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## *Citizen Participation and Congressional Responsiveness: New Evidence that Participation Matters*

This article examines the influence of citizen participation, specifically voter turnout, on congressional policy responsiveness. We argue that higher levels of citizen participation signal to representatives greater surveillance of their actions by their constituents and, thus, a higher probability of sanction. Representatives respond to these signals by deploying resources in ways that provide better intelligence of district needs and preferences. As a consequence, higher citizen participation is rewarded with enhanced policy responsiveness.

### **What Does Participation Do?**

What does participation do? The question has long vexed political scientists. In their reviews of participation research, Verba, Scholzman, and Brady (1995), Leighley (1995, 2008), and Lijphart (1997) note that very few studies have successfully connected citizen participation with policy or political outcomes. Rather, scholars tend to take a theoretical approach and assume effects (see Verba, Scholzman, and Brady 1995) or eschew empirical questions in favor of normative ones (see Campbell 2006, 187).

The few studies that have connected participation with outputs find differential government responsiveness to *subgroups* that participate at different rates. Keech (1968), notably, showed that municipal services improved in black communities after the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 in response to increased participation among blacks. Similarly, Hill and Leighley (1992) demonstrated that states with higher voter turnout among the poor spend more on social welfare.

Looking at variation in participation across cities, Verba and Nie (1972) found some limited evidence, as well, that overall higher turnout increased policy congruence, agreement between citizens and leaders on

the most important problems facing the community. They argue that higher levels of mass participation in local elections imposes pressure on elected leaders to more closely heed the demands of citizens, or at least to attend to the same concerns. Reanalyzing Verba and Nie's data, Hansen (1975, 1194) found that the combination of high participation and high electoral competition produced the greatest level of policy congruence. A more recent examination of Verba and Nie's data also found that higher voting rates promoted more agenda agreement between the masses and elites in a town, though civic engagement more broadly did not (Hill and Matsubayashi 2005). And though the central argument of Putnam's study of Italian governance was that "social capital" encouraged responsiveness (1993), later critiques have found that, among the measures of "social capital," only voter turnout has a strong influence on measures of government performance (Jackman and Miller 1996). Consequently, there is empirical support for the argument that increased electoral participation leads to increased agenda congruence between citizens and leaders in local communities.

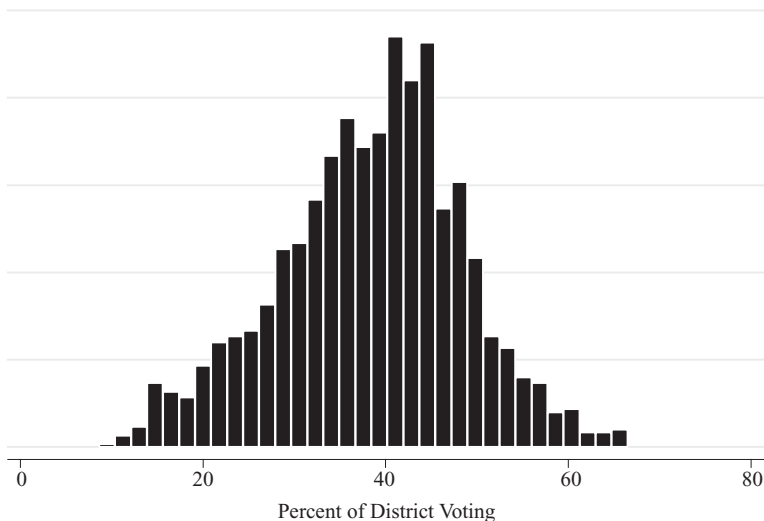
But what of congressional responsiveness? Studies of congressional elections and congressional representation have paid surprisingly little attention to political participation in spite of the substantial variation in turnout across congressional districts. Figure 1 illustrates the apparently normal distribution of voter turnout in congressional elections: in the right tail, District 6 in Minnesota had an average turnout of 77% across the 1994, 1996, 1998, and 2002 elections, while in the left tail, the 33rd district in California had an average turnout of 14% over the same elections.<sup>1</sup> It would be surprising if this variation in voter involvement produced no consequence for representation.

However, two early studies argued that higher turnout did not inspire policy congruence in the congressional arena, effectively silencing this line of inquiry for decades. Using the Miller-Stokes Representation study from 1958 and looking at directional policy agreement rather than agenda agreement, Hill and Hurley (1979) found that members of Congress *did not* express more policy agreement with constituents in high-participation districts. The 1958 study, of course, represents a period of widespread black disenfranchisement, and the attitudes measured in the study emphasized civil rights and domestic welfare policy. Stone (1979) began with the Miller-Stokes data and extended the analysis through 1972 using roll-call data. Focusing on the domain of domestic welfare policy, Stone, too, found that higher turnout reduced the correlation of congressional and centrist constituency opinion, though congressional congruence with the majority-party constituency was higher in high-participation districts. Participation, in this view, did not matter for representation.

