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What about the Poor?

Today's politicians all embrace an increasingly popular storyline of the super-rich against everyone else. In the 2016 US presidential election, for instance, Hillary Clinton spoke frequently about creating an economy that works for "everyone, not just those at the top" and she criticized Donald Trump as an enemy of "the Little Guy" (Applebaum 2016). Bernie Sanders also talked about "working people" throughout his campaign as he championed those who are not "millionaires and billionaires" (Frizell 2016). For his part, Donald Trump declared in his inaugural address that elites had not "thought about the millions and millions of American workers that were left behind," and that "the wealth of our middle class has been ripped from their homes."

Social scientists invoke similar themes of inequality in ways that also are resonating with the broader public. Most illustrative is the rise to the bestseller list of Piketty's (2014) 700-page economic tome on wealth and inequality, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*. Recent books by prominent political scientists on the concentration of power in American politics (Bartels 2008; Gilens 2012; Hacker and Pierson 2010, 2016; Mettler 2011, 2014) have also garnered attention outside academia, including from media outlets, both traditional (e.g., *New York Times*, NBC) and nontraditional (e.g., *The Daily Show*).

The first half of the inequality equation, the super-rich or "1 percent," is well understood. We are presented with eye-popping statistics about them, such as the fact that the four hundred richest people in America have more wealth than the bottom three-fifths of Americans (Collins and Hoxie 2015). Another prominent fact is that the top 1 percent holds over

40 percent of the nation's wealth (Saez and Zucman 2016).[1] Additionally, we are told that "the gap between the 'haves' and 'have nots' is widening," and are reminded that, because "the wealthy earned more, someone else in America had to get less" (Long 2016).

It is often less clear who this "someone else" is. It has become fashionable to consider the rest of society, the "have nots," as everyone but the top 1 percent. This is reflected in the Occupy Wall Street movement, which entered the national conversation in the fall of 2011 and coined the specific phrase "We are the 99 percent." In fact, the 99 percent catchphrase has been described by one commentator as being "part of our folklore" (Gitlin, quoted in Sanchez 2016). The phrase may be catchy, but "the rest of us" are far from an undifferentiated mass.

This conflation of everyone else is problematic because it obscures important political and economic differences among the non-super-rich. A family with a household income of $100,000 is much different from a family living at the poverty level, which is less than $25,000 for a family of four.[2] The family living on the brink of poverty confronts matters of subsistence every day. They care more about policies that directly affect their basic needs, whether that is Medicaid, the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), unemployment insurance, or school lunch programs. By contrast, the policies that affect the economic interests of middle-class families are very different: the mortgage–interest tax deduction, college savings plans, or Social Security.

When the 99 percent are differentiated, the focus tends to be on the "middle class" or some notion of the "average American." The middle class is central to American political discourse, and, along with apple pie and baseball, it is a rhetorical safe bet for politicians looking to appeal to "real" Americans (Soergel 2016). Politicians from both parties regularly invoke the middle class, as illustrated by then-candidate George W. Bush's budget plan, entitled the "Blueprint for the Middle Class" (Bruni 2000) and President Barack Obama's emphasis on "middle-class economics" during his reelection campaign (Farrington 2012). Part of the political appeal of the middle class is that it is both vague and inclusive. Indeed, most Americans identify as middle class, regardless of their objective

[1] This estimate from Saez and Zucman (2016) was widely reported in the media. Politifact has evaluated and classified it as "mostly true," which reflects disagreements among some economists, who estimate the top 1 percent's share to be closer to 34 percent (Bricker et al., 2016).

[2] The official poverty level in 2016 was $24,300 for a family of four, according to the US Department of Health and Human Services.

standing (Pew 2012, 2014). This myopia toward the middle class is reinforced in political science by median voter theory (Downs 1957), which elevates the voter in the middle as being decisive in determining election outcomes. The central tendency bias in psychology also tells us that humans tend to gravitate to the middle category (Poulton 1989), which is based, in part, on the implicit assumption that the middle is the most representative option. Together, these dynamics combine to reinforce the middle class as the primary "non-rich" segment of society when talking about politics.

