

Essays on the Determinants of Responsiveness in Liberal Democracies

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Abstract

One of the greatest threats to the liberal democratic project today is growing dissatisfaction and anger with elites who are unable or unwilling to respond to the needs of society. In its purest conception, representative democracy works by allowing voters to select individuals who best represents their preferences, and who will respond to their needs in an ongoing fashion. Yet, responsiveness to voters is far from perfect and representatives face constant trade-offs when deciding whose preferences merit a response. In this thesis, I argue that the trade-off representatives face when deciding which subconstituencies to prioritize can be conceptualized as a battle between nature and nurture – self-interest and socialization. In the articles of the thesis, I examine the ways in which each of these two competing influences affect legislative responsiveness in liberal democracies.

Earlier research highlighted the potential that elites' backgrounds and social experiences could shape behavior in elected office, with a focus on social class particularly.^{1,2} However, elites' socialization was later dismissed as an explanation for legislative behavior with the view that the "social backgrounds of politicians" do not have a "significant influence on their attitudes, values and behaviour".³ Yet, given increasing stratification in wealth and education, socialization is identified again as a significant organizing factor that shapes perceptions of politics. The first two articles examine how representatives' socialization shapes the ways in which they respond to different subconstituencies by centering the roles of elites' gender, occupation and education.

On the other end of the spectrum in explanations for elite behavior is the idea that elites are rational actors, behaving in their own self-interest.⁴ Though self-interest is often highlighted in the context of pursuit of electoral victory,⁵ self-interested ambitions extend beyond the institutional guardrails put in place in modern democracies. In the second two articles of the thesis, I show how self-interest shapes the representative behavior of elites by focusing on the role of money and interest groups, as well as the ways in which youth enfranchisement affects representatives' legislative behavior in relation to younger voters and their policy priorities.

Each of the articles in the thesis combines computational methods with statistical inference used to test normative theories of elite behavior. The aim of the thesis is to deepen our understandings of the roles of socialization and self-interest in elite behavior on substantive grounds, but the articles also make a methodological contribution as well. In each of the articles, I rely on different forms of natural language processing (NLP) and machine learning techniques applied to text directly from elites. Legislative speeches, bills, and messages sent on social media are all combined with public opinion data in ways that have not been feasible until recently due to advances in computing power

¹Langton, K. (1969) *Political Socialization*. Oxford University Press, New York.

²Lipset, S. M. and Solari, A. (1967) *Elites in Latin America*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.

³Norris, P. and Lovenduski, J. (1995). *Political Recruitment: Gender, Race, and Class in the British Parliament*. Cambridge University Press, New York.

⁴Downs, A. et al. (1957). *An Economic Theory of Democracy*.

⁵Mayhew, D. R. (1974). Congressional Elections: The Case of the Vanishing Marginals. *Polity*, 6(3):295–317.

and accessibility to complex algorithms. In each of the articles, the methods that are employed are intentionally described in a way that will allow future researchers to build on this research, as well as to apply similar methods in alternative contexts.

In the first and second articles, attention is given to the role of elites' individual characteristics and their influence on responsiveness to different subconstituencies. The first article examines two aspects of elites' socialization: education and occupation, and looks at their individual and interactive effects on responsiveness to middle and working class voters. With a focus on MPs in the United Kingdom, article one finds that representatives educated in elite academic institutions such as Oxford and Cambridge behave fundamentally different than MPs educated elsewhere. The influence of educational socialization is then compared with that of occupational socialization, finding that occupation plays a greater role in how MPs respond to public priorities. This article further demonstrates that regardless of elites' socialization, the priorities of middle class voters are better represented than working class priorities in legislative speeches delivered in the House of Commons. Article one concludes by highlighting that while socialization affects responsiveness, it does not fully explain unequal responsiveness afforded to working class priorities.

Article two builds on the first article of the thesis by further considering the role of representatives' socialization on responsiveness to public priorities. However, article two expands the context to include representatives in the United States and the United Kingdom, with a focus on the socializing role of gender. In this article, I examine the extent to which representatives' gender affects responsiveness to public salience on several issues. I argue that women face much greater barriers to elected office, which requires them on-average to outperform their male colleagues. I validate the argument using over 350 repeated public opinion surveys from the two countries in order to map levels of issue prioritization, and a combination of social media data and machine learning performed on over four million tweets sent directly from representatives. The data ultimately allow for time-series analyses that take advantage of the shifting nature of issue salience around the time of the COVID-19 Pandemic. Findings confirm the theoretical expectations of descriptive representation; yet, our results go further by uncovering that women in parliament are not only more responsive to the women they represent, they are also more responsive to the issue priorities of men as well. We conclude with the claim that women representatives may provide greater substantive representation to voters, regardless of gender.

