

Affluence and Congruence: Unequal Representation Around the World^{*}

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Abstract

Do elected representatives reflect the preferences of the citizens they represent? Recent studies from the U.S. have found that elected representatives tend to be more responsive to the preferences of affluent citizens. But we still know little about how widespread this bias is and why it exists. We gathered every available survey of national legislators in the world and matched it with mass survey data. Using a variety of methods, we find that around the world, legislators' preferences are consistently more congruent with those of affluent citizens. This bias seems most pronounced on economic issues; in contrast, on cultural issues, the poor seem to be over-represented. How might we explain these biases? We find no comparative evidence for any of the explanations proposed by prior studies. In most electoral democracies, representatives are disproportionately more congruent with the rich —but we still do not know why.

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Do elected representatives reflect the preferences of citizens? This question is central to understanding how representative democracy works—and under what circumstances it works better. It also informs much broader debates about inequality and democracy. If some citizens' preferences are disproportionately better represented, we may have to rethink our assumptions about government redistribution or the impact of inequality on democratic transitions (e.g., [Acemoglu and Robinson 2006](#); [Meltzer and Richard 1981](#); [Scheve and Stasavage 2017](#)).

And yet, the answer to this question remains elusive. Studies of U.S. politics have uncovered remarkable inequalities in representation: policymakers appear to be much more responsive to the preferences of the rich than they are to those of the poor or the middle-class (e.g., [Bartels 2008](#); [Butler 2014](#); [Gilens 2012](#)). Meanwhile, comparative scholars of representation have focused primarily on the overall congruence between citizens and their representatives (e.g., [Converse and Pierce 1986](#); [Esaiasson and Wlezien 2017](#); [Miller et al. 1996](#); [Soroka and Wlezien 2010](#)), and how differences across countries—especially electoral institutions—condition that congruence ([Bernauer et al. 2015](#); [Blais and Bodet 2006](#); [Ferland 2016](#); [Golder and Stramski 2010](#); [Huber and Powell 1994](#); [Lupu et al. 2017](#); [Powell 2006, 2009, 2013](#)). But we still know little about the extent to which modern electoral democracies around the world achieve the ideal by which ordinary citizens determine government policy by electing representatives.

This paper asks whether the affluence bias documented in the U.S. is the exception or the norm. There are good reasons to doubt that the U.S. is exceptional. Recent studies have found similar biases both in individual countries and across Europe ([Bernauer et al. 2015](#); [Giger et al. 2012](#); [Lupu and Warner 2017](#); [Rosset 2013](#); [Rosset et al. 2013](#); [Schakel and Hakhverdian Forthcoming](#)). Still, these studies analyze small samples limited to recent years. There may also be good reasons to think that U.S. democracy is exceptionally unequal. Most scholars studying unequal representation there attribute it to the uniquely outsized influence of money in American politics ([Bartels 2008](#); [Flavin 2014](#); [Gilens 2012](#)). After all, U.S. election campaigns are the most expensive in the world. If money biases the policymaking process in favor of the rich, then we could well find far less inequality in other countries, where the role of money in politics is more circumscribed.

Money may not be the only reason that democratic representation is unequal (see [Erikson 2015](#)). Elected representatives may weigh the opinions of the affluent more heavily because they are more likely to vote in future elections. Alternatively, the rich may simply know more about politics than the poor, making their preferences more crystallized and easier to communicate to their representatives. Uninformed voters may also find it harder to monitor their representatives' behavior. Finally, we might expect representation to be more unequal in countries that are less developed or more unequal economically. So far, we only have suggestive evidence about which of these mechanisms drive unequal representation in the U.S. But are other electoral democracies as unequal? And if so, are they unequal for the same reasons?

In this paper, we take these questions to the broadest possible dataset of comparative mass-elite data. We gathered every publicly available survey of elected national representatives and matched each one to a nationally representative mass survey. Our sample consists of 92,000 elite observations and 3.9 million citizen observations spread across 565 country-years, 52 individual countries, and 33 years. This represents more than a tenfold increase in country-years over prior studies, and much wider geographic and temporal coverage.

We use multiple approaches that calculate the left-right distances between mass respondents at different positions in the distribution of wealth and elected representatives. But ours is the first paper in this field to move beyond left-right placement, a metric with serious limitations. We use finer-grained issue positions from Latin America to distinguish congruence on economic and cultural issues, finding important differences between these dimensions. Finally, we leverage variation over space and time to test existing explanations for affluence bias.

We consistently find that mass-elite congruence is significantly and substantially higher for the rich than it is for the poor. The affluence bias we see in the U.S. is widespread. Why are elected representatives typically more congruent with the affluent? We find no evidence that the explanation has to do with campaign financing, differential turnout, political knowledge, or electoral rules; economic conditions seem to matter, but marginally. In most electoral democracies, representatives are disproportionately more congruent with the rich—but we still do not know why.

Democracy or Plutocracy?

Conventional theories of representative democracy view their guiding ideal as a system of “continuing responsiveness of the government to the preferences of its citizens, considered as political equals” (Dahl 1971: 1; Pitkin see also 1967). Ordinary people have policy preferences, they choose leaders who will act upon those preferences, and the policy preferred by the majority becomes law. Scholars have been debating just how responsive democratic governments really are (e.g., Burstein 2003, 2014; Canes-Wrone and Shotts 2007; Miller et al. 1996; Page and Shapiro 1983; Shapiro 2011; Stimson et al. 1995), but it seems clear that democracies sometimes—and perhaps quite regularly—fail to achieve this ideal. The particular failure that has concerned recent scholars—and which concerns us in this paper—focuses on inequalities in the link among mass preferences, elite positions, and policy outcomes (Canes-Wrone 2015; Enns and Wlezien 2011; Erikson 2015). In the U.S. (Bartels 2008; Ellis 2013; Flavin 2014; Gilens 2005, 2012; Gilens and Page 2014; Jacobs and Page 2005; Rhodes and Schaffner 2017; Rigby and Wright 2013) and other democracies (Bernauer et al. 2015; Giger et al. 2012; Lupu and Warner 2017; Rosset 2013; Rosset et al. 2013; Schakel and Hakhverdian Forthcoming), elected representatives appear to better represent the preferences of affluent citizens than those of less privileged citizens.¹

Much of this research has been concerned with government responsiveness: whether governments adopt the policies preferred by citizens (see, e.g., Manin et al. 1999; Stimson et al. 1995). Broader empirical research on representation typically encompasses both responsiveness and congruence, which Soroka and Wlezien (2010) call *opinion representation*: the degree to which representatives and their constituents agree on the issues (see Achen 1978).²

Congruence is itself an important topic for studies of representation. Normatively, mass-elite congruence means that elected representatives are “not found persistently

¹ There is some debate among scholars of U.S. politics about the extent of this bias (e.g., Branham et al. 2017; Enns 2015; Soroka and Wlezien 2008, 2010; Wlezien and Soroka 2011), although it is widely acknowledged to exist.

