

DEMOCRACY
in
POVERTY

A View From Below

By Daniel M. Weeks

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Dedication:

To Andy, Cassandra, Darius, Maria, Mel, MJ, Richard, Troy, Vinnie, and countless other Americans who are struggling to earn their keep and keep their faith in a country they feel has not kept faith with them.

1. INTRODUCTION: A DEMOCRACY PROBLEM

Darius did a poor job picking parents. His mother—fifteen and single when he was born—worked two jobs to support her habit and her home, in that order. His father, a jobless high school dropout, received his third strike and an automatic life sentence when Darius was six years old—end of story. In the neighborhood in south-central Los Angeles where Darius grew up, the best way out of poverty, as far as he could tell, was to join a gang and break the law by selling drugs. So Darius broke the law, made some money, and was sent to juvenile hall. His uncle broke the law, made some money, and was shot—while Darius, who considered him like a father, watched him die. A few years later, after serving time, Darius himself became a dad. “That made me stop and think,” he says. He put away his guns and found a public charter school that would take him in at the age of 20. Now, one semester away from earning his high school diploma at age 22, Darius dreams of landing a regular job so he can support his family without having to break the law. His dreams do not stop there. Somewhere along the way, Darius became political and decided that being a man meant fighting for child care centers in impoverished neighborhoods like his, so that young kids growing up could have a better start. But with many of his peers behind bars, and countless more barred from voting because of past offenses, he doubts whether politicians will ever “give people like me the time of day.”

Melissa never had to break the law—it broke her instead. On her way to work one day in Tulsa, Oklahoma, she was struck by a drunk driver and severely injured. “He was doing donuts in a Porsche,” she says, still in disbelief. Melissa, who goes by “Mel” for short, emerged from the hospital with crippling seizures (she averages two per day) and a medical debt that still remains unpaid. She had to trade her steady nursing assistant job for \$800 per month in disability benefits and \$16 in food stamps. The drunk driver managed to hide his assets with the help of a good lawyer and blamed her disability on a pre-existing condition; Mel could not afford a lawyer and walked away with half her medical expenses and a onetime payout of \$5,000 in worker’s compensation. Now, the 40-year-old is back in school studying computer animation (the four-year online degree will add \$65,000 to her medical debt) and is looking for a

place where she can afford to stay after a recent break-up. She dreams of passing a law that would give relief to people like her who are racked by medical debt and cannot afford their care, particularly those with terminal illness or a disability. The trouble is, she says, “I don’t really hang out with politicians—I mean they don’t hang out with me. . . . I have no idea where to start.”

Andy and Maria try not to worry about the law anymore. Having spent the better part of their combined 177 years waiting to attain the holy grail of U.S. citizenship, the elderly El Paso couple now takes pride in having earned that status in the country they always called home. But their papers do not assure them an easy retirement. Forty-plus years of work in the fields and factories of Texas, Arizona, and California—Andy picked vegetables and fixed cars while Maria stitched jeans and assembled rifle scopes—is not enough to lift them out of poverty on \$700 per month, combined, in Social Security. Nor can it patch the holes in the 12- × 40-foot trailer in the New Mexico desert where they have lived since 1987. Their political dreams are modest—a decent public education for their grandkids, enough Social Security to live on until they die—but the price of participation is high: in the last election, they spent four hours in line on a cold November night waiting to cast their ballot while many of their neighbors gave up and went home in frustration. For all their effort, Andy doubts whether his hard-won vote will make a difference. “The politicians only come here when they’re looking for votes,” he says. “They don’t care about the little people.”

Darius, Mel, Andy, and Maria are all American citizens endowed with equal rights under the Constitution. They have hopes and dreams and doubts and flaws like the rest of us. But they are far from equal citizens in a comprehensive sense. Instead, they are members of an American underclass, 50 million strong, that is defined by poverty-level incomes, limited education, lack of economic opportunity, and little—if any—political voice. Their stories, and countless others documented by the 2012–2013 Poor (in) Democracy research tour by Greyhound bus,¹ challenge our cherished assumptions about the American Dream. Consumed by the daily demands of subsistence and excluded from political participation by formal and informal means, they struggle to make their voices heard where it matters most: in politics.

Their poverty cannot be understood in strictly social and economic terms because it is embedded in the very structures of society and maintained by an unequal distribution of political power. Put differently, American poverty is a democracy problem.

This is a story about political voice in America: who has it, who doesn't, and why. It is about the uneven pursuit of political power by people like Darius and Mel on the one hand and people with the means to invest in political outcomes on the other hand. It is about why certain kinds of people seem to get their way in politics year after year, even generation after generation, and why other kinds of people do not—even when their numbers suggest that they should in a democracy.

To assess the political dimensions of poverty in the United States, I analyze data on participation and representation in government along socioeconomic lines, the “inputs” and “outputs” of politics. Focusing first on political participation (inputs) after a brief assessment of recent poverty trends, I look at who is registered to vote, who turns out to vote on Election Day, and what kinds of formal and informal barriers people face when seeking to exercise the franchise. I then examine costlier forms of individual and group-based political participation, such as volunteering time on political campaigns, contributing money to candidates for public office, and lobbying the government. Turning to political representation (outputs), I analyze which issues make it onto the legislative agenda, whose interests are substantively represented in the policymaking process, and what levels of descriptive representation exist among elected officials. To understand these complex phenomena, I draw on the work of respected political scientists and economists² and incorporate findings from dozens of in-depth interviews and participant observations conducted with a representative sample of low-income Americans as part of the Poor (in) Democracy project.

The findings pose a significant challenge to America’s proud tradition of government “of, by, and for the people.” Like so many millions of Americans currently living in poverty, the data suggest that American democracy itself has become impoverished, leaving those at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder effectively powerless and those at the top in charge.

2. POVERTY IN THE UNITED STATES

If you're looking for an expert on poverty, Troy is your man. Poverty was the place where Troy was born 43 years ago in the Lower Ninth Ward of New Orleans, a product of southern segregation. Poverty was the state he planned to leave when he was training to be an auto mechanic and working construction at the time of Hurricane Katrina. And poverty is the condition he has occupied ever since—especially now that jobs are scarce and his flooded former home has been replaced by a makeshift camp of trash bags and boxes under Interstate 10 in New Orleans.

For all his setbacks, Troy still knows how to hustle to make ends meet. His account of a typical week in poverty goes something like this: Monday, line up at 5 am outside the temp agency on Tulane Ave. and pray for a few days' work on the docks or in cold storage in New Orleans East. If luck is on his side, Troy can pick up 6-8 hours a day earning \$8 an hour for three or four days before they cut him off, "to give the next guy a chance." He understands sharing hours in a city where 46 percent of African American men currently lack employment, but wishes there were more hours and better pay to go around.³

Assuming no work, Troy spends Tuesday walking 30 blocks to and from a church across town, where he stands in line an hour or two for lunch, prayers, and a piece of toiletry. "Always gonna have church before anything happens," he says with ambivalence. Wednesday morning, he queues up again for a shower and a piece of clothing at another church across town, preaching included. Then he stops by the government office to get on a computer and put in for more jobs, pointless though it seems without phone, address, or transportation. "If the manager can't even call you back to say you've got the job, how's he going to be able to give you your weekly shifts?" he wonders.

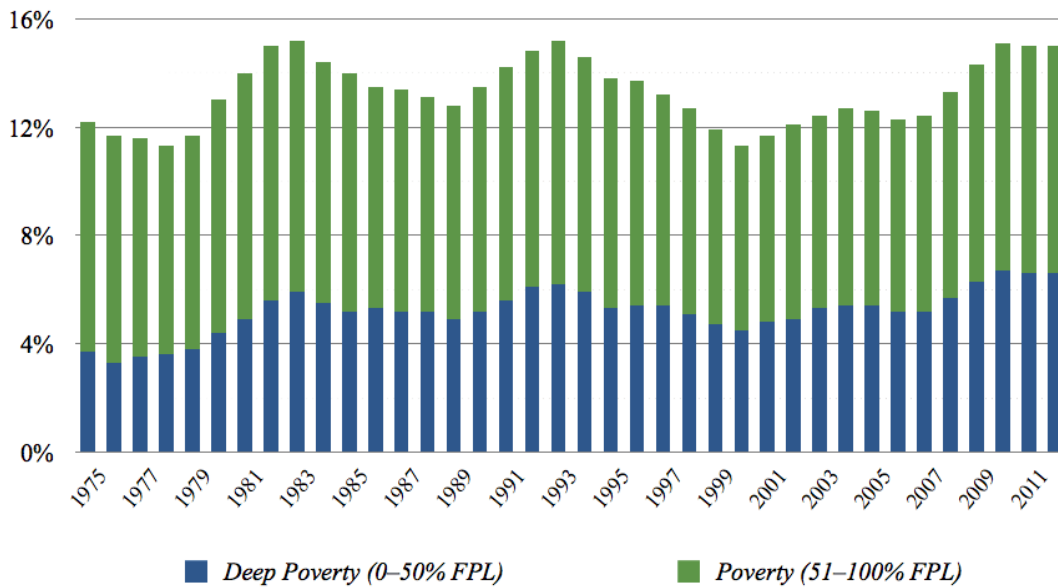
On Thursday, Troy takes another walk across town to the homeless service center, this time with a trash bag full of dirty laundry to use the washing machine. If the wait is not too long, he'll stop by the FEMA office on the way back to see if there's been any movement in the housing list. "FEMA says if you're homeless they'll give

you a voucher for housing. I'm jobless, I'm homeless, and I've been waiting for months," he says. Short of that voucher, Troy doubts whether he will ever make it into a room of his own at the going rate of \$1,200 upfront (deposit and first month's rent).

Troy finishes the week on Friday with a visit to the non-profit agency that is supposed to help him with medications—painkillers to take his mind off the slipped disc in his lower back that has been keeping him from sleeping for more than an hour at a time. Although he obtained the requisite prescriptions from the Medicaid doc, the nonprofit has so far refused to fill them on the presumption that any Schedule II painkiller will be sold on the street and abused. "I'm just trying to get the pain out of my back," he says.

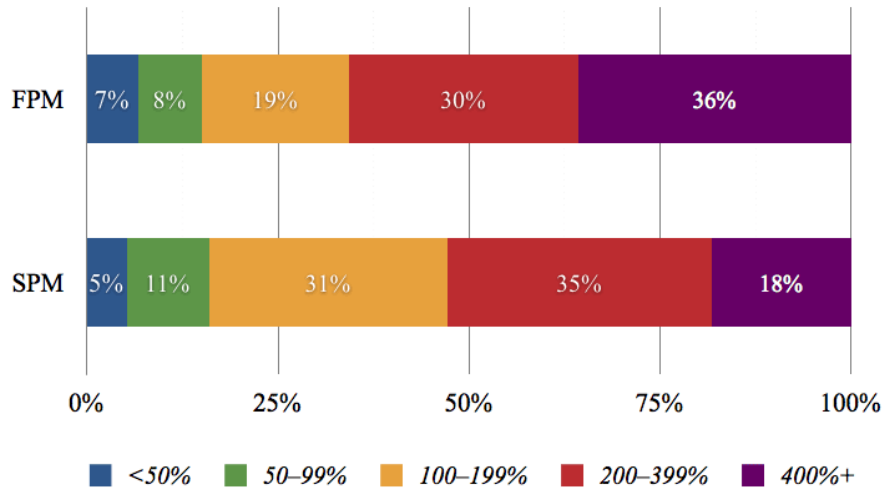
The pain of poverty is hardly Troy's alone. Six years after the financial collapse of 2008 and four years after the Great Recession officially ended, the latest official figures for 2013 show poverty still near the recession high of 15 percent. Although many are not as desperate as Troy, a total of 45 million Americans are currently living below the poverty line, according to the U.S. Census.⁴ Their incomes, including taxes paid and public benefits received, are less than \$6,000 per person per year for a typical family of four, or \$16 per day.⁵ Adding incarcerated people to the poverty count increases the overall rate to 16 percent, the highest point in nearly 50 years.⁶ Almost one-half of all impoverished Americans—20 million people—subsist in deep poverty with annual incomes of less than one-half the federal poverty line, or \$2,944 per person for a family of four.⁷ At six and a half percent, the rate of deep poverty remains at its highest point since recordkeeping began in 1975, as shown in Figure 1.⁸ Their daily-lived experience is not much different to Troy's. Meanwhile, another 61 million Americans live a few paychecks above the poverty line and below common measures of basic needs, with annual incomes between \$23,550 and \$47,100 for a typical family of four.⁹ Many observers call this group "near poor."

Figure 1. Percentage of Americans Living in Poverty, 1975–2012¹⁰



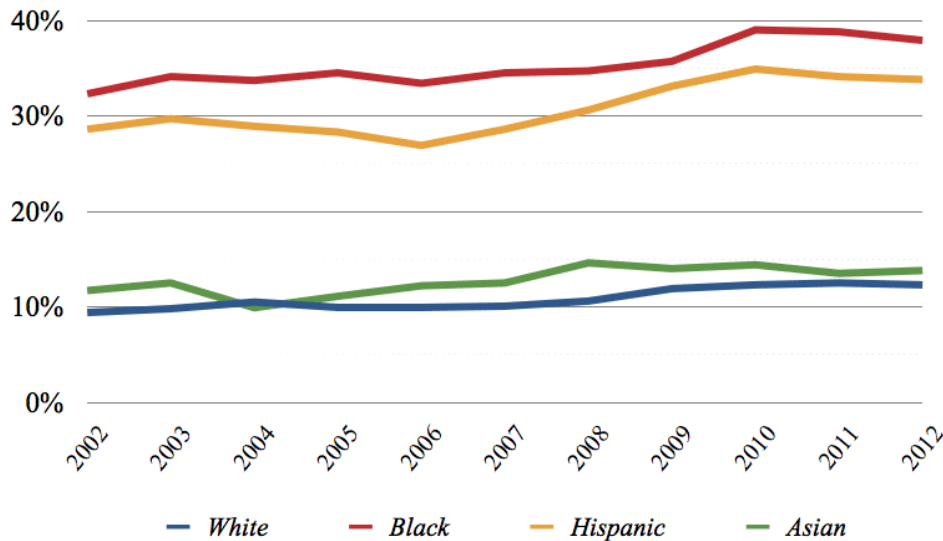
Recent innovations in poverty analysis under the Census Bureau’s research supplemental poverty measure (SPM), which incorporates geographically adjusted mandatory health and work-related expenses along with public benefits and tax credits received, show a slight reduction in the rate of deep poverty from 6.7 to 5.2 percent, a slight increase in the rate of poverty from 15 to 16.1 percent, and a pronounced increase in the percentage of poor and “near poor” Americans from 34.5 to 48.1 percent.¹¹ Taken together, one-half of the population is either in poverty or below the basic needs threshold of roughly \$46,000 per year for a family of four, as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Percentage of Americans by Income-to-Poverty Thresholds, Federal Poverty Measure (FPM) v. Supplemental Poverty Measure (SPM), 2012¹²



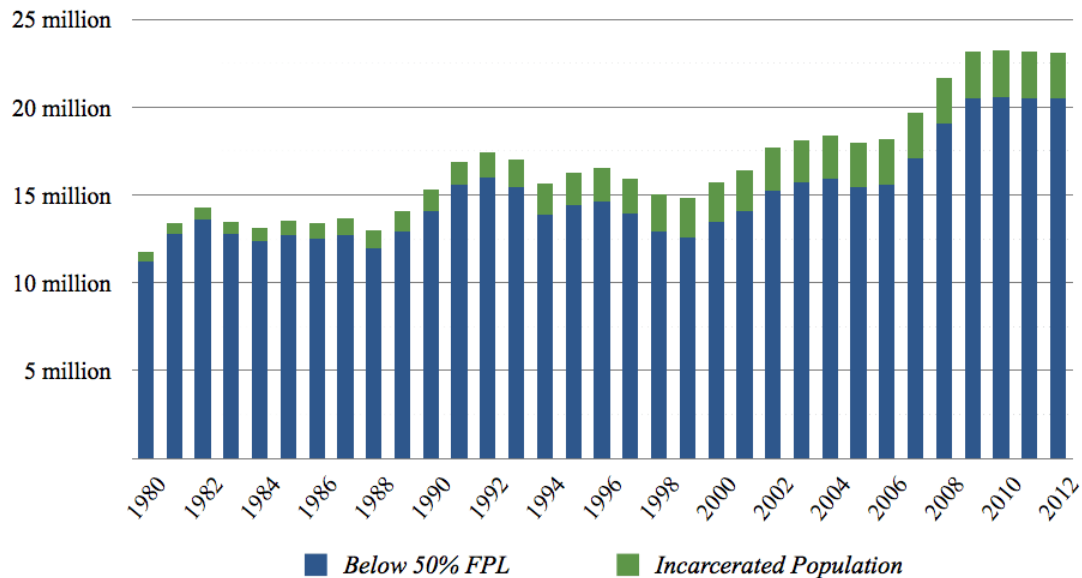
Poverty cannot be understood in numbers alone. Poor people are young and old and constitute all races and ethnicities. They live in homes, apartments, trailers, cars, tents, and parks across all 50 states and in nearly every community in the land. Some were born into poverty while others descended later in life, and many are only passing through. Like the rest of American society, most adults in poverty have jobs, raise families, pay taxes, and receive some form of government support, even as they derive the bulk of their limited incomes from work.¹³ Most of their kids attend school, play sports, watch television, and dream of bigger things (albeit from a very different vantage point than that of middle-class children). Although poor people are far more likely than their affluent counterparts to be stopped by the police and serve time in jail, the vast majority of impoverished Americans “play by the rules” of society as they are written.¹⁴ In addition, although the majority of poor people do not vote and scarcely any of them find other means of political engagement, as the following data will show, all are touched by government policy and all are reaching for their sliver of the American Dream.

Figure 3. Percentage of American Children Living in Poverty by Race, 2002–2012¹⁵



Of course, that is not to say that poor people are “randomly selected” or evenly distributed across the entire population. Although no group of citizens is spared the reality or possibility of experiencing poverty, being of a certain age, race, origin, or parentage significantly increases the likelihood of poverty. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, children are the most susceptible to poverty in the United States, with more than one in five living below the poverty line—the highest rate in the developed world.¹⁶ Among African American and Hispanic children, the rate climbs to more than one in three, which is three times the rate among whites. The racial poverty gap among children increased noticeably during the Great Recession, as Figure 3 depicts. Geographically speaking, people living in the American South and West also experience poverty at higher rates than those in other parts of the country, although inner-city and rural inhabitants everywhere are more likely to be impoverished than their suburban counterparts. Finally, members of single-parent households—a complex factor that can be both cause and effect of poverty—are far more likely to have their basic needs unmet, in spite of targeted assistance from the government.¹⁷

Figure 4. Number of Extremely Poor and Incarcerated Americans, 1980–2012¹⁸



Poverty has profound implications for an individual’s physical and emotional health, educational and work opportunities, and overall life success, particularly when it is experienced in childhood and for protracted periods of time.¹⁹ Children who grow up poor are far more likely than their middle-class counterparts to lack health insurance and adequate nutrition; to experience homelessness, anxiety, and childhood disease; to lack early education and attend failing schools; to drop out of high school and obtain a criminal record, even spending time behind bars; and to be jobless and impoverished as adults. The relationship between poverty and incarceration, noted in Figure 4, is explored in greater detail below.

As the following pages will show and as Troy can personally attest, poverty also affects the amount of voice and influence people have in the political process and the degree to which they are represented in government. By a host of relevant measures of political participation and representation analyzed below, Americans in poverty appear to be profoundly unequal when it comes to influencing the social and economic structures of the society in which they live.

3. INEQUALITY OF POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Politics is personal for Jerry. The 53 year-old security guard from San Francisco is proud of his unbroken record of service on the job but frustrated by a sense of powerlessness to improve his lot in a political and economic system that just doesn't seem to work for people like him. Ten years into the job, Jerry was briefly promoted to head of his building's security earning \$17 an hour, but the manager filed an unspecified complaint—no warnings—and had him replaced by a junior officer at a lower rate. When he started his new job at another building down the street, his wages and benefits were slashed. Not so for the cost of living in San Francisco.

Rent is high, even for the eight-by-ten foot SRO with communal kitchen and bath that Jerry shares with his girlfriend Lolly in the seedy Tenderloin district. He prefers not to ask her to help with rent because she earns around half his wage working two part-time retail jobs, and sends all she can home to family in the Philippines. Although basic health insurance is included in his contract, vision and dental insurance are not, and covered medical expenses are subject to a \$1,000 deductible; he still owes \$456 after an unexpected hospital visit last year. Adding in the cost of transportation, union dues, telephone, and cable (his only form of entertainment), Jerry is left with around \$70 per week to cover food, clothing, and other basic needs. "I take it a day at a time, a day at a time," he says, "There's a lot of people like that, and some people, they just gave up."

Making matters worse, Jerry and his fellow security guards have gone without a contract for the better part of a year. "At one point, it looked like we were going to get a decent contract," Jerry says, "but now the companies are thinking that they can stall and downgrade the contract." According to the latest reports, pay raises will be cut in half to 35 cents an hour and health insurance costs will be shifted further onto employees. To Jerry, it is a sign of disrespect. "We thought it would be better now [after the last contract]. We showed how professional we are. Why would the companies do that to us?" In answer to his own question, Jerry says, "It's all about money."

Although Jerry is proud to be part of a union that is "getting involved, getting out there, showing that [we] mean business," he doubts whether organized labor will ever be able to compete on an equal footing with the companies they serve because of what he sees as a widening gap in political and economic power. The politicians we elect to set the rules, he says, are "put in [office] by money, money pays for campaigns." Meanwhile, the unions with their dwindling membership and modest dues can't keep up. What's more, Jerry worries that too many low-income people who should be voting, attending meetings, and fighting for workers' rights have all but given up hope in the system. It's hard to blame them, he says. "You got the money, you got the power. . . . That's just the way it is, the way it's been a long time."

Civic participation is the foundation of representative democracy. It is the means by which the citizens elect their leaders at the polls; express their policy preferences in campaigns and legislative debates; influence the collection and distribution of public goods; and hold their leaders accountable in the next election. When the voices of ordinary citizens waver or are suppressed, the consequences are more than an abstract violation of democratic ideals; real people pay the price. As the political scientist Robert Dahl observed, "If you are deprived of an equal voice in the government, the chances are quite high that your interests will not be given the same attention as the interests of those who do have a voice. If you have no voice, who will speak up for you?"²⁰

I begin my examination of political voice in America by analyzing rates of citizen participation in a variety of political acts as well as the formal and informal barriers that currently stand in the way of meaningful participation. Drawing on the latest empirical studies and in-depth interviews with citizens living below the poverty line, I assess trends in voting, volunteering, contributing, and lobbying along socioeconomic lines, and the attitudes of low-income people with respect to each. The evidence suggests that the "inputs" of political participation are far from equally distributed across the population, with significant implications for the "outputs" of political representation examined below.