In the third article, the focus is shifted from socialization to self-interest, and I examine the ways in which traditional political actors – corporations, the media and non-governmental organizations – utilize new technologies to gain the attention of MPs in the UK House of Commons. I argue that representatives in the UK House of Commons look to multinational corporations for cues about which issues they should care about, and they specifically do so in the context of social media. The analysis therefore relies on millions of tweets sent on the social media platform Twitter in order to map the dynamic attention of different actors to ten policy issues. The data are then modeled to allow each of the actors to both influence and *be influenced* by each other. Findings reveal that shifts in the attention of multinational corporations predict subsequent shifts in the attention of Labour and Conservative Party MPs in the following three days. Findings also confirm previous results that show that the media plays a significant role in shaping the issues that are important to the various actors. The article concludes by raising the issue that adequate attention has not been given to corporations' newfound medium of social media which can be used to influence political discourse.

The fourth article (with Tevfik Murat Yildirm) attempts to reconcile the findings of the first three by examining what can be done to increase responsiveness. In this article, we adopt a quasi-experimental design to study the effects of enfranchising 16 and 17-year-olds on legislative responsiveness to younger voters' priorities. We argue that shifting the distribution of public pref-

erences in the direction of younger voters will incentivize self-interested representatives to give greater attention to issues typically associated with younger voters such as climate change and youth unemployment. The study focuses on Scotland where the voting age was lowered in 2013 ahead of the Scottish Independence Referendum. Using parliamentary speeches from several similar democracies, we constructed synthetic controls that allow us to estimate the effects of lowering the voting age. The findings show that indeed enfranchisement increased responsiveness, but only to a small degree and the effect was not sustained. We conclude that youth enfranchisement and the institutional incentives that representatives were given to respond do not go far enough to address a lack of substantive representation of young people.

Article abstracts & current word count:

In addition to the four articles outlined, the thesis will include a comprehensive introduction and conclusion which ties the work together and further situates it within the current literature. The expected word count for the introduction and conclusion is 10,000. The expected word count for the thesis in total is 50,000.

1 Social class and representation: The effects of socialization on legislators' responsiveness

It is an increasingly obvious conclusion that government is more responsive to higher class voters. Such findings are deeply problematic for conceptions of equal democratic representation, but we still have limited understanding of the various mechanisms driving unequal responsiveness. In this article, I argue that representatives' educational socialization affects how they respond to the working class. I apply this argument in the context of the United Kingdom's House of Commons by focusing on representatives' communication from 2019–2021. Using an original dataset comprised of weekly measures of working class issue priorities and legislators' attention to 14 salient issues derived from speeches in the House of Commons and their Twitter activity, I show that Oxbridge-educated representatives actively shift the issue agenda away from working class priorities. These results provide new evidence on the drivers of differential representation of the working class.

Word count: 8,805

2 Are Women Representatives More Responsive to Public Priorities?

There is a long list of normative benefits associated with increasing women's descriptive representation and past research has also shown empirically the substantive benefits women in legislatures provide. Yet, the extent to which women in parliament offer not only substantive benefits to the women they represent but also to constituents of all genders is unexplored and the focus of this article. Using nearly four million tweets sent by representatives in the United States and the United Kingdom, as well as 352 repeated public opinion surveys, we find that women representatives are consistently more responsive to shifts in the national electorate's issue priorities than their male counterparts in each country. We then turn focus to the issue priorities of men and women separately and demonstrate that voters of all genders pay a substantive representational price by relying on men to attend to their policy interests. These findings challenge the idea that women voters are the sole beneficiaries of an increased female presence in parliament and indicate that women may be better equipped to represent voters of all genders.

Word count: 8,668

3 Who sets the agenda? Legislators’ responsiveness to NGOs, corporations and the media

Who holds power in a representative democracy can be identified by determining who sets the political agenda. Yet, competing for political attention is no easy task as MPs are recipient to constant demands from all different directions. This article questions whose issue attention—multinational corporations, media organisations or NGOs—has the greatest influence on the agenda in the United Kingdom. I answer that question with a dynamic analysis of issue attention using a new dataset of over two million tweets. Attention to different issues is identified and measured using a temporal content analysis approach that relies on semi-supervised machine learning. Vector autoregression (VAR) models are then fitted to capture the extent to which a shift in issue attention from one actor (at $t - 1$) predicts a shift in another actor’s attention (at t). Findings reveal broad support for the agenda-setting influence of the media and corporations in British politics.

Word count: 10,091

4 Enfranchisement and Legislative Responsiveness to Younger Voters: Evidence from Scotland⁶

While the vast majority of countries around the world require that voters be 18 years of age to cast a ballot, advocates of extending the franchise to include individuals aged 16 and over point to greater engagement, and countries that have lowered the voting age to 16 have witnessed increased political participation compared to some older groups. While a handful of studies have looked at the effects of lowering the voting age to 16 on political knowledge or participation, we have almost no understanding of how youth enfranchisement influences legislative behavior. In this article, we adopt a quasi-experimental design and a synthetic control method to examine legislative responsiveness following 2014 legislation that lowered the minimum voting age from 18 to 16 in Scotland. Analysis of 1.8 million legislative speeches from the House of Commons and the Scottish Parliament over the course of two decades indicates that lowering the voting age had only marginal effects on legislative responsiveness to younger voters. We conclude that enfranchisement of 16- and 17 year-olds does not go far enough to address a lack of substantive representation of young people.

Word count: 8,223

⁶with Tevfik Murat Yildirim