Recent studies of Congress have begun to challenge this conclusion, finding evidence that congressional behavior does respond to differences in citizen participation *among subgroups* within the districts. When members of Congress faced an upsurge of letter writing from senior citizens, a group well-known to vote at high rates, Congress backed down from making major changes to Social Security in the 1980s (Campbell 2003a, 2003b). Further, legislators read geographic variation in voter turnout within their districts as an indicator of the relative attentiveness of regional constituencies and attempt to allocate the federal dollars going to their districts to the most attentive areas in order to maximize electoral advantage. Consequently, counties that voted at higher rates received a greater share of grant money from the federal government (Martin 2003). Finally, the views of voters are more likely to be represented in Senator roll-call voting than are the views of those who do not vote, in part because Senators purposely focus on voters (Griffin and Newman 2005). But do differences in participation *across* districts alter congressional responsiveness?

The earlier work concluding that higher participation does not improve congressional representation is time-bound. These studies cover the period before and just after full implementation of the Voting Rights

FIGURE 1  
Distribution of Voter Turnout for Congressional Elections,  
1974, 1982, 1994, and 2002



Act, which changed the nature of electoral power. In addition, Congress underwent key changes in the 1970s—a growth in personal staff and the rise of the incumbency advantage—that provide for a change in the nature of the relationship between members and their constituencies. Thus, the question of participation and representation demands a reexamination. This article undertakes that examination, returning to the central question of how participation matters. Investigating the post-Voting Rights era—a 40-year period—this study finds consistent evidence that the overall level of participation in a congressional district influences the quality of democratic responsiveness. Indeed, it is not just subconstituencies that benefit from enhanced representation as a function of participation; entire districts are more faithfully represented as participation increases within those districts.

### **Participation and Responsiveness**

Fenno's research still provides one of the best accounts of how responsiveness works: members represent the district in the manner they *perceive* is most likely to get them reelected (Fenno 1978). And district participation shapes these perceptions. To better understand what members of Congress see, we interviewed the Chiefs of Staff in 10 high-participation districts.<sup>2</sup>

Representatives represent the districts they see, and citizen participation is a clearly visible element. They see it in the size of the groups that attend public meetings, they see it in the volume of mail they receive, and they see it on election day. We argue that elected officials use their district's underlying pattern of participation to estimate the citizen's capacity for surveillance and sanction. While members of Congress are generally accustomed to public scrutiny of their behavior, they rely on cues that allow them to judge how closely they are being watched. High levels of district participation point to an enhanced constituency capacity. High-participation districts do not only vote at high rates, they send an enormous amount of mail, they flock to events with the congressional district staff, and they light up the phone lines when they are concerned.<sup>3</sup>

To elaborate, districts with high voter turnout consistently receive correspondingly high volumes of mail creating a compelling one-two punch of surveillance in mail and sanction in voting. A comparison of the high- and low-turnout districts confirms this. At the upper end of district turnout, congressional offices receive, process, and respond to twice the amount of citizen mail as the congressional offices at the lower end of district turnout. In more participatory districts, the volume of incoming constituency mail exceeds 50,000 pieces a year. Judging by the amount of

money spent by congressional offices on postage in response to individual letters, the 15 congressional districts with the highest voter turnout spent an average of just over \$10,000 in 2004, whereas the 15 congressional districts with the fewest voters spent an average of under \$5,000 that same year.<sup>4</sup>

The difference in the cost of postage represents the tip of the iceberg in staff effort and time. A telling solution to the high volume of mail in one district with very high participation was that every member of the staff, including the Chief of Staff, “did mail”—reading letters, responding to letters, and writing summary reports for the representative. Comparing across congressional districts, higher participation forces a reorientation of the congressional office toward dealing with constituents as an elementary part of the job. All House Member offices are allocated a budget based on district size, population, and distance from Washington, DC, and all offices are limited to 18 employees. Hiring more staff is not an option, so the major organizational decisions center on what staff do, whether staff are located in DC or in the district, and how to allocate the representative’s time.

Members strategically respond to increased or higher citizen inputs in ways that potentially enhance representation, though the particular form of response varies. Some deploy their Chief of Staff to their district rather than to the DC office, some open multiple district offices, some travel more to the district, and some reallocate more staff time to deal with constituency relations.<sup>5</sup> Evidence from an analysis of the formal staffing decisions of all 435 members of the 108th Congress was consistent with the interview data showing a wide variety of responses to enhanced district participation: examination of the ratio of district to DC staff, the location of the senior officers, or the number of caseworkers revealed no obvious statistical patterns related to district participation, suggesting offices pursue their goals using diverse frameworks and more nuanced assignments of duties.<sup>6</sup> Combining the evidence from the interviews and the differential mail response in high- and low-participation districts, we are left with the impression that informal assignment of staff duties may be more salient in terms of how districts respond to participation. A “Legislative Adviser,” for example, is a DC-based, policy-focused worker in one office, and a high-level constituent correspondence writer in another.

The organizational reorientation of staff toward attending to active districts offers the possibility of enhanced intelligence of and compliance with district preferences; congressional staff, whose ultimate job is to keep their boss in office, become highly attuned to district attention and pressure.<sup>7</sup> Because these organizational orientations grow out of patterns of citizen engagement, they lead to a nearly unconscious improvement in

policy responsiveness. The organizational shifts appear ordinary and mundanely bureaucratic. Interviewees frequently responded to questions about why they made certain organizational decisions with answers such as, "I don't know what else you would do" or "that's just what you have to do in this district." In response to the question of what it was like to represent one of the most participatory districts in the United States, one retired Midwestern representative answered, "I don't know. I've never thought of it before . . . I guess we got a lot of mail."

