

# Ask Only What Your Country Can Do for You: Group Interests, Constituency Characteristics and Demands for Representation

American Politics Research  
1–13  
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DOI: 10.1177/1532673X20961028  
journals.sagepub.com/home/apr



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## Abstract

Providing representation entails making choices about prioritizing the needs of diverse groups within one's constituency. While citizens cannot reasonably expect that representatives will cater to their particular interests or priorities all the time, we know little about citizens' expectations in this regard. In this paper, we present the results of two survey experiments that probe the relationship between citizens' group identifications, their perceptions of their constituencies, and their demands regarding representation. We find that citizens are generally egocentric, in that they expect a representative to cater to personally relevant interests even when such interests are not an important part of the representative's constituency. Moreover, we find that this egocentrism is not mitigated through the provision of information about the district's diversity or composition, indicating that voter ignorance about the nature of constituencies is not the primary cause of these expectations. Regardless of sophistication, we observe expectations that are unrealistically self-centered.

## Keywords

representation, constituency, public opinion, group interests

*"If I hear 1 more person scream at a Rep., 'I'm your boss!', I'll scream louder."*

*Friends, each of us is 1/700,000th the boss of a congressman."*

—Larry Sabato

In legislative constituencies as large as those present in contemporary America, and indeed, in constituencies much smaller, citizens cannot reasonably expect that a representative will cater to their ideology, interests, or priorities all the time. Were they to be fully informed about the nature of their constituency, a citizen might calibrate their expectations depending on whether they are in the majority or minority—or in most cases, whether they are a part of a larger or smaller interest or demographic group. A more sophisticated citizen might understand that the frequency with which the representative's behavior will match their preferences depends on whether they are a part of the member's "re-election" and "primary" constituencies (Fenno, 1978). These levels of political sophistication are, of course, not present in the bulk of the electorate, so instead we might presume that all expectations regarding representation, like the evaluations and voting decisions that follow from them, would be filtered through a lens of partisanship and other heuristics.

However, a distinction should be made between voting on policy questions and other aspects of representation, particularly agenda-setting and other actions than require choices of

effort and prioritization. Voting decisions naturally lend themselves to a dichotomy in which the voters' expectation is that the representative's action produce "policy congruity" (Miller & Stokes, 1963). Thus, it is not surprising to find that many voters eschew compromise and bipartisanship (Harbridge & Malhotra, 2011) and prefer that representatives choose district interests over national interests (Doherty, 2013), even if they give lip service to less egocentric positions. In this domain, several studies (Bowler, 2017; Carman, 2007; Rosset et al., 2017) have deepened our understanding of the classic debate about trustees and delegates by focusing on the citizen's perspective.<sup>1</sup>

In this paper, we focus on the second aspect of representation: the question of how much *effort* the representative expends on behalf of various groups and interests in the constituency. Arnold (1990) argues that legislators' attention to group interests will be a function of "traceability," and thus, driven by the procedural strategies of party leaders. The

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literature on “subconstituencies,” however, emphasizes the idea that not all group interests are alike, and explores the extent to which representatives over-serve certain small groups in their districts (e.g., Bishin, 2009) or ignore other salient groups (e.g., Miler, 2018).

From a normative perspective, the question of how much effort the representative *should* exert<sup>2</sup> dovetails with the concept of substantive representation, which, while typically applied to historically under-represented groups (e.g., Griffin & Newman, 2008; Grose, 2005; Hero & Tolbert, 1995; MacDonald & O’Brien, 2011; Swers, 2005), can theoretically be applied to a myriad of constituencies within a district. Our focus, however, is not on the provision of substantive representation, but on the citizen’s perspective regarding demands for representational effort (hereafter, “effort demand”). Just as the literature on policy responsiveness has benefited from attention to the citizen’s perspective, we believe such attention here can elucidate how citizens think about the efforts of their representatives, both in terms of concrete results and abstract principles.

Our goal in this paper, then, is to ask several questions pertaining to the concept of effort demand. First, to what extent are citizens’ effort demands driven by identification with groups and interests, even when such groups are not salient in a constituency? Second, to the extent that effort demands primarily reflect such self-interest, to what extent can this tendency be counteracted by the provision of information about one’s constituency?

To answer these questions, we present the results of two survey experiments that probe the relationship between citizens’ group identifications, perceptions of their constituencies, and demands regarding representation. That is, we examine demands for interest-based representation (defined in terms of policy effort, not policy congruity), in groups including farmers, college students, the elderly, and unions. We find that citizens are generally egocentric in that they expect a representative to cater to personally relevant interests even when such interests are not an important part of the representative’s constituency. Moreover, we find that this egocentrism is not mitigated by the provision of information about the district’s diversity, which suggests that voter ignorance about the nature of constituencies is not the primary cause of these expectations.

## Expectations about Expectations

In attempting to understand citizens’ expectations about constituencies and representation, we must first confront the generally low level of political knowledge that attends such discussions. But while citizens are broadly ignorant about politics and innumerate about demographics, some evidence suggests that knowledge of local politics (Shaker, 2012) and local demographics (Wong, 2007) are less problematic, and studies of community preferences (e.g., Zubrinsky & Bobo, 1996) have shown that people have reasonable levels of

knowledge regarding other communities in their vicinity. Thus, even if they are unaware of the precise boundaries of their Congressional district, they may have a general sense of the people who live in surrounding communities. If citizens have some knowledge about the groups and interests that might be influential in their constituencies, the next question is how that information shapes their expectations.