3.1 Voting and Disenfranchisement

Trends in Voter Turnout

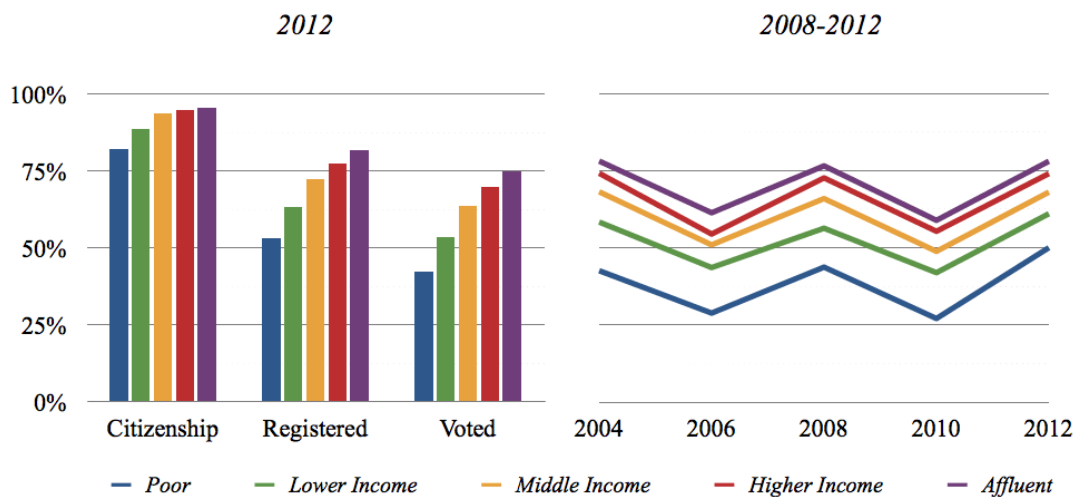
Detailed statistics compiled by the U.S. Census Bureau through the Current Population Survey (CPS) allow us to track voting disparities across a range of factors, including income, employment, education, race, and age, as well as the reasons nonvoters give for staying home.²¹ Although close to six in 10 Americans over the age of 18 vote in presidential elections and roughly four in 10 Americans vote in midterm elections, the overall level of participation masks wide disparities across demographic groups. I consider rates of voter turnout up and down the socioeconomic ladder before turning to common barriers voters face and the legal disenfranchisement of certain groups. In order to assess the full measure of ballot representation of each group, the voting rates presented in this section are as a percentage of the voting-age population, including non-citizens who historically enjoyed the right to vote but are currently excluded from most elections.

Americans at the bottom of the income distribution are roughly half as likely to vote in presidential elections and a third as likely to vote in midterm elections as people at the top. Only one in five people over age 18 with family incomes of less than \$10,000 per year, and around a quarter of adults with poverty-level wages of less than \$20,000 per year, cast ballots in the 2006 and 2010 midterm elections. That number rose to roughly four in 10 impoverished adults voting for president in 2004 and 2008. By contrast, six in 10 voting-age Americans with annual family incomes in excess of \$150,000 voted in 2006 and 2010, and close to eight in 10 cast ballots in 2004 and 2008. At the same time, the very wealthiest voters with annual incomes of \$200,000 or more significantly increased their share of the national vote from 5 percent in 2006 to 8 percent in 2010 as voters in the bottom half of the income distribution lost ground in mid-term elections.²²

In order to isolate the actual effects of income and other factors on voter turnout, multivariate regression analysis of the 2008 Census data shows that middle-income individuals with annual family incomes of \$25,000-\$75,000 are 50 percent

more likely to vote than their low-income counterparts with incomes below \$25,000 per year. Meanwhile, higher-income individuals earning \$75,000 per year or more were 110 percent more likely to vote than low-income people, when controlling for gender, race, age, educational attainment, region, and duration of residence.²³ The disparities grow wider still when compared to the wealthiest Americans with incomes of \$200,000 or more. Although similar income-segmented data are not available for regression analysis for the 2012 and 2014 election, the spread in voter turnout across income groups is largely unchanged, as shown in Figure 5.

Figure 5. U.S. Citizenship, Registration, and Voter Turnout by Family Income, 2004–2012²⁴

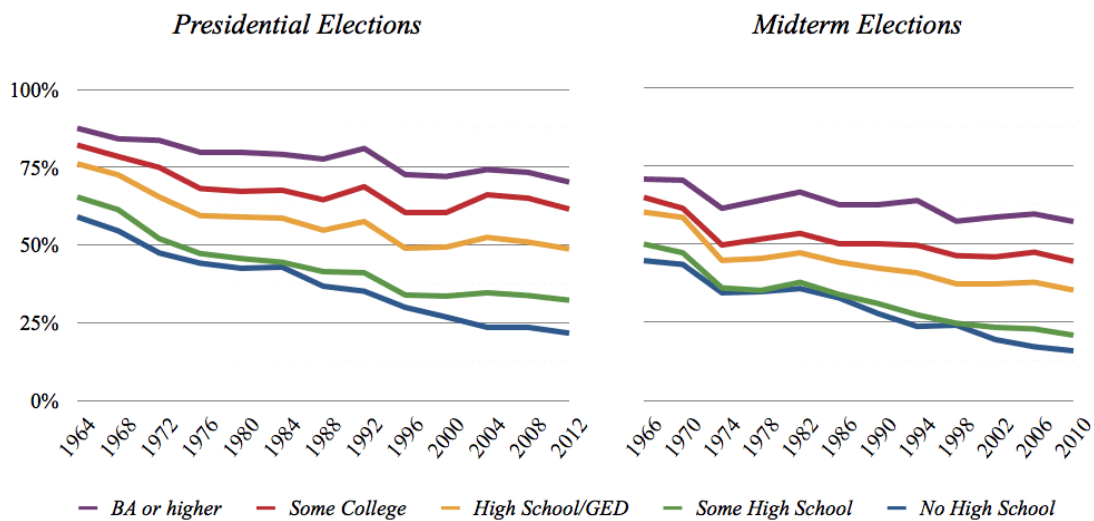


Voting disparities are even more pronounced when examined relative to citizens' education levels, the second core component of socioeconomic status after income. Census data show that in recent presidential elections, fewer than one in four citizens with lower than a 9th-grade education, and one in three citizens who attended but did not graduate high school, voted. Those numbers drop even lower to around 15 and 20 percent, respectively, in recent midterm elections. By contrast, two thirds of citizens with some college attendance and three quarters of those with a bachelor's degree or higher voted in recent presidential elections, and roughly 45 and 60 percent, respectively, voted in midterm elections. Like the data on income and voting above,

multivariate regression analysis finds that the effect of education on voter turnout is even more pronounced when controlling for other factors known to influence turnout, including gender, race, age, income, and region. According to Census Bureau calculations, moving from high school dropout to college graduate increased a citizen's odds of voting by almost nine times in 2008.²⁵ For high school graduates, the odds of voting improved by a factor of two compared with those who did not graduate, and for those who attended some college the odds increased by a factor of four.²⁶ The disparities in voter turnout based on educational attainment were similar in 2012.

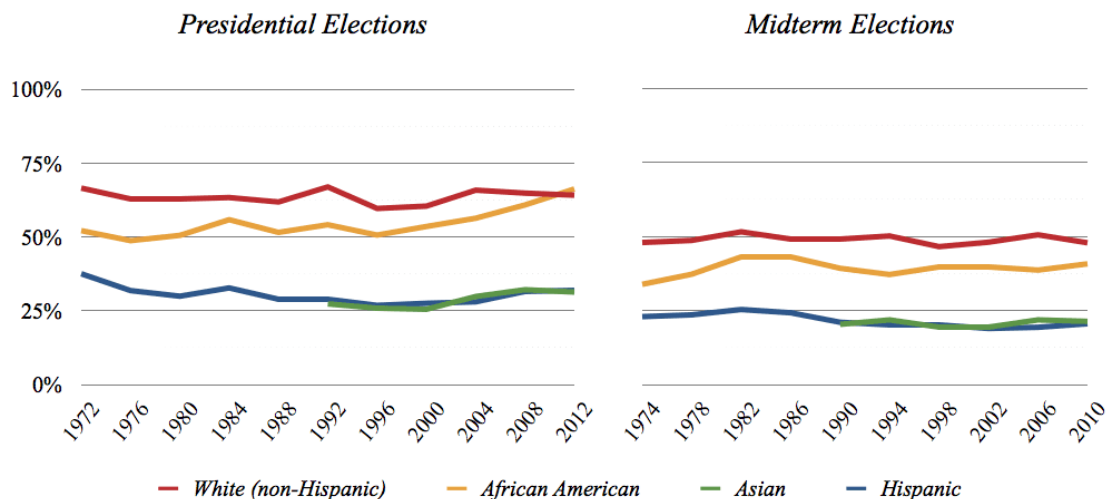
Rich historical data on voting and education from the U.S. Census (not available for income) reveal a pronounced split in voting rates based on citizens' educational attainment over the past 50 years. As Figure 6 reveals, nearly two thirds of Americans with less than a high school diploma and three quarters of those who finished high school cast ballots in the presidential election of 1964—more than twice the rate among similarly educated Americans today. By contrast, those with a college degree turned out at a rate of 87 percent in 1964 compared to 73 percent today. Although educational attainment has increased for the entire population since 1964, the split does not bode well for less-educated Americans who already occupy a precarious position in the increasingly globalized, knowledge-based economy.

Figure 6. U.S. Voter Turnout by Education Level, 1964–2012²⁷



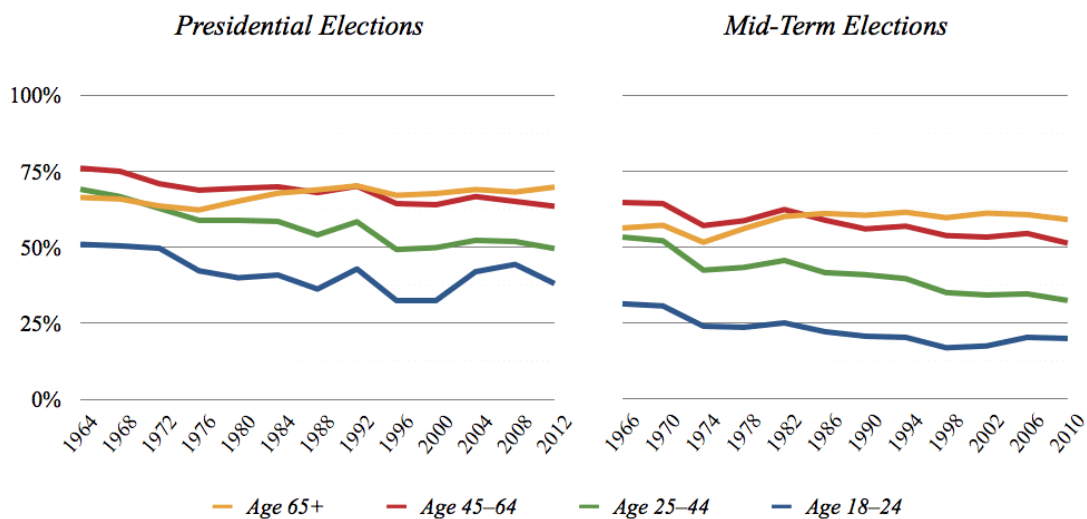
If income and educational attainment are the primary components of socioeconomic status, race and age are also relevant factors, with younger people and members of minority groups experiencing both lower socioeconomic status and voter turnout. Racial-ethnic disparities in voting have grown less pronounced between voting-age whites and African Americans in recent years, but the gap between whites and both Hispanic and Asian Americans remains startlingly wide. Two thirds of non-Hispanic whites cast ballots in the 2008 presidential election and half voted in the midterm elections of 2006 and 2010, as seen in Figure 7. Voting among African Americans climbed to slightly less than that of whites, at about 60 percent in 2008 and about 40 percent in 2006 and 2010. In the 2012 presidential election, the gap effectively closed. Voting-age Hispanic and Asian Americans, however, lingered far behind with only 32 percent of the voting-age population in both groups voting in 2008 and 2012 and 21 percent voting in 2006 and 2010. These trends are largely unchanged over the past five decades, with the exception that African American voters have increased their turnout in presidential elections, an outcome that is partly attributed to President Barack Obama. It remains to be seen whether African Americans will continue to vote in higher numbers after he leaves office.

Figure 7. U.S. Voter Turnout by Race/Ethnicity, 1972–2012²⁸



Finally, age is another important factor in predicting the rate of voter turnout, particularly when combined with class. Notwithstanding recent reports of a newly energized segment of young voters, turnout among youth ages 18 to 24 continues to lag far behind that of the older generations. In the last two presidential elections of 2008 and 2012, roughly 45 percent of young people ages 18-24 cast ballots, 20 percent less than the two thirds of middle-age and older Americans who voted in those same years, as seen in Figure 8. The disparity is even more pronounced in midterm elections, where less than one in five young Americans turned out in 2006 and 2010, compared with a majority of Americans older than age 45. Adding income to age increased the effect to a substantial, if predictable, degree, particularly in midterm elections. Only 11 percent of 18- to 24-year-olds with annual family incomes of less than \$10,000 voted in 2010, one third the rate of their peers in the highest income bracket.²⁹ Meanwhile, voting among older and wealthier Americans in 2010 climbed to 80 percent.

Figure 8. U.S. Voter Turnout by Age, 1964–2012³⁰



These data showing limited but stable voter participation among people with lower socioeconomic status mask the complex love–hate relationship that many impoverished Americans have with voting and democracy. On the one hand, voting is important to the low-income people interviewed because of what their forebears endured to achieve the right to vote for women and minorities—from Abolition to

Suffrage to Civil Rights. Practically speaking, voting is also important to them because it is the only democratic right they feel they have, when it is not restricted. On the other hand, abstract commitments to the franchise do not translate into widespread turnout among low-income voters, as many do not believe that voting will produce tangible benefits in their own lives. Put simply, while low-income Americans profess strong support for voting and democracy in principle, they are far from certain that democracy applies to them.

According to Twain, an African American shop assistant in his 50s born in segregated Alabama, democracy is all about elections and voting is a sacred right. “At one time, I thought my vote don’t count,” he says. “Now I know better—it makes a difference who’s in office.” Yet Twain is still concerned about “that big money thing,” where affluent people influence political outcomes at the expense of ordinary citizens. “You can do a lot more with money [in politics] than you can without.” Even as Twain celebrates the election of President Obama—“the first time I ever voted was in 2008, and I’m gonna vote again”—the reminders of Jim Crow segregation are never far from mind. “It’s still kinda hard here in Montgomery,” he says. “They still got their racist people here, I hate to say it.”

Like Twain, Mel from Oklahoma fervently believes that “voting makes a difference” in principle. However, the 40-year-old white woman on disability is concerned that “half of the time the people that should be voting don’t”—namely low-income people like herself. The reasons Mel gives are broadly representative of the views of the more than two dozen low-income people interviewed on the subject: “They’ve lost their faith in the system. Why bother? It’s not going to make a difference.” Although she maintains that “really, one vote does matter, voting’s important,” she also accepts that as long as poor people “don’t feel it’s going to make a difference, they don’t vote.”

Vinny, an unemployed computer programmer from New Hampshire who served a short prison sentence for possession and is currently homeless, shares Mel’s conviction that “lower income people need to get out and vote more” and her concern that “poorer people maybe don’t vote because they think their voice can’t be heard.”

For him, the fear of not being heard hits close to home. “By our system of so-called democracy, if I want to go and vote for somebody, I can’t. I’m an ex-felon so I can’t vote. I have no voice whatsoever.” Speaking of the “big business” of elections, another common theme in interviews, Vinny questions whether his vote could ever matter when large companies and special interest groups invest substantial sums of money in swaying public opinion. In the end, he says, “It comes down to money. . . . I think they control the vote.”

For Mariaelena, a 36-year-old Latina from New Mexico earning \$800 per month as a substitute teacher, historically-disenfranchised people believe that, “No, my vote doesn’t count.” Through her own volunteer attempts to register friends and neighbors in elections, she has heard—and can sympathize with—the many common refrains: “Look, I voted and nothing ever changes,” or “These politicians, they only come here for our votes,” or “Politicians never sit down and listen to what we say and follow through.” Politicians asking for votes is good, she says, but “it’s the follow-through that people are really concerned about.”

These observations provide a snapshot of the tension low-income Americans feel between embracing the right to vote, which they see as their primary means of political participation, and doubting its effect. Analyzing people’s perceptions of voting across the 25 in-depth interviews in which voting was discussed, two further distinctions arise. First, the amount of efficacy individuals assign to voting positively correlates with their socioeconomic status, even within the limited low-income demographics of the interview sample. Interviewees holding low-wage jobs who are able to support their families, in part or in full, express a mix of confidence and uncertainty that voting is worth the effort; many of them reported voting in recent presidential elections but not in other elections. By contrast, those at the very bottom of the income distribution, particularly homeless people, described themselves as overwhelmingly disaffected and disinclined to ever vote. Considering their experience of persistent unmet needs and their limited investment in government or private institutions, this is not an unexpected position.

Second, the African Americans interviewed expressed slightly higher levels of confidence than other minority citizens that their votes count, a response that is consistent with national trends showing rising voter turnout among African Americans while voting among other groups has remained constant or declined. The finding may be partly attributable to the election of President Barack Obama, the first African American president. Although perceptions of the president's performance were mixed among African Americans interviewed, many attributed his failures to a recalcitrant Congress and expressed pride and a sense of personal investment in his having been elected twice.

Informal Barriers to Voting

Limited confidence in government may be the first, but it is certainly not the last, reason given for why low-income citizens are considerably less likely to vote than their more affluent counterparts. A wide range of practical barriers, identified in the interviews and in national surveys alike, continue to stand in the way of tens of millions of poor and less-educated Americans exercising the franchise. These informal barriers are supplemented by an array of legal restrictions on voting, explored in the following section.

First on the list of practical barriers to voting is early registration. Contrary to democratic norms around the world, the large majority of American states currently require would-be voters to register in advance of Election Day, with many states still enforcing lengthy pre-election deadlines of 25 to 30 days.³¹ The burden of early registration is compounded by the fact that election administration is conducted independently by countless local jurisdictions across the 50 states with only limited coordination within or between states. When citizens relocate, they must reregister according to times and procedures that are particular to each state, making the cost of registration higher than that of voting itself.³² As a result of these and other practices, the Pew Center on the States reports that America's entire voter registration system is badly outmoded and in need of an overhaul, with millions of voter registrations currently inaccurate or out-of-date.³³

Low-income Americans, who relocate far more frequently than their upper-income counterparts and so are required to reregister to vote, are disproportionately counted among those not registered, according to the U.S. Census Bureau and the interviews conducted for this study. Approximately six in 10 eligible adults with family incomes of less than \$20,000 per year were registered to vote in 2008, compared with 85 percent of people with incomes of \$150,000 or more.³⁴ Registration rates showed marginal improvement across income groups in 2012, as shown in Figure 5, according to the Current Population Survey. Among the total adult population (including noncitizens), roughly half of those in the lowest income bracket were registered to vote in 2008 and 2012.³⁵ The effects of relocation on registration rates, independent of income, were clearly felt. Controlling for other factors, people with at least five years' residence in a given location were twice as likely to be registered to vote as those with less than one year's residence, according to multivariate regression analysis of the Census Bureau data for the 2008 election.³⁶

Not surprisingly, low rates of voter registration also applied disproportionately to members of minority groups and the young, with around 70 percent of African Americans, 60 percent of Hispanics, 55 percent of Asian Americans, and 59 percent of young citizens ages 18 to 24 registered in 2008 and slightly lower rates of young citizens registered in 2012.³⁷ When the entire voting-age population is taken into account, registration rates are considerably lower in 2008 and 2012. For example, just 49 percent of young people ages 18-24 were registered in 2012, including 42 percent of low-income youth and 66 percent of high-income youth with incomes below \$30,000 and above \$100,000, respectively.

Getting registered to vote, however, is not the only barrier citizens face in seeking to exercise the franchise. Millions more registered voters chronically fail to turn out on Election Day for reasons that are partly within and partly beyond their control. The historic tradition of voting on a Tuesday, never a constitutional requirement, effectively prevents scores of eligible voters from casting ballots, particularly low-wage workers who for reasons of job security, transportation, child care, and the like find it difficult to reach the polls during the hours prescribed.

Glitches in election administration, such as failure to receive a requested absentee ballot and malfunctioning equipment at the polls, further depress turnout, as do stringent voter identification requirements in many jurisdictions. Finally, the experience of voters on Election Day—including long lines and reported intimidation at the polls—also has a measureable effect on turnout. For many low-income voters and would-be voters, multiple barriers to voting apply.

According to “Wendy,” a working-class white woman approaching 40 years of age, the reasons for not voting are practical and preventable. Speaking at a bus stop outside City Hall in Cincinnati, where early voting was underway in mid-October of 2012,³⁸ Wendy describes her recent experience attempting to cast a ballot for the very first time. According to Wendy, the election official turned her away because of an alleged discrepancy in her file. “They said my birthday was wrong on the form,” she says, adding, “I filled out the form and I know my own birthday, so it can’t be wrong!” Rather than allowing her to immediately correct the error or fix it before Election Day, Wendy says she was told to leave and come back another year. “I thought I’d vote this time but they turned me away,” she concludes. She doubts if she will come back another year.

Vinny, the homeless computer programmer from New Hampshire, believes that the informal barriers poor people face to exercising the franchise—when combined with a general lack of faith in government, cited above—effectively undermine equal representation at the polls. Citing one practical concern in particular, Vinny notes that “a lot of lower-income people don’t have transportation to get to a place to vote and I think the government counts on that.” He maintains that poor people “could change an election if we were to be able to pool our vote,” but he doubts that will ever happen because low-income voters are deterred from voting and “think their voice can’t be heard.” Whatever the reasons people like him do not turn out, the stakes are high for Vinny. “If we keep allowing the upper-middle class to control the vote, we’re never going to have anything,” he concludes. “It’s never going to change.”