In short, we should expect that members of Congress from more participatory districts would be more apt to represent the district's policy preferences because they make ongoing organizational decisions that orient their staff toward attending to constituency concerns, giving them greater intelligence and greater respect for potential sanction. Members from less active districts may very well want to represent the policy desires of their constituencies, but they have little incentive to invest scarce staff time in the daily, mundane activities of constituency relations that would lead to more accurate assessments of these policy desires and, thus, better responsiveness.<sup>8</sup>

The interviews with Chiefs of Staff from high-participation districts along with field notes from 10 months of observations made while working for a member of Congress from a high-participation district provide evidence for the preliminary development of a plausible mechanism that explains how high participation is rewarded with greater responsiveness. Likewise, the study of congressional postage provides corroborating evidence supporting the plausibility of the mechanism. Nevertheless, one of the lessons from observing a high-participation office and from interviewing staff in other offices is that internal responses to high participation appear nuanced and driven by the particulars of the district and the proclivities of the member of Congress. The empirical analysis that follows examines the observable implications of high-participation districts on the end result of policy responsiveness.

### **Is Participation a Proxy for Competition?**

While the effect of participation on policy responsiveness is the primary interest of this article, scholars have previously identified electoral competition as a key force encouraging responsiveness. The role of competition is not uncontested: while some research finds strong evidence that competition influences responsiveness (Griffin 2006), others point out that members can be highly responsive in spite of a lack of competition (Bartels 1991).

Recent work, nevertheless, presumes the link between competition and responsiveness. The decline of competitive House elections over the past 50 years (Abramowitz, Alexander, and Gunning 2006), scholars warn, may precede (or account for) a decline in responsiveness.

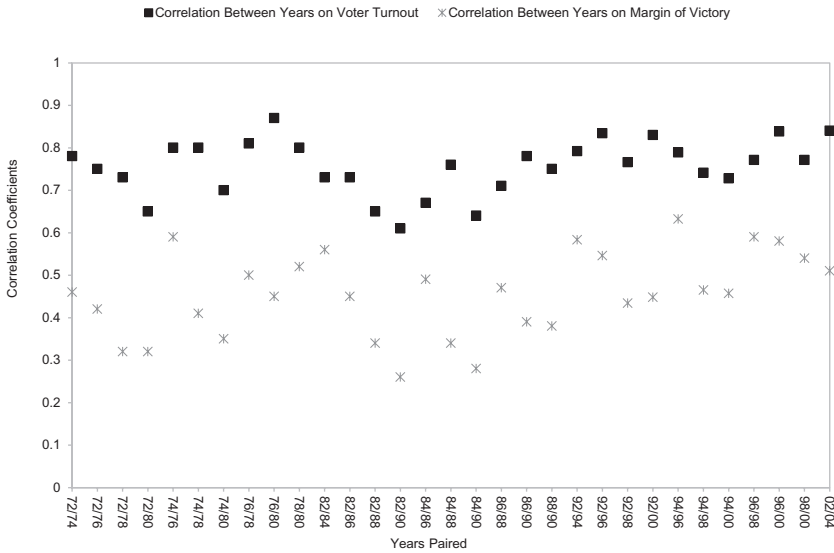
Citizen participation varies substantially across congressional districts, yet scholars have largely overlooked the direct study of district participation as a cause of policy responsiveness by members of Congress. Possibly, researchers assume participation to be a consequence of electoral competition. Studies of aggregate participation frequently point to competitive elections as a prime cause of higher participation, both in the House (Caldeira, Patterson, and Markko 1985) and more broadly (Franklin 1996). One review goes so far as to claim that “[t]he close relationship of electoral competition and voter turnout at the individual level and at the system level is a frequently verified proposition, bordering on the status of a law” (Gray 1976, cited by Campbell 2006, 20). But while participation and electoral competition are related, the relationship is much weaker than conventional wisdom supposes (Campbell 2006), suggesting an underappreciated mechanism for enhancing policy responsiveness.

Competition and participation in House elections can be strongly correlated—for example, the correlation is .66 in 1974—but this is the highest correlation from 1972 to 2006. The correlation is only .36 in 1994 and .41 in 2004. District participation varies for a number of reasons apart from the level of competition. Participation might be high in states with competitive state-level races even in the absence of competitive House races. Importantly, recent work finds a curvilinear relationship between participation and competition, with high participation in both highly competitive areas and highly uncompetitive areas (Campbell 2006, chap. 2), strongly contesting the law-like generalization of a high correlation between participation and competition.

Participation is encouraged by both political competition and civic homogeneity, but it also exhibits an underlying level of stability in response to demographics and political history. Members of Congress develop an understanding of their districts’ level of civic engagement much like they understand their districts’ underlying ideology: they know whether they have a relatively active or inactive constituency just as they know whether they have a relatively liberal or conservative one. A simple comparison of the over-time correlation of voter turnout to the over-time correlation of vote margin (as a measure of competitiveness) shows district participation to be more stable and more predictable.