Broadly speaking, there are two principles to which voters may implicitly subscribe. First, they might demand that the representative cater to their own priorities, regardless of whether the voters’ group interests represent a substantial portion of the constituency. Second, voters might recognize that constituencies are diverse and that the representative must cater to a variety of groups and interests, roughly in proportion to their size or prominence in the district.<sup>3</sup> We expect that citizens’ demands will primarily be shaped by self-interested concerns, but that under some circumstances, information about the constituency may counteract this mindset.

With respect to effort demands, there are a few reasons to believe the self-interested perspective might be predominant in the minds of voters. Not only does this argument have ample grounding in social psychology (McPherson et al., 2001; Neuberg & Cottrell, 2008), but citizens expecting that a representative cater to their priorities also mimics the cognitive logic of policy responsiveness. Although several studies have found that voters care about forms of responsiveness other than policy responsiveness (Griffin & Flavin, 2011; Harden, 2016) and care about collective representation over dyadic representation (Harden & Clark, 2016), the logic of dyadic representation is still likely to match the voter’s baseline intuition. All else equal, voters will be more satisfied when the representative’s votes match their preferences, and more dissatisfied when they do not (Ansolabehere & Jones, 2010). After all, Republican voters in a 60% Republican district are unlikely to be satisfied if their Republican member of Congress votes for the Republican position just 60% of the time. In such a safe Republican district, it would be reasonable to expect the member to support the Republican position almost all of the time. If that same logic is applied to effort demands, the voter would expect the representative to focus on the voter’s group interests, without considering the constituency’s contours. Even a highly sophisticated voter might demand maximum effort on behalf of one’s own interests, reasoning that citizens with other interests would do the same.

Second, while discussion of policy responsiveness might lead voters to focus on ideological and issue preferences (Lapinski et al., 2016), inviting citizens to focus on geographic and demographic aspects of representation may prime thinking in terms of identity, since people draw linkages between identity and place (Cramer, 2016; Hui, 2013; Sides et al., 2018). Moreover, since citizens are generally skeptical that representatives from other communities will represent them well, especially when those communities are different in terms of socioeconomic and race (Christenson

& Makse, 2015) or urbanity (Jacobs & Munis, 2019), they may come to think of representation as a zero-sum game, in which time spent catering to other groups in the constituency means less time catering to the voter's priorities. This leads us to the following hypothesis:

*Egocentric Hypothesis: Citizens will demand more effort from representatives on behalf of groups with which the citizen identifies.*

While self-interest is an obvious factor in shaping effort demands, other considerations may also shape how citizens think about this question. For example, knowing that constituencies are diverse amalgamations of interests, a citizen might demand effort roughly in proportion to a group's presence in the district. Members of large, prominent interests might expect significant, visible representational effort while members of smaller interests might have more modest demands. Although this cognitive logic would be a departure from the mindset associated with policy representation, some research suggests that citizens are capable both of departing from purely self-interested preferences and of understanding the mechanics of representation (e.g., Doherty, 2013). If they can understand the incentives that lead representatives to favor district preferences over national ones, they may also recognize that an individual representative must cater to the diverse set of interests within his or her constituency.

Harden and Clark's (2016) finding that voters care more about the composition of the legislature as a whole (collective representation) than about their own representative (dyadic representation) also suggests potential for a less self-interested mode of thinking. If voters recognize that other legislators can cater to their priorities, they may be less inclined to make unreasonable demands of their own legislator. More directly, Costa et al. (2018) find that voters value "communal representation," or the concept of a representative looking after the entire constituency. Although their study evaluates this claim using a general assessment of whether the legislator represents the whole district well, it stands to reason that such voters would be receptive to a representative who caters to several different district interests, and not just those of the respondent.

This countervailing perspective, however, is dependent on citizens having information that informs these attitudes. Even informed voters are limited in their knowledge of constituency traits, so fully understanding attitudes regarding this aspect of representation also requires consideration of how people's attitudes are revised or updated in response to the provision of such information. Providing voters with information about a district, its citizens, and public opinion in the district may affect beliefs about several outcomes germane to representation. For example, recent experimental work has presented information about fictional or hypothetical districts or constituencies in order to better understand preferences regarding redistricting (Christenson & Makse,

2015; Winburn et al., 2017) or descriptive representation (Hayes & Hibbing, 2017), while Doherty's (2013, 2015) studies have explored the effects of learning information about public opinion in the constituency.

Insofar as we are interested in the linkages between constituency traits and citizens' expectations of their representative, our central concern is not public opinion in the district, but the presence of various groups in the district. We speculate that certain forms of information will counteract the baseline tendency for citizens to make prioritization demands in line with their self-interest; other forms of information will reinforce that baseline tendency. We might frame that information in two ways: in terms of district heterogeneity or homogeneity, or in terms of the presence or absence of specific groups (especially those the citizen is a member of) in the district.