However, this focus on the rich and middle class neglects those at the very bottom, and their distinctive needs and interests. This is not a small oversight. There are forty-six million people living in poverty in the United States, along with nearly fifteen million "near poor" just above the poverty line (Hokayem and Heggeness 2014).[3] This means that, on average, there are approximately 140,000 people in every congressional district who live in poverty or uncomfortably close to it. Furthermore, the American public believes in helping them: two-thirds of all Americans say that government should play a "major role" in helping people get out of poverty (Pew Research Center 2017). This makes the lack of attention to the poor all the more striking.

Political scientists also tend to overlook the poor. Indeed, just over a decade ago, an American Political Science Association Task Force (Jacobs and Skocpol 2005) called attention to the fact that inequality in general is understudied by political scientists. Its report lamented the combination of professional "hyperspecialization" and the tendency to avoid "normative questions about the extent and nature of democratic governance" (see also Jacobs and Soss 2010).

Since the Task Force's report, scholars have increasingly examined inequality in American politics and the advantages enjoyed by the wealthy, especially from the vantage point of public opinion (e.g., Bartels 2008; Ellis 2013; Ellis and Faricy 2011; Enns and Wlezien 2011; Gilens 2009, 2012; McCall 2013; Page and Jacobs 2009). Still other approaches focus on inequality and party polarization (e.g., Faricy 2015; McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal, 2006, 2013) or state-level politics (Butler 2014;

[3] There is no official definition for the "near poor," but the US Census Bureau uses 125 percent of the poverty line to delineate this group (see Hokayem and Heggeness 2014). In 2016, a family of four would be considered "near poor" if the family's annual income was less than $30,375.

Flavin 2012a, 2015; Kelly and Witko 2012; Rigby and Wright 2011).[4] This reinvigorated study of inequality is an important development in political science, but there remain significant gaps in our knowledge, most notably when it comes to the poor and their voice in the lawmaking process. Thus, to all of the aforementioned discussions, I pose a simple but important question: what about the poor?

In this book, I investigate the twin questions of whether the poor receive adequate representation in Congress and by what means that representation occurs. I first examine what Congress as a whole does to represent the poor (collective representation), whether by taking up relevant bills, holding hearings, or passing legislation, particularly when poverty intensifies or spreads into more districts. I next examine whether legislators from districts with greater poverty do more to represent the poor. That is, do the poor receive the same dyadic representation as other constituents? Across both ways of thinking about representation, I find little evidence of congressional activity on behalf of the poor. Congress spends only about 1–2 percent of its time on poverty-related issues, and this effort remains low, even during periods of greater need. Perhaps most sobering is that legislators from districts with high poverty are not particularly active on poverty-related issues.

I then highlight surrogate representation, or the representation of constituents outside one's district, as the primary way the poor receive some representation. Some sympathetic lawmakers, particularly women and African Americans, are likely to see overlap between issues of concern to female or black constituents and issues that affect the poor. I find that they, along with certain partisans, are much more likely to put poverty-related issues on the congressional agenda, suggesting that greater diversity in Congress could elevate the representation of the poor. Yet surrogate representation affords no electoral accountability and is insufficient for getting legislation passed, which underscores the need for dyadic representation where the poor can be represented by "their" legislator. The 2016 election year saw a heightened awareness of left-behind constituents, which creates some optimism that legislators may begin to focus on poor constituents in their districts that they previously neglected. However, there is not yet evidence of major changes in legislative activity on Capitol Hill, leaving doubts that the representation of the poor will improve.

[4] See Faricy 2016 for an excellent review.

THE IMPORTANCE OF REPRESENTING THE POOR

Representing all constituents equally, including disadvantaged groups like the poor, is a foundational principle of representative democracy. There is widespread agreement among political scientists on the normative desirability of this benchmark of representative government. In more colloquial terms, the American public expects government, including Congress, to fulfill the promise of "government by the people, for the people." That the practice of democracy often falls short of the ideal does not diminish the importance of the goal, it only underlines the importance of efforts to bring practice closer to the democratic ideal.