² For instance, a recent special issue on “Advances in the Study of Democratic Responsiveness” includes studies of both responsiveness and congruence (see Esaiasson and Wlezien 2017).

at odds with the wishes of the represented” (Pitkin 1967: 210), an important element of representation. Moreover, in the theoretical framework developed by Miller and Stokes (1963), congruence is a necessary step on the path to responsiveness. Theorists have also highlighted the normative value of congruence with regard to descriptive representation (e.g., Mansbridge 1999). A large body of research, focusing mostly on Western Europe, has developed around the question of how congruent representatives are with mass preferences overall (e.g., Converse and Pierce 1986; Miller et al. 1996).

Empirically, congruence also seems to affect the public’s satisfaction with democratic institutions (Arnesen and Peters Forthcoming; Mayne and Hakhverdian 2017; Wlezien 2017). While we cannot infer every behavior from representatives’ stated policy preferences, we know that they regularly act upon those preferences, particularly in the important agenda-setting phase of the legislative process (e.g., Carnes and Lupu 2015; Schwindt-Bayer 2006). Although studying mass-elite congruence is a departure from the focus of U.S. studies on responsiveness, we think it is both a reasonable move and an important object of study.³

In this paper, we focus on what some scholars call *collective representation*. We ask whether representative bodies collectively reflect the preferences of the electorate. A long tradition in political theory going back to Edmund Burke and John Stuart Mill emphasizes collective representation (see Pitkin 1967; Weissberg 1978). Scholars of representation in the U.S. sometimes focus instead on *dyadic representation*, the extent to which politicians represent their districts. In Western Europe, studies often measure the congruence between voter preferences and the policy positions of their preferred party (e.g., Bernauer et al. 2015; Miller et al. 1996). Since we are interested in cross-country comparisons, it makes practical sense to study collective representation because some political systems (e.g., closed-list PR) produce little connection between representatives and their district constituents, and in other systems (e.g., open-list PR and many presidential systems) political parties are all but irrelevant. For this reason, broadly comparative empirical work on congruence indeed tends to measure collective representation (e.g., Golder and Stramski 2010; Powell 2009).

³ As we note below, the data necessary for a comparative analysis of responsiveness across many countries are also unavailable.

Why might elected representatives unequally represent the preferences of the more affluent? Scholars of U.S. politics tend to blame the outsize influence of campaign contributions (Bartels 2008; Flavin 2014; Gilens 2012). Affluent voters are the source of most of the money involved in political campaigns (Brady et al. 1995; Gilens 2012), so it seems highly plausible that they use their wealth to influence the selection of policymakers. Although we know far less about the role of money in politics outside the U.S. (Scarrow 2007), campaign contributions may similarly bias representation in other democracies.

Another explanation for unequal representation may be that poor people are less likely to vote than the rich (e.g., Erikson 2015; Lijphart 1997; Schlozman et al. 2012). If elected representatives care about reelection, they may discount the preferences of citizens who are unlikely to turn out to vote. U.S. studies find little evidence that disproportionate turnout accounts for the affluence bias in representation (Bartels 2008; Gilens 2012), although that evidence is mostly indirect. Although disproportionate turnout among the rich is less common in developing countries (Gallego 2015; Kasara and Suryanarayan 2015), it seems at least plausible that elected representative discount the preferences of the poor in contexts where they participate less.

Alternatively, elected representatives may discount the preferences of the poor if their views are less strongly held or less coherent (Erikson 2015). If the poor are less well-educated, pay less attention to politics, and generally know less about political issues, the views they express in surveys may be less crystallized than they appear (e.g., Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). Elected representatives may discount those views, giving greater credence to the more informed preferences of the affluent. They may assume that less-informed voters will be less likely to hold them to account on specific policy outcomes, or less-informed voters may send them mixed signals across issue areas. Representatives may be catering to the preferences of the most informed citizens, which also happen to be the most affluent.

Looking across countries, institutions may also matter. Electoral systems with proportional representation are thought to promote more mass-elite congruence than majoritarian systems (Budge and McDonald 2007; Ezrow 2007; Huber and Powell 1994; McDonald and Budge 2005; Powell 2006, 2009; Powell and Vanberg 2000), although

some studies challenge that finding (Blais and Bodet 2006; Ferland 2016; Golder and Lloyd 2014; Lupu et al. 2017). The logic is that proportional systems ensure that a larger swath of the electorate is represented in the legislature, which might also reduce biases toward the rich (see Bernauer et al. 2015).

Finally, economic conditions may affect representation. Economic development may be associated with higher levels of education, greater opportunities for class-based mobilization, and declining opportunities for clientelism—all of which might increase the policy demands of the poor (Luna and Zechmeister 2005). On the other hand, where economic resources are distributed unequally, the rich may be able to exert more disproportionate influence on policymakers (Rosset et al. 2013).

In this paper, we first examine whether representative democracies besides the U.S. exhibit similar patterns of political inequality. Put differently, we take up the question of whether the affluence bias in U.S. democracy is the exception or the rule. We then leverage cross-national variation in electoral rules, campaign finance regulation, compulsory voting, and economic conditions, as well as individual variation in political knowledge, to adjudicate among these explanations for unequal representation. If U.S. democracy is not exceptional, we should uncover a similar affluence bias in representation in other contemporary democracies. And if existing explanations are behind that bias, we should find that representation is more unequal where voting is not mandatory (suggesting that the poor participate less), where campaign finance is less regulated, where legislative seats are allocated disproportionately, where the poor are less politically informed, and where economies are more developed and more equal.

Measuring Representation Around the World

In an ideal world, we would study representation by comparing the preferences of citizens on every possible policy proposal with actual policy outcomes. The study that comes closest to this ideal is Gilens (2012), who compares the preferences of citizens on every policy proposal that publicly available surveys asked them to consider and whether or not the policy was approved (see Barabas 2016). Others compare the

left-right placement of mass survey respondents with the positions of their elected representatives as revealed by their legislative votes (Bartels 2008; Ellis 2013; Flavin 2014). Outside the U.S., however, public opinion polls are far less frequent or detailed, and far more difficult for researchers to obtain. Legislative roll-call votes are also frequently unreported, and in parliamentary systems most of the legislative process has taken place by the time a bill comes up for a vote. In order to study representation across a broad set of country contexts, we have to instead focus on opinion representation.

In order to compare mass and elite preferences, we first gathered information on the left-right self-placements of elected representatives. We collected all the publicly available surveys of national representatives or candidates from cross-national and national data repositories, as well as a general literature search.⁴ We included an elite survey in our dataset if the respondents were elected national legislators —or, in the case of candidate surveys, the survey allows us to establish whether the respondent was elected —and where the full population of national legislators were sampled.⁵ Finally, our dataset only includes surveys that asked representatives to place themselves on a scale with “left” and “right” anchors (or close variants thereof, such as “liberal” and “conservative”).⁶ Our final elite sample includes 92,000 unique legislator-year observations.