First, we might provide information about the district in a broad, abstract framework of homogeneity versus heterogeneity. The Egocentric Hypothesis contends that citizens will reward a representative who is responsive to identity groups with which the citizen identifies. Even if this is true generally, however, reminding citizens about the diverse and complex nature of districts may counteract this tendency. Some citizens may persist in evaluating representation egocentrically; however, we hypothesize that priming constituency diversity will attenuate the power of self-interest in shaping expectations. Conversely, portraying the district as more homogenous will not engender any conflict between a dyadic vision of representation and the complexity of constituencies. Focusing on this aspect of information culminates in the following hypothesis:

*Heterogeneity Information Hypothesis: The relationship between citizen identities and demands for representative effort will be attenuated (strengthened) by information about the heterogeneity (homogeneity) of one's constituency.*

Second, we might offer information about the district with respect to specific constituency groups. In this case, information would prime citizens to think about how the groups they identify with fit into the overall constituency of their representative. If the information conveys that a citizen's identity group represents a major part of the constituency, the citizen should feel more empowered or entitled to demand responsiveness to that group. Contrarily, if the information implies that the identity group plays a minor role in the constituency, the citizen may adjust expectations for representation downward. The predictions with respect to this second form of information is captured in the following hypothesis:

*Size Information Hypothesis: The relationship between citizen identities and demands for representative effort will be attenuated (strengthened) by information that the identity group is a small (large) part of the constituency.*

## Research Design

### Experiment 1

The data for our first study come from a laboratory experiment conducted at a large Midwestern university. 175 undergraduates were recruited from introductory-level political science classes<sup>4</sup> and potential subjects signed up ahead of time by providing contact information including the postal code of their home address; this information was used to identify the Congressional district each subject lived in, which allowed us to program into the questionnaire a customized, district-specific vignette for each subject in the experiment. Subjects hailed from a total of 26 Congressional districts, around two-thirds of which are in the state where the study was conducted.<sup>5</sup>

To measure the relationship between identities and representational demands, we asked respondents about seven different group interests to which a representative might be responsive. Both the key dependent variable (“demand for representation”) and the key independent variable (“closeness to group”) are constructed from responses regarding each of these seven groups.<sup>6</sup> The seven groups are: (1) the elderly, (2) farmers, (3) the military, (4) the poor, (5) small business, (6) college students, and (7) unions. The groups were chosen with the intention of producing variation in levels of attachment among subjects (e.g., most undergraduates are likely to identify with the group “college students”), and partisan or ideological variation, both in terms of the identity group’s voting patterns and its perceived allies in the political parties.

To test the Egocentric Hypothesis, we create the key independent variable by measuring the attachment between the respondent and each of the seven group interests. Since we asked subjects about each group separately, subjects could identify strongly or weakly with any combination of groups; membership in groups was not mutually exclusive. The question was posed as follows:

*Individuals often feel close to certain groups in society, either for personal, social or familial reasons. For each of the following groups, please indicate whether you feel very close to the group, feel somewhat close to the group, or do not feel close to the group.*

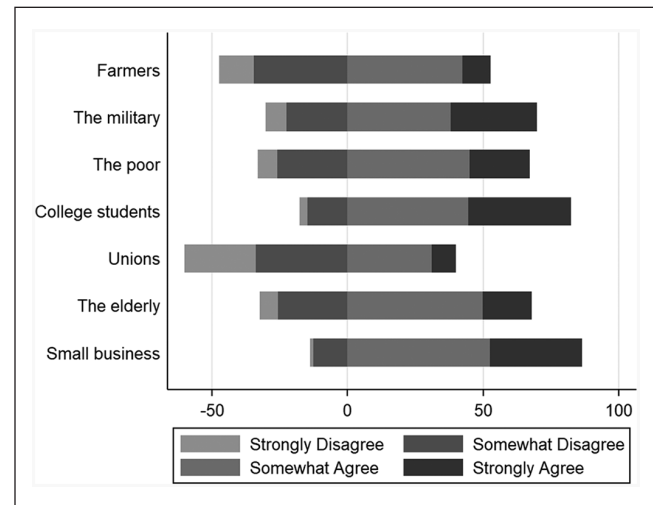
As seen in Table 1, closeness to the seven groups varies significantly. Beyond the predictable pattern of our undergraduate subjects identifying with college students, there are two groups with a somewhat heterogeneous distribution (small business and the military), two groups where the modal response is “somewhat close” (the elderly and the poor) and two groups with whom few subjects identified (farmers and unions). Six of the seven groups also exhibit meaningful differences between Republicans’ and Democrats’ propensity to feel close to the group. The responses from this question are

**Table 1.** Distribution of Group Attachments.

Group interest	Very close (%)	Somewhat close (%)	Not close (%)	Partisan gap <sup>1</sup>
College students	84	12	4	−0.01
Small business	28	43	29	0.31**
The military	23	37	40	0.50**
The elderly	17	58	25	0.27**
The poor	12	46	42	−0.45**
Farmers	10	28	61	0.36**
Unions	7	21	72	−0.24*

<sup>1</sup>Note. Partisan gap indicates the difference of means on a three-point scale between Republicans and Democrats. Positive values indicate Republicans identify more with the group and negative values indicate Democrats identify more closely.

\* $p < .10$ . \*\* $p < .05$ . \*\*\* $p < .01$ .



**Figure 1.** Demands for representational effort.

used to create the variable **closeness to group**, with the unit of analysis being the respondent-group dyad; thus, there are seven cases per respondent in the analyses that follow.

