Affluence and Influence? Examining the Extent of Non-Policy Responsiveness in American Cities

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Recent research on representation has considered the extent to which policymakers are more responsive to the preferences of some income groups over others. Bartels (2008), for example, shows that legislator ideology in the Senate is more closely associated to the ideological position of high-income constituents, relative to middle and low-income earners. Gilens (2012) offers a similar take, demonstrating that aggregate-level policy change follows preferences for change among the affluent, especially when those preferences diverge from those of lower income groups. Still others suggest that the rich do not "win" more often than the middle or the poor (e.g., Bashir 2015; Branham, Soroka, and Wlezien 2017; Enns 2015; Tausanovitch 2016), often noting that previous work "looks for difference" even though detecting group-based representation is made difficult by the strong association in preferences across groups (e.g., Soroka and Wlezien 2008).

Policy representation, however, is not the only way in which policymakers, or government more broadly, may prioritize one income group over others. And indeed, given the challenge of separating and distinguishing the policy preferences of high-income earners from low-income earners, it may be the case that examining policy output is a theoretically unimportant way to consider representation. Constituent service—a form of distributive politics—is another mode of representation. Here, we may expect to find that governments provide fewer services to poorer neighborhoods, for example, in part because poorer neighborhoods may be less likely—due to a lack of resources, for example—to officially request services (such as snow removal, or garbage pickup) from government. As indicated, examining representation from this angle may be more reasonable, as preferences—or more aptly, the propensity to lobby for government assistance—-may actually diverge across income groups. As a result, differences are likely to be much more discernible for government officials. To the extent that it exists, then, reliably detecting differential representation might be more likely.

My proposals asks: do city governments provide fewer services to the poor, relative to the rich? My hypotheses are that city governments will (1) be more likely to respond to and complete service requests as the median income of a neighborhood increases; and (2) conditional on response, respond to and complete service requests faster—as measured by the number of days between request and completion—as the median income of a neighborhood increases. I will test my expectations using 311 data from Boston, New York City, and San Francisco (to begin).

My question is important because it considers whether local governments are *equally* responsive to the needs of the public, or whether the distribution of government services is biased toward some citizens on the basis of income. Studies of representation overwhelming consider either representation with respect to either particular polices and broader ideological positions. But politicians and governments more generally interact with and influence the lives of citizens in more ways than simply through policy proposal and implementation. Moreover, citizens want more from government than just policy representation. Considering these other dimensions of representation will go a long way toward expanding our understanding of the relationship between the governed and the government in American politics.

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