For each elite sample meeting our criteria, we also gathered data on contemporaneous mass preferences. We began by identifying the legislative term that each elite survey sampled, information that was either available in the data or could be coded from other sources.⁷ We then matched these elite surveys with mass surveys that included both left-right self-placement and some measure of affluence from any of the years during the elite respondents’ term. For instance, an MP surveyed in 2004 for a 2003-2005 term would be matched to mass survey respondents from 2003, 2004,

⁴ Further information about sources, variables, and coding decisions are available in the online appendix.

⁵ Although our dataset includes Members of the European Parliament (who are national representatives), we do not include them in our analysis.

⁶ The online appendix discusses how we address the issues of representativeness and multiple elite surveys for the same period.

⁷ In two cases, information about the legislative term was not available so we coded the year the legislator was surveyed and matched the response to mass samples only in that year.

or 2005. Since mass data are more widely available, we chose mass surveys more selectively, according to their comparability to elite surveys for the same country-year (see online appendix for details). The resulting dataset includes nearly 3.9 million unique citizen-year observations.

To measure affluence, we develop a rank-ordering of indicators, which privileges measuring wealth over household income and occupational status.⁸ Where we have data on ownership of durable goods (e.g., a car or refrigerator), we use multiple correspondence analysis to generate a factored index of affluence (see [Filmer and Pritchett 2001](#)). Where these data are not available, we use household income or occupation, in that order. We then generate quintiles from the material wealth and income variables, and we recode occupational data into general categories (e.g., “white-collar professional”).⁹

Our final sample includes 565 country-years, covering 52 countries and 33 years.¹⁰ Although our dataset represents all of the publicly available data on mass and elite preferences, most of the data come from Europe and Latin America. As a result, we cannot claim to have a representative sample of the world’s democracies. But only additional data gathering will allow us to extend the analysis beyond these regions.¹¹

Across such a large number of surveys, of course, the question about left-right self-placement varies. Most importantly, different studies offer respondents different response scales, typically ranging from 5 to 11 points. To make these responses comparable, we rescale them to range from -1 to 1. Since the scales themselves may affect responses, our analyses control for the scale used in each mass and elite survey and

⁸ We prefer measures of wealth because (1) nonresponse to questions about household income is typically high (in some country-years nearly 40%), and (2) occupational structures are difficult to compare across countries.

⁹ Of the 565 observations in our data, 379 use asset wealth as a measure of affluence, 172 use household income, and 14 use occupation. Our main results are consistent if we focus only on the cases where we can measure affluence using wealth (see online appendix).

¹⁰ The countries are listed in [Figure 2](#). The years are 1967-2015, although most of the data begin in the 1990s.

¹¹ The U.S. is not in our dataset because no publicly available survey of Members of Congress has been conducted since [Miller and Stokes \(1963\)](#)—and their study did not ask a left-right item. We draw on a recent survey of parliamentarians in several African countries below, but neither these data nor the mass surveys conducted by Afrobarometer include a left-right item.

for the differences between the scales provided to elite and mass respondents in each country-year.¹²

Measuring Congruence

We analyze congruence in two ways. Our preferred method is to generate dyads between each mass respondent and each elite respondent in a particular country-year (see [Boas and Smith Forthcoming](#)). We measure congruence as the left-right distance between each citizen-legislator pair and then regress that distance on the citizen’s level of affluence.¹³ Our models also include citizen and legislator random effects to account for dyadic dependence ([Aronow et al. 2015](#)). Since our dependent variable is a measure of distance, larger values indicate less congruence.

This method allows us to characterize the complete set of relationships between citizen preferences and legislator positions, and to control for individual-level covariates. In the language of [Golder and Stramski \(2010\)](#), this dyadic approach measures many-to-many congruence, or collective representation. Differences in the mean positions of voters and legislators affect the measure of distance, but so do differences in the variances of the distributions.¹⁴

Using this dyadic approach increases our sample to 99 million observations. The size of this dataset and the effort to estimate 4 million legislator and citizen random effects run up against computational constraints.¹⁵ Instead, we compute two simplified

¹² Our data do not contain the anchoring questions required for joint rescaling methods, so we cannot rule out measurement problems from variation in how individuals interpret left-right scales. However, below we show that our results are consistent among respondents with high levels of political knowledge.

¹³ Put formally, our ideal model is $y_{d(c,\ell)} \sim \mathcal{N}(\alpha + \mathbf{x}_{d(c,\ell)}^T \boldsymbol{\beta} + \gamma_c + \delta_\ell, \sigma^2)$, where $\gamma_c \sim \mathcal{N}(0, \sigma_c^2)$ and $\delta_\ell \sim \mathcal{N}(0, \sigma_\ell^2)$. Here y is distance on the left-right dimension; \mathbf{x} is a vector of indicator variables for each affluence quintile; $d(c, \ell)$ refers to the citizen- c , legislator- ℓ dyad; and the γ_c and δ_ℓ are random effects for citizens $c \in \mathcal{C}$ and legislators $\ell \in \mathcal{L}$. The coefficients of interest are $\boldsymbol{\beta}$.

¹⁴ The alternative most widely used in prior studies measures only differences in mean positions. Comparing the distances between poor/rich citizen mean positions and mean legislator positions, our results are very similar (see online appendix). Still, we prefer our measurement approaches because they also account for differences in the variances of the mass and elite distributions.

¹⁵ We attempted to estimate these models on our university’s high-performance computers, but they failed to converge within the maximum runtime of two weeks.

models. First, we drop the legislator and citizen random effects and estimate the model using iterative weighted least squares (IWLS), which reads in “chunks” of data and updates a running coefficient estimate until all the data are used. Although dropping random effects underestimates uncertainty, our point estimates are unaffected. As an alternative, we bootstrap estimates by taking 250 random samples of 50,000 observations, fitting our preferred model with random effects and computing quantiles from the 250 sets of coefficient estimates. Bootstrapping allows us to recover more accurate measures of uncertainty, but could introduce bias since our observations are dyads and, therefore, not independent across resamples. Both methods have disadvantages, but to the extent that they yield similar estimates, we should be confident that we have closely approximated what computing the full model would have returned.

Our second method for measuring congruence characterizes the distance between citizens’ and legislators’ preference distributions in each country-year. We compute the Earth Mover’s Distance (EMD), a flexible measure that calculates the amount we would have to move probability mass from one distribution to transform it into the other distribution. The EMD has recently been shown to better capture similarity between distributions than alternative measures of congruence (Lupu et al. 2017). Higher values of the EMD indicate more distance between the two distributions, and so less similarity and lower congruence. The aggregate analysis using EMD collapses some of the information in our data, but has the advantage of being much more tractable computationally.