Next, we construct the dependent variable, **demand for effort**, by asking subjects about expectations that their representative should act on behalf of a given group. Specifically, we ask:

*Please tell us how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements. Again, with respect to each of the following groups, how would you respond to the statement “I would not consider a member of Congress a good representative unless they exerted major legislative effort on behalf of. . .”*

Figure 1 shows the distribution of responses to this question. The first thing to note is that most responses indicate agreement, signifying that respondents are quite demanding. On average, each respondent agrees or strongly agrees that a representative “must exert major legislative effort” on behalf



**Table 2.** Examples of Experimental Condition Vignettes (Ohio 3rd District).

Homogeneity condition	Heterogeneity condition
Based on the information provided, your member of Congress is Mike Turner, a member of the Republican Party. He has served in Congress since 2003. The Third District of Ohio is a largely urban district which is dominated by the city of Dayton; more than three-quarters of its population resides within Montgomery County. The district is heavily Republican: it has supported Republican presidential candidates in the last three elections, and Turner has not faced a competitive election since being elected to Congress. The district is also racially homogeneous: whites make up more than 80% of the district's residents, and this number rises to over 90% outside of Dayton proper.	Based on the information provided, your member of Congress is Mike Turner, a member of the Republican Party. He has served in Congress since 2003. The Third District of Ohio stretches across large sections of southwestern Ohio, from the city of Dayton to rural counties east of Cincinnati. Although Dayton is the largest city in the district, a majority of its residents live in the Cincinnati media market. The district leans Republican in presidential and Congressional elections, but had a history of electing Democrats to Congress throughout the 1980s and 1990s, and the city of Dayton provides a strong based of Democratic support. The district ranks as one of the most racially diverse in the state of Ohio, with the city of Dayton almost evenly split between black and white residents.

of 4.7 of the seven groups.<sup>7</sup> Thus, while subjects may view the task of representing diverse groups as a very challenging one, they largely expect representatives to rise to that challenge.

The Egocentric Hypothesis, which asserts that individuals will demand more effort on behalf of groups with whom they feel closer, predicts a positive relationship between the **closeness to group** and **demands for effort** variables. Examining bivariate patterns, subjects do have greater demands when it comes to groups they feel close to. When a subject feels close to a group, 49% strongly agree that a representative must expend legislative effort on behalf of that group, while 40% somewhat agree, and only 11% somewhat or strongly disagree. At the other end of the scale, when a subject does not feel close to a group, only 7% strongly agree, 37% somewhat agree, 39% somewhat disagree, and 18% strongly disagree. However, while this evidence is consistent with the Egocentric Hypothesis, it rules out a stronger claim: that citizens are *solely* driven by self-interested concerns. A meaningful number of subjects did not demand policy effort on behalf of a group the subjects identifies with, and an even greater number recognized a need for a representative to cater to groups with whom the subject did not identify. The idea that information about one's constituency would shape demands remains plausible.

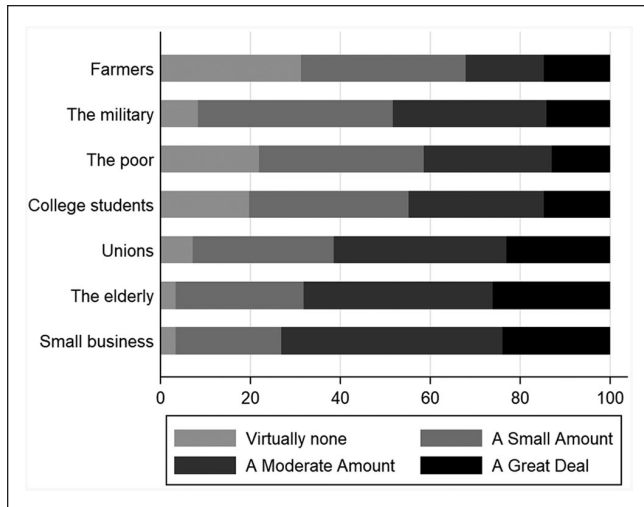
To test the Heterogeneity Information Hypothesis, we introduced three information conditions (two experimental conditions and a control group). We provided this information prior to the battery on **demands for effort** but after the questions on group attachments. In keeping with the Heterogeneity Information Hypothesis' assertion that the link between demands for effort and the citizen's identity will be conditional on beliefs about the constituency, respondents in the experimental conditions were presented with information about the homogeneity or heterogeneity of their Congressional district. Subjects in the control group were only given their member of Congress' name, political party, and length of service. In the two experimental conditions (the homogeneity and heterogeneity conditions), subjects

were given the numerical designation of their Congressional district and a description of it based on Census information and information from the *Almanac of American Politics* (Barone & Cohen, 2010). Information included the distribution of racial and ethnic groups, the mix of urban, suburban and rural communities, partisan voting patterns, names of cities, counties and communities, and the mix of white-collar and blue-collar workers. All information provided to the subjects was factually correct but presented selectively so that subjects in the **homogeneity condition** were presented facts that emphasized the district's homogeneity while subjects in the **heterogeneity condition** were presented facts that emphasized the district's heterogeneity. Examples of the vignettes can be found in Table 2.

Although we hypothesize that the *provision* of information about constituencies will counteract the power of self-interest in shaping effort demands, citizens already have some such information at their disposal, and may also attune their expectations in response to that knowledge.<sup>8</sup> As such, we control for the respondents' beliefs about the importance of each group in their district's constituency. Specifically, we ask:

*Thinking about each of the following groups, how much influence would you think this group might have in your member of Congress' district? Would you say they have a great deal of influence, a moderate amount of influence, a small amount of influence, or virtually no influence?*

It is possible that these impressions could be completely inaccurate, although that would not necessarily matter, since we are interested here in public perceptions rather than objective reality. To the contrary, however, we find evidence that for six of the groups, these perceptions are broadly accurate, with responses exhibiting reasonable correlations with objective constituency measures such as the presence of military bases and universities, union membership and poverty rates, and measures of small business and farming presence



**Figure 2.** Perceived group influence in constituency.

in the economy. Only for the elderly (whose objective presence, measured as population over 65, does not vary that much across districts) is there no correlation between perception and reality. The distribution for each group on the four-point scale of **perceived group influence** can be seen in Figure 2.<sup>9</sup>