Like the registration and transportation issues cited by Wendy and Vinny, waiting in line and intimidation at the polls are the major barriers experienced by Andy

and Maria, the elderly couple in Chaparral, New Mexico. Thanks to rising turnout and a lack of adequate resources assigned to them by the state, the Chaparral polling station did not finish processing voters until 10:45 p.m. on Election Day 2012, according to local news reports—long after polls had closed across the state and the election had been called for President Obama.³⁹ Andy and Maria, both in their late 80s, said they had to stand in line for a two full hours in order to cast their ballot. They were better off than some, Maria says. When a flood of voters arrived after work, the lines dragged on for up to four hours in the cold November night and many had to leave before they were able to vote. Maria believes the problems were compounded by a lack of Spanish translation services, required under New Mexico law, and the fact that the election judge and poll workers serving the predominantly Hispanic community were all white. She also cites the mistreatment of volunteer poll monitors by the police when they tried to bring water and chairs to voters waiting outside after dark: the barrier police set up after criticizing volunteers made the polling place seem more like a crime scene than a site of civic engagement, according to Maria.

Summing up the state of low-income voting, Laurie, a young woman in her 20s from Cincinnati, provides a laundry list of hurdles low-income people face when seeking to exercise the franchise—hurdles she has seen first-hand as a community organizer in the inner-city. First, she points out that voting is always on a Tuesday, which means “people who work low-wage jobs [and] don’t have job security or paid days off often can’t take off in the middle of the day to go vote.” She is a fan of Ohio’s recent early voting law—and similar efforts in other states—to open up the franchise, but she doubts if it will be enough to sustain low-income turnout in the face of voter intimidation by the Right, her second big concern. “People can vote early, but we’ve seen efforts at suppressing people’s rights to vote early and to vote at all—efforts targeted at low-income and minority communities,” she says. Asked for specific examples, she references the billboards and leaflets and media commentaries that have been picking up steam in the run-up to the 2012 election aimed at keeping all but the most confident voters from turning out. “All this talk about voter fraud, try to scare people into thinking that means them, [especially] students and low-income communities,” she says. “They try to be as vague as possible so that people think,

‘Well, it’s too risky to even try.’” Her final big concern is the tough new photo identification law currently pending in the Ohio state legislature and in numerous state capitols around the country. Although she says she strongly supports reasonable efforts to prevent voter fraud, she maintains that requiring would-be voters to present a photo identification listing their current address is almost like taking away their right to vote. “Low-income folks don’t have the same address year-to-year, they move around a lot—[not like] middle, upper-middle class folks with a permanent address and stable income.”

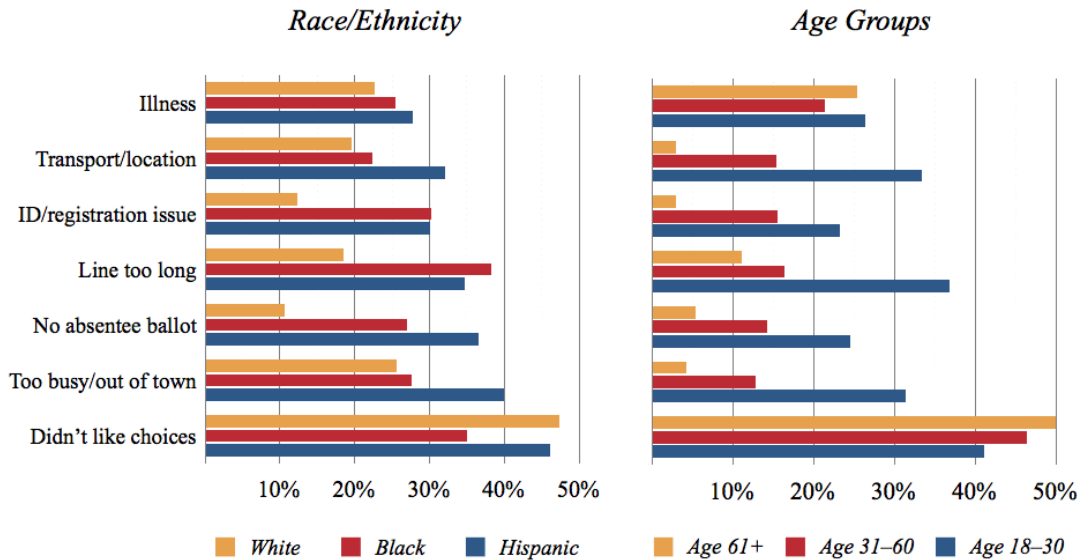
These findings from the interviews are supported and expanded in national studies of voter behavior. A comprehensive Caltech/MIT survey of both registered and unregistered eligible voters who failed to cast a ballot in 2008 found disapproval of candidate choices, busyness, illness, transportation, and registration/administrative problems to be the leading causes of nonparticipation, with considerable variation across groups (similar data for 2012 were not available).⁴⁰ Although income and education levels were not recorded in the survey, race and age were major factors influencing who made it to the polls on Election Day and what kind of barriers they faced. African American and Hispanic citizens were roughly three times as likely as whites to lack the required identification and to have difficulty finding the correct polling place. They were more than three times as likely as whites to not receive their requested absentee ballot, and roughly twice as likely to be out of town on Election Day and to have to wait in long lines. Asian and Native American citizens also reported voting problems at rates equal to, and in some cases higher than, African American and Hispanic citizens.⁴¹ With the exception of Asian Americans, members of minority groups experience poverty at between twice and three times the rate of whites.⁴²

Minority citizens in general were also substantially more likely than whites to report transportation problems, voting hours, and location as reasons for not getting to the polls, although white voters were the most likely to cite disapproval of candidate choices as the reason for not voting. All told, the most common barriers facing African American and Hispanic citizens on Election Day in 2008 were long lines, registration

and identification problems, difficulty getting to the polls, scheduling conflicts, failure to receive a requested absentee ballot, and disapproval of candidate choices. At least 25 percent of minority nonvoters cited each of these issues as “major” or “minor” reasons for not voting. Among white citizens, by contrast, the two reasons given by more than 25 percent of nonvoters were disapproval of the choice of candidates and scheduling conflicts, at 47 percent and 35 percent, respectively.⁴³ The data are summarized in Figure 9.

Young voters were also substantially more likely than their older counterparts to experience a range of practical and administrative hurdles when attempting to exercise the franchise in 2008, according to the Caltech/MIT survey. Nonvoters between the ages of 18 and 30 were at least twice as likely as middle-age nonvoters to report transportation issues and difficulty accessing the polls, and more than twice as likely to cite long lines, bad timing/busyness, and failure to receive a requested absentee ballot. By contrast, older nonvoters cited disapproval of candidate choices as the most common reason for not voting. Overall, informal external barriers related to election administration accounted for 44 percent of the reported “major factors” and 61 percent of the reported “minor factors” given for nonparticipation among eligible citizens, although the remaining major and minor factors consisted of voluntary/personal issues or other reasons.⁴⁴

Figure 9. Reasons for Not Voting by Eligible Citizens, 2008⁴⁵



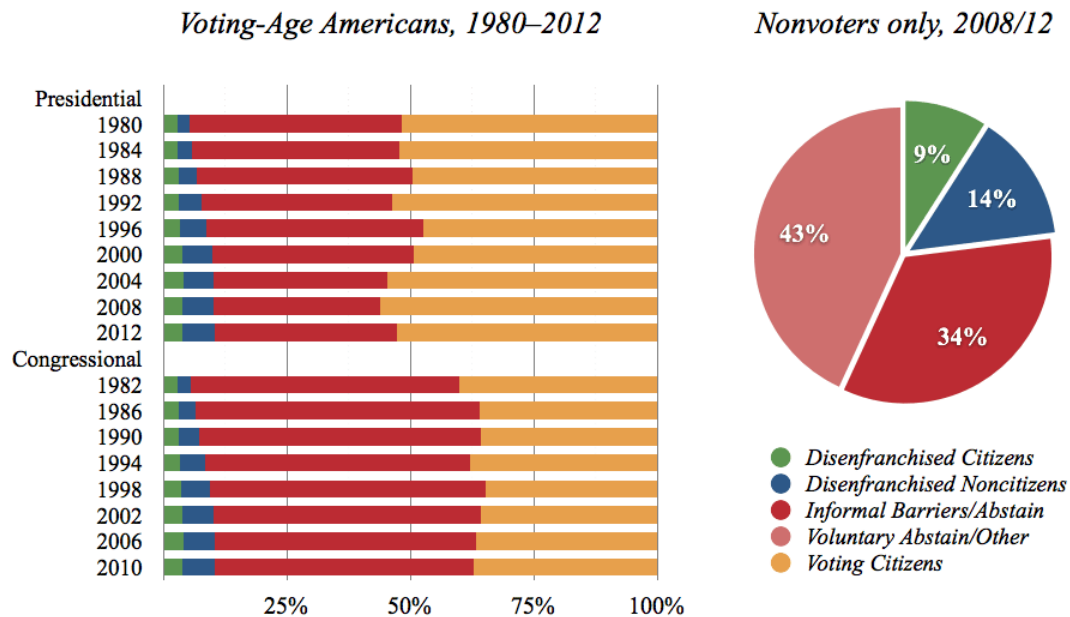
The number of disproportionately low-income voters discouraged or prevented from voting as a result is striking. The Caltech/MIT survey estimates that between 910,000 and 3 million votes were lost because of registration problems in 2008, a modest improvement compared with the year 2000, when between 1.5 million and 3 million votes were lost for the same reason.⁴⁶ Another 1.8 million voters experienced equipment problems at the polls, placing the total number of registered voters who were prevented from voting in 2008 well ahead of national popular vote margins in the presidential elections of 2000 and 2004.⁴⁷ Furthermore, an estimated 1.5 million voters found their polling place poorly run and 1 million reported feeling intimidated at the polls.⁴⁸ African American and Hispanic voters were considerably more likely than white voters to be asked to show photo identification at the polls, at rates of 70 percent, 65 percent, and 51 percent, respectively.⁴⁹

Over 50 million voters reported waiting in line on Election Day 2012 and approximately 25 million reported waits of 30 minutes or more—primarily people of color in urban areas and the state of Florida.⁵⁰ African American and Hispanic voters waited an average of more than 20 minutes to vote, almost twice as long as whites. In counties with populations exceeding 150,000 voters, the average wait was longer than

18 minutes, more than double the time in counties with 50,000 voters or less.⁵¹ Low- and moderate-income voters waited approximately 10 percent longer than those with incomes above \$100,000, and young voters also experienced significantly longer waits than their older counterparts.⁵² Finally, in the state of Florida, voters waited an average of 45 minutes and an estimated 200,000 Florida voters “gave up in frustration” before they had the chance to cast their ballot in 2012.⁵³ Overall, nearly one in 10 Americans reported that they or someone they knew tried to vote but was not able to in 2012, and close to half of eligible Americans who did not cast a ballot cited external administrative barriers as the major cause.⁵⁴

Of course, it is better to have the franchise—hurdles and all—than to be denied voting rights under the law. That is the fate of nearly 6 million U.S. citizens who carry a criminal record, even though the majority of them were jailed for nonviolent offenses (or never locked up at all) and have since completed their sentences. Another 22 million American immigrants do not have voting rights because of their noncitizen status, a modern aberration from the norm of allowing permanent residents the right to vote in a majority of states until the 1920s. In addition, roughly 5 million more law-abiding citizens in Washington, DC; Puerto Rico; and the other island territories also have their voting rights curtailed because of a lack of voting representation in Congress. I summarize the categories of voters and non-voters in Figure 10 and examine each group in turn.

Figure 10. Americans Voting and Not Voting, and Categories of Nonvoters, 1980-2012⁵⁵



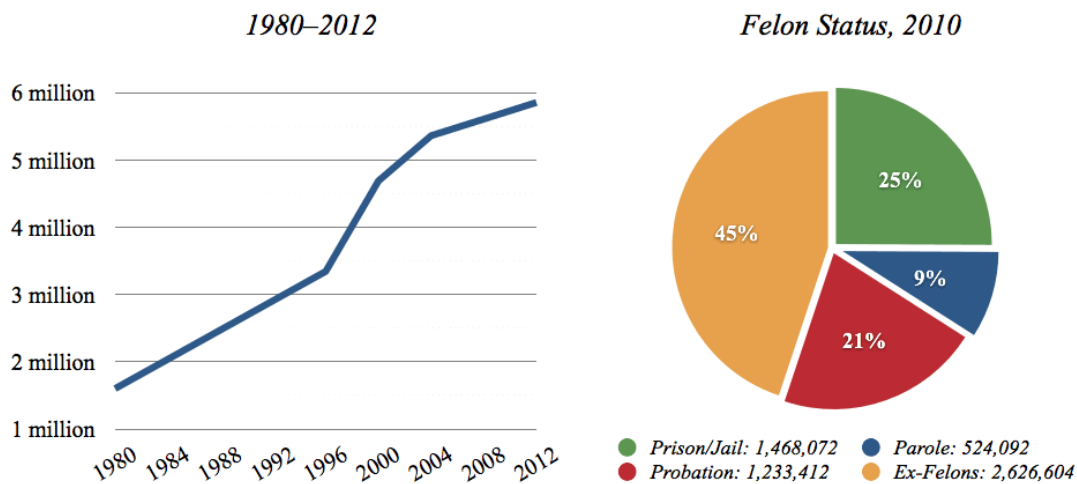
Felon Disenfranchisement

Most American states severely restrict the franchise for citizens convicted of a felony. Although the terms *felon* and *criminal* are often associated with violence and brutality, the vast majority of Americans who carry the label today were convicted of relatively minor nonviolent offenses, and many never set foot in prison.⁵⁶ More than 2.3 million Americans are currently locked up, seven times more than in 1972, giving America the largest prison population on earth.⁵⁷ People convicted of possessing or selling illegal drugs, regardless of the amount, account for one third of all convicted felons, the largest single group.⁵⁸ Other common felonies include property, white-collar, and driving-related offenses. Murderers and rapists, by contrast, make up only 4 percent of the convicted felon population.⁵⁹

Although the practice of felon disenfranchisement dates back to colonial times, its effect on democratic participation has increased in recent decades with America's so-called War on Drugs and soaring prison population. An estimated 5.8 million people in 48 states—2.5 percent of the adult population—are currently ineligible to vote because of a felony conviction, even though two thirds of them have completed

their prison terms.⁶⁰ Nearly 2 million people in 35 states are barred from voting when they resume their normal responsibilities as taxpaying citizens under community supervision (probation or parole) and more than 2 million more in 12 states continue to be disenfranchised once they have completed their sentence in full.⁶¹ In the four most restrictive states of Florida, Iowa, Kentucky, and Virginia, all citizens convicted of a felony permanently lose the right to vote, even if they never set foot in prison.⁶²

Figure 11. Disenfranchised People in the Criminal Justice System, 1980–2012⁶³



The number and range of offenses that result in disenfranchisement has grown in time along with the number of affected citizens, as shown in Figure 11. Once reserved for “high crimes,” disenfranchisement laws were expanded during the Jim Crow era of racial segregation to bar all people convicted of felonies from voting.⁶⁴ In Florida, where an estimated 600,000 ex-felons were prevented from voting in the hotly contested 2000 presidential election, possession of an ounce of marijuana can result in lifetime loss of voting and other rights.⁶⁵ At least six states even disenfranchise citizens convicted of a misdemeanor.⁶⁶

Felon disenfranchisement is not randomly distributed across the population. The large majority of past and present felons who have lost the right to vote were raised in low-income households and continue to live in poverty. According to a U.S.

Department of Justice survey conducted before the Great Recession, 70 percent of state and 58 percent of federal prisoners had poverty-level incomes of less than \$2,000 in the month prior to their incarceration, and 28 percent were unemployed—roughly five times the overall rates of poverty and unemployment at the time.⁶⁷ The study also found that prisoners were half as likely as the general population to have achieved more than a high school qualification.⁶⁸ The rate of poverty and low education among people convicted of a felony has likely increased since the financial collapse of 2008.

In racial terms, the disparities in formal exclusion from the polls are even greater, with African Americans constituting around 38 percent of disenfranchised people—five times the rate among other groups—owing to significantly higher rates of searching, sentencing, and detention by law enforcement.⁶⁹ Nationwide, roughly one in seven African American men is officially disenfranchised, with rates climbing as high as one in three in certain states.⁷⁰

Felon disenfranchisement was a common concern raised by low-income citizens interviewed for the Poor (in) Democracy project. Roughly one in three interviewees reported past involvement in the criminal justice system, generally for nonviolent offenses such as theft, narcotics possession, insurance fraud, homelessness, or panhandling; three individuals reported committing violent, gang-related offenses. Consistent with the criminal justice data, the vast majority of interviewees with reported felony convictions were men and the majority of them were people of color. All reported having been raised in poverty and said they were presently experiencing poverty.

According to Richard, a 28-year-old homeless electrician in Montgomery, Alabama, who recently completed a three-and-a-half year sentence for armed robbery and is struggling to find a job, the change in status that comes with felony convictions in Alabama is costly and irreversible. “Some people don’t believe in second chances,” he says, adding, “Once you’re a criminal always a criminal—they’ll do anything to keep our kind of people down.” For certain violent offenses, the loss of citizenship is permanent in Alabama; for lesser offenses, voting rights can now be restored after serving time in prison and on parole, thanks to a 2003 state law.⁷¹ But the onus is on

the offender to petition for reinstatement, as Richard knows. He says that to have his rights restored, he must go to City Hall to apply for a special pardon from the Board of Pardons and Parole. Although he intends to submit his petition after he finishes parole, he does not hold out hope that he will be approved. The numbers appear to bear him out: 7,700 ex-felons have had their voting rights restored under the 2003 law, just 3 percent of the roughly 258,000 Alabamans with felony convictions; the number of requested reinstatements is unknown. The remaining quarter-million—including 15 percent of the state’s African American population—continue to be ineligible to vote because of past offenses.⁷²

If Richard is one of the 5.8 million citizens who are legally disenfranchised through the criminal justice system, Diane in Cleveland and Troy in New Orleans represent a potentially much larger group of effectively disenfranchised people with past convictions who say they would like to vote but are unaware of the fact that they may petition to have their voting rights restored. Diane, a self-professed workaholic and grandmother of two in her 60s who was laid off from her Cleveland auto parts factory a few years ago and has been unable to find work since then, maintains that she is still ineligible to vote because of a theft she committed 40 years ago. “I’m not voting now because I’m a felon—they won’t let me vote,” she says, adding, “I paid my fine, did 17 months . . . why can’t they let it go, give me another chance?” Making matters worse, Diane believes that “nobody really cares about [felon disenfranchisement]” or wants to make a change—“but to me it’s important.”

Troy, the middle-aged former auto mechanic who lost his family home to Hurricane Katrina and currently lives under Interstate 10 in downtown New Orleans, shares Diane’s presumption that he is disenfranchised because of a past conviction. Troy’s reported offense consisted of driving a friend’s car when “the police stopped me and found a dirty firearm in the trunk, gave me a convicted felony and sent me to federal prison for four years.” Troy claims he had never seen the gun before in his life. Now, more than a year after his release from federal prison, Troy maintains that he is a convicted felon—“they call me a ‘career criminal’”—and assumes that he is permanently ineligible to vote. In actual fact, although Louisiana denies jail inmates,

prisoners, and anyone released on parole or felony probation from exercising the franchise, ex-felons like Troy are technically entitled to vote. But neither the court officials nor his former parole officer nor any of the social services offices he has visited since his release have let him know his rights, according to Troy. A 2010 estimate placed the number of disenfranchised citizens of Louisiana and Ohio at 112,000 and 54,000, respectively;⁷³ the number of citizens like Diane and Troy who incorrectly assume that they are still ineligible may be even larger.

As Richard, Diane, and Troy made clear in their interviews, the burden of felon disenfranchisement does not end with voting. Even after they have finished serving their sentence, former felons may not sit on juries and are denied access to essential government services for people without incomes or employment in many states, such as food stamps, public housing, unemployment insurance, and welfare.⁷⁴ Ex-offenders also find themselves ineligible for many educational benefits and may lose parental rights.⁷⁵ Most damaging to their long-term prospects, they face legal restrictions on employment in many states and must carry the social stigma associated with their conviction for the rest of their lives.⁷⁶ Those who do obtain employment may find their wages garnished, in part or in full, to pay for their former jail sentence or to make up missing child care payments from when they were imprisoned.

“If you have any one of them kind of charges, what I went down for,” Richard says, “[employers] say ‘Naw, we won’t take you.’” Troy’s reported experience is much the same: “When I was released to the halfway house, I had all the work in the world; when I was released from the halfway house, I had no work at all, so I was homeless.” The result, according to legal scholars like Michelle Alexander, is a semi-permanent second-class status—the “American under-caste”—for current and former felons, irrespective of the nonviolent nature of most offenses.⁷⁷

Immigrant Exclusion

American citizens in the criminal justice system are not the only group of people who are denied voting rights under the law. For millions of foreign-born people who call the United States home but have yet to join the ranks of full-fledged citizens,

casting a ballot remains an elusive dream. Few Americans today question the longstanding practice of denying permanent residents the right to vote, as voting is often taken to be an essential component of citizenship. But no American court has ever found the practice of noncitizen suffrage to be unconstitutional.⁷⁸ In fact, for most of our country's first 150 years, a majority of American states granted voting rights to all residents under the Constitution, and a handful of American cities still grant those rights today in the case of local elections.⁷⁹ Indeed, as many as 40 American states and territories extended the right to vote in local, state, and federal elections to their noncitizen residents between 1776 and the 1920s, when the practice fell out of favor amidst anti-immigrant fervor.⁸⁰ More than 40 democracies worldwide currently extend the franchise to noncitizen resident either in part or in full.⁸¹

What is the relationship between immigrant disenfranchisement and poverty and political voice? Around 40 million foreign-born immigrants currently live and work in the United States.⁸² A majority of them—22 million or 7 percent of the total population—do not have citizenship status, including 11 million who are undocumented and at risk of deportation.⁸³ In certain jurisdictions, between a quarter and a half of the adult population is ineligible to vote because they are noncitizens.⁸⁴ This lack of legal standing leaves noncitizens with a limited formal stake in the country they call home and scarcely any political voice in the laws that govern their lives. The rise in the number of noncitizens living and working in the United States is charted in Figure 12 alongside other disenfranchised Americans.