To estimate the effect of affluence on congruence, we separately compute the EMD between legislators and each affluence quintile. We then simply regress these congruence measures on indicators for each affluence group, using the rich as the baseline.¹⁶ We include fixed effects for country, year, and the original scale of the left-right item. We drop country-years for which the elite sample included fewer than 30 legislator to ensure that our results are not driven by small samples.¹⁷

¹⁶ Put formally, we estimate $y_{i,t} \sim \mathcal{N}(\alpha + \mathbf{x}_{i,t}^T \boldsymbol{\beta} + \mathbf{u}_{i,t}^T \boldsymbol{\theta}, \sigma^2)$, where y is the EMD, \mathbf{x} is a vector of indicator variables for each affluence quintile, \mathbf{u} are indicators for the fixed effects $\boldsymbol{\theta}$, countries are indexed by $i \in \mathcal{I}$, years are indexed by $t \in \mathcal{T}$, α is the intercept and $\boldsymbol{\beta}$ are the estimates of interest.

¹⁷ Our results are consistent if we set this threshold either lower or higher, or if we interact the affluence indicators with the indicator for question scale (see online appendix).

Is There An Affluence Bias?

Do these data reveal an affluence bias in representation around the world? Figure 1 shows the results of all three of our estimation methods. For each quintile of mass respondents, the leftmost estimates come from the dyadic model estimated using IWLS (hence the very tight confidence intervals), the middle estimates are 250 bootstrap replicates from the dyadic data, and the rightmost estimates come from models using the EMD.

These results imply that the distribution of less affluent citizens' left-right preferences are consistently further away from elected representatives' than those of the most affluent. Regardless of how we estimate these relationships, the evidence of an affluence bias is consistent. Moreover, at about 0.03, this difference is substantively meaningful. Since the mean EMD among the rich is 0.18, this effect size suggests that on average, less affluent voters can expect elected representatives' positions to be about 16 percent further from theirs than can more affluent voters. Our cross-national findings are not as stark as those of U.S. scholars, who find that elected officials respond *only* to the preferences of the very affluent; our findings show that the top half of the distribution is overrepresented. Still, some unequal representation appears to be the norm across democracies.

Among scholars of U.S. politics, there is some debate about whether representation should be evaluated using the full set of available issues or the subset on which rich and poor citizens disagree (see [Gilens 2009](#); [Soroka and Wlezien 2008](#)). As in the U.S., our data similarly reveal a more pronounced affluence bias when the preferences of the rich and poor diverge. We reestimated our models on the 25 percent of country-years in which the absolute difference in mean left-right preferences between the least and most affluent citizens was greatest. The overall patterns of affluence bias are the same (see online appendix), but twice as large. When the poor and rich disagree, the poor can expect to be 31 percent further away from their representatives than are the rich.

Given the wide geographic and temporal coverage of our dataset, an obvious question is whether our finding of an on-average affluence bias is actually more circumscribed. Figure 2 shows the degree of affluence bias that we see in each country-

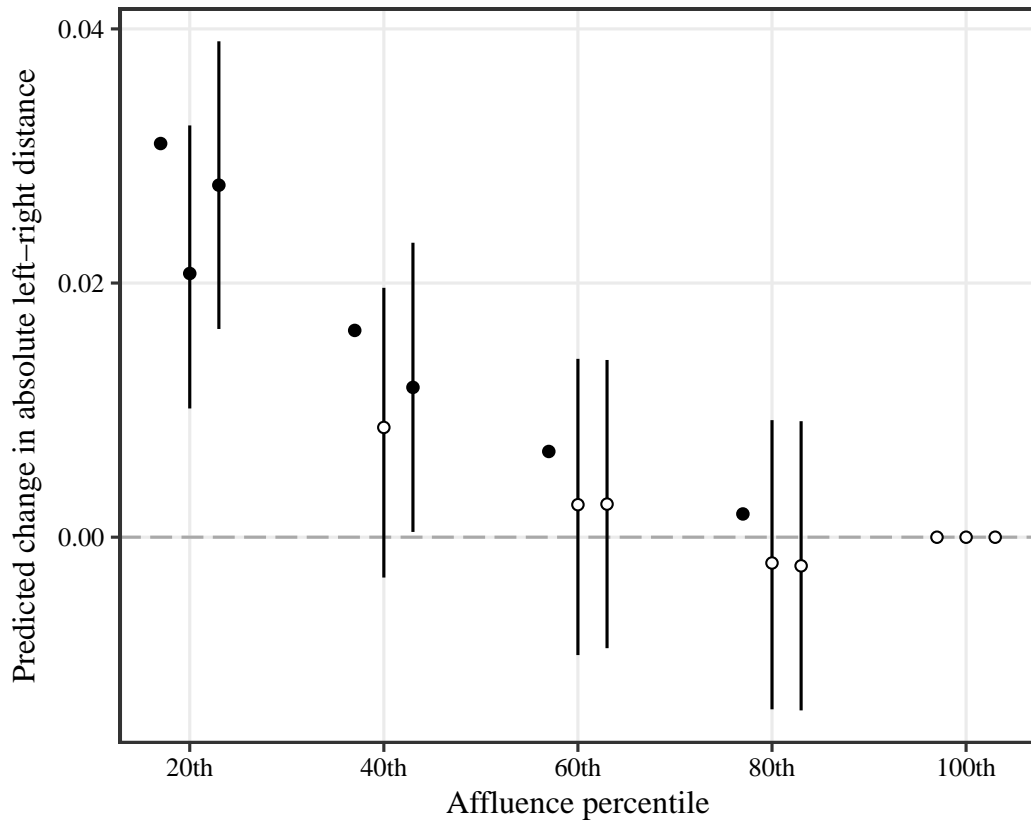


Figure 1: Affluence bias around the world. Values represent the relationship between affluence and absolute left-right distance to legislators, with the richest quintile as the baseline. Dots indicate point estimates with lines for 95% confidence intervals. For each quintile, dots on the left are from the dyadic model without random effects, estimated using IWLS, dots in the middle are mean estimates from 250 bootstrap replicates from the dyadic data, and dots on the right are from models using the EMD. See the online appendix for complete regression results.

year in our dataset (since 1995). Although there is variation over time and space, we see no obvious regional or temporal patterns. Cases of affluence bias (in shades of red) do not seem especially prevalent in more recent years nor limited to specific parts of the world, though certain countries do seem particularly biased.¹⁸ Figure 2 also demonstrates the substantial noise in our data, which is unsurprising for survey data. This reinforces the benefit of our large dataset over the much smaller datasets used in recent comparative work.

These results imply that there is something systematic about many contemporary electoral democracies that leads elected representatives to reflect more closely the preferences of affluent citizens, a far cry from the ideal of democratic representation. At least in terms of left-right positions, the affluence bias documented in the U.S. seems to be the rule, not an exception.

Beyond Left and Right

Relying on left-right positions alone comes with many limitations. It is well-known that these survey-based measures rely on conceptions of left and right that can vary across contexts and individuals (Harbers et al. 2012; Zechmeister 2006). We also know that respondents with less formal education may find it more difficult to place themselves on the left-right scale, particularly in developing contexts (Zechmeister and Corral 2013). Moreover, it is well-known that individual survey items are far noisier measures of preferences than are indexes composed of multiple measures (Ansolabehere et al. 2008). In order to construct the largest possible comparative dataset, our main analysis relies on left-right placements, but doing so forces us to use a noisy and imperfect measure.