### Experiment 1 Results

Table 3 presents the results of a series of models that explain demands for effort with respect to a specific group, as a function of the respondent's closeness to the group and the perceived influence of that group in the district. Since each respondent was asked the demand question for each of the seven groups, there are seven cases per respondent, and a total of 1,200 responses (a handful of respondents left one or more demand responses blank). We utilize ordered logit models and account for potential error correlation within with robust standard errors clustered on the respondent.<sup>10</sup>

Model 1 in Table 3 is the baseline model, which only includes the variables **closeness to group** and **perceived group influence**. While both variables are statistically significant and have positive coefficients, the substantive effect associated with one's group attachments is considerably larger. Increasing one's closeness to a group from "not close" to "very close" produces an average change in the probability of a higher response choice of 23%. For perceived influence, conversely, shifting from a belief that the group has "virtually no influence" to a belief that a group has a "great deal of influence" yields a 9% average upward change in probability on the demand scale.

In Model 2, we introduce the experimental treatments, examining first whether the provision of information affects the overall propensity to demand representation. The results from these treatments, which are both statistically insignificant,

suggest that these subtle framing differences had little direct effect on the demand for group representation.

In Model 3, we more directly test the Heterogeneity Information Hypothesis by introducing interactions between the **closeness to group** and **perceived group influence** variables from the previous model and the two experimental treatments. The lower order terms for closeness and influence remain consistent with Model 1 in terms of significance and magnitude, but the interactions are not significant. We cannot, then, reject the null hypothesis with respect to the effect of information on demands for representation.

We next consider the possibility that the null findings stem not from the lack of impact of information about one's constituency, but due to the general presence of non-attitudes among the subjects on this topic. If meaningful attitudes about group interests exist, we should expect to see demands for representation that are in line with partisan identifications. That is, individuals should be more likely to demand action on behalf of groups when support for those groups is ideologically aligned with their partisanship (e.g., unions for Democrats and the military for Republicans).<sup>11</sup> To that end, Model 4 adds a series of dummy variables corresponding to the seven identity groups, as well as a series of interactions between each identity group and party identification.<sup>12</sup> The results of Model 4 are consistent with the previous models in terms of support for the Egocentric Hypothesis and lack of support for the Heterogeneity Information hypothesis. The model finds partisan effects for demands of representation: the positively-signed interactions indicate that as a person moves toward the Republican end of the partisanship scale, they are more likely to demand representation for farmers, the military, the elderly, and small business, relative to the baseline group, unions. Conversely, there is no positive interactive effect for college students or the poor, as we would expect, since these groups are, like unions, more Democratic-oriented constituencies. In short, meaningful attitudes about these groups do influence attitudes, but they do not change the null results with respect to information about the constituency.

Finally, we examine the extent to which the two main effects vary across subjects, based on two important traits: political knowledge and partisanship. To see whether either of these traits has a conditioning effect on group identities or perceived district influence, we re-ran Model 1 with interactions between the two key covariates (group identities and perceived district influence) and either partisanship or political knowledge. With respect to partisanship, we find no interactive relationship. However, for political knowledge, we do observe a relationship between group identities and political knowledge. For individuals with the highest level of political knowledge, increasing one's closeness to a group from "not close" to "very close" produces an average change in the probability of a higher response choice of 29% (compared to 23% in the baseline models). For individuals with the lowest level of political knowledge, this average change

**Table 3.** Ordered Logit Models of Demand for Representation.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Closeness to group	1.248** (0.094)		1.181** (0.168)	1.079** (0.184)
Perceived group influence	0.312** (0.070)		0.319** (0.125)	0.374** (0.124)
Homogenous treatment		−0.254 (0.199)	−0.315 (0.358)	−0.314 (0.359)
Heterogeneous treatment		−0.203 (0.214)	−0.484 (0.377)	−0.563 (0.385)
Closeness × Homogenous			0.111 (0.214)	0.089 (0.215)
Closeness × Heterogeneous			0.098 (0.213)	0.075 (0.217)
Perceived influence × Homogenous			−0.083 (0.170)	−0.097 (0.163)
Perceived influence × Heterogeneous			0.074 (0.176)	0.108 (0.172)
Party identification				−0.266** (0.075)
Farm group				−0.187 (0.268)
Farm × PID				0.352** (0.090)
Military group				−0.252 (0.342)
Military × PID				0.591** (0.104)
Poverty group				1.661** (0.289)
Poverty × PID				−0.123 (0.081)
Student group				0.440 (0.377)
Student × PID				0.157 (0.109)
Elderly group				−0.056 (0.306)
Elderly × PID				0.273** (0.092)
Small business group				0.557** (0.271)
Small business × PID				0.415** (0.091)

Note.  $N = 1,200$  in all models. *Union* is baseline category. Cutpoints not reported.

# $p < .10$ . \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

drops to 18%. Results from these models can be found in Table A-4 of the Appendix.

We turn next to a second, complementary, experiment that changes the type of information provided to subjects, in order to focus on the Size Information Hypothesis.

## Experiment 2

The second study was conducted at a medium-sized, Southern university. Undergraduate students were recruited from an experimental subject pool housed in the university's psychology department; therefore, students were not typically political science majors and had lower levels of political knowledge (subjects correctly answered only 0.9 questions out of 4 correctly on a knowledge battery, compared to 2.2 questions in Experiment 1) and political interest (50% follow the news most or some of the time, compared to 84% in Experiment 1). Excluding incomplete responses, 225 subjects completed the experiment.<sup>13</sup>

This experiment differed from the first experiment in two important ways. First, rather than asking subjects directly about their demands for representation, we relied on a *revealed preference* approach in which subjects read a vignette about a representative's justifications for policy-relevant decisions, and then evaluated the representative's decision. As Grose et al. (2015) find, representatives' explanations for policy choices can shape citizens' reactions to policy choices they might otherwise disagree with. Asking about policy priorities in a way that is similarly contextualized may result in more external validity than the abstract question in Experiment 1.