For the majority of U.S. noncitizens born in Mexico, the rate of labor market participation among adults exceeds their native-born counterparts by 71 to 64 percent.⁸⁵ Most of them are locked in low-skilled jobs earning poverty-level wages that few Americans would choose to undertake.⁸⁶ Because of their precarious position in the American political economy, they are frequently subject to abuse by employers and are without legal recourse. A landmark survey of low-wage workers in America's three largest cities found that more than two-thirds of workers—most of them foreign-born—experienced at least one pay-related violation in the previous work week, losing an average of 15 percent off their average weekly earnings of \$339.⁸⁷ All told, one in

four noncitizens currently lives below the poverty line, nearly twice the rate of native-born Americans, and recent immigrants account for a small fraction of the country's household wealth.⁸⁸

In exchange for the many advantages they derive by living in the United States, American noncitizens pay considerably more in taxes than they receive in public benefits from local, state, and federal governments—\$80,000 more in a lifetime, on average, according to the National Research Council.⁸⁹ Immigrants pay an estimated \$133 billion per year in income, sales, and property taxes across the United States.⁹⁰ The Social Security Trust Fund is a leading beneficiary, as undocumented immigrants alone contribute roughly \$15 billion per year through their payroll taxes while taking only \$1 billion from the fund because of their general ineligibility for retirement and disability benefits, according to official government figures.⁹¹ The total contributions of undocumented workers to Social Security are estimated at \$300 billion.⁹² The U.S. military also benefits from active enlistment by American noncitizens, with around 16,000 currently serving on active duty despite being unable to vote for their Commander-in-Chief.⁹³

Not surprisingly, most immigrants are eager to join the ranks of full-fledged citizens, a process that typically takes eight to 10 years and is considerably more costly and restrictive than in the past.⁹⁴ Because of their illegal status, many undocumented immigrants currently living in the United States are prevented from naturalization. For those immigrants who are able to become citizens and join the formal workforce, the rate of poverty falls from 25 to 12.5 percent, less than that of the native-born population.⁹⁵ Yet until they reach their goal or America decides to revisit its earlier tradition of enfranchising all residents in local, state, or even federal elections, the voices of foreign-born immigrants will continue to go unheard in politics.

For Christina, a middle-age naturalized citizen from Mexico who earned her college education in the library sans degree, political rights for immigrants are a matter of economic fairness. Interviewed in Spanish and English at a local community center in Memphis, Tennessee, she argues that immigrant disenfranchisement is fundamentally “all about money.” According to Christina, “Immigrants pay taxes but

they want to deny us Social Security when we retire, kick us out,” adding, “We helped build and grow the economy.” She reports that she is regularly accused of stealing other people’s jobs, using public services, and not paying her share—“but that’s not true. I pay taxes, I work here, eat here, live here.”

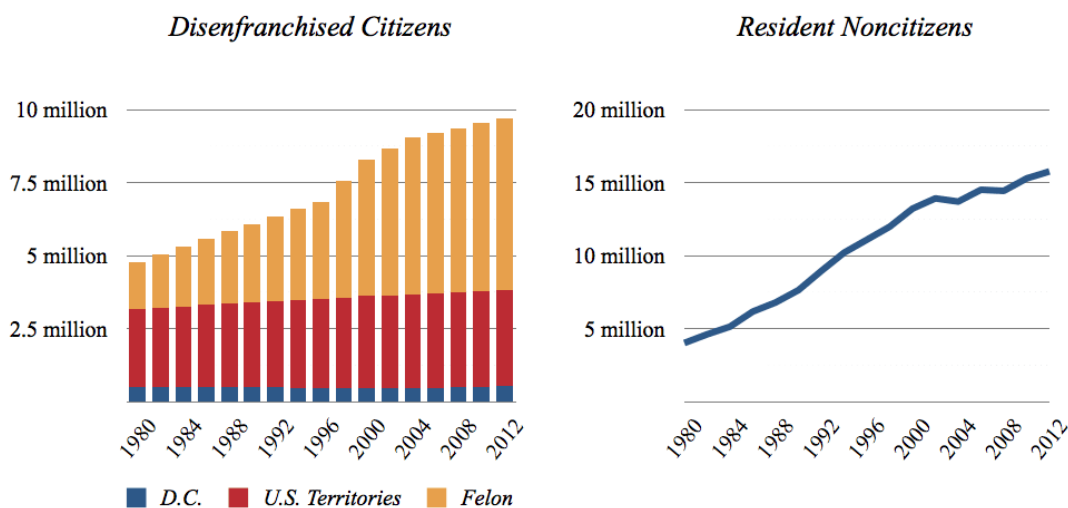
For those less fortunate than Christina, who have not been able to secure citizenship rights, abuse and exploitation are regular facts of life in the workplace. Giovanna, a Peruvian American approaching age 30 who grew up in Costa Rica and has lived in Tennessee for the last seven years, reports in fluent English that large numbers of immigrant workers experience but do not report wage theft on the part of employers for fear of losing their jobs or being detained. Although wage theft can take a wide variety of forms, the most common cases Giovanna has seen are compensation below the mandatory minimum wage, typically \$5 to \$6 per hour or less than half the poverty line for a family of four. In restaurants, she says, it is not uncommon for undocumented workers to be denied wages altogether and rely only on tips. Giovanna’s experiences are backed up by national studies of wage theft, which find between two and three million workers are denied minimum wage alone.⁹⁶ The predictable result of worker abuse, along with persistent racial profiling by the police, is to silence large numbers of both documented and undocumented immigrants in the political realm, according to Giovanna. “Most of them are afraid,” she says. “They think because they are Latino they are different and shouldn’t get to participate in politics.”

Mariaelena, the 36-year-old substitute teacher and community organizer of Mexican descent living in Las Cruces, NM, echoes these concerns. She says she has seen her share of immigrant deportations, at considerable cost to families and the community, for what she considers to be petty offenses. “If you’re selling dope or making meth, please by all means you have to leave,” she says in fluent English, emphasizing her lack of sympathy for law-breaking immigrants who give the community a bad name. “But if you are a hardworking onion farmer and you are speeding at five in the morning because you are going to be late to work and they dock your pay and make you stay two hours because you’re late . . . if you arrest him and

he’s the only bread[winner] in the family and you take the only vehicle,” she continues, “then you devastate the community.” According to Mariaelena, “They’ve been doing that to tons of different families around here . . . deporting them for silly stuff.”

The experiences of Christina, Giovanna, Mariaelena, and other foreign-born immigrants interviewed reinforce the finding from comparative studies of immigration policy that extension of socioeconomic rights and benefits in developed democracies go hand-in-hand with immigrant political rights.⁹⁷ On both socioeconomic and political accounts, the United States appears to lag behind many of its peers in the developed world. Even in immigrant communities where a sizable percentage of the foreign-born population has been naturalized and gained the right to vote, the immigrants interviewed perceive a distinct lack of political voice. Describing her recent experience during a civic engagement campaign in southern New Mexico before the 2012 election, Mariaelena says, “We went up against a lot of folks that had been disenfranchised.” She says the common refrains she heard from naturalized citizens were, “No, my vote doesn’t count. . . . Look, I voted and nothing ever changes. . . . These politicians, they only come here for our votes.” Based on personal experience, Mariaelena says, she cannot disagree.

Figure 12. Number of Disenfranchised Citizens and Resident Noncitizens, 1980–2012⁹⁸



Representation for Washington, D.C., and the Territories

A final group of disenfranchised Americans consists of the 632,000 citizens in Washington, D.C., and roughly 4 million citizens in Puerto Rico and the other American territories who lack voting representation in Congress—a bizarre historical injustice that has yet to be corrected in spite of repeated attempts by Congress and the courts. When the District was first established as the nation’s capital in 1790, residents were permitted to vote for U.S. Representatives in neighboring Maryland and Virginia until the federal government intervened in 1801.⁹⁹ Only with ratification of the 23rd Amendment in 1963 were D.C. residents permitted to vote in presidential elections, while ongoing efforts to secure Senate representation and more than a single nonvoting delegate in the House of Representatives (granted by Congress in 1971) have repeatedly failed.¹⁰⁰ Even city leaders were initially appointed by the president and only became subject to direct election by citizens through an act of Congress in 1973.¹⁰¹

In Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands, Guam, and American Samoa, residents observe the same rights and responsibilities as other American citizens, but are denied voting equality by the courts—a precedent dating back to the Insular Cases of 1901 to 1904.¹⁰² The decisions regarding America’s colonial possessions have been compared by legal historians to another ruling by the same Supreme Court denying equal citizenship to African Americans in *Plessy v. Ferguson*.¹⁰³ Like District residents, the citizens of Puerto Rico and the other island territories pay certain federal taxes (albeit it not on territorial income) and are subject to military conscription, but lack representation in the U.S. Senate and have only one nonvoting delegate each in the House of Representatives.¹⁰⁴ Unlike D.C. or the 50 states, they do not have a vote in national presidential elections.¹⁰⁵ Even so, their commitment to democracy is strong, according to recent elections: eight in 10 voting-age Puerto Ricans regularly turn out in the island’s local elections, one of the highest rates of voter participation in the world.¹⁰⁶

The effects of nonrepresentation of District and territory citizens in Congress disproportionately fall on low-income and minority people. Approximately half the

population of Washington, D.C. is African American, a sharp contrast to the one percent African American population in Wyoming and Vermont, the two states with smaller populations than D.C. and full congressional representation. Another 10 percent of District residents are Hispanic.¹⁰⁷ Although median household incomes in Washington exceed the national average by a healthy 17 percent, thanks in large part to the District's affluent white minority and booming "influence" industry, nearly one in five residents and one in three children are currently living in poverty.¹⁰⁸ In Puerto Rico, the largest of the American territories by far with 3.5 million Hispanic inhabitants, the poverty rate is an astonishing 46 percent—three times the national rate—and formal unemployment hovers around 16 percent.¹⁰⁹ Child poverty in Puerto Rico is even higher, at 56 percent, and 80 percent of Puerto Rican children live in high-poverty areas, compared with 11 percent of children in the 50 states.¹¹⁰

For District residents with means, the close proximity to (and frequent professional employment in) the organs of government partly offset the lack of voting representation; as we will explore in the following chapter, wealthy citizens employ a range of tools beyond the franchise to influence politics. For the majority of Washingtonians with limited means, however, the story is different. One need only walk a few blocks from the U.S. Capitol to see inner-city neighborhoods in disrepair where endemic, intergenerational poverty is a fact of life. In the Puerto Rican capital of San Juan and outlying areas, conditions frequently resemble a developing country, with deeply rooted socioeconomic inequalities and incomplete access to basic sanitation, public health facilities, and adequate education.¹¹¹ The lack of voting power for their respective delegates in the House of Representatives means low-income residents are effectively excluded from participation in the national decision-making process, especially when it comes to deciding federal appropriations for human capital and infrastructure development in the District and territories. Whether or not equal representation would result in increased federal appropriations—considered overly generous by some—is a matter of speculation.

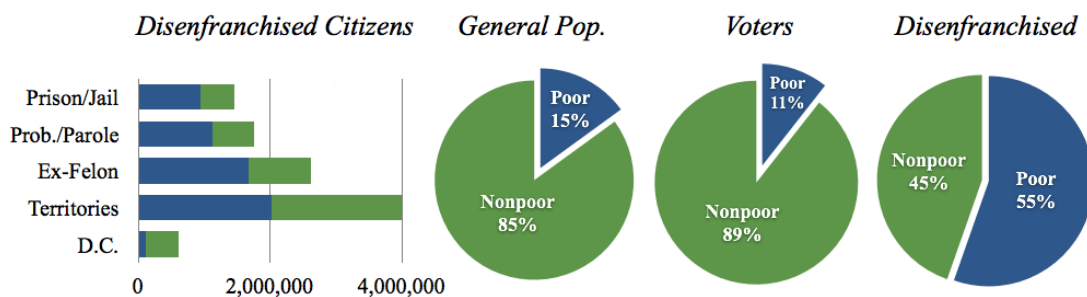
The lack of political voice is clearly felt by Malik, a homeless man with disabilities and a D.C. native in his 50s, interviewed outside the city's only downtown

shelter a few blocks west of Capitol Hill. According to Malik, word on the street is that the shelter will be shutting down in a couple of months for lack of funds, making way for more lucrative properties in this quickly gentrifying part of downtown. Although he has high hopes for getting out of the shelter and into a place of his own next month—his long-awaited disability check, including back payments, has finally come through—he says he worries about what will happen to the thousands of homeless people who call the shelter home every year. “I see people come in here all day,” he says. “They come from the prison, [police] let ‘em out on that corner. . . . I see it every day.” Free and subsidized housing arrangements can be made through the city’s Department of Housing, he says, but in a tight housing market where rates are climbing quickly, the wait is often several years before the applicant’s name comes up, if it ever comes up at all. Although Malik’s immediate concerns are the purview of city government and not directly attributable to his lack of voting representation in Congress, he views the state of services available to low-income people as inextricably linked to a general lack of representation in politics.

Josan, another resident of the E Street Shelter in his late 30s who recently packed up his homeless camp in the woods near Key Bridge because of the November chill, echoes Malik’s concerns about the lack of funding for social needs in a city that is largely beholden to the federal government. He notes that “some people [at the shelter] have mental health problems and they don’t have the funds to keep these mental health places open.” Detailing the many steps a person must take to get into public housing—“there’s people been on that housing list for almost 10 years and they still haven’t got houses yet.” Josan sees the city’s homeless problem worsening in the next few years. “It’s really like a crisis right now ‘cause there’s less jobs and people don’t have funding to really take care of themselves out here,” he says. “That’s why you really see a lot of people out here on the street.” Although he has been able to line up occasional under-the-table jobs in construction and demolition, the money he earns is only enough for “washing clothes, getting food, transportation—it won’t get you into a house . . . takin’ care of bills.”

For Malik and Josan, the problems are both personal and political and require a change in personal attitudes as well as political voice. A person has to take responsibility for their own self, Malik says, bemoaning the fact that “people tell me they’re tired . . . when they got no reason to complain.” In Josan’s words, many of the people at the shelter have “given up on life and don’t wanna accept responsibility,” a position he condemns. But both men also maintain that the system should ensure that everyone, rich and poor, is represented in the decision-making process. That’s where D.C.’s lack of voting rights in Congress comes into play. “Ain’t got no representation in Congress,” Malik says. “The game has already been fixed, it’s fixed before it even starts.” As far as both men are concerned, the perceived lack of adequate social services for low-income citizens in Washington, D.C. goes hand-in-hand with their lack of congressional representation. Although District residents pay federal taxes and serve in the U.S. armed forces, Malik and Josan feel effectively silenced in politics. “Hell no the politicians ain’t gonna come down here to find out what we need,” says Josan, underscoring his perception that people in power do not know and do not care about D.C. people. Likening politics to chess with a rich opponent who is allowed to set the rules, Malik says, “People that got the money, they put their people in [government]. . . . The poor can’t make a move.”

Figure 13. Poverty Status of Disenfranchised Citizens v. General and Voting Populations, 2012¹¹²



All told, the informal barriers to voting outlined above—combined with rising disaffection among voters overall—kept more than 50 million eligible Americans from registering to vote in 2012 and 40 million more registered voters from casting their ballots.¹¹³ Formal legal restrictions accounted for another 10 million citizens being excluded from the polls because of a felony conviction or outright territorial exclusion. In addition, roughly 16 million voting-age immigrants are ineligible to vote because of their noncitizen status, putting the total number of disenfranchised people in the United States at more than 25 million, or 11 percent of the voting-age population (up from 5 percent in 1980). Taken together, the number of potential voters excluded from equal participation by both formal and informal means is significantly more than half the number of votes cast in 2012, and more than the total turnout in recent midterm elections. Furthermore, as we have seen, legally disenfranchised Americans are not randomly selected from the population: nearly all are people of color with limited educational opportunities and family incomes below the national median. The majority of disenfranchised Americans live in outright poverty, as shown in Figure 13.

Whether these patterns were intended or not, the persistent, systematic nature of American disenfranchisement along class and racial lines undermines public confidence in the institutions of government and profoundly affects representation. Practically speaking, widespread exclusion of poor and minority voters produces a disproportionate dependence of candidates and elected officials on more affluent voters and creates an incentive for vote-seeking candidates to tailor their messages and voting behavior to middle- and upper-income constituents. Psychologically speaking, such actions contribute to a self-reinforcing cycle of distrust, disaffection, and disengagement among impoverished Americans when it comes to politics and public life.¹¹⁴

But voting is not the only form of participation practiced in American politics, and it is arguably not the most effective either. Volunteering in politics, contributing to political causes and campaigns, and lobbying the government all have a profound effect, including the potential to change election outcomes and representation. Unlike voting, these forms of political participation are, in principle, unrestricted and open to

all under the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. As such, where voting provides a “ceiling” on the political power of the individual in the form of one person—one vote, unrestricted modes of political participation come at a considerable cost to low-income people while enhancing the participatory power of people with means. They have been linked by scholars to a “dependence corruption”¹¹⁵ of elected officials on a small minority of the population—an ominous trend from the standpoint of low-income Americans seeking equal voice and representation in politics.

3.2 Campaigning, Contributing, and Lobbying

For many Americans, like Twain in Alabama and Mel in Oklahoma, voting is all there is when it comes to making your voice heard in a democracy. Why think beyond the ballot box when voting is already a stretch for millions of people, as we discussed above? But the conversation doesn’t end there.

In reality, voting is but one of many activities citizens may engage in to express themselves politically—if they have the social and financial means. What happens on Election Day is merely the culmination of a long and arduous process of political contestation in which candidates are recruited, campaigns are staffed, volunteers are enlisted, platforms are vetted, messages are devised, ads are run, and money is raised and spent in ever-increasing sums, all in a highly professionalized and choreographed process we call the modern campaign. Once the campaign ends, a period of governing begins, marked by professional lobbying, legislative maneuvering, message manipulation, and interest group mobilization, soon to be eclipsed by another election season.

Throughout these continuous cycles of American politics, political scientists argue that money and influence hold sway. Votes are only one input among many that determine who runs for and gets elected to public office, and what kinds of policies they pursue once they are there. In primary, midterm, and state and local elections where only a small fraction of eligible voters regularly turns out, votes are often treated as a secondary concern. What matters more are the resources candidates have to make

their message heard—resources that are far from equally distributed across the population.

In their monumental study of political voice and class in American democracy, political scientists Kay Lehman Schlozman, Sidney Verba, and Henry Brady summarize the state of political activism and economic inequality as follows: “When we think about the operation of elections in America, we focus on the essential equality among voters, each of whom has one vote. We rarely incorporate the fundamental insight . . . that year after year, decade after decade, and from one generation to the next, the affluent and well educated have participatory megaphones that amplify their voices in American politics. These class-based participatory inequalities shape what politicians hear about political needs, concerns, and preferences.”¹¹⁶ In other words, political participation comes at a cost, and not everyone has equal means—of time, talent, and treasure—to take part.

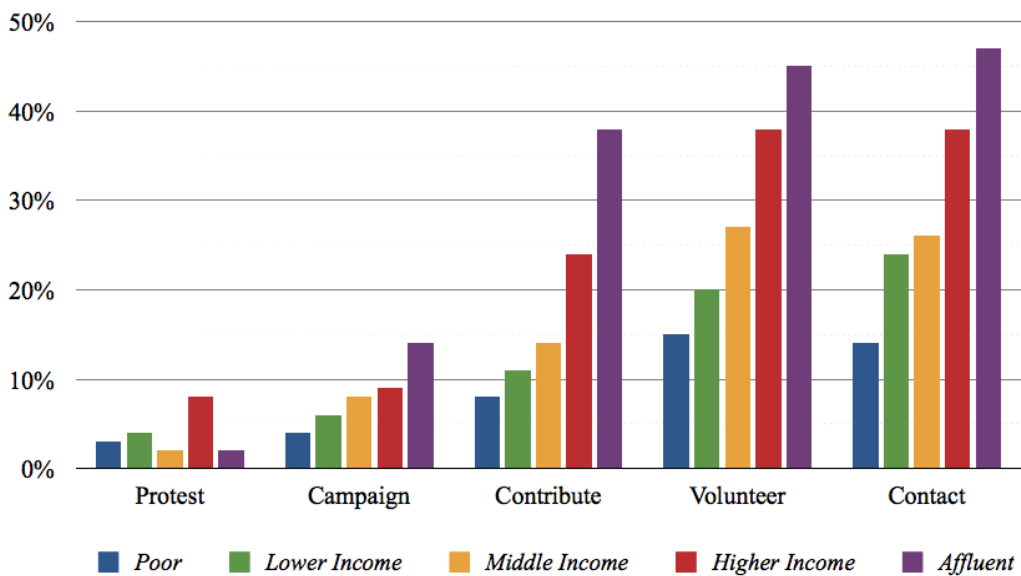
To understand the full dimensions of voluntary political participation in America beyond the ballot box, it is necessary to consider both the quantitative record (including surveys, campaign finance, and lobbying disclosures) and qualitative research from individual interviews. I begin by analyzing rates of citizen involvement in contacting government officials, working on community issues, joining political campaigns, attending political protests, and joining and becoming active in political organizations, a category of participation I call campaigning. Because official participation and membership data are not reported by groups, I rely on extensive citizen surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center (Internet and American Life Survey, 2008–12), Stanford University and the University of Michigan (American National Election Studies, 2008–12), National Opinion Research Center (Citizen Participation Survey, 1990), and Georgetown University (Citizenship, Involvement, Democracy Survey, 2005), compiled by Schlozman et al. The primary unit of analysis for organizing respondents is socioeconomic status,¹¹⁷ a composite of both income and education.¹¹⁸ Following that, I consider another form of political engagement that is entirely based on money—funding election campaigns—before investigating group-based political participation through the lobbying process. I conclude the section by

summarizing the qualitative research findings with respect to all three forms of political participation beyond the ballot box, based on interviews conducted with impoverished Americans’ through the Poor (in) Democracy project.

Campaigning

According to the Pew Internet and American Life Survey analyzed by Schlozman et al. and re-examined for this study, 15 percent of Americans in the bottom fifth in terms of socioeconomic status reported working with fellow citizens to solve a community problem, 14 percent contacted a government official for some reason, 8 percent work for a political party or candidate, and 3 percent attended a protest.¹¹⁹ Taken together, one in three impoverished citizens are deemed “active” by participating in at least two kinds of political activity, including contributing to political campaigns, which I cover in detail below.¹²⁰ By contrast, half of those in the middle in terms of socioeconomic status, and nearly three quarters of those in the top quintile, are politically active according to Pew.¹²¹ The findings are summarized in Figure 14.