Fortunately, in a subset of our broader sample, we have finer-grained measures of preferences. The AmericasBarometer and Parliamentary Elites in Latin America (PELA) surveys have harmonized the wordings and scales of a series of issue questions

¹⁸ We test these possibilities more systematically in the online appendix, but find no statistically significant conditioning effect of region or time on affluence bias.

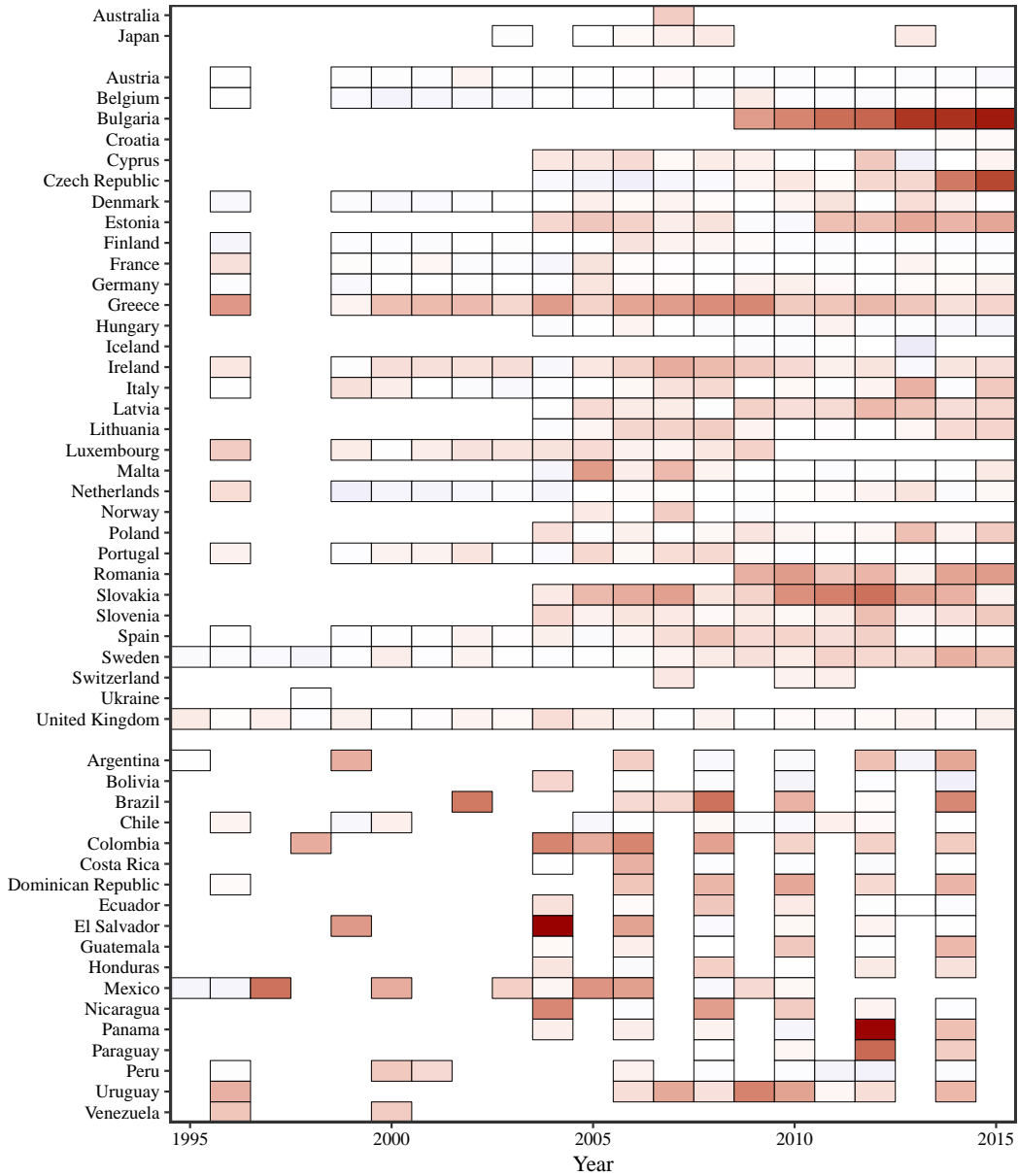


Figure 2: Affluence bias around the world. Each cell is shaded according to the size of the affluence effect. Darker red indicates greater bias in favor of the affluent, while darker blue indicates bias in favor of the less affluent. For clarity, observations before 1995 are not plotted.

since 2010,¹⁹ yielding high-quality data on mass-elite congruence in greater detail than is afforded elsewhere. We focus on three issue-areas. First, to fix a baseline for comparison, we use the same 11-point left-right question we used in our main analysis. Second, we generate a factored index of economic preferences using four questions that asked respondents to rate their agreement (on a 7-point scale) with statements about the role of the state in ownership of natural resources, ensuring citizens' wellbeing, creating jobs, and providing healthcare. Since the question wordings are nearly identical, we factor citizens and elites within the same country-year together. Finally, we examine preferences on cultural issues using a question that asked respondents how strongly they approve or disapprove (on an 11-point scale) of same-sex couples' right to marry. As above, we rescale the issue-areas to the range $[-1,1]$, where lower values indicate the left, support for state intervention in the economy, and support for same-sex marriage. Since this dataset is orders of magnitude smaller than our complete cross-national dataset, we now simply use our preferred modeling strategy (mass-legislator dyads with citizen and legislator random effects).

Figure 3 reports the results from these models. As in the broader dataset, we find a similar affluence bias when we use left-right positions in Latin America. When we focus specifically on economic preferences, we again find a very similar affluence bias. As with the left-right, there appears to be a graduated relationship between affluence and congruence: although less precisely estimated, the wealthier quintiles seem closer to the legislature. These estimates suggest that congruence increases somewhat smoothly with affluence, though the data may be too noisy to estimate this relationship precisely. The substantive effects are somewhat smaller than in our global analysis: in left-right terms, the wealthiest voters can expect to be about 9 percent closer to legislators than can the poorest, and on economic issues about 7 percent closer.

However, we find the precise opposite with respect to cultural issues: the poor appear to be substantially *over*represented relative to the affluent on the issue of

¹⁹ Our dataset includes the 2010, 2012, and 2014 AmericasBarometer mass surveys and the PELA survey from the matching legislative term. We do not have information on economic preferences in Panama because the economic questions were not asked in the AmericasBarometer surveys there. We also do not have data on Venezuela because PELA has not conducted legislator surveys there during this period.