Figure 2 separately plots the simple correlation coefficients of every within-decade year-pairing for district turnout as well as the analogous correlations of the districts’ margins of victory. For example, the

FIGURE 2  
Stability of District Turnout and Competition Over Time



first black box in the upper-left corner represents the correlation between district turnout in 1972 and 1974 (.78); directly below, the gray X indicates the correlation between district vote margin in 1972 and 1974 (.46). For every paired comparison (within decade), there is greater stability in the level of voter involvement than in electoral competition. The average correlation across all of the within-decade pairs between 1972 and 2004 is .76 for turnout and .45 for competition. Members may not know whether they will face serious challenges from one election to the next, but they can reliably predict the underlying electoral involvement.<sup>9</sup>

Most scholarship on congressional responsiveness returns to the theme developed by Mayhew's seminal work on the electoral connection: members act strategically to avoid electoral loss (1974). Faced with greater electoral competition or vulnerability, members become more responsive to their districts (Ansolabehere, Snyder, and Stewart 2001). When members can minimize their electoral vulnerability—via money, redistricting, discouraging quality challengers—democratic responsiveness becomes less strategically vital (Abramowitz, Alexander, and Gunning 2006; Jacobson and Kernell 1983). The stable rates of participation within congressional districts serve, as well, to shape representative's strategies for remaining in office.



While district characteristics shape how responsive members are to their constituencies, party also plays a central role influencing member decision making. Parties in the contemporary Congress serve to structure the legislative agenda (Cox and McCubbins 2005), to provide voting cues (Kingdon 1989), and, because of the nature of a two-party system, to constrain the political debate. Furthermore, research provides compelling evidence that members of Congress have been historically more responsive to the demands of political parties than they have been to their district preferences (Ansolabehere, Snyder, and Stewart 2001; Hussey and Zaller 2011).

### **Research Design**

This study investigates whether district participation enhances the influence of district preferences on the policy behavior of members of Congress. While we argue that the causal mechanism lies in staff and member's organizational responses to higher participation, we focus our tests on the empirically observable implications: in this case, higher policy responsiveness to district preferences. Analyses covering the past four decades show evidence that district participation enhances policy responsiveness.

#### *Measures*

Legislative behavior is estimated as a function of both party and of district preferences weighted by the level of participation and the competitiveness of the congressional district. We begin by developing a measure of district turnout, starting with the first nonpresidential races following each decade's redistricting—1974, 1982, 1994, and 2002—and then describe the remaining key measures: district preferences, district competition, party affiliation, and legislative behavior.<sup>10</sup>

District participation is measured by the average turnout across the three elections following redistricting, beginning with the first midterm election after redistricting. The three-election average weights the underlying participation in off-year elections by two-thirds and turnout in the presidential election by one-third. By pooling all three elections, district participation captures the moving cycles of other state-wide elections, including senatorial and gubernatorial elections that may boost participation. District turnout in each year is the total vote for the House election divided by the voting-age population as measured in the most recent census.<sup>11</sup>

District preferences are captured by the Republican Party share of the two-party presidential vote in each district. It is common for both political scientists and members of Congress to think about the most recent presidential vote as representing the underlying district ideological preference. Indeed, when asked to describe the congressional district, chiefs of staff from high-participation districts consistently began by mentioning the “baseline” from the prior presidential election.

District competition is measured by taking the log of the margin of victory of the most competitive election within the three-election cycle. Actual electoral competition varies widely at the district level, relying as it does on national events and drawing a competitive challenger, but perceptions of vulnerability are based on representative’s memories of tough races (or their absence). A member of Congress who has a close call one year and fails to draw a challenger a second year is still vulnerable in his or her own mind (Fenno 1978). The 1994 election was remarkably fresh in the minds of members of the Democratic caucus as late as 2000. We log the value because the theoretical impact of competition should diminish as a district becomes increasingly one-sided. The difference in winning a district by 5 versus 10% is more significant than the difference between winning by 15 versus 20%.

Party affiliation is a simple measure of whether the member of Congress was a Democrat or a Republican, but because the analyses cross over multiple electoral cycles with possible transitions among office holders, multiple analyses are shown. The full sample includes unlike cases; in particular, some districts see a change in the party of the representative while others do not. This introduces uncertainty into the meaning of the dependent variable (described next) that we should expect to dampen the results. Consequently, we estimate the model on three additional subsets of data: (1) where incumbents survive the midterm, (2) where incumbents leave office but the representation of the district remains within the same party, and (3) where the incumbent does not run in the midterm.<sup>12</sup> The estimates from these samples hold party constant within the district. Party is measured as a 0 if the member of Congress was a Democrat and a 1 if she was a Republican.

Finally, as a measure of legislative voting behavior, we use the average of the first dimension DW-Nominate scores (Poole and Rosenthal 1997) in the two Congresses immediately following the relevant presidential elections.<sup>13</sup> Higher DW-Nominate scores indicate greater policy conservatism. Congress scholars have increasingly used the relation between district preferences measured via presidential vote at the district level and DW-Nominate scores as a reasonable, though imperfect, measure of policy responsiveness (see for example Ansolabehere,

Snyder, and Stewart 2001; Canes-Wrone, Brady, and Cogan 2002; Griffin 2006). Collectively, these measures provide a plausible representation of how members of Congress might read elections in their district for information about how they should act on policy. Presidential elections identify the “baseline” district preference and the turnout, and margin of victory tell them how much they have to pay attention to district preferences.