Indeed, there are multiple reasons why the representation of the poor deserves more attention as part of the growing scholarship on inequality. The first is that the poor themselves are negatively affected by unequal representation. If Congress fails to consider the interests of the poor, then solutions to poverty are unlikely to be discussed, and few programs will be created to address it. Also, to the extent that Congress does take action, the resulting policies may not reflect the interests or needs of the poor. Both of these scenarios have direct, negative impacts on the lives of the poor.

Second, a failure to represent the poor can result in an incomplete and biased policy agenda. As Lindblom and Woodhouse argue: "When some important problems are not forcefully called to attention, then all of us are deprived of the opportunity to deliberate about them, deprived of the opportunity to reappraise our own judgements of what issues most deserve scarce time, attention, and funding" (1993, 147–8).[5] Space on the congressional agenda is limited, and the failure to engage problems (including those facing the poor) by debating them, or even by recognizing them as questions of public policy, can be consequential not only for the individuals affected, but for society in general (e.g., Bachrach and Baratz 1962, 1963; Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Jones and Baumgartner 2005; Kingdon 1984).

A third concern is that, when members of Congress do make poverty policy, they will do so without understanding its full implications (e.g., Baumgartner and Jones 1993, 2015; Jones 2001; Jones and Baumgartner 2005; Tetlock 2005; Tversky and Kahneman 1982). If the poor are not represented, then Congress will develop programs for the poor without

[5] As quoted in Schlozman, Verba, and Brady 2012.

the perspective, experiences, and input of the millions of Americans who have first-hand experience with poverty. Such information is uniquely valuable in order to combat poverty, but relevant policy decisions are unlikely to reflect the interests of constituents who do not have a seat at the table (Miler 2010). As a result, Congress may continue to pursue ineffective anti-poverty policies that reflect the "extreme allegiance to the status quo" in congressional decision-making (Jones and Baumgartner 2005, 54). Moreover, Congress may miss opportunities to innovate and improve how poverty is addressed in the United States.

Lastly, it is particularly important that members of Congress are active on issues affecting the poor, because there are relatively few interest groups advocating for them. Despite the explosive growth in the number of interest groups in Washington, DC, groups focused on poverty policy are a small fraction of the advocacy community (e.g., Baumgartner and Leech 1998; Berry 1999; Schlozman 1984; Skocpol 2004). A recent study estimates that, since the 1980s, social welfare interest groups have made up less than 1 percent of all politically active organizations in Washington (Schlozman 2010).[6] Thus, the famous upper-class accent in the interest group community identified by Schattschneider (1960) persists today. In short, while outside groups can help most constituents amplify their voice and attract the attention of their elected representatives, this typically is not a strategy available to the poor.

There also are strong normative reasons to care if the poor are represented in Congress. In Dahl's classic book *Polyarchy*, he argues that "a key characteristic of a democracy is the continuing responsiveness of the government to the preferences of its citizens, considered as political equals" (1971, 1). The responsibility for putting this into action falls to elected representatives, who must "make present" in government the interests and needs of all of their constituents.[7] Young illustrates this point when she emphasizes the importance of the inclusiveness of the process: "The normative legitimacy of a democratic decision depends on the degree to which those affected by it have been included in the decision-making processes and have had the opportunity to influence the

[6] Schlozman examines more than 27,000 organizations in the 1981, 1991, 2001, and 2006 *Washington Representatives* directory, which is a comprehensive listing of organizations actively involved in national politics.

[7] Pitkin (1967) likewise envisions legislators as representatives who "act for" constituents by representing their interests in the legislative process.

outcomes" (2002, 2). When this does not happen, representative bodies like the US Congress fail to provide complete political representation.

The normative stakes are arguably higher when the potentially unrepresented group is economically disadvantaged. This is because economic and political inequality may reinforce one another. The tension between a free-market economy which produces economic inequality and a democratic government which guarantees political equality has long been a challenge in American politics. Initially, the upper class feared that popular government would allow the lower class to use majority rule to promote a tyranny of the poor. Indeed, the Federalist Papers and the US Constitution wrestled with how to reconcile support for the broad principles of democracy with elites' self-interest in preserving certain arrangements from which they benefited (see Williams 1998).