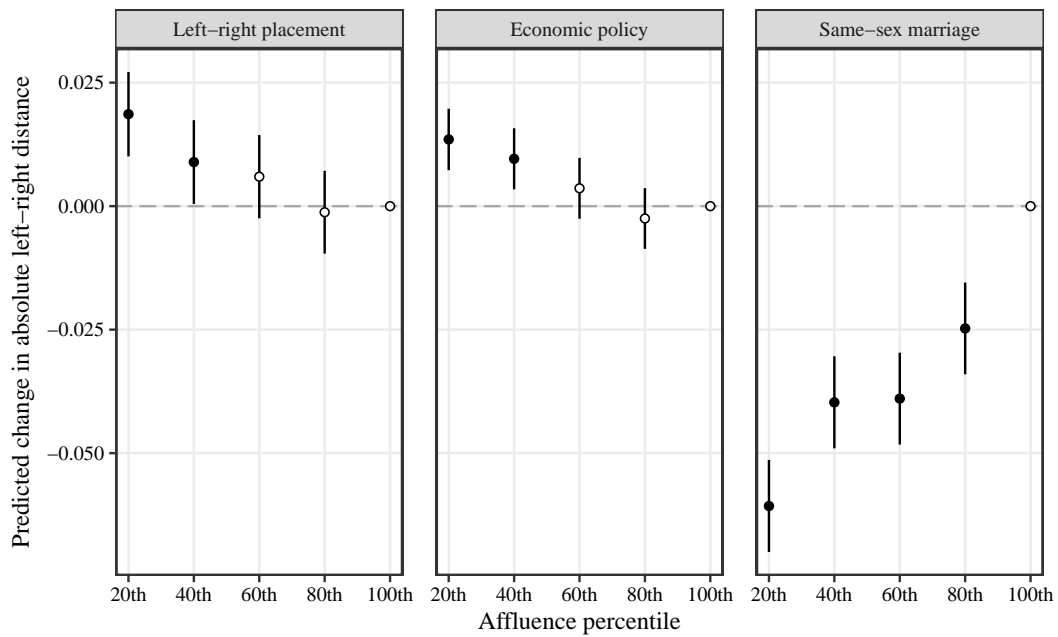


Figure 3: Affluence bias by issue-area in Latin America. Dots represent estimates of the relationship between mass affluence quintile and congruence on left-right placement, economic policy, and same-sex marriage. The baseline is the most affluent quintile. Lines indicate 95% confidence intervals. See the online appendix for complete regression results.

same-sex marriage—37 percent closer to legislators’ preferences than the richest. Unfortunately, the LAPOP-PELA data only provide us with this one item capturing the cultural dimension, so we cannot generalize too far. However, as we note below, we find similar results with two other datasets. On both economic and cultural issues, we find evidence of political inequality, but on cultural issues it appears to favor the preferences of the poor.

Our discussion so far has focused on absolute biases, but we may also want to know the direction of the bias. The lefthand panel in Figure 4 plots the mean preferences of the poorest and richest mass quintiles along with the mean preference of legislators on economic issues by country.²⁰ For the sake of comparability, we normalize the average poor preference to zero for each country. Quite intuitively, in nearly every country in the region, the rich on average prefer less state intervention in the economy than do the poor. The exceptions are Argentina and Honduras, where the difference between rich and poor is negligible. In most countries, legislators prefer even less state intervention in the economy than does the richest quintile, suggesting that their preferences are probably closer to the very affluent. Their rightward bias is particularly extreme in cases like Chile and Paraguay. In one case, Ecuador, legislators are in between the rich and the poor, but substantially closer to the rich. In only one case, Bolivia, do legislators on average prefer less state intervention in the economy than even the poor. But during the time-period for which we have data, Bolivia was governed by a populist leftist president who had written a new constitution that built in extraordinary electoral advantages for his leftist ruling party (Levitsky and Loxton 2013). So the unusual leftward bias in that case is unsurprising; indeed, had we had data on Venezuela for the same time period, we would have expected a similar pattern.

The righthand panel in Figure 4 plots mean preferences on same-sex marriage. Unlike on economic issues, more affluent citizens in every country in the region are more liberal when it comes to this cultural issue. Legislators, on the other hand, are either less supportive of same-sex marriage than the poor or somewhere between the poor and the rich on this issue. Nearly a mirror image of the economic issues, in all but two countries, legislators’ preferences are closer to those of the poor than to those of the

²⁰ These means pool across the matched samples we have for each country.

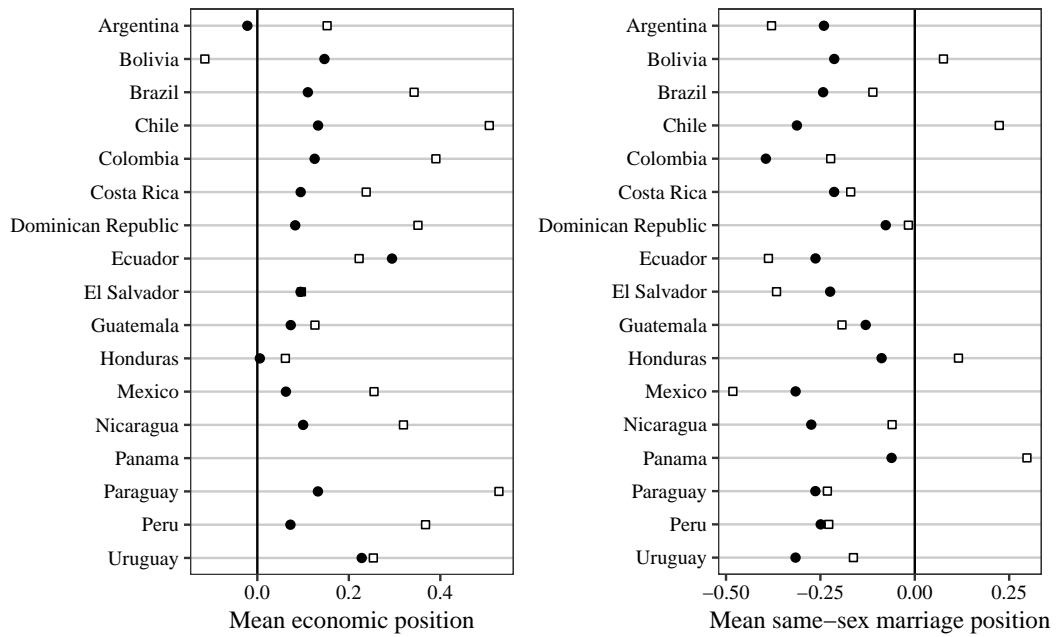


Figure 4: Mean economic and cultural preferences in Latin America. The left panel plots mean preferences on economic issues, while the right panel plots mean preferences on same-sex marriage. For each country, the mean preference of the poorest quintile of citizens is normalized to zero, with legislators' mean preference represented by squares and the richest quintile of citizens' mean preference in circles.

rich. This result reinforces the limitations of focusing solely on left-right positions: the direction of the bias may depend on whether respondents have in mind the economic or cultural dimension.