Figure 14. Political Participation Rates by Socioeconomic Quintile, 2008¹²²



Using long-term survey data on activity in campaigns drawn from the quadrennial American National Elections Studies (ANES) for 1952–2008, Schlozman et al. show even more striking variations in the likelihood of engaging in campaign work and attending campaign events based on socioeconomic status. Although only 2 percent of Americans at the bottom of the income and education distribution attended campaign meetings and rallies or conducted campaign work, 17 percent of citizens at the very top attended campaign meetings and 11 percent conducted campaign work—a rate of participation five to eight times higher for those at the top.¹²³

Stepping back in time, analysis of citizen affiliations with and involvement in political groups contained in the 1990 Citizen Participation Survey (CPS) also shows marked variations across socioeconomic status. A quarter of respondents in the lowest socioeconomic quintile reported that they were a member of, or contributed money to, an organization that takes stands in politics, compared with half of those in the middle and nearly three quarters of those at the top.¹²⁴ Only one in 10 respondents in the bottom group reported attending a meeting of a group, compared with 27 percent and 51 percent of those in the middle and top, respectively.¹²⁵

Not surprisingly, the gap in participation grows even wider when it comes to direct engagement in political organizations, including serving on a committee, giving time to special projects, or helping organize meetings.¹²⁶ Four percent of citizens at the bottom, 17 percent of those in the middle, and 34 percent of those at the top reported being active in groups, a top-to-bottom ratio of more than eight to one.¹²⁷ If the general historical trends in voting observed among citizens with limited education and income apply to other forms of political engagement, the rates of participation reported by low-income Americans in 1990 are likely to be lower today. Indeed, only one percent of citizens in the bottom half of the population in terms of educational attainment reported working with a political organization or association in the 2005 Citizen, Involvement, Democracy Survey.¹²⁸

Investigating the means by which individuals become politically active in the first place sheds light on this distinction. Only one fourth of citizens in the bottom socioeconomic quintile reported engaging in some form of political recruitment of their

peers, compared with more than three fourths of citizens in the top quintile.¹²⁹ Those at the top were also six times more likely than those at the bottom to become active in response to a request, and nearly three times as likely to report being spontaneously active.¹³⁰ Furthermore, the majority of citizens surveyed as part of the ANES between 1956 and 2008 never heard from someone connected with a political party, although the likelihood of being contacted by a party rose sharply in step with rising socioeconomic status.¹³¹

Unions, in turn, have shown a marked decline in their ability to engage citizens in the political process, as the share of total political acts performed by union members fell from 25 percent in 1967 to 18 percent in 1990 and 11 percent in 2006.¹³² What limited power they had across the period tended to be concentrated among higher-income members, typically white-collar employees in the public sector, while traditional blue-collar unions lost ground. For example, members in the bottom two quintiles in terms of socioeconomic status accounted for 4.6 percent of all union political acts in 1967 and just 2.5 percent in 2007.¹³³ Far from mitigating participatory inequalities based on income and education, the political recruitment process, including union activity, seems to magnify the effect.

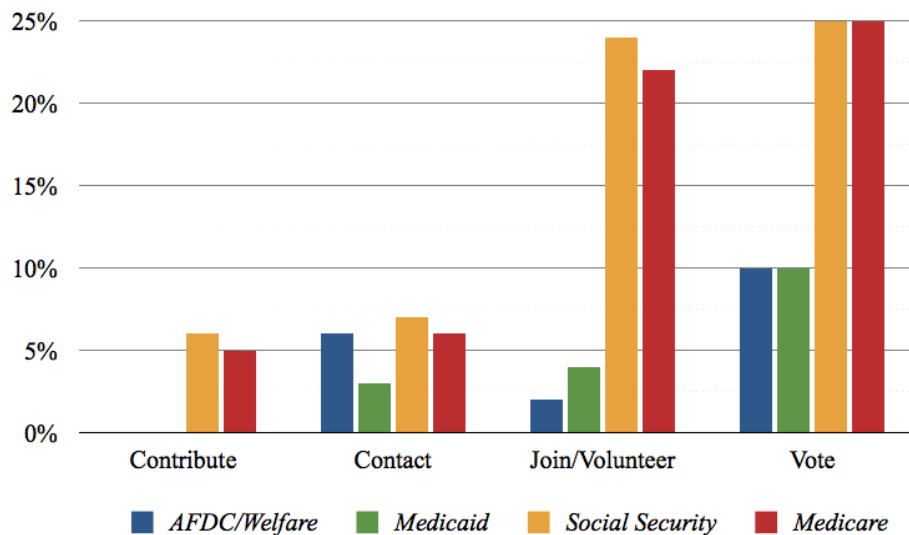
Turning to individual dimensions of economic need that correspond with low socioeconomic status, Schlozman, Verba, and Brady find that politically inactive citizens were substantially more likely than their active counterparts to live in substandard housing or to go without health insurance. Using ANES data, they find that 28 percent of respondents who did not vote, work for a campaign, or contribute to a candidate or party lived in substandard dwellings or neighborhoods, and 27 percent lacked any kind of health insurance.¹³⁴ By contrast, around 16 percent of voters and campaign workers reported going without health insurance and living in substandard housing and neighborhoods, and fewer than one in 10 campaign contributors reported the same problems.¹³⁵

Not surprisingly, the differences in political participation were even more pronounced when citizens were asked if they or a family member in their household received means-tested public benefits, including Medicaid, food stamps, housing

subsidies, or welfare. Although 9 percent of all respondents in the CPS answered yes, the rate among politically inactive citizens climbed to 17 percent, more than three times greater than their more active counterparts.¹³⁶ By contrast, 6 percent of voters, 5 percent of campaign workers, and 2 percent of campaign contributors reported receiving or having a family member receive means-tested public benefits. As noted above, the rates of participation among low-income citizens reported in 1990 are anticipated to be even lower today based on the clear and disproportionate decline in voter turnout among citizens with low socioeconomic status charted in Figure 6.

When recipients of specific forms of public assistance were asked whether they engaged in various forms of political activity in relation to the programs on which they depend, people receiving means-tested benefits like Medicaid reported substantially lower rates of participation than their comparatively well-off counterparts receiving the non-means-tested benefits Social Security and Medicare, as shown in Figure 15.¹³⁷ Although all beneficiaries have a demonstrable incentive to take part politically if there is even a small likelihood of influencing policy outcomes, only 10 percent of the low-income group reported voting with regard to their program, compared with 26 percent in the latter group of citizens. Furthermore, only 3 percent of those in the former group reported being affiliated with an organization concerned about government benefits, compared with 23 percent of those in the latter group.¹³⁸ As before, these findings date back to the 1990 CPS and may only be considered as background.

Figure 15. Political Participation Rates by Public Benefits Recipients, 1990¹³⁹



As the foregoing data show, moving from simply voting to more active forms of participation, such as volunteering for political causes or campaigns, tends to accentuate existing participatory inequalities based on socioeconomic status. Scholars attribute this fact to the common observation that contacting public officials, joining political campaigns, and banding together with neighbors to solve community problems require levels of time and talent that underprivileged citizens have in short supply. A more basic explanation emerges from interviews with low-income citizens themselves. As the qualitative evidence below will show, political engagement beyond the ballot box is frequently outside the plausibility frameworks of impoverished Americans, and even when they are invited to become politically active, many doubt whether their efforts will bear fruit.

Contributing to Political Campaigns

Before turning to the qualitative data, I analyze a final category of political participation based entirely on wealth, and assess its implications for equal political voice. Funding political parties and campaigns, hiring lobbyists and consultants, setting up advocacy organizations, and advertising one's point of view on the airwaves are

considered essential to the functioning of American democracy by the political establishment and by many wealthy citizens and special interest groups. Unlike voting and volunteering in politics, these activities cost money—substantial sums of money in today’s highly professionalized, media-drenched political environment. The predictable effect is to further accentuate existing inequalities of political voice between rich and poor Americans detailed above.

Although the number of campaign contributors has climbed in recent elections with the advent of online giving, particularly in presidential campaigns, the vast majority of Americans are effectively excluded from the campaign finance system. Roughly 8 million Americans situated near the top of the socioeconomic ladder contributed the \$3.26 billion raised by federal candidates, parties, and political action committees (PACs) during the 2012 election, according to campaign disclosures filed with the Federal Election Commission.¹⁴⁰ At 2.5 percent of the total population, these politically active donors were hardly representative of the general public. Surveys find that the average campaign contributor is considerably older, more partisan, and more likely to be white and male than the average American.¹⁴¹ Not surprisingly, he is considerably wealthier as well.

Men were more than twice as likely as women to contribute to political campaigns in 2012 according to the Center for Responsive Politics, accounting for 70 percent of total campaign funds. An Associated Press analysis found that more than 90 percent of itemized campaign contributions to 2012 presidential candidates came from majority-white neighborhoods, compared to 3.5 percent and 2.7 percent from majority Hispanic and majority African American neighborhoods, respectively.¹⁴² Although the AP analysis did not incorporate neighborhood-level income of campaign contributors, earlier surveys reveal that more than eight in ten people making itemized donations of \$200 or more have annual family incomes in excess of \$150,000, nearly three times the median family income in the United States.¹⁴³

What’s more, the 8 million Americans who fund political campaigns are hardly equal, as depicted in Figure 16. The large majority of citizens who contribute to politics do so in relatively small amounts of less than \$200. Taken together, such un-

itemized donations account for less than 15 percent of the total money raised even though they constitute over 80 percent of all donations made in recent elections. Indeed, the rise in mobile and online giving and the waves of first-time donors mobilized by President Obama, however noteworthy, have done little to counteract the hyper-concentration of political money at the top: between 2000 and 2008, the amount of money contributed in small amounts was cut in half from 15 percent to 8 percent of total monies raised, and 2012 was no exception.¹⁴⁴ The remaining 1.2 million donors in 2012—less than half of one percent of the population—provided roughly 90 percent of individual contributions in itemized amounts of \$200 or more.

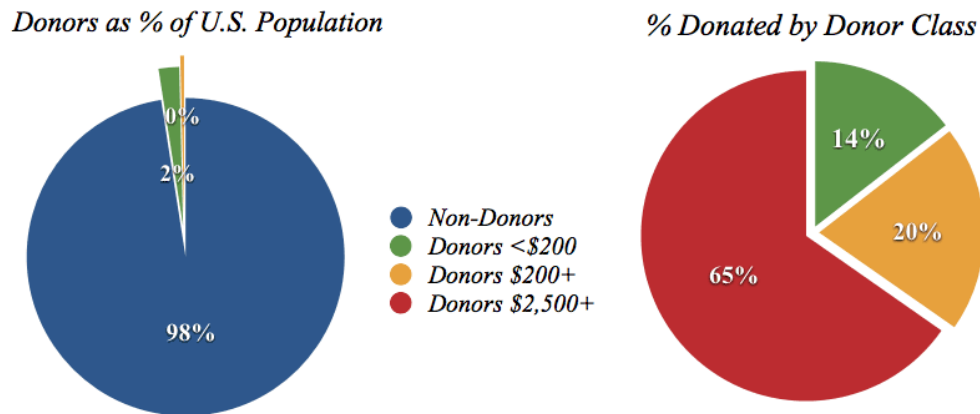
Turning to the exclusive club of major campaign donors, 237,640 individuals—less than one tenth of one percent of the population—made contributions totaling more than \$2,500 in 2012, the maximum size a person is allowed to give to a single candidate in an election. In spite of their low numbers, these individuals typically contribute to multiple candidates and PACs and are likely to be on a first-name basis with one or a handful of federal elected officials and party higher-ups. In 2012, they accounted for \$2.13 billion in campaign contributions, two thirds of the total monies raised from individuals and more than the bottom 99.9 percent of citizens combined.

An even more exclusive group of 44,260 heavy-hitters—one in 10,000 citizens—made donations in excess of \$10,000 in 2012 and accounted for \$1.33 billion or 41 percent of the total money raised from individuals. Many in this latter group serve as coveted “bundlers” to their favored candidates by hosting fundraisers and collecting stacks of checks from friends and business associates once they and members of their family have “maxed out.” Many of the more than 20,000 Washington lobbyists registered with the federal government fall into this rarefied group, for whom funding the members of Congress whose votes and influence they require in order to serve their clients’ needs is considered a “cost of doing business.”

By all accounts, these affluent heavy-hitters have become an indispensable first constituency for any person who aspires to public office. Even before the official campaign season begins, a “money election” takes place in which political candidates appeal to major donors for guidance and support.¹⁴⁵ Candidates must either “win” the

money election or do extremely well if they are to be in a position to effectively compete once the public campaign begins, raising around \$2 million and \$10 million, respectively, to run for the U.S. House and Senate. In the vast majority of races, the candidate (typically the incumbent) with the most money a year before Election Day wins.

Figure 16. Individual Political Donor Concentrations, 2012¹⁴⁶

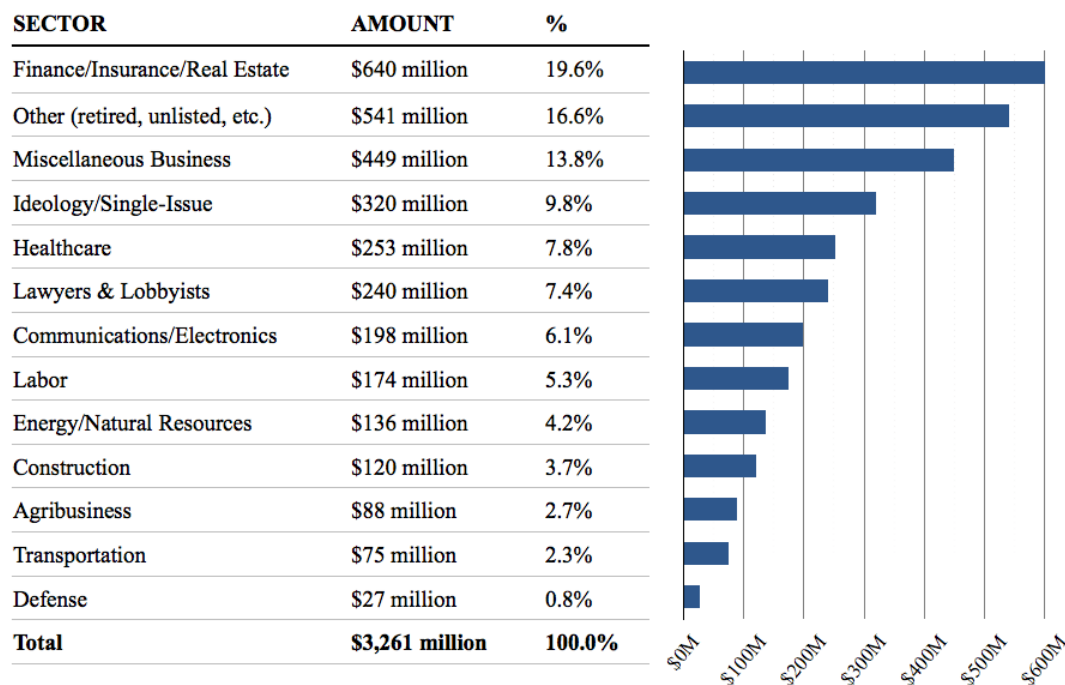


	DONORS	% POP.	AMOUNT	% DONATED
Donors <\$200	6,750,217	2.15%	\$472.5 million	14.5%
Donors \$200–\$2,499	1,003,011	0.32%	\$659.4 million	20.2%
Donors \$2,500–\$9,999	193,380	0.06%	\$802.4 million	24.6%
Donors \$10,000+	44,260	0.01%	\$1,326.3 million	40.7%
Total	7,990,868	2.55%	\$3,260.5 million	100.0%

Given the extreme concentration of political donations at the top, it is not surprising that the complexion and policy preferences of the donor class are hardly representative of the general public. Family income is the single best predictor of whether individuals invest in political campaigns and how much money they give.¹⁴⁷ Of the 12 contributing sectors identified by the Center for Responsive Politics, 10 consist primarily or exclusively of high-income business representatives, typically executives and lawyers making individual contributions, and businesses giving through their PACs. Indeed, more than two thirds of the money contributed in 2012—the bulk of it to incumbents in both parties—came from business and law, with the financial, insurance, and real estate sector leading the pack at 20 percent or \$640 million. The

health sector, and the lawyers and lobbyists sector, came next on the list of business interests, with around \$250 million in contributions each, followed by the communications, energy, and construction sectors at more than \$100 million each. Agribusiness, transportation, and defense followed with \$88 million, \$75 million, and \$27 million, respectively. Giving amounts by sector and percentage of total donations are shown in Figure 17.

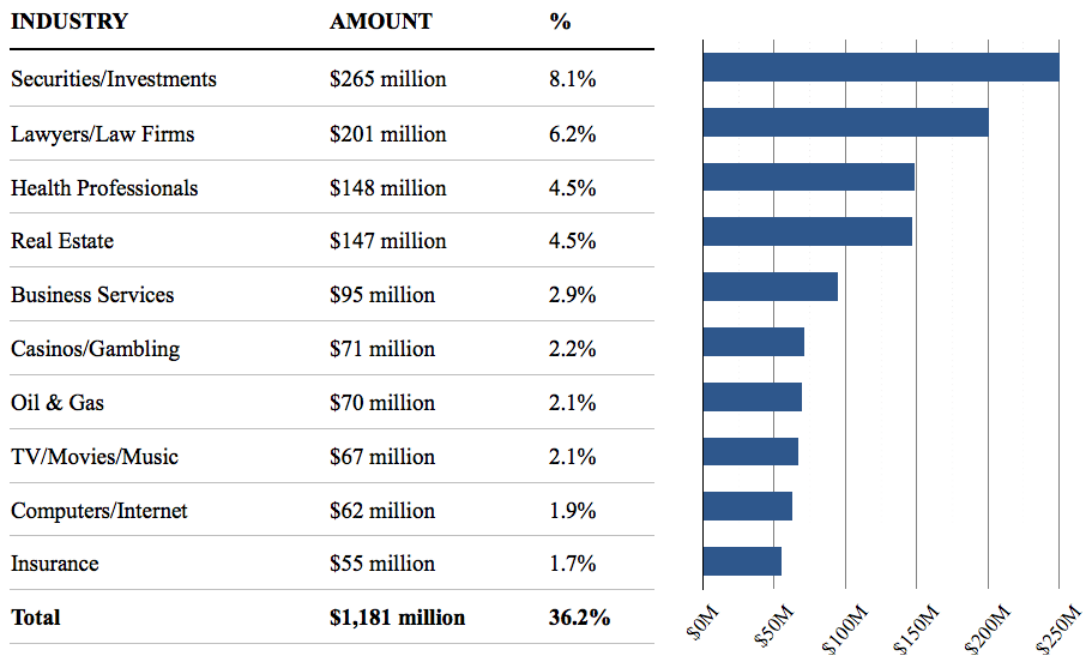
Figure 17. Campaign Contributions by Sector, 2012¹⁴⁸



Taken together, ideologically inspired interest groups on both the Right and Left contributed a hefty \$320 million or 10 percent of the total in 2012, with conservative groups out-spending liberal groups by a factor of two-to-one. Labor unions collectively accounted for \$174 million or 5.3 percent of all campaign contributions, much of it given through their PACs. The remaining \$500 million came from a range of other sources, mostly retired individuals no longer working in business or other fields, as well as educators, government employees, religious groups, nonprofit organizations, and members of the armed forces.

Closer analysis of the major contributing industries in each sector reveals a continued bias in favor of business interests. Of the top 20 industries, which collectively accounted for two thirds of all dollars raised in 2012, businesses provided 90 percent of the sum when retirees and candidate committees (making transfers) were excluded. Securities and Investments again topped the list at \$265 million, with lawyers and law firms not far behind. By contrast, out of 128 contributing industries and 2,560 donors (20 in each) identified by the Center for Responsive Politics, only one donor, the National Community Action Foundation, made the list exclusively on behalf of low-income Americans. Its combined contributions of around \$500,000 represented 0.00015 percent of the total monies raised in 2012. Contribution amounts and percentages for the top ten industries are provided in Figure 18.

Figure 18. Campaign Contributions by Top 10 Industries, 2012¹⁴⁹



Moving beyond individual donations to candidates, parties, and PACs—traditionally referred to as “hard” or regulated money—the concentration of political giving to “soft money” independent expenditure campaigns is even more extreme. Topping the list of Super PAC funders in 2012 were 25 extremely wealthy individuals making average contributions of \$10.5 million each. Their combined contributions of

\$262 million exceeded the total amount donated by the bottom 99.5 percent of American citizens. Nevertheless, their giving amounts to a fraction of one percent of their combined net worth of \$106 billion, or \$4.2 billion each on average, in 2012—more than the combined assets of the vast majority of Americans.¹⁵⁰ The largest single donor, casino magnate Sheldon Adelson, personally accounted for \$93.1 million in federal campaign contributions, more than the total contributed by the bottom 98 percent of the population combined. Adelson’s personal fortune is estimated at \$26.5 billion. Hard and soft money donation totals for the top ten individual donors are provided in Figure 19 along with estimated net worth.¹⁵¹ All of the top donors appear to be male and white.

Figure 19. Top 10 Individual Political Donors and Net Worth, 2012¹⁵²

DONOR	HARD	SOFT	PARTY	NET WORTH
Sheldon Adelson	\$345,800	\$92.8 million	GOP	\$21.8 billion
Harold Simmons	\$201,900	\$26.9 million	GOP	\$9.3 billion
Bob Perry	\$224,200	\$24.3 million	GOP	\$650 million
Fred Eychaner	\$198,300	\$14.6 million	DEM	\$500 million
Michael Bloomberg	\$28,500	\$13.8 million	DEM	\$22 billion
John Ricketts	\$124,954	\$13.1 million	GOP	\$1 billion
James Simons	\$303,200	\$9.6 million	DEM	\$11 billion
Robert Mercer	\$247,900	\$5.6 million	GOP	\$900 million
Peter Thiel	\$82,200	\$4.7 million	GOP	\$1.5 billion
J. Steve Mostyn	\$165,530	\$4.3 million	DEM	\$500 million
Total	\$1,922,484	\$209,440,765		\$69.2 Billion

However the numbers are counted, one point is clear: candidates for federal office rely almost exclusively on a tiny and unrepresentative sample of the American public to fund their election campaigns. Although citizens with limited means are free to vote and volunteer on a candidate’s behalf (as their time and talents allow), lower- and middle-class people are effectively sidelined when it comes to fronting the money

that determines who can run for public office. They are even less likely to run office themselves, as I explore in greater detail below.