The analyses that follow combine four sets of data anchored by the midterm elections of 1974, 1982, 1994, and 2002. Table 1 details the

TABLE 1  
Measures Used in Analyses, with Descriptive Statistics

	District Preferences	District Participation	District Competition	Legislative Behavior
1970s	1976 Republican Presidential Vote	Average House Turnout, 1974, 1976, 1978	Log of Most Competitive House Election, 1974, 1976, 1978	Average Nominate Scores, 1977–80
Mean/SD	47.75 / 10.57	46.26 / 11.60	4.31 / .19	-.09 / .33
min/max	9 / 74	13 / 77	3.9 / 4.6	-.76 / .90
N Cases	433	406	406	433
1980s	1984 Republican Presidential Vote	Average House Turnout, 1982, 1984, 1986	Log of Most Competitive House Election, 1982, 1984, 1986	Average Nominate Scores, 1985–88
Mean/SD	58.39 / 12.15	43.38 / 8.53	4.12 / .16	-.04 / .36
min/max	5 / 82	18 / 68	3.9 / 4.6	-.76 / .76
N Cases	433	404	424	433
1990s	1996 Republican Presidential Vote	Average House Turnout, 1994, 1996, 1998	Log of Most Competitive House Election, 1994, 1996, 1998	Average Nominate Scores, 1997–2000
Mean/SD	44.32 / 12.99	41.06 / 9.00	4.10 / .15	.04 / .43
min/max	4 / 72	13 / 72	3.75 / 4.61	-.76 / 1.09
N Cases	430	412	434	435
2000s	2004 Republican Presidential Vote	Average House Turnout, 2002, 2004, 2006	Log of Most Competitive House Election, 2002, 2004, 2006	Average Nominate Scores, 2005–08
Mean/SD	50.01 / 14.35	44.93 / 9.80	4.17 / .15	.06 / .49
min/max	9 / 78	16 / 76	3.86 / 4.61	-.90 / 1.39
N Cases	435	422	435	435

remaining measures used in each analysis along with descriptive statistics.

### *Statistical Considerations*

Testing the effect of district participation on responsiveness requires modeling the three-way interaction between participation, competition, and district preferences on the policy behavior of representatives while controlling for the partisanship of the representative. The complex interaction is necessary to jointly test participation and competition as conditional forces on policy responsiveness.

The model is:

#### *Member Behavior*

$$\begin{aligned}
 = & b_0 + b_1 (\text{District Preferences}_i) + b_2 (\text{District Participation}_i) \\
 & + b_3 (\text{District Competition}_i) + b_4 (\text{Preferences}_i * \text{Participation}_i) \\
 & + b_5 (\text{Preferences}_i * \text{Competition}_i) \\
 & + b_6 (\text{Participation}_i * \text{Competition}_i) \\
 & + b_7 (\text{Preferences}_i * \text{Participation}_i * \text{Competition}_i) \\
 & + b_8 (\text{Party}) + X_{\text{controls}} + e_i
 \end{aligned}$$

Because of the three-way interaction, the interpretation of the lower-order elements is not straight forward. A traditional hypothesis test based on the ratio between the coefficient and the standard error of the interaction between engagement and district preference on policy behavior only tests whether engagement moderates the effect of district preferences when district competition is at zero, which is clearly not the usual case. As a solution, we provide graphical results of the marginal effects of participation across multiple conditions (Brambor, Clark, and Golder 2006). In addition, we center the independent variables at their medians so that zero becomes meaningful, representing the middle case of participation, competition, and conservatism.<sup>14</sup>

The models are estimated with robust regression, a weighted least-squares estimator that is insensitive to outliers (see Western 1995). Because some congressional districts have relatively extreme values of district preferences, participation, and competition, robust regression insures that these outliers do not exert undue influence on the estimates.

## **Results**

This section presents the results from a series of models that simultaneously test the influence of participation and competition on policy

responsiveness. Overall, the hypothesis that policy responsiveness rises with district turnout is supported but contingent upon more competitive districts.

The first column of Table 2 shows the results using the full sample of data from the 1976, 1984, 1996, and 2004 presidential-election cycles, stacked. We are most interested in the coefficient for interaction between preferences and turnout, but because the three-way interaction between preferences, turnout, and competitiveness is statistically significant, the earlier two-way interaction is not directly interpretable. The effect of turnout on responsiveness relies in turn on the level of competitiveness.

The next two columns present the results of the model estimated on the subsamples including only those representatives who were successful in the midterm elections and including only the districts where the incumbent's party retains the seat. For both the "incumbent-survival" sample and the "party-survival" sample, where party is held constant within the district, the effect mirrors that of the full sample: the effect of turnout on responsiveness is contingent on competitiveness.<sup>15</sup>

The final column of Table 2 provides the results using a relatively small sample of districts that had open seats at the midterm. In this case, turnout has no discernible impact on responsiveness. As a representative likely knows in advance that they intend to retire, the competitiveness of the district is theoretically moot. The participatory activity of the district fails to significantly alter representation. New members in active districts may also not yet have established the organizational capacity to insure stronger representation.

A graphical representation more clearly relays the substance of the key conditional effects.<sup>16</sup> Figure 3 plots the marginal effect of district preferences on congressional voting behavior for the top 25% of competitive districts as participation varies. Each panel represents the effect for a different estimating sample (omitting the open-seat sample that failed to achieve statistical significance). A histogram of average turnout is displayed at the bottom of each graph for reference.