No other datasets allow us to measure congruence on issues beyond the left-right to the extent that our Latin American data do, but we provide some evidence in the online appendix that these results hold more broadly. First, we examine harmonized citizen and legislator surveys conducted as part of the Swedish National Election Study, with waves covering seven election cycles from 1985 to 2010. We focus on a range of questions on economic and cultural issues, including prompts on reducing the size of the public sector and banning pornography. These results closely mirror those from Latin America: the poor are substantially underrepresented on economic issues but overrepresented on cultural ones. Second, following [Clayton et al. \(Forthcoming\)](#), we match Afrobarometer data with surveys of MPs provided by the African Legislatures Project ([Mattes and Mozaffar 2016](#)). Since policy questions were not asked in either survey, we code whether respondents gave particular issues when prompted to name their country's most important problems. These results are very similar. Legislators are more likely to prioritize the economic issues that affluent citizens prioritize and the cultural issues the least affluent prioritize. Together, these data indicate a consistent trend. Around the world, the poor appear to be most underrepresented on economic issues and overrepresented on cultural issues.

Why Is Representation Unequal?

These findings beg an obvious question: why are the affluent better represented on average? Previous scholars have broadly identified five possible mechanisms behind the disproportionate political influence of the rich. If they are right, we should find that representation is more unequal where campaign finance is less regulated, where the poor turn out to vote less than the rich, where legislative seats are allocated disproportionately, where the poor have less coherent political preferences, and where levels of economic development are lower and inequality higher. Of course, there may be other reasons behind the affluence bias, but these five are the most prominent

theories put forward by prior studies of representation. We test only these five here and leave it to future studies to theorize and test additional explanations.²¹

We leverage the differences over time and space in our global dataset to test these mechanisms. If campaign finance drives unequal representation, then we should see the affluence bias diminished or eliminated in countries that enact strict limits on the role of money in politics. We study this possibility using V-DEM data on whether campaigns are publicly funded.²²

If different turnout rates among rich and poor citizens accounts for their unequal representation, we should see the affluence bias attenuated in cases where the poor turn out to vote. Given the difficulty of accurately measuring individual turnout by socioeconomic group, we instead measure whether a country makes voting compulsory and enforces this, a variable available from V-DEM. If low turnout among the poor is behind the affluence bias, then we expect this effect to be smaller in countries with compulsory voting.²³

Similarly, since preference coherence is difficult to measure, we follow work on ideological congruence and treat knowledge and educational background as proxies for preference coherence (Golder and Stramski 2010). For each country-year-survey, we use factual questions to construct a factored index of political knowledge. Where these are not available, we instead use educational attainment.²⁴ We then drop the middle quintiles, keeping just the least and most knowledgeable respondents, with an indicator variable for whether respondents belong to the latter group. If the affluence bias is driven by the fact that poor citizens have less coherent preferences, we should find that poor citizens with higher levels of political knowledge are more congruent with their representatives.²⁵

Following a growing debate on ideological congruence, there are good reasons

²¹ We also leave for future work the possibility of causal heterogeneity.

²² Our results are consistent using V-DEM's measure of campaign finance disclosure requirements as well as indicators for regulations on campaign finance available from IDEA International (see appendix).

²³ Our results are consistent using the turnout rate in the prior national election (see appendix).

²⁴ Restricting our analysis to only the cases where we do have factual questions does not substantively change our results (see the online appendix).

²⁵ In our data, 19 percent of poor respondents have high levels of political knowledge and 17 percent of the rich have low levels of political knowledge.

to expect the affluence bias to be greater in less proportional electoral systems. We measure disproportionality using the [Gallagher \(1991\)](#) index updated by [Gandrud \(2015\)](#). Finally, we test for economic explanations using logged GDP per capita (in thousands of constant 2000 USD) as a measure of economic development and the Gini index of economic inequality, both from the World Bank.

We estimate a series of models in which we interact each potential mechanism variable with the indicator variables for affluence quintiles.²⁶ If a potential mechanism conditions the relationship between affluence and congruence, we should find statistically significant interaction coefficients. We expect to find negative interaction coefficients for mechanisms that mitigate affluence bias (campaign finance regulation, compulsory voting, political knowledge, and economic development) and positive interaction effects for mechanisms that exaggerate the affluence bias (disproportionality and economic inequality).

Figure 5 presents the predicted effects from each model, varying each covariate across its interquartile range. Among the models that produce statistically significant results, one goes against the received wisdom and two imply substantively small effects. The sign of the political knowledge coefficient is positive, the opposite of what the preference-coherence argument predicts: among citizens with higher levels of political knowledge, the affluence bias in congruence appears to be even higher. The estimates for economic development and inequality imply that to eliminate the affluence effect, a country’s GDP per capita would need to increase by \$8,000, while inequality would need to decline by 14 percentage points. These changes are equivalent to the difference between Mexico and the Netherlands in 2008. Although economic conditions seem to matter for unequal representation, they can hardly explain the variation we see across cases. In short, these results indicate few statistically or substantively significant explanations for affluence bias.

These results offer little traction on the question of why the affluent seem to be better represented in modern democracies. Unlike studies of the U.S. that attribute bias

²⁶ Put formally, we estimate $y_{i,t} \sim \mathcal{N}(\alpha + \mathbf{x}_{i,t}^T \boldsymbol{\beta} + \mathbf{z}_{i,t}^T \boldsymbol{\nu} + (\mathbf{z}_{i,t} \mathbf{x}_{i,t})^T \boldsymbol{\gamma} + \mathbf{u}_{i,t}^T \boldsymbol{\theta}, \sigma^2)$, where we interact each mechanism variable z with the vector of affluence quintile indicators. We are interested in the size and significance of the coefficient on the interaction terms, $\boldsymbol{\gamma}$.