Second, for this experiment, rather than asking subjects which groups they identified with, we took their shared trait—being college students—as a starting point for exploring scenarios in which legislators faced tradeoffs between higher education concerns and other considerations. While it is possible that a small number of non-traditional students would not view being a college student as a salient identity, recall that in Experiment 1, over 96% of subjects identified feeling very or somewhat close to the group “college students.”<sup>14</sup>

In each of three scenarios, subjects were asked to read a newspaper article discussing a controversy involving a fictional member of Congress' re-election campaign. In each case, the article described: (a) the actions taken by the MC that led to the disagreement; (b) how the MC defended the decision and how the challenger criticized the decision; (c) how the decision may have helped or harmed constituencies in the MC's district, including the higher education constituency.

To test the Size Information Hypothesis, we embedded the experimental condition in the final piece of information: in one version of the condition, the higher education constituency or the competing constituency was portrayed as being objectively large, while in the other, the higher education constituency was portrayed as smaller or less important. For example, in Scenario #1, the conditions stated that either (a) “20% of district residents,” or (b) “1% of district residents,” are “either students, employees, or alumni” of the school discussed in the article.

Several additional design choices are worth noting. First, to rule out the possibility that the null effects in Experiment 1

**Table 4.** Summary of Experimental Scenarios.

	Scenario 1	Scenario 2	Scenario 3
Incumbent decision	Voting for bill that would cut money for hypothetical university	Leading effort to pass financial reform bill that would cut student loan benefits	Accepting seat on Agriculture Committee in lieu of seat on Education Committee
Incumbent defense	Other groups in district will benefit from the bill's tax cut provisions	Bipartisanship is valuable; getting things done is better than demanding the perfect bill	Agriculture is a large sector in the district; opponent is pitting groups against each other
Constituency trait varied	Size of university, % of residents affiliated with the university	% of college graduates in the district who have federal student loans	How rural district is; how large agricultural sector in the district is
Condition 1	Largest university, 20% of residents	50% of graduates	75% rural; one of the largest agricultural sectors in the country
Condition 2	Fourth largest university, 1% of residents	10% of graduates	30% rural; agriculture is third largest sector in district

**Table 5.** Ordered Logit Models of Support for Incumbent's Arguments in Vignettes.

	Scenario 1	Scenario 2	Scenario 3
	University funding	Student loans	Committee work
High importance condition	0.02 (0.26)	-0.60 (0.25)*	-0.02 (0.26)
Political knowledge	0.06 (0.11)	-0.04 (0.11)	-0.08 (0.11)
Party id (7-point scale)	-0.04 (0.07)	-0.04 (0.07)	0.14 (0.07)#
Female	0.14 (0.26)	0.25 (0.25)	-0.09 (0.26)
White	-0.25 (0.36)	-0.25 (0.34)	-0.22 (0.36)

Note.  $N = 225$  in all models. Low importance condition is baseline category. Cutpoints not reported.

# $p < .10$ . \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

were due to experimental manipulations that were too subtle, we chose very large informational contrasts between the two conditions. Second, to provide heterogeneity in the scenarios, we varied the subject matter (e.g., education funding, student loans), the legislative actions being described (roll-call voting, legislative entrepreneurship, committee requests), and the competing considerations. No mention is made of the MC's partisanship and the scenarios avoid providing information that might lead to divergent partisan reactions. A summary of the three scenarios can be seen in Table 4.<sup>15</sup>

After reading each scenario, subjects were asked to evaluate the arguments made by the incumbent and challenger; these revealed preferences were the outcome variables in the analyses. Specifically, they were asked whose argument they found more convincing: the incumbent's argument, which defended less effort on behalf of higher education, or the challenger's, which advocated more effort on behalf of this constituency.<sup>16</sup> This question was asked on a four-point Likert scale.<sup>17</sup>

## Experiment 2 Results

Overall, participants were more sympathetic to the incumbents than we might have expected. Despite the incumbent taking the "anti-higher education" position in each scenario, subjects believed the incumbent made the stronger argument 60% of the time. The respondents were most hostile to the

incumbent in Scenario #2, dealing with student loans, and most sympathetic to the incumbent in Scenario #3, dealing with committee assignments.<sup>18</sup>

Table 5 presents a summary of the findings for the three scenarios. In each case, we use an ordered logit model to examine the impact of varying the information provided in the experimental conditions. If, as the Size Information Hypothesis contends, subjects are responsive to information about the size of educational interests in the constituency (which are also, we assume, the subjects' interests as college students), we would expect subjects in Condition 1 (i.e., larger higher education constituency) to be less understanding of the incumbent's decision in Scenarios 1 and 2. In Scenario 3, we would expect the opposite pattern: subjects in Condition 2 (i.e., smaller higher education constituency) should be less understanding of the incumbent's argument.