In modern American society, however, the fear of majority tyranny of the poor has been replaced by concerns that the poor are overlooked in the majoritarian political system. Cameron describes democracy in the United States as one in which "a political system grounded on a principle of equality coexists with an economic system that produces and perpetuates inequality" (1988, 219). Put differently, the United States has chosen an economic system that produces winners and losers, and we accept the resulting economic inequalities. However, we also have chosen a political system that emphasizes political equality. The concern, then, is that economic inequality will taint political equality. As Dahl argues, "I have long believed that the effect of socioeconomic inequalities in political systems, certainly in the United States, is to lead to political inequalities" (in Shapiro and Reeher 1988, 154). Williams expresses similar concerns over "the ways in which existing political processes, while facially neutral, function to reproduce existing patterns of social inequality along group lines" (1998, 78). The problem that Williams identifies is not that political practices explicitly codify economic inequalities by giving different rights or access to some citizens over others. Instead, the political inequalities become apparent when government is systematically more responsive to wealthier groups than poor groups within society and advances policies that promote their interests.

THE INTERSECTION OF POVERTY AND CONGRESS

There is a great deal of research in both the poverty and congressional literatures that informs this book, but connections across these studies are all too scarce. Research on poverty tends to leave the legislative process by

which anti-poverty policies are developed in a "black box." In turn, studies of congressional representation seldom focus on the poor as a constituency. This book fills this gap by treating the poor as a distinctive, and potentially under-represented, constituency, and by unpacking the legislative process to examine the procedures, rules, and incentives that shape House members' decisions.

Research on Poverty

One of the fundamental insights gained from studies of poverty is that the context of poverty, or its place, matters a great deal. Where poverty is located affects how hard it is for the poor to access social services, to buy fresh food, or to commute to a job (e.g., Allard 2009; Reckhow and Weir 2011). The location of poverty also has implications for the congressional representation of the poor. Members of Congress are elected from geographically defined districts, which means that there is variation in poverty across congressional districts. Some districts will encompass neighborhoods with concentrated, high levels of poverty, while other districts may include more sparsely distributed or low rates of poverty. Therefore, we might expect legislators from these districts also to vary in their activity on poverty-related issues.

The context of poverty as either rural or urban also has played an important role in how poverty in America is portrayed and addressed. Numerous scholars from sociology, political science, and history focus on the particular concerns of rural poverty, including Gaventa's (1980) seminal work on political power in Appalachia (see also Cramer 2012; Duncan 1992, 1999; Sherman 2009). Rural poverty has been central to the politics of poverty. It was rural poverty in Appalachia that caught the attention of President John F. Kennedy during the 1960 campaign, and it was Appalachian poverty that President Lyndon B. Johnson saw in 1964 when he declared an "unconditional war on poverty." Today, rural poverty is increasingly likely to exist in districts represented by Republican members of Congress, and to occur in Southern states (Farrigan 2017).

Cities are the other geographic place typically associated with poverty in America. Poverty has long existed in urban areas, but several post-war trends in the United States heightened the concentration of urban poverty. These include the residential shift to the suburbs, the change in urban economies from manufacturing to services, and the changing racial composition of urban areas. Research by sociologists and political

scientists alike chronicles the ways in which urban poverty affects economic environments, job opportunities, crime rates, educational opportunities, and cultural norms (e.g., Jargowsky 1997; Jennings 1994; Morgen and Maskovsky 2003; Wilson 1987, 1996). Traditionally, poor urban congressional districts have been more likely to include concentrations of minority poverty, particularly among African Americans, and to be represented by Democratic members of Congress.