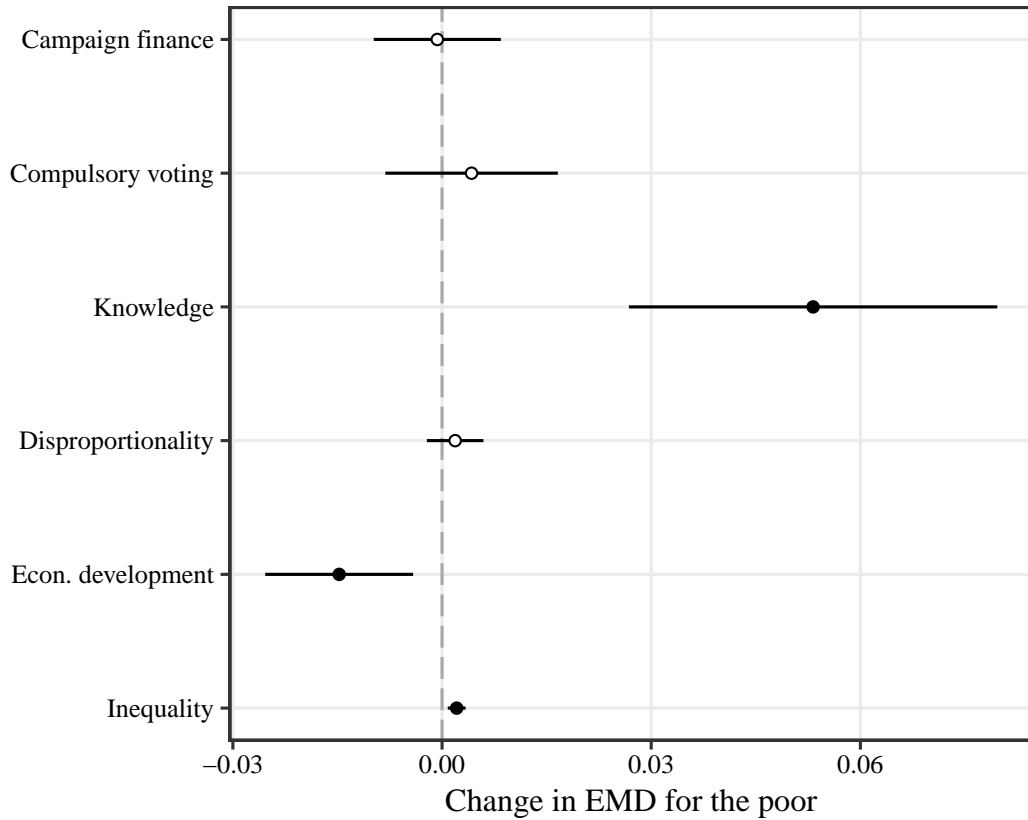


Figure 5: Affluence bias: mechanisms. Values represent estimates of predicted change in congruence for the poor based on shifting each mechanism variable across its interquartile range. These estimates come from interactions between the indicator for the least affluent quintile and the mechanism variable. Lines represent the 95% confidence interval. Complete regression results are available in the online appendix.

toward the affluent to their role financing campaigns, we find no comparative evidence consistent with that explanation. Regardless of how countries finance campaigns, the rich always seem to be better represented than the poor. Turnout differentials also fail to explain this pattern: cases with compulsory voting fare no better than those that do not require participation. The argument that the poor are underrepresented because their preferences are less coherent fares particularly poorly: if anything, poor citizens with high levels of political knowledge are even more incongruent with their representatives than those with low levels of knowledge. Proportional electoral rules seem to have no effect on affluence bias. And while economic conditions seem to matter, their substantive effect on affluence bias seems very small. For some reason, modern democracies produce elected representatives whose views are closer to the preferences of affluent citizens than those of the poor. But scholars have yet to identify what that reason is.

Unequal Representation and Democracy

A basic tenet of democracy is that citizens' preferences are equally reflected by their representatives. But recent research in the U.S. has raised questions about whether American democracy fulfills this promise. U.S. policymakers seem to predominantly—perhaps even only—represent the preferences of the affluent. [Gilens and Page \(2014\)](#) conclude that, “America’s claims to being a democratic society are seriously threatened” (577).

Comparative scholars may write this off as yet another peculiarity of the exceptional U.S. political system. Most researchers attribute unequal representation in the U.S. to the influential role of money in American politics, an area where the U.S. is an outlier. But whether similar patterns obtain broadly across modern democracies remains an open question. Until very recently, comparative scholarship on representation had largely failed to compare different socioeconomic groups. More recent comparative work uncovers affluence biases, but focuses on a small number of cases, making it difficult to examine mechanisms. Moreover, these studies focus exclusively on left-right positions, which can be a problematic metric.

This paper takes a more global approach. Studying every available survey of national legislators matched with a mass opinion survey, we have shown that the U.S. is much more the norm than the exception. To be sure, some U.S. studies find that the rich—and only the rich—influence policy in the U.S. Our comparative results are less damning. On average, middle-class citizens can expect their preferences to be more or less equally represented in their national legislature. The poor, on the other hand, seem to be underrepresented in the average democracy. Representation may be *more* unequal in the U.S., but it is still unequal elsewhere. Around the world, less affluent citizens can expect their preferences to be less well reflected among their elected representatives than are the views of their more affluent neighbors.

We also find some evidence to suggest that the direction of inequality varies by issue domain. The preferences of the rich seem to be overrepresented in the area of economic policy, while the preferences of the poor appear to be overrepresented on cultural issues. In one sense, this is good news because it means that the poor are not *always* underrepresented. Indeed, there is some comparative evidence that the poor and the rich may base their voting behavior on different issue domains (e.g., [De la O and Rodden 2008](#); [Shayo 2009](#)). On the other hand, economic concerns are typically the most salient issues for citizens around the world, especially the poor ([Singer 2011](#)). It remains troubling that the rich seem to get better representation on the issues people care about most.

We need much more comparative research on the mechanisms behind this unequal representation. Contrary to the expectations in much of the scholarship in this area, we find no cross-national evidence that these inequalities are driven by campaign finance, considered by most scholars of the U.S. to be the primary culprit. We also find no evidence that lower turnout among the poor, poor people's less coherent preferences, the proportionality of electoral rules, or economic conditions do much to explain unequal representation. But these analyses are only the tip of the iceberg. We have limited our analysis to studying mechanisms that have been theorized by previous studies and for which data are readily available. We need much more—and finer-grained—theory-building and empirical research to study why democratic representation is so unequal so often. On the question of mechanisms, our paper does more

to raise questions than to answer them.

There are two well-developed theories that we do not explore here. One is that elected representatives misperceive the preferences of their constituents. Representatives' perceptions are in fact an important link in the representational chain developed by [Miller and Stokes \(1963\)](#). There are reasons to think that with the spread of opinion polls, representatives' information about public preferences could be more accurate ([Geer 1996](#)), but there is also growing evidence of biases in how legislators (at least in the U.S.) derive their impressions of public opinion ([Butler 2014](#)). Unfortunately, there is too little information available in our data about legislators' perceptions of their constituents' preferences for us to properly test this mechanism. We hope that future scholars collect more of these kinds of data.

Another possibility is that elected representatives reflect better the preferences of the affluent because they themselves tend to be affluent. This possibility has recently received renewed attention ([Carnes and Lupu 2015](#)). Unfortunately, only a fraction of our elite surveys provide information about the affluence of the respondent, and the proportion of representatives who are not affluent is a small fraction of those. Lacking statistical power to test this very plausible mechanism, we must leave it for future studies.

More broadly, comparative scholars ought to take up a broader consideration of when and why representation becomes unequal. Our dataset includes all the available data, and more can be added as new elite surveys become available. We have used this large dataset to study inequalities in representation across socioeconomic groups, but the data may well reveal other inequalities. Are men better represented than women? Are the preferences of urban residents better represented than those of rural residents? Are citizens living in some regions (e.g., capitals) or those from certain ethnic groups better represented? Our dataset can be used to evaluate a whole host of empirical questions on democratic representation beyond the ones we explore. Comparative studies of representation and congruence often focus on describing individual cases or on how institutions explain variation across countries. It is time we ask deeper questions about how and why modern democracies throughout the world represent citizens' preferences unequally.

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