In this linear multiplicative model, the marginal effect of district preference on Nominate scores depends on the level of voter turnout and congressional competitiveness. In Figure 3, the *y*-axis represents the marginal effect of district preference on congressional voting behavior, the *x*-axis represents changes in congressional voter turnout, and the solid lines represent districts in the highest quartile of competitiveness. Confidence intervals are represented by the dashed lines. A common pattern emerges in each of these estimating

TABLE 2  
Effects of Voter Turnout and Electoral Competition  
on Policy Responsiveness to District Preferences

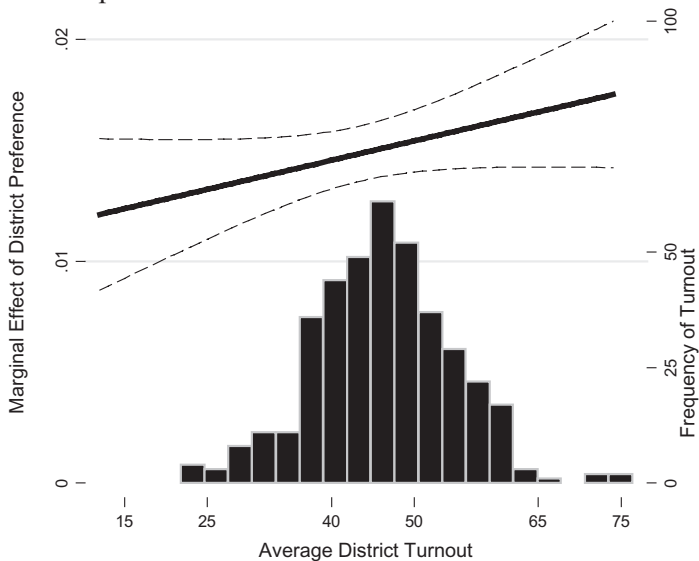
	Full Sample	Incumbent Survival Sample	Party Survival Sample	Open Seat Sample
District Preferences	.014* (.001)	.012* (.001)	.012* (.0005)	.019* (.002)
District Turnout	-.002* (.000)	-.002* (.001)	-.002* (.0004)	-.003 (.002)
District Competitiveness	.085* (.028)	.040 (.027)	.052* (.026)	.083 (.128)
District Preferences × District Turnout	.00003 (.00004)	-.00001 (.00004)	-.00001 (.00004)	.0002 (.0002)
District Preferences × District Competitiveness	-.010* (.002)	-.010* (.002)	-.009* (.002)	-.010 (.009)
District Turnout × District Competitiveness	-.015* (.002)	-.014* (.002)	-.016* (.002)	-.021* (.009)
District Preferences × District Turnout × District Competitiveness	-.0005* (.0002)	-.0003* (.00015)	-.0004* (.0001)	-.001 (.0007)
Party	.556* (.010)	.600* (.010)	.603* (.010)	.375* (.040)
Year, 1976	-.046* (.012)	-.060* (.012)	-.061* (.011)	.003 (.050)
Year, 1984	-.150* (.012)	-.148* (.012)	-.150* (.011)	-.171* (.058)
Year, 1996	.064* (.012)	.042* (.011)	.040* (.011)	.102 (.059)
Constant	-.787 (.017)	-.838 (.017)	-.842 (.016)	-.533 (.076)
N	1641	1430	1533	152
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.858	.885	.890	.722

*Note:* Robust regression estimates are presented with standard errors shown in parentheses. The dependent variable is a two-Congress, average Nominate Score with higher values indicating greater conservatism. District preferences are the percent of the presidential vote going to the Republican Party candidate; district turnout is the average percent of adult population casting a ballot for the House elections across three elections; district competitiveness is the log of the margin of victory in the closest of three races (higher values are less competitive). The measures of district preferences, turnout, and competitiveness are centered at their medians. Party is coded 0 for Democrat and 1 for Republican.

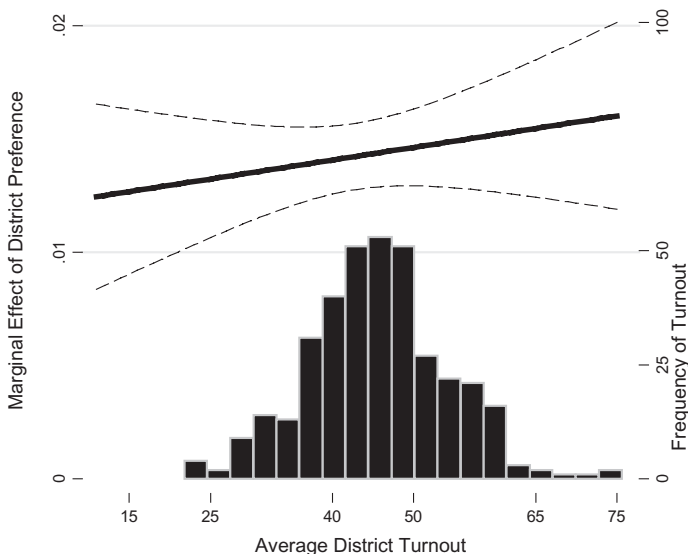
\* $p < .05$ .