Lobbying the Government

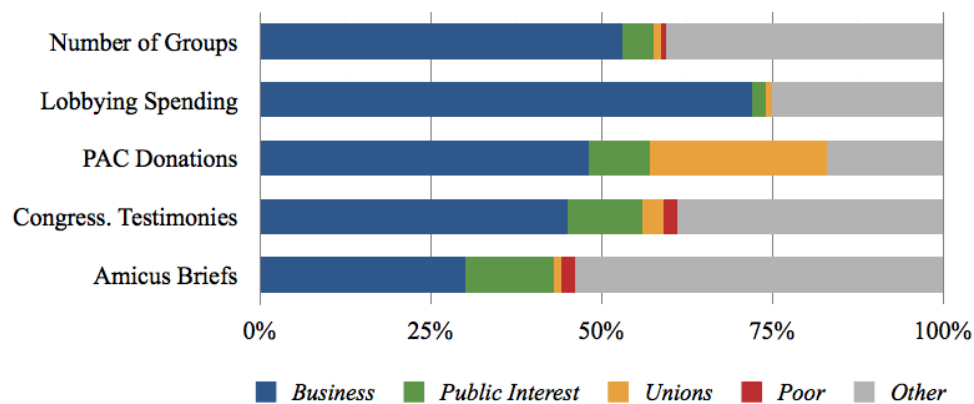
A final, critical component of participatory power in America is lobbying the government to act (or withhold acting) according to your interests. Like voting and volunteering in campaigns, lobbying takes time and a greater measure of political skills and contacts than the average citizen enjoys. Like funding political campaigns, lobbying takes treasure as well, with leading lobbyists in Washington spending far more money to influence government officials than the median household income. Unlike voting, volunteering, and contributing, however, lobbying tends to happen in groups, with well-funded professional organizations taking center stage.

There are many different ways to measure interest group power in Washington. Although no methodology perfectly captures the countless factors of influence at play on a given issue, the studies reinforce familiar findings about the lopsided distribution of national political voice when lobbying comes into play.¹⁵³ Taking a broad view of the Washington influence community, political scientists Schlozman, Verba, and Brady examine all 11,651 interest groups contained in the 2001 Washington Representatives Directory in terms of their constituencies, activities, and spending. Consistent with the research on campaign giving above, they find a pronounced bias in favor of big business and against the interests of middle-income Americans and particularly the poor. I briefly review their findings on interest groups at large before expanding and updating the analysis with reference to organized lobbying.

Looking first at the categories of politically active organizations, Schlozman et al. find that corporations and trade associations constitute the single largest set by far at 53 percent, around 6,200 groups.¹⁵⁴ State and local government groups come next at 10.4 percent, followed by foreign entities at nearly 8 percent, environmental and other public interest groups at 4.6 percent, educational institutions at 4.2 percent, and identity groups at 3.8 percent.¹⁵⁵ Near the bottom are unions at one percent (mainly public sector unions representing middle-income white-collar workers) and finally

organizations representing low-income Americans at 0.8 percent of registered interest groups.¹⁵⁶ The latter are outnumbered by business groups by a factor of 67 to one, as shown in Figure 20. Only one third of the 93 low-income groups, in turn, engage in direct advocacy on behalf of human needs, with the remaining groups focusing instead on social service provision.¹⁵⁷ Meanwhile, not a single group in the sample is made up of actual beneficiaries of means-tested government programs such as Medicaid or public housing advocating on their own behalf.¹⁵⁸

Figure 20. Distribution of Interest Groups by Number, Spending, and Activities, 2001¹⁵⁹

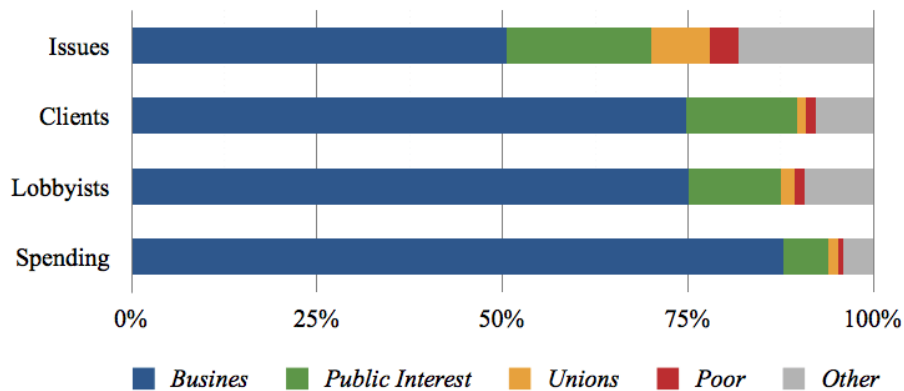


Schlozman and her colleagues conclude that fewer than 5 percent of interest groups active in Washington politics represent the concerns or speak on behalf of broad public interests, and less than one percent serve the needs of the poor and low-income Americans. “However the data are arranged or rearranged, the conclusion is inescapable: when it comes to economic organizations, those representing business are vastly disproportionate in their numbers, and the vast majority of adults who work in service, blue-collar, or lower-level white-collar jobs or who are out of the workforce entirely have a very small share of organized representation.”¹⁶⁰

To gain a more up-to-date understanding of interest group power in the policymaking process, I analyze official lobbying reports for 2012 filed under

the Lobbying Disclosure Act (LDA). Starting with the 77 issues (spanning thousands of introduced bills and regulatory matters) on which legislative and executive branch lobbying was reported in 2012, I categorize each issue according to its relevance to four familiar groups—low-income Americans, labor unions, big business, and the general public¹⁶¹—and analyze the range of lobbying activities undertaken by each, including the number of lobbyists retained, clients represented, and amount of money spent. The approach provides a unique window into whose interests command a greater or lesser share of lawmakers’ attention, and the amount of resources brought to bear by each.

Figure 21. Share of Lobbying Issues, Clients, Lobbyists, and Spending by Constituency, 2012¹⁶²

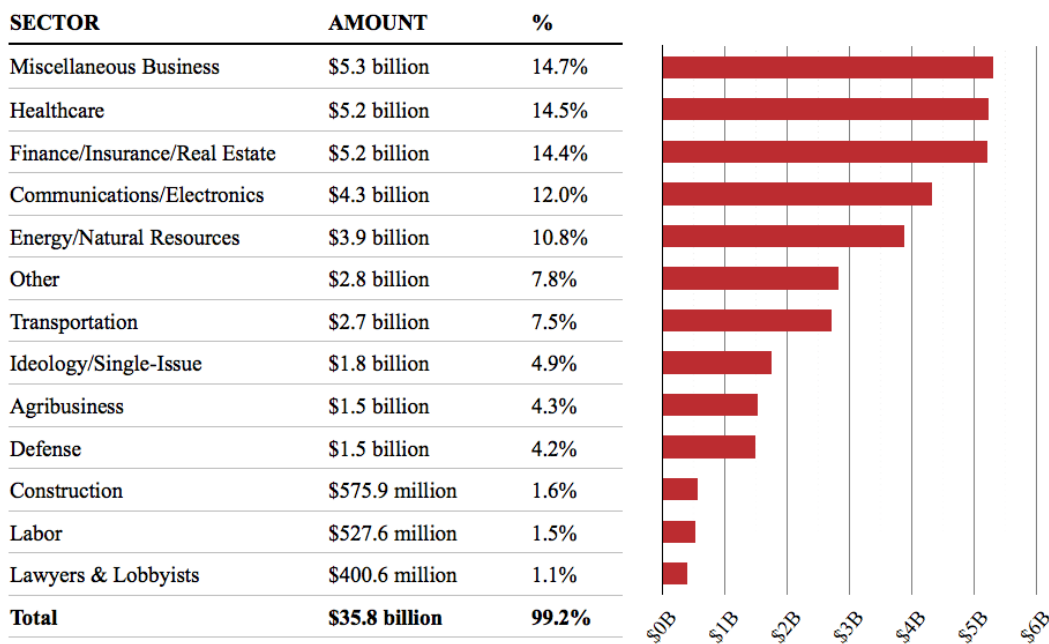


Taken together, some 100 groups involved in delivering services to or advocating on behalf of low-income Americans reported lobbying activities in 2012, around one percent of the total interest groups. They were represented by fewer than 300 lobbyists—also around one percent of total lobbyists hired—and had total expenditures of less than \$20 million or half of one percent of the lobbying total and less than one hundredth the amount spent by business.¹⁶³ Furthermore, only a small handful of the organizations engage in direct lobbying on behalf of poor Americans, rather than advocacy and service delivery that benefit wider groups. The 2012

combined spending of the smaller set of poverty advocates stood at less than \$1 million, leaving them outspent by business by a factor of 3,000 to one.

Labor unions also lagged far behind in terms of lobbying clout in 2012. With roughly 100 union clients and some 400 hired lobbyists, unions accounted for 1.4 percent of total expenditures at \$45 million, or less than 2 percent of the total spent by business. In keeping with recent trends, public sector unions representing better-paid white-collar workers led the pack with \$17 million, followed by transportation unions at \$11 million. Private sector industrial unions—once a major force in American politics—weighed in at only \$7.5 million, a quarter of one percent of the amount spent by business.

Figure 22. Lobbying Spending by All Sectors, 2012¹⁶⁴

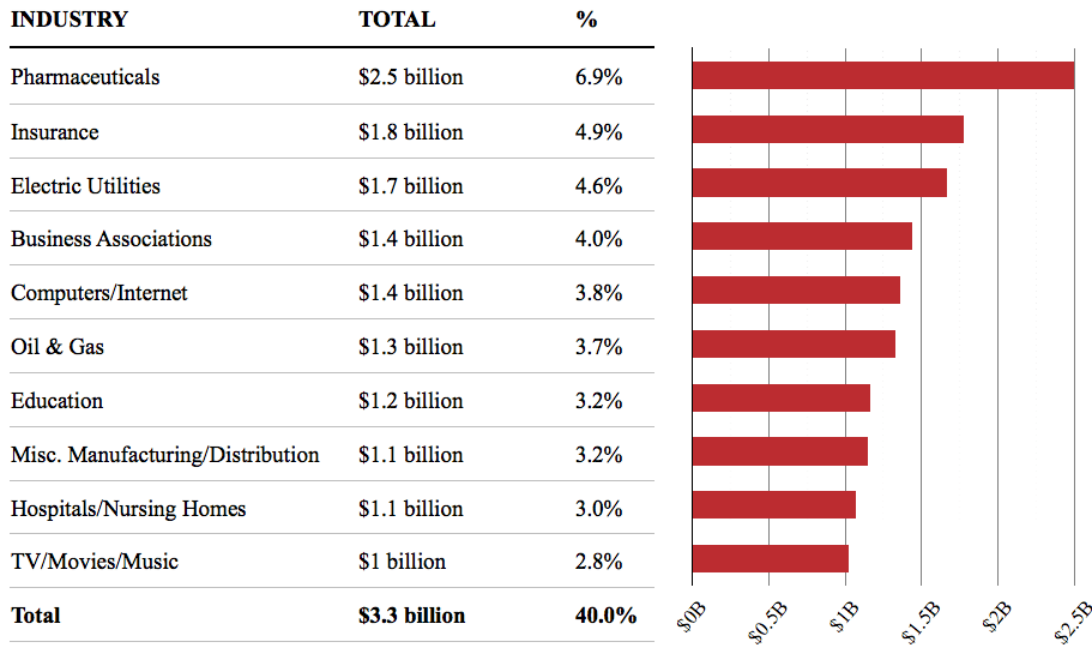


Nearly 1,500 public interest advocacy groups and 3,000 registered lobbyists—less than 15 percent of the whole—reported lobbying activities in 2012 on a wide range of issues concerning the general public, including education, immigration, health care, transportation, consumer safety, economic development, and the environment. Like antipoverty advocates, their share of spending is smaller than their share of groups at 6 percent of the whole and less than 7 percent of business, or \$193 million.

Leading public interest lobby groups include the American Cancer Society and other disease/research associations, the Environmental Defense Fund and other environmental groups, state and local governments, nonpartisan foundations, and major research universities.

Finally, business interests accounted for the lion's share of lobbying resources in 2012 with more than 7,000 corporations and trade/professional groups represented by 17,500 registered lobbyists in Washington, three quarters of the total in each case. At \$2.85 billion, business spending came to 88 percent of the total lobbying amount. The health sector and the finance, insurance, and real estate sector led the pack with more than \$480 million in lobbying each, followed by communications and electronics, energy and natural resources, transportation, defense, and agribusiness at more than \$100 million each. The top industry by far was pharmaceuticals, with \$233 million spent on 1,500 lobbyists in 2012, or nearly three lobbyists and \$500,000 per elected member of Congress. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce was the largest single spending interest group by far at \$136 million, more than twice the amount of money spent by labor and poverty advocates combined, and seven times more than poverty groups alone. Business also spent nearly three times more per individual lobbyist than poverty groups spent. Comparative data on lobbying issues, clients, lobbyists and spending by constituency are provided in Figure 21, while Figures 22-23 contain lobbying spending alone by sector and leading industries.

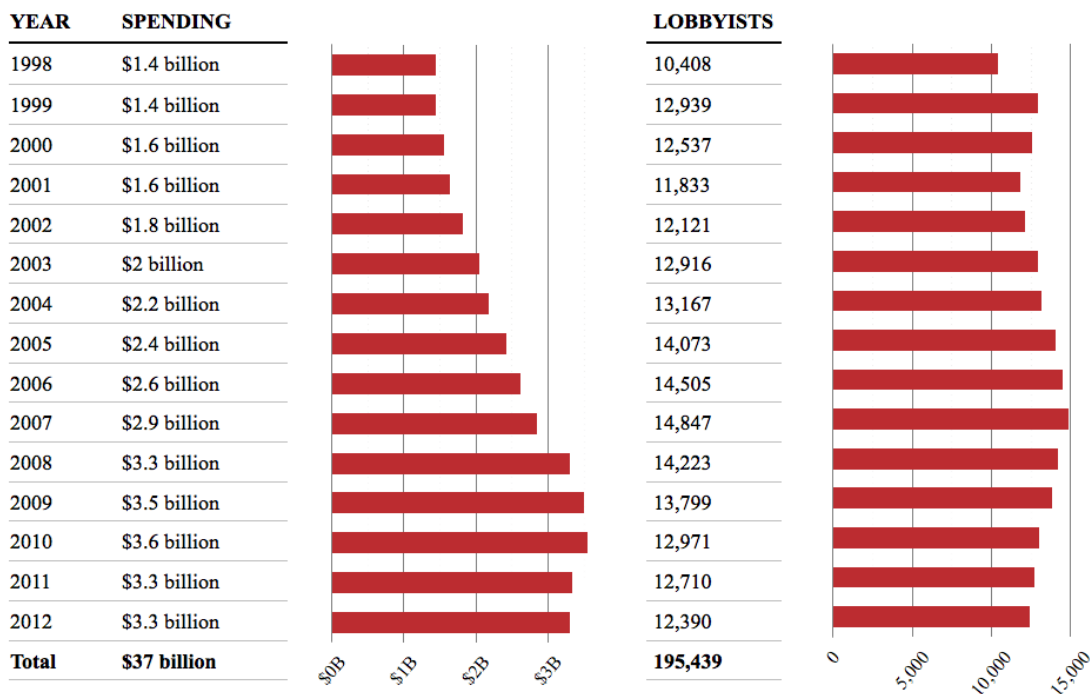
Figure 23. Lobbying Spending by Top 10 Industries, 2012¹⁶⁵



While these data provide only two snapshots in time for 2001 and 2012, analyzing the growth in interest groups during the past three decades confirms the general trends. Between 1981 and 2006, the net number of organized interest groups lobbying the federal government more than doubled.¹⁶⁶ Much of the net growth came in the business community, where a minimum of 2,500 corporations and trade associations (and easily twice that sum when category changes are taken into account) set up new offices in Washington.¹⁶⁷ Some 150 public interest groups and 70 anti-poverty advocates were added to the fold.¹⁶⁸ Meanwhile, the number of labor unions represented in Washington did not rise at all since 1980, as increases in white-collar public sector and mixed unions were offset by steep declines in blue-collar private sector unions.¹⁶⁹ As a share of total groups, business increased its representation considerably during the period while public interest advocates held steady at around 4 percent, and the share of organizations representing middle- and low-income citizens declined from 3 to 2 percent.¹⁷⁰ All told, business accounted for more than 90 percent of the growth in organized interest groups lobbying the federal government from 1980-2006.¹⁷¹

In keeping with these long-range trends, lobbying spending itself more than doubled in the 10 years after 1998 when detailed reporting began, from \$1.44 billion in 1998 to \$3.3 billion in 2008, where it has remained ever since. The number of registered lobbyists also increased, although less dramatically, from 10,408 in 1998 to 14,223 in 2008, as shown in Figure 25. It has since declined to 12,390 lobbyists in 2012, a trend that is partly attributed to stricter lobbying regulations that have encouraged individuals engaged in lobbying to modify their title and activities slightly in order to no longer be formally classified as such. Throughout the period, business dominance of the lobbying process has gone unchallenged while groups speaking on behalf of lower-income Americans remain all but silent on Capitol Hill.

Figure 24. Growth in Lobbying Spending and Registered Lobbyists, 1998–2012¹⁷²



These data on political participation beyond the ballot box provide a broad empirical overview of inequalities of political inputs based on socioeconomic status. The results do not bode well for those at the bottom of the income and education distribution. But *why* are people with lower incomes and education categorically underrepresented in volunteering, contributing, and lobbying when each is an essentially voluntary and unrestricted mode of participation?¹⁷³ To understand the

unique relationship that underprivileged Americans have to such forms of political participation, I return to the in-depth interviews conducted with a cross-section of low-income citizens and would-be citizens across the United States. The interviews reveal significant practical and psychological barriers that must be overcome before people can effectively participate in politics.

First, political participation is outside the plausibility framework of low-income Americans, most of whom have never had the experience of being politically empowered or had examples of robust engagement by the people they know. As noted at the outset of this section, most of the people interviewed—irrespective of their own voting past—agree in principle that voting is an important form of political engagement, but few actually vote and fewer still progress beyond the vote of their own accord. Voting is considered the basic democratic deed—the only means (if any) by which people with lower incomes and less education can have their voices heard. Put differently, the answer to the lack of political equality experienced by many of the people interviewed, according to them, is equal access to—and participation in—the franchise.

Typical of this vote-centric view is Vinny, the homeless computer programmer in New Hampshire, who maintains that impoverished people like himself do not have an equal voice in politics for two main reasons: they are either denied voting rights, as in the case of convicted felons, or they choose to stay home on Election Day. “Lower income people need to get out and vote more,” he says. “If we keep allowing the upper-middle class to control the vote, we’re never going to have anything, it’s never going to change.” To underscore his confidence in the power of the ballot, Vinny argues that low-income people could change politics for the better “if we were to be able to pool our vote.” Like the other people interviewed, Vinny does not mention any other form of political participation of his own accord.

Nevertheless, the lack of familiarity with the range of political engagements beyond the ballot box, and their importance to equal political voice, cannot be ascribed to a simple lack of knowledge that diverse forms exist. When prompted to consider specific ways that people make their voices heard before and after voting, such as

volunteering in and contributing to political campaigns, and lobbying the government, the majority of people interviewed have something to say. Vinny, for instance, readily accepts the importance of lobbying government officials and engaging the media in order to have one's opinions heard, but he is quick to point out how unfamiliar and unlikely such activities are for people who are homeless like himself. "The homeless will not speak for themselves because they're afraid of retaliation," he says, adding, "They're defeated." As Jared, a middle-age white man interviewed at a soup kitchen in downtown Cincinnati, put it, "I really ain't on top of voting. Just never voted, never believed in it. . . . I don't get involved with politics."

Vinny maintains that the lack of confidence or a sense of entitlement among people at the margins of society extends to a wide range of institutions including the police, politics, and the media. "Most of the homeless people shy away from the media, don't want to have anything to do with the police [or politics]," he says. As a case in point, Vinny describes a local coalition of homeless advocates that he says is made up of middle-class people with little practical understanding of the experiences and needs of the people they claim to represent. When he and another homeless person tried to join the coalition board, he says they turned him down: "Won't let us on it." Vinny doubts whether they actually have the interests of homeless people at heart and alleges that they are unaccountable, or worse than unaccountable, in how they spend public funds combatting homelessness. "They get public money and they don't want us to know where that money goes," he says.

Regardless of the actual issues at play, Vinny's perception of middle-class and elite institutions is typical of a deep-seated disaffection toward the political and economic establishment expressed by low-income people in the interviews. This is true in spite of Vinny's past experience as a middle class computer technician and his identity as a white male in predominantly-white New Hampshire. For women and people of color who were born into poverty and lived their entire lives on the social and economic fringes of mainstream society, the feelings of alienation from politics and public life reported in interviews are even more pronounced.

Nevertheless, these and other psychological barriers to political participation are only half the picture. Practical barriers also stand in the way to meaningful engagement beyond the ballot box, beginning with money. In a negative-rights framework where few restrictions exist on spending money in elections or on lobbying the government—and where few attempts are made (through public funding or other means) to level the electoral playing field—financial barriers of entry are a decisive reason why low-income Americans fail to show up in politics.

According to Troy, the unemployed former auto mechanic in New Orleans, influencing politics costs money and a person's ability to make his voice heard is directly proportional to the amount of money he has. "People that are millionaires or billionaires, they make laws that we can't change, rules that we can't touch . . . don't have to worry about nothing we have to worry about," he says. Because people like him lack means and "don't have anybody to back us," he says "a lot of the laws, a lot of the rules they bypass us—our word isn't good enough or strong enough to carry any weight."

Like the other individuals interviewed, Troy believes that basing political voice on money unfairly excludes people with limited means. "Just because you have money doesn't mean you're supposed to have power—that's wrong," he says. "As far as I'm concerned, everybody should have a voice." He adds that, "Just like I can vote, I should be able to speak and you should be able to listen . . . because when you say we gonna cut Medicare, Medicaid then you're cutting the little man—the big man, he don't need that."

Building on Troy's assessment of "the big man," Vinny views special interest groups as the primary means by which wealthy interests exert influence on government and "buy the politician." "I think groups are what actually has control of the government, not you or I," he says. "If you're a special interest group . . . you can afford to put a politician in. That's the reality of it." He cites as examples tobacco, oil, and drug companies that provide substantial funding for political campaigns—not as a form of political endorsement, in his view, but rather as a financial investment. "Like anything else, it's big business. I think campaigning is big business."