Another key insight is that, despite the concentration of poverty in some communities, poverty is not an exclusively urban nor rural problem. Recently, a number of scholars have begun to examine the rise of the suburban poor (e.g., Allard 2017; Kneebone and Berube 2013; Kneebone and Garr 2010; Weir 2011). This trend partially reflects the resurgence (and gentrification) of many urban areas, which has forced low-income residents out of the cities and into the suburbs. The collapse of the housing market in the late 2000s and the Great Recession also contributed to the rising number of poor who live in the suburbs. As a result, poverty may be relevant to more congressional districts, including those that previously had relatively few poor residents. An outstanding question, then, is how quickly legislators from these newly poor, suburban districts adapt to the changes in their constituency?

Scholarship on poverty and race also provides an important foundation for the examination of the political representation of the poor in Congress. Specifically, the racial and ethnic distribution of poverty has implications for the types of congressional districts that are likely to experience higher rates of poverty. The reality is that poverty rates are higher among racial and ethnic minorities in America than among whites, even though more white Americans live in poverty in absolute terms. Recent data from the US Census Bureau reveals that poverty rates are approximately twice as high for Native Americans (27%), African Americans (26%), and Latinos (23%), as compared to whites (12%) (see Macartney, Bishaw, and Fontenot 2013). Rather than look at these numbers in isolation, poverty scholars consider them in light of patterns of residential segregation, which can create (and perpetuate) poor minority communities (e.g., Allard 2008; Cohen and Dawson 1993; Jargowsky 1997; Massey and Denton 1993; Pattillo 2007; Sharkey 2013; Stoll 2008; Wilson 1987, 1996). To this, public opinion scholars add a valuable, if at times contentious, debate about the extent to which race and poverty are linked in the public's mind, and whether the primary culprit is racial attitudes, beliefs about fairness, or the promise of upward mobility (e.g., Avery and Peffley 2003; Bobo and Smith 1994; DeSante 2013; Gilens

1999; 2003; Hochschild 1981, 1995; Kinder and Sanders 1996; Lin and Harris 2008; McCall 2013; Page and Jacobs 2009; Sniderman and Piazza 1993). Focusing on political institutions, congressional scholars consider the role of race-based redistricting and the creation of majority-minority districts, which may contribute to concentrated minority poverty (e.g., Cameron, Epstein, and O'Halloran 1996; Canon 1999; Lublin 1997a; Overby and Cosgrove 1996). A critical question for congressional representation of the poor, then, is whether minority legislators are more likely to represent high poverty districts, and, in turn, more likely to be active on poverty-related issues.

These studies raise another important question for the representation of the poor in Congress. Do legislators who are themselves members of a racial or ethnic minority have a unique perspective that shapes their behavior on poverty-related issues? Of particular interest is whether African American legislators pay greater attention to issues related to poverty, regardless of the level of poverty in their district. Minority legislators' sense of "linked fate" (Dawson 1995) may compel them to act as surrogate representatives for the poor (see also Dawson 2003; Fenno 2003; Gamble 2007; Mansbridge 1999; Minta 2009, 2011; Tate 2003). Moreover, racial and ethnic identity may be particularly important, because the poor lack descriptive representatives in Congress who would otherwise be expected to take up poverty-related issues. As Carnes (2013) shows, there is a scarcity of members of Congress who come from working class roots, and arguably even fewer members who have personal experience with poverty (see also Carnes and Sadin 2015; Grumbach 2015). As a constituency, then, the poor may be more dependent on legislators who identify with a community familiar with poverty issues, as compared to legislators who are poor themselves.

Moments of major legislative action also provide an important focal point for studies of poverty. Scholars provide rich and often historical examinations of national policy success, including major policies like the G.I. Bill, Medicare, Aid to Families with Dependent Children, Social Security, and public education (e.g., Campbell 2003; Katznelson 2006; Katznelson and Weir 1988; Mettler 1998, 2005; Skocpol 1992, 1995, 1997). They illustrate the political conditions under which Congress can advance the interests of the poor, and suggest that there may be times when Congress is systematically more likely to take up poverty-related issues. These high-profile successes, however, are notable because they are unusual. Major legislation often reflects years of work and previous legislative failures, as well as the good fortune of a perfect storm of