FIGURE 3  
Marginal Effect of District Preference on NOMINATE Score  
in Top 25% of Competitive Districts

A. Full Sample



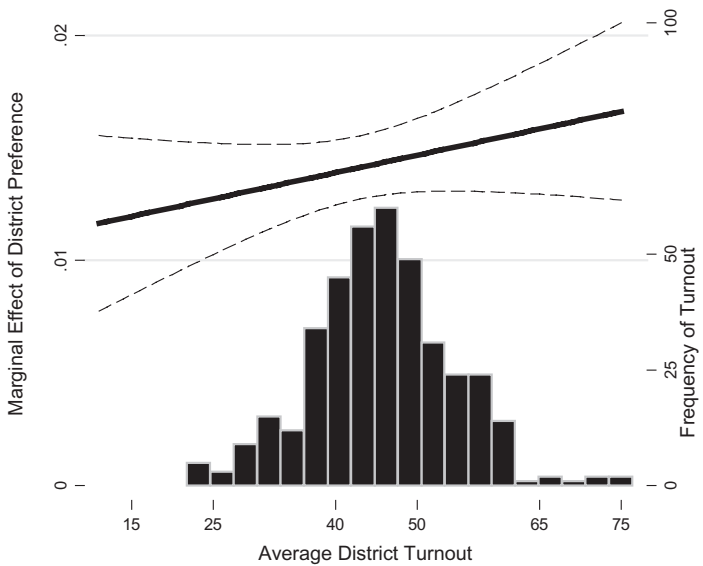
B. Incumbent-Survival Sample



Note: Dashed lines show 95% confidence interval.

FIGURE 3  
Marginal Effect of District Preference on NOMINATE Score  
in Top 25% of Competitive Districts  
(continued)

C. Party-Survival Sample



Note: Dashed lines show 95% confidence interval.

samples: increases in turnout correspond to a higher marginal effect of district preferences on Nominate scores, suggesting greater legislative responsiveness. Further, turnout varies substantially even in competitive districts.<sup>17</sup> Demonstrating a significant effect of turnout even within competitive districts provides crucial support for the hypothesis since electoral competition is a strong rival influence on district responsiveness.

Table 3 provides an additional summary of the substantive effects of participation on representation, estimating the magnitude of change in Nominate scores as district preferences change by a standard deviation for different values of participation and competition. For low-turnout districts, roughly one standard deviation below the mean turnout (25%), a one standard-deviation increase in district preferences towards more conservatism leads to an increase in Nominate Scores of .201 for competitive districts, an increase of .197 for districts at the median of competitiveness, and of .193 for uncompetitive districts. For high-turnout



TABLE 3  
Rate of Change in Nominate Score by  
District Preference Change, Levels of Competition, and Turnout

Level of Competition	25% Turnout	65% Turnout	Improvement from Higher Turnout
More Competitive (top 25th percentile)	.201/SD	.249/SD	25% faster
Middle (50th percentile)	.197/SD	.224/SD	15% faster
Less Competitive (bottom 25th percentile)	.193/SD	.202/SD	5% faster

districts, where turnout is one standard-deviation above the mean (65%), a one standard-deviation increase in district preferences increases Nominate scores by .249 for competitive districts, by .224 for median competitive districts, and by .202 for uncompetitive districts. In short, legislative behavior changes in response to changes in district preferences more rapidly for high-turnout districts, contingent on higher competition. Where participation is high, district preferences are converted into Nominate scores about 25% faster in the most competitive districts, compared to where participation is low, 15% faster in the median districts, and 5% faster in less competitive districts (see Table 3).

These results collectively show a broad and general phenomenon where the collective preferences of congressional districts are more influential on the voting behavior of members of Congress when those districts participate at higher rates. At the microlevel, higher participation districts send upwards of 50,000 individual messages per year and representatives process a degree of requests, complaints, and demands that could be overwhelming. Yet, these results show that rather than sow confusion, higher participation from a district generally helps representatives to get the district right and vote with it.<sup>18</sup>

## Conclusion

These results indicate a real cost to low participation: districts that vote at lower rates have less impact on their representatives' policy positions. We outline a broad argument about how district participation affects the way members of Congress see their district—as active or not—and how subtle organizational responses may accumulate into a broader pattern of enhanced responsiveness. We cannot, however, overlook that variation in district-level political participation is not a random phenomenon. Within some states like New York or California, the

disparity between highly participatory districts and relatively nonparticipatory districts can be explained by levels of poverty. Indeed the least participatory districts in the country tend to be in urban, high poverty areas. In other comparisons, for example between Minnesota and Louisiana, history, culture, and the rules of the game would seem stronger explanatory factors (see for example, Campbell 2006 and Putnam 2000, chap. 16). Explaining the variation in district-level voter turnout is beyond the scope of this analysis, but we know from a variety of studies across individuals, states, and countries that income, education, and age of constituencies matter (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995), that state-level economic conditions, namely unemployment, matter, that electoral rules, such as same-day voter registration, matter (Knack 1995),<sup>19</sup> and that the overarching structure of the political systems matters (Jackman 1987). Participation in the United States has also varied greatly based on the organization of political parties as mobilizing units and on the strategies those parties have used to contest elections (McGerr 1986; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993).<sup>20</sup>

We raise these issues to discourage readers from drawing the conclusion that low-participation districts should be blamed for their relatively weaker impact on their representatives or, alternatively, that high-participation districts should be praised for achieving a significantly higher level of responsiveness. Rather, these results add to the larger picture of political inequality in contemporary America. Just as some individuals appear to have greater impact on the political system, so do some congressional districts.