As expressed throughout the interviews, such resource-intensive modes of political engagement are simply out of reach for the vast majority of low-income Americans. Many lack the time, and flexibility outside of work and family obligations to volunteer in political campaigns, and few have the necessary political skills and connections—and the financial resources—to effectively build and fund electoral and lobbying efforts. Political participation is considered a luxury in which few impoverished citizens can afford to take part.

It is important to note that not all low-income people exhibit the level of political apathy outlined above or doubt that they can exercise their voice. Deena, an African American woman in Cincinnati, is a proud exception to the rule. The longtime janitor and single mother of three is also a union organizer who campaigns vigorously for the notion that “everybody who works deserves to bring home a decent check so we can afford to live.” The cause hits close to home, she says. At less than \$500 per month, her janitorial job in downtown office buildings does not enable her to provide for her own and her three sons’ needs: “I work every day but I have to get assistance from the state just to make it, and that’s wrong,” she says.

Although Deena is committed to engaging the political process as a volunteer organizer and by reaching out to government officials, she is well aware of the resource limitations she and her colleagues face when it comes to funding political campaigns and lobbying the government. “I don’t think that working-poor people have the same rights or voice as other citizens,” she says. “If you don’t make enough money to cover what you’re saying, they couldn’t care less. It’s all about the money.” According to Deena, most of the working-poor citizens she seeks to engage have long since given up hope in a political system they do not believe was made to work for them.

The collective loss of political power has practical consequences for Deena, her colleagues, and her three teenage sons. For years, she says the company she works for has been cutting back hours, even as they increase the number of offices assigned, in order to absorb mandatory raises built into the last union contract. At 22 hours per week, Deena has no chance of receiving full-time benefits and takes home a maximum

of \$250 every two weeks—less than half the poverty line and not even enough to cover her family’s rent. “More work, less time, and less pay,” she says, adding, “It’s a survival game out here for me. I gotta go from one check to the next.”

She says her attempts to engage politically during the last 10 years, and particularly now as her union re-enters negotiations for the next contract, are primarily aimed at her boys. “There’s so much going [wrong] in the world, I figured this is one thing I don’t want my kids to have to deal with.”

3.3 Measuring Participatory Power

The foregoing analysis has shown that rates of citizen participation in a variety of individual political acts vary widely according to a person’s socioeconomic status. Based on a rich assortment of formal and informal measures taken during the 1990s, 2000s, and today, Americans with higher incomes and education exhibit increased levels of engagement in the democratic process. What is the overall distribution of political voice and participation across the population? To answer that question, I now present a composite index of political power across income groups using the primary measures of individual participation examined above: citizenship, registration and voting, campaigning, and contributing to election campaigns.¹⁷⁴

First, a word on the data. In order to generate a single index of participation across various political acts, I use the most complete and contemporaneous data available between 2008 and 2012 for which the income levels of respondents are reported. Citizenship, registration, and voting rates by income quintile are derived from the U.S. Census Bureau’s 2013 Current Population Survey, the largest available body of survey data on the subject coded by family income. Data on individual campaigning and the rate of political donations are from the 1952–2008 American National Election Studies analyzed by Schlozman et al. and examined in detail above.¹⁷⁵ The final variable, amount donated to political campaigns, is derived by estimating the percentage of total donations in various amounts made by individuals in each income group, based on known assets of major campaign donors; analysis of household income and wealth in the top donor zip codes; rates of donor disenfranchisement across

income groups owing to noncitizen status; and conservative assumptions about the ability of individuals to contribute based on income.¹⁷⁶ Although the results are far from perfect given the limited information available on donor incomes, even a sizable increase in the rate of campaign giving by citizens lower on the income ladder does not meaningfully alter the final result.

Figure 25. Summary of Individual Participation by Income Quintile, 2008-2012¹⁷⁷

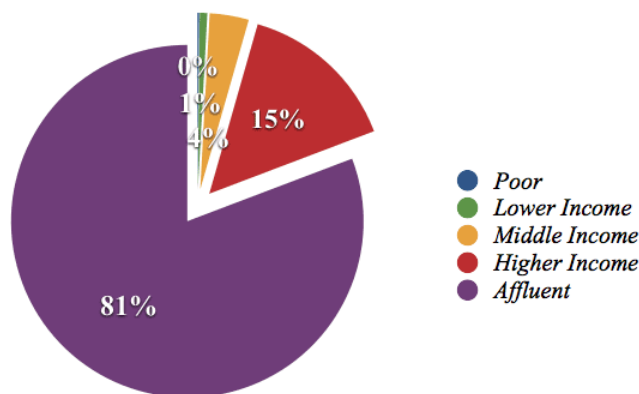


To provide a unitary index of political power, I assign simple weights to each category of political participation based on its estimated numerical value in terms of delivering votes in an election. Voting receives a standard weight of 1.0. Citizenship status, which entails the right to vote but does not imply that the holder will exercise her right, receives a rounded weight of 0.6, based on the likelihood that voting-eligible citizens cast a ballot in 2012 (58.2 percent). Voter registration receives a weight of 0.7, the rate of turnout among registered (citizen) voters in 2012.¹⁷⁸ Campaigning receives a rounded weight of 2.0, based on the estimated vote-generation of the average volunteer in campaigns.¹⁷⁹ Finally, political contributions are weighted based on the amount of money given by individuals divided by 18, the average amount (in dollars) spent per

vote by the two major-party presidential campaigns in the 2012 general election, and consistent with the “cost” per vote of winning congressional candidates.¹⁸⁰

The result is a startlingly skewed distribution of political power. Consistent with individual trends in political participation outlined above, the level of political inequality across income groups increases as we move along the participation spectrum from simple citizenship and voter registration to more costly forms of political engagement. When it comes to the amount of money donated to political campaigns—the costliest form of all—low-income people do not factor at all, and those in the middle register only trace amounts. Meanwhile, the top income bracket accounts for the lion’s share of donor political power. Indeed, Americans in the bottom half of the income distribution, with annual family incomes of around \$50,000 or less, command less than 5 percent of overall political power when considering all five measures of participation. Those with family incomes between \$50,000 and \$100,000 per year account for roughly 16 percent of political power. And those at the top with incomes in excess of \$100,000 per year command a remarkable 83 percent of overall political power.

Figure 26. Individual Political Power Index by Income Quintile, 2012¹⁸¹



	Citizenship	Registered	Voted	Campaigned*	% Donated*	\$ Donated	Amount
Poor	83.2%	54.3%	44.9%	3.0%	1.0%	0.3%	\$11 million
Nearpoor	88.6%	63.6%	56.1%	5.0%	4.0%	1.3%	\$42 million
Middle Income	93.0%	72.6%	65.9%	7.0%	7.0%	4.5%	\$141 million
Upper Income	95.0%	77.8%	72.6%	9.0%	11.0%	9.5%	\$302 million
Affluent	95.6%	81.1%	76.2%	13.0%	23.0%	84.3%	\$2.7 billion

At first glance, these findings seem to violate basic laws of electoral mathematics in a democracy. Candidates still require real citizen support in order to stand for public office and a majority (or plurality) of flesh-and-blood votes to get elected. Even with the bottom half of citizens providing only 40 percent of the votes in presidential elections and less than a third in other years, the top 20 percent can never deliver the requisite votes in full. Nevertheless, as shown above, Election Day is merely the culmination of a long and expensive process in which candidates are picked, platforms vetted, campaigns funded and more—not by the general public, but by politically active elites. Furthermore, elections are hardly the only thing that matters when it comes to portioning out political voice and power in America.

Although poor people have limited ability to speak and be heard in politics, that does not mean they are ignorant of its importance—or that they accept a system that they perceive to be “all about the money.” For Cassandra, the former welfare recipient-turned political activist in Cincinnati, modern elections are all about getting your face on television: “Whoever can buy the most TV time, whoever talks at them the right way, usually gets the votes.” According to Malik, the homeless man in Washington, D.C., those who contribute large sums of money play the leading role: “The people that got the money, they put their people in place.” Richard, the ex-offender in Montgomery, and dozens of other disenfranchised Americans interviewed, agree. When asked why politicians do not seem to fulfill their promises to ordinary voters, Richard replied, “It’s all about the money. Don’t matter if you’re Republican or Democrat, it’s all about the money.”

4. INEQUALITY OF POLITICAL OUTPUTS

Cassandra does not worry too much about political participation. Ever since the Cincinnati woman first became active in politics during the welfare reform debates of the mid-1990s, she has had little trouble getting herself and her colleagues to the polls. In fact, the nonprofit agency where she works has made a practice of busing groups of low-income women to the Statehouse in Columbus once a year to lobby their state legislators. She even makes the trip to Washington, D.C. from time to time. But for all her activism in government, she doubts whether people like her are actually being represented.

Cassandra's journey from self-described "welfare mom" to community leader is instructive. Raising her children as a single mother in the 1980s and 1990s and trying to find decent-paying work wasn't easy for the Cincinnati native in her mid 50s without a high school degree. Contrary to the popular conception of the "welfare queen," Cassandra never had a car, a home of her own, or other "special" things. Instead, she had a cramped apartment in the wrong part of town; the public bus to get to school and work on time; thrift store clothing for the kids twice a year; and a local soup kitchen to help with groceries when the food stamps ran out at the end of the month. "I didn't want to be [on welfare], because the money that you get is not enough to take care of you, pay rent, gas and electric, telephone," she says. "You can only stretch the dollar so far."

As for trips and other enrichment activities, they were out of the question. "When our children wanted to go on trips," she says, "We couldn't. Couldn't put that money aside." Cassandra remembers how embarrassed she was when her son asked her for \$50 so he could go for driver's ed. "I didn't have it," she recalls. "So he went out and got a little job." The "little job," however, created problems of its own as long as Cassandra was still receiving her monthly welfare check. "That was money coming into the house that needed to be reported," she says, adding, "It's a trap. But you have to do what you have to do."

She says that when welfare reform was on the agenda in 1995 and 1996, someone in the neighborhood convinced her to start attending meetings. Sitting in public hearings downtown, she recalls how men in suits would say things like, “Those people are lazy, those people won't work,” and how it gradually dawned on her they were talking about her. It made her mad.

What did they really know about her life, she wondered. Did they know that she had enrolled in one job program after another, had worked hard toward her G.E.D., and had been turned down from job after job to which she had applied due to the high demand from low-skilled workers like herself? Did they know how hard she had struggled to keep the heat and electric turned on all those years that her kids were growing up? Did they know what it was like to keep food on the table and clothes on her kids' backs, and to see them all through school, on a modest welfare check?” Did they know what would happen if all those checks ran out without the jobs, childcare, and transportation assistance mothers needed to support themselves?

Getting active came naturally to Cassandra, whose mission since coming to work at her community nonprofit in Cincinnati's Over-the-Rhine neighborhood is to “give the community a voice.” She organizes monthly benefits advocacy meeting “to hear from our members what issues they're going through . . . housing issues, healthcare, dental, all kinds of different things.” When election season rolls around, she and her colleagues organize voter registration drives and help their members learn about the issues, attend meetings, and the like. “We can't tell them who to vote for, we just give them the information that they need . . . get them to go to different places to understand what these issues are about.” Their annual trips to Columbus are a chance for low-income people to “tell their stories” directly to their elected representatives in the Ohio General Assembly.

But if getting active is easy, getting represented is not. It's one thing to show up in the Statehouse, Cassandra says, and another thing to have your voices heard by people in power. Much like the “men in suits” in the 1990s who dismissed all welfare moms as lazy and undeserving, she finds that many elected officials still show blatant disregard for low-income people today. “Some of [our people] feel intimidated by the

way the legislators talk to them . . . won't want to speak after one person has gone," she says, describing how legislators "look down on us [and] try to scare people off." Maybe if they had the resources to hire an experienced lobbyist or fund political campaigns or run for office themselves things would change in terms of representation. But Cassandra doesn't see that happening anytime soon. "Our biggest problem," she says, "is getting money to be able to continue doing the work that we do."

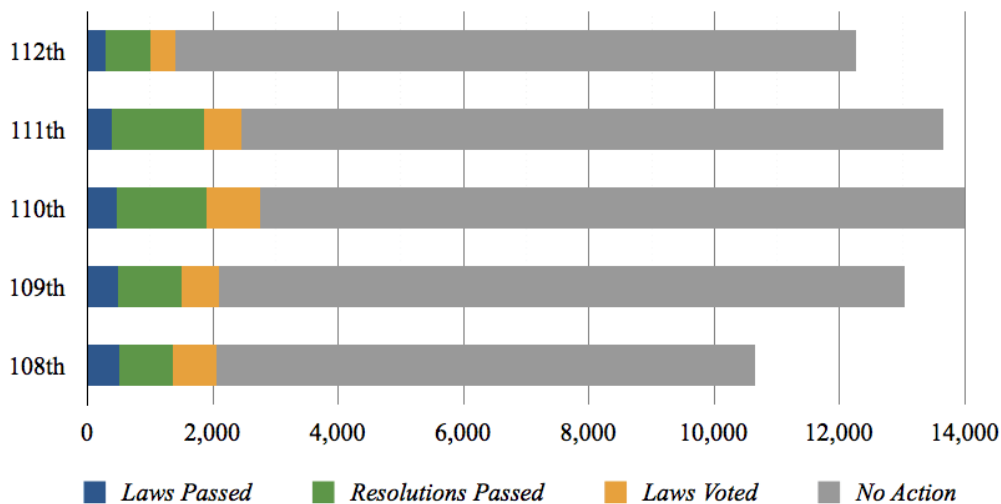
Cassandra is an exception to the rule of low participation. As the foregoing data have shown, inputs of political voice in the United States vary widely by socioeconomic status, with low-income people less than half as likely as their wealthy counterparts to engage in a variety of political acts. However, inputs are only half the picture, as Cassandra can attest. Having described the level and frequency with which different groups of people speak in the public square (through voting, campaigning, contributing, and lobbying), I now consider which voices are actually heard. The question is straightforward: Does the amount of time and money people invest in politics correspond with the level of benefits they receive from government in terms of policies and elected officials amenable to their interests? Put differently, does participatory power buy representational results?

At least three basic measures of political influence allow us to track the degree of representation different groups of people enjoy in politics: (1) whose issues make it onto the legislative agenda for debate; (2) whose interests are accounted for in lawmaking; and (3) whose representatives are elected to public office. I consider each set of political outputs in turn, analyzing quantitative data on levels of representation by socioeconomic status and qualitative perspectives from interviews with low-income Americans. The investigation again takes place at a macro level, charting overall trends in representation at different rungs of the socioeconomic ladder. For individual case studies connecting specific participatory inputs to policy outcomes, there is a rich body of political science scholarship available.¹⁸²

4.1 Legislative Agendas

Political representation begins with being heard. Before the needs and preferences of a given group of people can be translated into law, they must make it onto the political agenda. This is no easy task, considering the ever-expanding range of issues and constituencies clamoring for attention during legislative sessions and the amount of resources required to break through the gridlock. According to GovTrack.us, of the 12,299 bills introduced by lawmakers during the 112th Congress (January 2011–January 2013), 393 bills, or 3 percent of the total, received a vote at some stage in the legislative process, and only 284 bills, or 2 percent of the total, were passed by Congress and signed into law. Meanwhile, legislators took no action on almost 90 percent of legislative measures introduced in the two-year Congress. These data are consistent with past Congresses dating to 1979, with between 10,000 and 14,000 bills introduced in the House and Senate during a typical term and 80 to 90 percent of legislation effectively ignored. The statistics for 2003-13 are contained in Figure 28.

Figure 27. Number and Status of Bills Introduced by Congress, 2003–2013¹⁸³

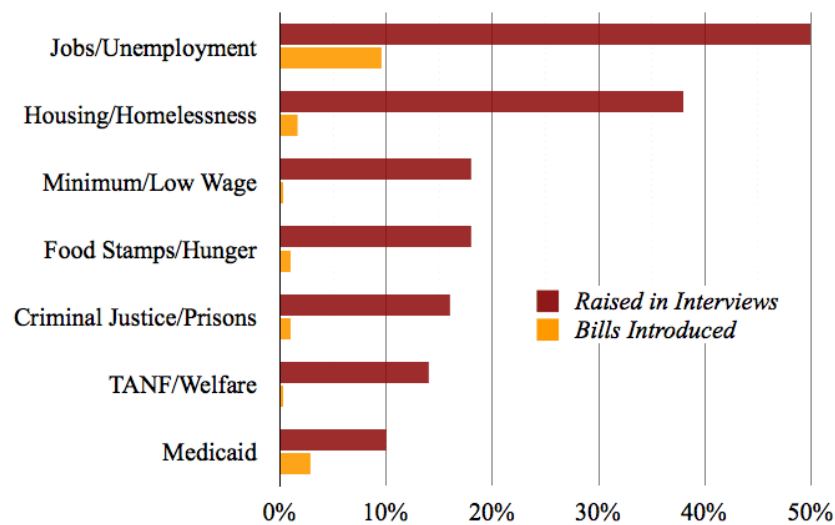


Public Priorities

To what extent does legislation introduced in Congress reflect the priorities of low-income Americans? I begin by examining the major issues raised in interviews and focus groups with people in poverty, and the limited available survey data on priorities among low-income people. I then consider the extent to which such priorities are reflected in legislation introduced in Congress, and the amount of lobbying resources devoted to various issues and constituencies.

For the 50 low-income citizens who participated in in-depth interviews as part of the “Poor (in) Democracy” research project, bread-and-butter issues of employment and earnings were the leading concern. Half of the people interviewed raised concerns about the availability of jobs and the level of unemployment they, their family members, and friends experienced. One in five voiced specific concerns about compensation levels being inadequate to meet basic family needs. And nearly all of the people interviewed across 30 states, including urban and rural inhabitants ages 17 to 87, expressed a strong desire to work and support themselves without having to rely on private or public support. To magnify the results, I return to the accounts of individual citizens interviewed. Although the findings are not statistically significant because of the small sample size and qualitative research methods employed, they provide a useful snapshot of the needs and preferences of low-income people in the United States.

Figure 28. Issues Raised in Interviews and Introduced as Bills in the 112th Congress¹⁸⁴



Mariaelena, the substitute teacher and community organizer from Chaparral, New Mexico, and her Mexican-born parents, Andy and Maria, are a case in point. “There’s no jobs here,” says Mariaelena of her unincorporated desert community on the Texas-New Mexico border. For the estimated 20,000 people who call Chaparral home, Mariaelena does not see how a single gas station, two schools, and a smattering of small-scale establishments can provide sufficient employment close to home—nor does she foresee outside investment coming to the rural *colonia* anytime soon. With few formal jobs and a high proportion of undocumented immigrants, Mariaelena says, “Chaparral people do whatever they can do to make money for their families” such as selling scrap metal, blankets, and old electronics in front of their homes and working seasonal under-the-table jobs in farming and construction across the region. To help fill the gap, Mariaelena says that the citizen children of immigrants frequently hitch rides approximately 30 miles each way to El Paso, Texas, or Las Cruces, New Mexico, to work minimum-wage jobs in fast-food restaurants, movie theaters, and the like.

The lack of decent-paying jobs is keenly felt by Mariaelena’s elderly parents, Maria and Andy. Maria, a naturalized U.S. citizen, says she was forced to retire early

at the age of 57 when her El Paso factory job assembling rifle scopes moved south across the border in 1982, part of the continued outsourcing of American industry. After 35 years of factory work, Maria says her outgoing wage was \$6.70 per hour without benefits or a pension. “Wages were too low to support the family,” she says, referring to Mariaelena and the several other adopted children who moved in and out of their mobile home in Chaparral—“And now there’s no work.” Maria’s husband, Andy, who only obtained his citizenship in the last ten years, says he has “always been a mechanic—worked on people’s cars and also harvested crops.” Since he is no longer able to earn a steady wage at the age of 87, the couple relies primarily on Social Security for a combined \$700 per month, along with occasional financial support from family members in Texas, New Mexico, and California.

If the lack of formal jobs is the primary concern for people in rural backwaters like Chaparral, underemployment and insufficient earnings are top-of-mind among urban poor residents interviewed. Unlike Maria’s experience with outsourcing in El Paso, Dave, a white machinist with the Ironworkers Local 44 in Cincinnati, sees at least some of the industrial jobs lost to globalization coming back into town. The difficulty, according to Dave, is that the returning jobs do not provide anywhere near the level of wages and job security they once did. “Yeah, we’re getting [jobs] back, but we’re getting ‘em back at half the price,” he says. “What good is that really doing?” Dave says a typical example is the construction worker dad who previously earned a middle-class wage of \$25 per hour before the Great Recession but who now has to “settle for a factory job paying ten or twelve bucks an hour.” To make up the shortfall and keep the family afloat, Dave says, “they’ve gotta work 60 or 70 hour weeks . . . Bills aren’t cut in half, just their wage.” Dave is particularly concerned about the social-emotional effects of insufficient wages, extended hours, limited job security, and the resulting decline of families. “The jobs that are out there, they’re poverty-level jobs,” he says, adding that “once you start getting money problems many relationships start having troubles.” He says he has seen more than a few acquaintances get divorced as a result of financial pressures, an unfortunate turn which only serves to increase the financial strain on families.

Other job-related concerns raised in interviews include systematic discrimination in hiring and compensation, especially for people with criminal records and undocumented workers who fear deportation if they report workplace violations to the authorities. Richard, the homeless electrician in Montgomery, and Diane, the retired grandmother of two in Cleveland, are among the several interview subjects reporting job discrimination based on their felon status. Both Richard and Diane were recently denied jobs because of a prior theft conviction dating back five years and 40 years, respectively.

For Diane, the employment picture could have been worse. She says with evident satisfaction that she was able to work factory jobs assembling auto parts and testing chemicals for many years. “I like working in factories; did it for a long time, didn’t never get tired of it,” she says. When the auto parts factory in Cleveland where Diane had worked for the last 10 years abruptly closed in 2009 and she could not find another factory job, she says she managed to secure a temporary position as a daycare assistant. After working for almost a month at the daycare, however, Diane’s criminal background check came back and revealed a pair of theft convictions dating back to her early 20s. “I lost my job, and I love kids—I just cried,” she says, adding, “The agency told me I lied about my record; I told them I didn’t remember 40 years ago.” Besides, she says, “I was young, I didn’t kill nobody or hurt nobody—it was robbing. I did my time, paid the money—why can’t they give me another chance?”

