assertion, but it usually centers on policy-based knowledge and attitudes (e.g., Converse, 1964; Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996; Althaus, 1998). While citizens may not always have a great deal of knowledge about the intricacies of policy issues, I demonstrate in this book that they do hold structured, systematic preferences over what legislators should spend their time doing in office.

Most notably, I show that many factors, including demand from constituents, can lead legislators to focus more or less on each of those different dimensions of representation. The relationship between constituents and legislators is characterized by a multidimensional space. After showing evidence of this claim, I then return to the study of policy-based representation. I ultimately conclude that studying all of these dimensions at once from both the supply and demand perspectives matters most because doing so is the only way to uncover critical implications for political inequality in America.

1.3 INEQUALITY IN POLICY-BASED REPRESENTATION

Understanding the role of political inequality in society is a fundamental reason for studying representation (Dahl, 1961; Verba, 2003). Accordingly, in presenting my theoretical expectations and empirical analyses, this book puts forth a novel perspective on class- and race-based inequality in policy representation. While there is considerable evidence documenting the fact that the wealthy and whites get their policy views represented in government more, on average, than do the poor and racial minorities, the sources of this disparity are more difficult to identify. I show in the following pages that one explanation for inequality may come from a critical combination of the supply and demand sides of the representation relationship: Many constituents want their legislators to focus on other aspects of the job besides policy, and legislators may listen to those demands.

A long tradition of scholarship in American politics examines the causes and consequences of political inequality. One of the most well-known works is Schattschneider's (1960) *The Semisovereign People*, which includes the famous line "The flaw in the pluralist heaven is that the heavenly chorus sings with a strong upper-class accent" (35). Schattschneider wrote that many people are left out of the decision-making process due to a noncompetitive party system, a distribution of pressure groups weighted toward business interests, and disproportionate participation in politics by the economically advantaged.

Others have continued this line of inquiry. Verba and Nie (1972), for example, document the role of socioeconomic status in driving political participation. Verba and Orren (1985) examine Americans' views toward economic and

political equality. Verba et al. (1995) show that civic participation can lead to unequal weighting of political influence, and that many important participatory activities require resources that not everyone can access. As a result, the economically advantaged are more active in politics and their voices are heard more often (Schlozman et al., 2012).

Building on this work, recent scholarship presents detailed analyses of exactly how certain groups in society wield more political influence than others. Bartels (2008) demonstrates that voting behavior in the U.S. Senate tracks well with the policy opinions of wealthy constituents, but not with the views of the poor. He also shows that this is one means by which politics can reinforce economic disparity, producing a cycle of political inequality. Gilens (2012) expands on those findings, showing that actual policy outputs from the federal government substantially reflect the preferences of the affluent, but not the poor or even "average citizens" (see also Gilens and Page, 2014). He also finds that this pattern is particularly strong when the preferences of those two groups diverge. This result is consistent across a wide variety of policies, with social welfare policy being a rare exception. Moreover, political parties, which are often seen as vehicles of representation (e.g., Wright and Schaffner, 2002), provide little or no help in the area of inequality (Rigby and Wright, 2011, 2013).

Indicators of political inequality are not limited to wealth. Griffin and Newman (2008, 2013) show that, in addition to the role of income, there are substantial differences in policy-based representation across racial lines. Controlling for income, white citizens tend to get their views represented by government policy outputs and through voting in Congress more than do blacks and Latinos. Again, the only areas in which something closer to equality appears is in issues that are highly salient to minority racial groups, such as social welfare and crime policy. In short, there is considerable evidence that America does not live up to the idea that "a key characteristic of a democracy is the continued responsiveness of the government to the preferences of its citizens, *considered as political equals*" (Dahl, 1971, 1, emphasis added).

A critical issue stemming from this work is in identifying how political inequality developed. Several explanations center on demand-side factors such as the finding that advantaged groups participate more in politics (e.g., Verba et al., 1995).[3] Griffin and Newman (2008) demonstrate that this generally holds true for race, though the return to voting for blacks still does not match that for whites (see also Griffin and Newman, 2013). However, Bartels (2008) shows clearly that wealth-based political inequality is not solely a function of disparities in voter turnout, political knowledge, or even frequency of contacting elected officials. The one demand-side explanation that evidence consistently

[3] There are also explanations that focus on factors outside of the representative–constituent relationship. For example, Hacker and Pierson (2010) show that a host of factors in Washington, D.C., such as interest groups and organized coalitions in Congress, have facilitated policy that disproportionately benefits the "have-it-alls."

supports is that the economically advantaged tend to donate more money to campaigns, which in turn amplifies their voice in the political process (Verba et al., 1995; Bartels, 2008; Miler, 2010; Gilens, 2012).

Less work explores potential supply-side explanations for inequality. One notable exception is Carnes' (2013) book *White-Collar Government*. He shows that a central reason for why the upper class is so well represented in government is because political officials are almost always members of the upper class, and as a result, vote in line with upper class preferences. The election of a blue-collar representative is a rare occurrence, so it should not be too surprising that representation of poor citizens' views is also rare. Butler (2014) echoes this sentiment more generally by showing that representatives themselves are subject to a myriad of personal biases (after all, they are people too). He contends that even if all citizens participated in politics equally, political inequality would still emerge because politicians "are not neutral parties…[they] exhibit marked favoritism toward constituents from their in-group" (118).

In this book I provide an explanation that fits in with all of these accounts but incorporates both the supply and demand sides of representation. First, I demonstrate that preferences for representation follow a pattern similar to that of political inequality: advantaged groups (e.g., the wealthy, the educated, and whites) tend to *prefer* policy-based representation more than do the disadvantaged (e.g, the poor and racial minorities), and the disadvantaged tend to hold stronger preferences for a representative who focuses on constituent service and/or allocation (see also Griffin and Flavin, 2011). Then I show suggestive evidence that legislators may be responsive to these preferences – those representing economically advantaged constituents show some evidence of prioritizing policy more compared to their colleagues representing economically disadvantaged districts. In contrast, legislators in those disadvantaged districts may place relatively more emphasis on service and/or allocation. My empirical analyses show some uncertainty surrounding these results, so I interpret them with caution. But they are consistently observable patterns that appear across multiple data sources, so the weight of the evidence does suggest that legislators respond to their constituents' multidimensional preferences for representation.

My analysis of the supply and demand sides of representation is important because it sheds light on a potentially troubling normative conclusion. If legislators in advantaged districts do, in fact, listen to their constituents and emphasize policy and legislators in disadvantaged districts listen to their constituents and focus relatively more on nonpolicy dimensions like service or allocation, policy outputs will consistently reflect the views of the advantaged. Thus, my proposed explanation for inequality stems from the very act of providing representation – legislators working on behalf of their constituents' preferences. The problem is that those preferences provide an incentive structure for legislators that is conducive to perpetuating political inequality. In general, the benefits from policy representation can accrue for a long period of time, whereas the benefits of service and allocation are concentrated more in the short- and