In short, higher citizen participation enhances policy responsiveness. It does so more strongly in competitive districts, but across levels of electoral competition, participation matters for representation. We argue that members repay district participation with greater reciprocal attention through staff arrangements and the allocation of member time, and that this advantages the citizens in high-participation districts with more policy representation.

This article adds to a too-limited body of research documenting the influence of political participation. Prior scholarship has primarily demonstrated the importance of subconstituency differences. This study shows that variation in voting turnout *across* congressional districts has clear implications for representation as well: *districts with higher political participation have more influence over their legislators' policy votes in the House of Representatives.*

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## NOTES

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1. Figure 1 combines data from the first nonpresidential, congressional elections that occurred after the last four census population counts. Data on turnout rates is from the Center for Voting and Democracy ([www.fairvote.org](http://www.fairvote.org)).

2. The interviews were conducted over the phone in the fall of 2006 and lasted about two hours each. We spoke with 10 Chiefs of Staffs, including most of the congressional delegations in Wisconsin, Minnesota, Maine, and Oregon. In addition, one of the authors served in a high-participation district for approximately 10 months as an APSA Congressional Fellow.

3. Interviews with Chiefs of Staff of high-participation districts consistently reported this cluster of activities.

4. Authors' calculations from congressional filings in the *Statement of Disbursements* from 2004 and 2005 (United States. Congress. House. 2004–2005). These differences are derived from summing the total expenditures on franking and subtracting the amount spent on bulk mailings. House rules require members to file with the Franking Office for any mailing of over 500 pieces that are substantially similar. Removing these larger mailings from their total postage costs gives a reliable estimate of the amount of mail responded to individually. Offices will, of course, vary in how detailed their responses are to their constituent mail.

5. Surprisingly, none reported enhanced polling, though most conducted some general poll connected to the campaign.

6. Authors' analysis using the official House of Representatives phone book from the 108th Congress. Basic staffing patterns were assessed by categorizing the titles, office locations, and numbers of staff members listed as employed by the member of Congress. Common office titles can also obscure significant divergences in responsibilities.

7. Only one Chief of Staff articulated a negative view of high district participation as something that needed to be “contained” so that it did not disrupt the workings of the legislative office. The representative of that district lost their next election.

8. Members from low-participation districts may also estimate that their constituency is largely inattentive, granting them the leeway to pursue policies that are inconsistent with district preferences because they are less likely to be held accountable. In contrast, members from high-participation districts assume a highly attentive public.

This keeps them from risking policy positions too far from the district center and provides a clear incentive to develop the best possible intelligence on district opinion.

9. Omitting open-seat elections has a negligible effect on difference between the pair-wise correlations. The gap between the sets of correlation reduces by an average of .02.

10. The 1970s are the first full decade after the implementation of the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

11. The measure of voting-age population is taken from the decennial census and the measure of House votes are taken in the following three cycles. In the 1970s example, voting-age population is measured using the 1970 census and then House votes are measured in 1972, 1974, and 1976 House elections. The denominator, tied to the census, may add error over time as populations shift within a district.

12. Additional models were estimated using a subsample where incumbents lost at the midterm and/or the party representing the district switches at the midterm. The sample sizes in these two cases are relatively small, at 60 and 102, respectively. The results from these two samples point in the same general direction as the analyses fully presented but fail to achieve conventional standards of statistical significance.

13. Congress scholars use Poole and Rosenthal's first dimension DW-Nominate as a reliable estimate of legislator's voting behavior on a liberal-conservative scale. The scores are estimated from all roll-call votes conducted in every Congress since the first in 1789. In earlier periods of history, the scores picked up two underlying dimensions, with the second dimension capturing the conflict between the North and South leading up to the Civil War and later conflicts over race in the period from 1930s to the 1970s. Beginning in the 1980s, the scores seem to converge to a single left-right dimension (Carroll et al. 2008).

14. Table 1 lists the noncentered values.

15. F-tests of the joint statistical significance of (1) the interaction between turnout and preferences and (2) the interaction between turnout, preferences, and competition are statistically significant to the  $p < .05$  level; F-tests of the joint statistical significance of (1) the interaction between turnout and preferences, (2) the interaction between turnout, preferences, and competition, and (3) preferences and competition are statistically significant to the  $p < .01$  level for the unrestricted models using the full sample, the incumbent-survival sample, and the party-survival samples.

16. The following graphs were generated using the STATA code provided by Brambor, Clark, and Golder (2007).

17. This essential finding holds up through a wide variety of modeling and testing. Analyses using only the middle 80% of the cases (based on turnout) show the same positive and statistically significant result. Likewise, the results hold using White standard errors and clustered standard errors. A simpler analysis that omits competition also finds that participation enhances responsiveness.

18. This study has focused on the broad relationship. Future research should help to identify conditions, perhaps specific to types of policy, where participation has a greater and weaker impact on policy responsiveness.

19. Knack (1995) points out the endogeneity of many policy adoptions in that states that have longer histories of higher participation were most likely to adopt voter-friendly laws.

20. In addition, a growing body of research identifies the policy precursors to changes in the levels of citizen engagement. Policies such as the GI Bill and Social Security remade the resources and incentives to participate in politics (see Campbell 2003; Mettler 2002), whereas experience with some social welfare policies may undermine a citizen's sense of political efficacy (Soss 1999). The experience with the implementation of these policies varied widely across states as some were early adopters of provisions that shared characteristics of the later federal legislation (see Hanson 1994).

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