As it turns out, we find little evidence consistent with such responsiveness to information about the constituency. Only one of the differences exhibits even a marginal level of statistical significance: in Scenario 2, subjects were more understanding of the changes to student loans when the district was described as having few student loan recipients, compared to when the district was described as having many student loan recipients. In the scenarios about university funding (Scenario 1) and committee work (Scenario 3), there were no significant differences.<sup>19</sup>



One possible confounding factor is party identification: although we did not provide subjects with information about the MC's party, it is possible that some subjects inferred that information from other information in the vignettes. Only in Scenario 3 do we see any relationship between partisanship and reactions to the incumbents and challenger's arguments.: Republicans are more likely to side with the incumbent who chooses Agriculture Committee membership over the Education Committee. It is likely that this is due to associations between rural constituencies and more Republican subjects.<sup>20</sup>

Following this revealed preference-based approach, then, we once again find no evidence that information about constituencies shapes demands for representation. The evidence in both experiments suggests that self-interested considerations play a strong role in shaping demands for representation. Although it is not the only factor shaping such demands, we cannot conclude that information about constituencies mitigates those egocentric tendencies.

While other studies have found that people understand the incentives which legislators face in providing representation (e.g., Doherty, 2013), it is possible that citizens do not consider the idea that legislators must cater to many constituency groups simultaneously. However, an additional question that we asked in both studies casts doubt on this possibility. In each experiment, we asked subjects to rate how "challenging" several tasks that a representative must perform are: writing legislation, voting on legislation, communicating with constituents, and "balancing the needs of diverse groups within the district." Specifically, we asked:

*Thinking about some of the tasks that members of Congress must perform, which of the following tasks would you consider to be somewhat or very challenging, and which would you consider somewhat or very routine?*

Overall, subjects in both studies were attuned to the idea that balancing the needs of diverse constituencies is challenging. In Experiment 1, 53% of subjects believed this task to be "very challenging," compared to 27% for writing legislation and 11% for voting on legislation and communicating with constituents. In Experiment 2, 48% of respondents felt this would be very challenging, compared to 44% for writing legislation and 18% for voting on legislation and communicating with constituents. Moreover, in asking this question earlier in the survey, it is possible that we primed subjects to think about this aspect of representation, beyond what they might think of organically. If that is the case, the design should make it *easier* to find information effects, making the consistent null results even more meaningful.

## Discussion

In this paper, we explored a novel aspect of how people think about representation: perspectives on the extent to which a

representative should cater to specific groups in the district. Rather than view representation through the traditional lens of policy congruity, we focus on questions of prioritization, where a representative does not face binary policy decisions, but instead needs to allocate effort across many groups within the constituency. The two studies presented in this paper show that group identities guide demands for responsiveness. In large part, voters prefer a representative who caters to the groups matching their most salient social identities.

In the first experiment, we find that an individual's closeness to a group is a major determinant of whether the citizen believes a group merits representation. Individuals recognize the basic tenets of the representational relationship, and broadly believe that groups who are more numerous in a district warrant more attention from the representative, but when comparing the impact of the citizen's identity and the citizen's beliefs about the district's composition, they weigh the former more heavily than the latter. We find little evidence that these perspectives are moved by the provision of information about the constituency. In the second experiment, we also find only limited evidence that citizens' reactions to the arguments of a representative are susceptible to change based on one's understanding of the representative's constituency. Whether provided with information indicating that a group is important or unimportant in the district, respondents' reactions are indistinguishable in two of the three scenarios.

Our findings provide a complementary perspective to the literature that explores how citizens react to legislative voting. While past work has shown that voters may punish legislators for extremism (Canes-Wrone et al., 2002) or excessive partisanship (Carson et al., 2010), this paper suggests that legislators are also vulnerable to voters' sanctions based on their priorities, especially as those priorities relate to group interests. Although the analyses in this paper focused on voter attitudes, and not electoral accountability per se, future work should explore whether evidence of these preferences can be gleaned in observational data from campaigns, legislative behavior, and the outcomes of subsequent elections. While studying attention to group interests in campaigns and legislative action is not as straightforward as studying similar patterns in discrete policy realms (e.g., Sulkin, 2009), studying representational priorities is a perspective closer to both the "concentric circles" lens through which representatives see their constituencies (Fenno, 1978) and the "group interest" lens through which a plurality of voters view parties and candidates (Campbell et al., 1960).

Moreover, because of our focus on groups and identities within the constituency, our findings also have implications for debates on the design of constituencies. If voters prefer the type of representation that comes with more homogeneous constituencies, this may support arguments for larger legislative bodies (Frederick, 2009) or for more homogeneous constituencies by design (Brunell, 2008; Buchler, 2005).

Future work might consider whether and how social identities shape citizen responses to legislators' explanations of their policy decisions. Recent work has found that elite communication can influence how citizens react to policy positions and decisions (Broockman & Butler, 2017; Esaiasson et al., 2017), and has explored dimensions of communication such as the audience (Grose et al., 2015), the medium of communication (Hassell & Monson, 2016) and the simplicity of the argument being made (Amsalem, 2019). The findings in this paper suggest that social identities may influence receptiveness to arguments and that some or all of the above patterns may depend on whether social identities are primed due to the audience, the specific explanations given by elites, or the interplay of the two. Scholars might consider additional predictors of demands of representation at the individual level, including past experiences with representation (positive or negative), membership in different types of groups, and political contexts.

Finally, the findings in this paper speak to the value of exploring connections between the literature on constituency representation and the burgeoning literature on identity-driven voting behavior (Sides et al., 2018), affective polarization (Huddy et al., 2015; Iyengar et al., 2012) and other explorations of partisanship-as-social-identity (Green et al., 2002; Greene, 1999). Unlike in partisan competition, politically salient groups differ in the extent to which their mere mention implies a corresponding out-group. Moreover, the extent to which there is a relevant out-group may also depend on the place or the political context. Even if satisfying the egocentric preferences of citizens can be challenging for representatives, speaking to the priorities of groups within the constituency can offer a flavor of representation less tainted, if only somewhat, by political polarization.

### Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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### Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

### Notes

1. Considerations of trustee and delegate perspectives have been explored beyond legislators to bureaucrats (e.g., Goodsell, 2004; Kerwin, 1999), justices (e.g., McGuire & Stimson, 2004; Mishler & Sheehan, 1996) and even superdelegates

- to party conventions (e.g., Christenson & Heidemann, 2016; Herrera, 1994; Southwell, 2010).
2. Effort, like policy voting, might seem to be a zero-sum matter where effort expended on behalf of one group in the constituency is effort that cannot be spent on another group. But in practice, the fact that voters are electorally responsive to "credit claiming" (Grimmer et al., 2012) and to efforts in the form of bill sponsorship (Box-Steffensmeier et al., 2003; Sulkin et al., 2015) suggest that voters can be satisfied with a modicum of effort, without consideration of whether the representative's effort is sufficiently great. This allows for a mutually satisfactory outcome where representatives make many groups in the district feel represented.
3. Competing collective and individualistic concerns, and the relative weight given to each by the public, is a theme not limited to the literature on representation. In economic voting, for example, early evidence supported the primacy of sociotropic over egocentric voting (Kinder & Kiewiet, 1979, 1981; Lewis-Beck & Paldam, 2000). However, subsequent scholarship has noted contingencies (Anderson, 2007), with roles for prospective and egocentric voting (Gomez & Wilson, 2001; Goren, 1997; Lacy & Christenson, 2017). Other work in this vein has even called into question the direction of the relationship (Evans & Andersen, 2006; Evans & Pickup, 2010; Fiorina, 1981; Hansford & Gomez, 2015), a concern potentially mitigated by experimental approaches, such as the one in this paper.
4. An important caveat with student samples is that experience with the political system has been consistently found to strengthen partisan ties (e.g., Alwin & Krosnick, 1989; Converse, 1969; Markus, 1983; Shively, 1979), which means that their views on political constituencies may also evolve. While we cannot rule out the possibility that demands for representation operate differently in the broader population, we test for heterogeneous treatment effects (Druckman & Kam, 2011) on two covariates related to experience with politics: party identification and political information.
5. Table A-1 in the Appendix shows a comparison between the sample and the undergraduate body as a whole; the sample closely reflects the university in terms of race, gender, and age.
6. To minimize concerns over priming or question-order effects, these three batteries were spread throughout the survey and were separated by other question batteries.
7. We also considered whether there was underlying structure in responses to these seven prompts, which might allow us to analyze a multidimensional preference space (e.g., Ciuk et al., 2018). Factor analysis of the data, however, indicated only one clearly identified dimension, onto which all seven questions loaded, corresponding to a general propensity to be demanding of representatives. A second factor appeared to be ideological in nature (positively correlated with demands for the military, and negative correlated with demands for the poor and for unions), but this second factor had an eigenvalue (0.7) well below the traditional threshold for retention of factors.
8. It is also possible that demands for effort are shaped not merely by the "objective" presence of a group in the district, but by the efforts and demands of interest groups and activists in the district. Ultimately, however, we believe that the development of perceptions will not matter in terms of how perceptions map onto demands.

9. Given the perceptual errors people make regarding the composition of political parties generally (Ahler & Sood, 2018), it is noteworthy that while six of the seven group identities differ by political party, there are no partisan differences in the perceived presence of these groups in the districts. See Appendix Table A-3.
  10. Running our models with robust standard errors clustered on the group arrives at substantively similar results.
  11. Since some members of Congress are more successful in cultivating a personal vote (Cain et al., 1987), we considered the possibility that perceptions of group influence or demands for effort might be systematically different in districts where the incumbent had a stronger or weaker personal vote (operationalized as the incumbent's vote share minus the same-party presidential vote share in the prior presidential election). We found no evidence of such a pattern. We also accounted for the possibility that length of legislative service could shape either perceptions of group influence and/or demands for representation, especially since this was one piece of information provided across all conditions. We found no evidence that citizens in districts with longer-serving members perceived more group influences. And while we see some descriptive evidence that the linkage between perceptions and demands for effort is greater in districts with more senior legislators, the difference was not statistically significant.
  12. Unions are the baseline group in this model, and thus we do not include a group dummy for unions or an interaction between unions and party identification in the model.
  13. Table A-1 in the Appendix illustrates the similarity between the sample and the student body.
  14. Given the lack of variance in the closeness question in Experiment 1 with respect to college students, we did not ask it in Experiment 2.
  15. The full text of the scenarios can be found in the online appendix.
  16. In addition, we asked a vote intention question, asking whether the MC's decision would make them more, or less, likely to support the MC's re-election; findings from models using this as an alternative dependent variable can be found in Table A-2 of the Appendix.
  17. Results were the same when this scale was dichotomized.
  18. Even though the repetition of the three scenarios might lead subjects to react similarly each time, the data show that respondents were quite capable of reacting to each scenario independently. Only 22% of respondents evaluated all three incumbent arguments in the same direction.
  19. As in Experiment 1, we also found no evidence of an interaction between information and political knowledge. Results from these models can be found in Appendix Table A-5.
  20. We also tested whether partisanship might condition the relationship between the provision of information and responses. We found no evidence of this in any of the three scenarios (see Appendix Table A-5.)
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