Richard echoes the same sentiment: “A lot of people that’s trying to change are having a hard time because to [employers], once you’re a criminal always a criminal.” Although his skills as an electrician are in high demand, the 28-year-old has been unemployed since he was released from prison, despite his ongoing attempts to find work. As a case in point, Richard describes one of his recent applications to work in construction in Montgomery a few weeks prior to our interview. According to Richard, things were looking up during the job interview until the construction company owner decided to pick up the phone and call a mutual acquaintance for a reference. “[The man on the phone] said I like to steal . . . profiled me to him, he decided to give me no chance because of that,” Richard said, adding, “People that’s in positions to help you,

they listen to others and don't want to take a chance on you . . . that's one reason why I'm still in the situation I'm in now.”

Like people with felony convictions, undocumented immigrants lack legal standing in many jurisdictions and are subject to a wide range of workplace abuses, according to Doug, a middle-age caseworker at an immigrant rights center in San Francisco. Doug and immigrants interviewed in the field report abuses ranging from working off the clock and illegal deductions in pay to unsafe working conditions, sexual abuse, and only paying restaurant workers with tips. When regular wages are paid, according to the interviews, they rarely exceed the minimum wage of \$7.25 per hour (\$2.13 for tipped labor)—keeping a family with only one worker who worked full-time, year round well below the poverty line for a typical family of three. Mexican immigrants interviewed in Tennessee report earning actual wages of \$5–\$6 per hour—less than one-half the poverty line for a typical family of three—and others report going without pay altogether while working kitchen jobs like dishwasher and short-order cook, except a small portion of tips handed down by the waitstaff. According to Giovanna, the Peruvian American in Memphis, TN, “People suffer from wage theft, employers taking advantage of their non-legal status . . . don't earn living wages for sure.”

It is not surprising that jobs are a primary concern for low-income people when we consider that most impoverished adults in the United States—including a majority of those interviewed—work at least some of the time and derive the bulk of their limited incomes from work. Nevertheless, employment and earnings were not the only issues interviewees raised. A large number of people interviewed discussed basic welfare needs such as housing and homelessness (38 percent of interviewees), hunger and food stamps (18 percent), welfare (14 percent), and Medicaid (10 percent), with several interviewees expressing concerns about more than one issue. Many of the social welfare issues raised were either explicitly or implicitly connected to discriminatory experiences in the criminal justice system, the last of the seven policy concerns raised by more than 10 percent of respondents in the interviews.

Although interviewees cited a wide range of social welfare programs and individual needs, there was common agreement about a lack of access to sufficient public assistance for the unemployed, underemployed, and people with disabilities. According to Maurice, a middle-aged African American man living on the outskirts of Montgomery, Alabama, eligibility restrictions are a major concern. Maurice says the most a homeless person or any other person “at the bottom rung” can hope to receive in government support in the South is Supplemental Nutritional Assistance (SNAP). “They’ll give me some food stamps but won’t give me no money to get a place to stay,” he says, adding, “Up North you can get welfare, but Alabama’s not gon’ give no black man no welfare!”

Troy, the unemployed former auto mechanic from New Orleans who works occasional temporary jobs in construction and demolition, echoes Maurice’s concerns about access to social welfare, even if some of the services he requires are legally guaranteed by the state. Troy says that since he slipped a disc in his lower back, he has been unable to manage the chronic pain because of limitations in Medicaid coverage and his inability to afford comprehensive coverage or purchase medications. “Medicaid gets you a visit to the hospital,” he says, “but you ain’t getting no medicine, not a drop.” His attempts to secure the prescribed pain medications with the help of a local nonprofit organization, as noted in the introduction, have so far failed due to the organization’s suspicion that the drug will be abused. He doesn’t doubt that such medications are sometimes abused, but doubts the problem is unique to low-income people and alleges, “I’m just trying to get the pain out of my back so I can sleep.”

Cassandra, the community activist in Cincinnati, shares Troy’s concerns about the ability of social programs to provide the level of support people need to stand on their own two feet. Although she is sympathetic to some of the motivations behind the 1996 welfare reform law, the effects she sees in her community leave plenty of reason to doubt the law’s success moving people “from welfare to work.” Indeed, the lack of jobs that pay a living wage for former welfare recipients like herself has meant millions of people—especially women with young children and people of color—are now struggling to meet even their most basic needs.

These and other economic concerns described in the interviews are largely consistent with national surveys of people in poverty. According to the most recent available national opinion poll focused specifically on poverty, economic issues such as unemployment, lack of jobs and affordable health care, poverty, low wages, and crime are top priorities for low-income people.¹⁸⁵ In fact, poor people are between three and four times more likely than their wealthier counterparts to cite wages and unemployment as national priorities and are considerably more likely to see poverty as a major problem in American society.¹⁸⁶

Those experiencing poverty in the United States are more likely than other Americans to describe the root problems in economic or institutional terms rather than individual or social terms. By a margin of 62 to 27 percent, poor people consider a shortage of jobs to be a major cause of poverty, and seven in 10 poor people consider medical bills and “too many jobs being part-time or low-wage” to be major causes of poverty. The majority of poor people consider only two “noneconomic” issues—drug abuse and single-parent families—to be major causes of poverty.

By contrast, people earning more than twice the poverty line tend to focus on individual deficits such as lack of motivation, drug abuse, declining moral values, as well as poor quality of public schools, when asked to name the single most important cause of poverty. Poor and non-poor people had only drug abuse in common as a single most important cause of poverty. It is important to note that a similar percentage of respondents in both groups cited the various factors as “major reasons” for poverty in spite of the wide disparity in views concerning the “single most important” cause.

Such divergent views are naturally grounded in people’s experience—or lack thereof—of poverty. People living in poverty were almost twice as likely as their wealthier counterparts earning more than twice the poverty line to say that poor people in general live difficult lives and struggle to secure work. Given the perspectives of wealthier people, it is not surprising that they are far more likely than poor people to believe that government is spending too much money on means-tested public assistance, although larger numbers of people in both groups say government spends

too little. Middle-income and wealthier people also have far less confidence in the government's ability to eliminate poverty if granted unlimited resources to do so.

These and similar perspectives reported in the survey are evidently grounded in experience: When asked about their current employment status, only 22 percent of people in poverty say they have a full-time job compared with 62 percent of their wealthier counterparts. Poor people who are employed are also more than three times as likely as middle-class people to be dissatisfied with their jobs and more than five times as likely to have poor health. Consistent with prior data on the links between income and educational attainment, 41 percent of poor people surveyed have less than a high school education—a percentage four times higher than middle-class people—while the latter group is nearly four times as likely to have a college degree. Not surprisingly, people in poverty are more than twice as likely as their wealthier counterparts earning over twice the poverty line to express dissatisfaction with the economy, and seven times more likely to describe their current financial situation as poor.

The findings are largely reinforced by more recent opinion surveys comparing the preferences of the general public to those of wealthy campaign contributors with average incomes in excess of \$1 million per year.¹⁸⁷ For example, wealthy respondents are two-and-a-half times more likely than the general public to list reducing the deficit as the most important concern. The reverse is true when it comes to unemployment, with 11 percent of wealthy respondents identifying it as the most important concern compared to 26 percent of the general public. The gap in public opinion about access to higher education is wider still: 78 percent of the general public believes the federal government should make sure that everyone who wants to go to college can do so, compared to 28 percent of wealthy respondents.

Congressional Priorities

If the majority of low-income Americans cite wages and unemployment, social welfare, and criminal justice as top priorities for government to address, where do these issues rank for our nation's leaders? I consider three measures in the public

record of legislation brought before Congress to provide a snapshot of current policy priorities in Washington and their relevance to low-income people compared with other groups. Although they cannot be considered conclusive in their own right, the surveys provide a starting basis for assessing levels of substantive representation in the following section.

First, I analyze key words in the titles and full texts of all 12,299 pieces of legislation introduced in the 112th Congress from January 2011 to January 2013. The textual analysis reveals that seven of the top eight issues raised by people in poverty appear in less than 3 percent of the bills introduced, as shown in Figure 30. Only jobs and unemployment—considered a nationwide priority since the Great Recession, with particular relevance for working poor people—reach double digits, appearing in 10 percent of legislation introduced between 2011 and 2013. Medicaid appears in 3 percent of bills, housing and homelessness appear in 2 percent of bills, and all other issues raised by low-income citizens appears in 1 percent or less. Indeed, low-income people are between four and 62 times more likely to raise the eight priority issues in interviews than members of Congress are to include these issues in legislation, according to the textual analysis. On average, the issues receive 27 times more attention from people interviewed than from their elected representatives.

What's more, when members of Congress do introduce legislation pertaining to low-income people, their positions frequently clash with those expressed in interviews, as the following section on substantive representation reveals. Given the small probability that a piece of legislation becomes law, it follows that the number of approved measures pertaining to poor people is extremely low: Less than 100 of the 2,125 pieces of legislation directly relevant low-income Americans were passed by the 112th Congress and 58 were signed into law. More than half of the bills passed were in the area of jobs and unemployment, a national concern that is hardly unique to low-income people.

Of course, all bills are not created equal in terms of their relevance to and impact on the issues named in their titles and text. A single piece of legislation like the Affordable Care Act of 2010 can have consequences far in excess of the tiny

percentage of total bills it represents—consequences that in this case appear to benefit low-income and under-insured people. Taking these limitations into account, the following analyses incorporating lobbying activity provide a more nuanced measure of the levels of representation low-income people receive in the policymaking process.

Figure 29. Issues Raised in Interviews and Introduced/Passed in the 112th Congress¹⁸⁸

	Bills Introduced	% Total Bills	Congress Passed	President Signed	Raised in Interviews	Raised/ Introduced	Mentions per Interview
Jobs/Unemployment	1,213	10%	50	27	50%	5.1	1.8
Housing/Homelessness	243	2%	15	5	38%	19.2	3.8
Minimum/Low Wage	58	0%	1	1	18%	38.2	1.8
Food Stamps/Hunger	36	0%	5	4	18%	61.5	3.3
Criminal Justice	115	1%	6	4	16%	17.1	2.5
TANF/Welfare	40	0%	3	3	14%	43.0	3.4
Payroll Tax	67	1%	2	4	14%	25.7	2.7
Medicaid	353	3%	11	10	10%	3.5	2.8
<i>Subtotal</i>	<i>2,125</i>	<i>17%</i>	<i>93</i>	<i>58</i>	<i>100%</i>	<i>26.7</i>	<i>2.8</i>
<i>All Bills</i>	<i>12,299</i>	<i>100%</i>	<i>386</i>	<i>284</i>			

Building on my prior analysis of interest group engagement in the political process in part 3.3, I now review the categories of legislation, as well as executive branch rule-making, on which some amount lobbying was reported in 2012 under the Lobbying Disclosure Act (LDA) of 1995 and its amendments. According to LDA reports, individuals and interest groups lobbied on behalf of 77 separate issues in 2012. Three of the 77 issues (4 percent) are highly relevant to poor and near-poor citizens: welfare, bankruptcy, and unemployment. Another nine issues (12 percent) are jointly relevant to low-income citizens and the general public: housing, health, education, immigration, taxes, budget and appropriations, Medicare and Medicaid, civil rights and liberties, law enforcement, and crime. Five issues (6 percent) are highly relevant to labor—education; trade; retirement; government issues; and labor, antitrust, and workplace issues—and a total of 19 issues (25 percent), including labor and education,

apply to the general public. Finally, 39 issues (51 percent) including aerospace, airlines, banking, insurance, chemicals, and mining are deemed primarily relevant to business—twice the number of general public issues and more than one-half of the total sample. The remaining 14 issues do not apply specifically to any of the groups in question. These findings on legislative categories from the Lobbying Disclosure Act reports are consistent with the Library of Congress (LOC) classification of federal legislation into 32 distinct issue areas, of which only two subjects (6 percent)—social welfare and housing and community development—are considered highly relevant to low-income people.¹⁸⁹ Scanning all 571 sub-issues contained in the LOC classification, a total of 24 issues (4 percent) pertain specifically to people living in poverty, while the bulk of issues concern smaller and better resourced interest groups, as outlined above.

It should be noted that, although 4 percent of the issues on which lobbying occurred are highly relevant to low-income people, the bulk of the lobbying activity on those issues (particularly bankruptcy regulation, a major concern for banks) was undertaken by business interests, whose stated purpose does not include representing the needs of low-income Americans. Furthermore, the disparities in overall resources devoted to lobbying by business, labor, and low-income groups are even more pronounced, as outlined in Part 3 above.

All told, the data suggest that issues of primary concern to low-income Americans are largely absent from the national political agenda. Poor people are far less likely than their wealthy counterparts to have their concerns addressed in the mountain of legislation introduced and debated in Congress, and even less likely to have their issues receive the attention of organized lobbyists. When lobbying does occur on issues of concern to them, it is generally not in keeping with their interests. I now assess the actual representation of low-income people in votes taken and legislation adopted by Congress.

4.2 Government Responsiveness

Since low-income people command a larger share of votes, or potential votes, than affluent Americans earning six figures or more, it stands to reason that they

should, more often than not, be able to elect leaders and motivate policy changes amenable to their interests. Furthermore, if poor people tend to have their interests represented in the policymaking process, the differences in participation rates according to socioeconomic status, as noted above, should not matter. To examine this claim and uncover the extent to which the interests of low-income Americans are addressed in Washington, I compare the stated preferences of low-income people with votes taken and legislation passed by Congress.

In the previous section on legislative agendas, I outlined a broad set of policy priorities that emerged from the interviews and focus groups with low-income people, as well as from the most recent available national survey data on poor people's preferences. Although findings from the two datasets substantially overlap, they are limited by the fact that one is derived from a 50-interview sample and the other represents a single point in time. In order to draw working conclusions about the level of political responsiveness in Washington, a more comprehensive and systematic collection of closely related data on public preferences, legislative votes, and policy outcomes is required. I turn to the recent works of two political scientists on the subject: Larry Bartels and Martin Gilens.

Congressional Votes

To what extent do the votes cast by members of Congress reflect the opinions and priorities of their constituents? Although it is impossible to know all of the motivations behind an individual legislator's actions, detailed analyses of voting behavior among senators and representatives, and public opinion surveys directed to their constituents, allow us to measure with reasonable accuracy the rate of responsiveness of Congress.

For a comprehensive application of this method with regard to representation of low-income citizens, I turn to a 2008 study by political scientist Larry Bartels.¹⁹⁰ Using standard measures of the ideological positioning of U.S. senators based on every roll-call vote taken during the four-year study period (1988–1992), Bartels compares senator behavior with the preferences of their constituents.¹⁹¹ Constituents are divided

into lower-, middle-, and higher-income groups based on reported household incomes, and the ideological opinions of each group are calculated on a state-by-state basis using National Elections Studies survey results.¹⁹²

Analyzing the full set of issues on which votes were cast during the study period, Bartels finds that senators are roughly 50 percent more responsive to the views of wealthy constituents in the upper-income bracket than they are to those in the middle-income bracket and not at all responsive to those at the bottom. The disparity in representation is even wider when considering specific ideological roll-call votes that concern low-income citizens, such as raising the federal minimum wage.

Although party affiliation tends to predict the way senators vote on most issues, senators' responsiveness to the views of their high-income constituents on economic issues exceeds party affiliation. In sharp contrast, the views of low-income constituents exhibit a *negative* relationship: as support for a given economic policy rises among low-income people, it declined for their elected representative in the Senate. Even the views of middle-class citizens are effectively ignored, as affluent constituents exert three to four times more influence over senators on economic matters than the average constituent, rich or poor. The patterns of responsiveness even hold when controlling for disparities in voter turnout and political knowledge between rich and poor citizens. Not surprisingly, costlier forms of political participation such as contacting senators directly and contributing to their campaigns, have a noticeable effect on representation. Summarizing his findings on the under-representation of impoverished Americans in the Senate, Bartels concludes that, "far from being considered as political equals, [low-income people] are entirely unconsidered in the policy-making process."¹⁹³

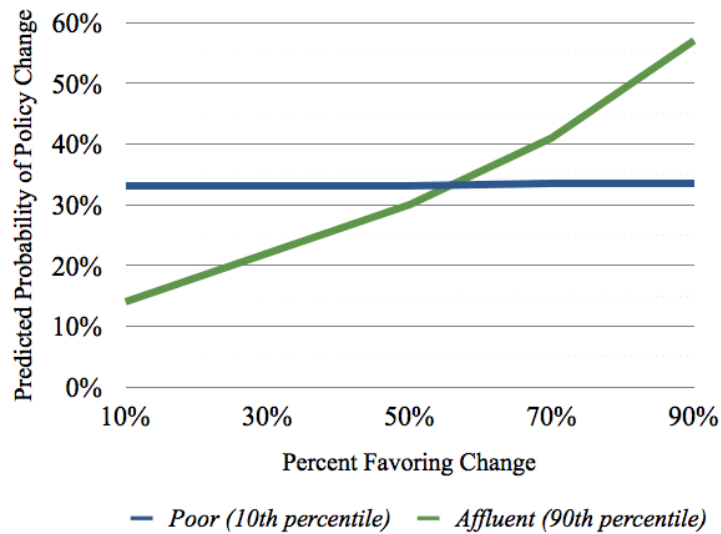
Policy Outcomes

Moving from Senate roll-call votes to the actual policies approved by Congress and signed into law by the president, I turn to a 2012 study of the socioeconomic dimensions of influence by political scientist Martin Gilens. The study analyzes hundreds of general population surveys on the policy preferences of individuals up and down the income ladder between 1964 and 2006, and compares the results with actual

policies enacted by the federal government.¹⁹⁴ Not surprisingly, the surveys reveal that economic issues are the primary area of disagreement between lower- and higher-income citizens, with affluent people in the top 10 percent of the income distribution indicating strong support for “free-market solutions” such as decreased corporate regulation, private rather than public health insurance, school vouchers as an alternative to public schools, and expanded free trade. High-income citizens also prefer a less progressive tax structure than is currently in place. On these and other economic issues, Americans lower down the income ladder tend to hold the opposite views. The surveys also reveal smaller but noticeable differences on certain social issues, with affluent citizens tending to support abortion rights, LGBTQ rights, and stem cell research but opposing school prayer—views that contrast with their lower-income counterparts.

Comparing the stated policy preferences of citizens with actual legislation approved by Congress and signed into law, Gilens finds that stronger overall public support corresponds with increased adoption by policymakers, but the rate of responsiveness varies by income group. When more than 80 percent of the public favors a given issue, the likelihood that it will be adopted is in the range of 50 to 60 percent, a responsiveness gap that scholars attribute to the status quo bias inherent in large institutions like the federal government. When public opinion is divided by economic class, however, policymakers are considerably more responsive to the preferences of their affluent constituents, particularly with regard to economic issues such as tax rates and corporate regulation. In fact, while the predicted probability of policy change rises in a linear fashion as the percentage of wealthy Americans favoring the change increases, the predicted probability of change remains flat regardless of the percentage of poor people favoring the change, as shown in Figure 30—a striking indictment of the fundamental democratic principle of fair representation. The study concludes that “under most circumstances, the preferences of the vast majority of [lower-income] Americans appear to have essentially no impact on which policies the government does or doesn’t adopt.”¹⁹⁵

Figure 30. Preference-Policy Link When Preferences Between Poor and Affluent Americans Diverge¹⁹⁶



Although representational inequality is evident throughout the period under examination (1964–2006), regardless of the political circumstances, Gilens finds that government responsiveness has decreased for low- and middle-income people and increased for affluent people since at least the 1980s. This trend persists even when controlling for higher rates of turnout and involvement in political campaigns among wealthy citizens, as outlined in previous sections of this study.

These findings are largely reinforced when interest group preferences and lobbying are taken into account. Considering that interest groups are more likely to represent corporate America than any other segment of society, as outlined above, it is not surprising that their policy preferences are reflected in government outcomes at rates roughly equal to those of wealthy Americans. When affluent citizens and interest groups agree on policy, Gilens finds that decision makers in Washington are extremely likely to follow suit; when they disagree, the status quo is generally maintained.

Labor unions are an exception to the rule. Although most of the interest groups in Gilens's sample have similar policy preferences to those of wealthy Americans,

labor unions are in sync with middle- and low-income citizens and experience a similar degree of under-representation. When unions take positions on public policy, they are opposed (and generally defeated) by other interest groups 77 percent of the time, more than 2.5 times the rate of contestation on other, non-economic issues. Gilens finds that union influence is further eroded by the declining size and strength of labor in American society and by weakening alliances with many liberal groups, whose priorities have generally shifted away from progressive economic issues and toward “postmaterialist” issues such as civil liberties, the environment, and consumer protection favored by their upper-income constituents. Gilens concludes that well-funded interest groups augment the already considerable representational gap between affluent Americans and the rest of American society.

These findings on unequal representation are hardly unique to Gilens and Bartels. A blue-ribbon task force of the American Political Science Association, comprised of fifteen top scholars from around the country, reached a similar conclusion in its landmark 2004 report “American Democracy in an Age of Rising Inequality.”¹⁹⁷ Notwithstanding the work of generations of Americans “to equalize citizen voice across lines of income, race, and gender,” the report found that “today . . . the voices of American citizens are raised and heard unequally. The privileged participate more than others and are increasingly well organized to press their demands on government. Public officials, in turn, are much more responsive to the privileged than to average citizens and the least affluent. Citizens of lower and moderate incomes speak in a whisper that is lost on the ears of inattentive government officials, while the advantaged roar with a clarity and consistency that policy-makers readily hear and routinely follow.”¹⁹⁸

What are the practical effects of unequal representation for low-income Americans with regard to the issues that matter most to their well-being? Numerous empirical studies published in recent years have traced the rapid rise of economic inequality since the late 1970s, the increasing insecurity that middle- and low-income families experience, and the growth in both relative and absolute poverty, particularly among American children.¹⁹⁹ Increasingly, these trends are linked to changes in public

policy instead of accidental (if inevitable) shifts in the economy and global competition. Summing up the evidence, political scientist Jacob Hacker and colleagues observe that “revisions to tax law, labor regulations, and social policies—often made beneath the radar screen of public awareness—have combined to produce changes in nearly every sphere of government action affecting economic inequality and insecurity in the United States.”²⁰⁰ As a result of these changes, the authors contend that government’s traditional role as a major source of security and opportunity for poor and middle-class families has been reduced, even as the size and scope of governmental benefits for privileged people has increased.

Indeed, lower-income people are not the only segment of American society whose fortunes are partly determined by policies in Washington. As political scientists David Callahan and J. Mijin Cha observe, “Affluent Americans’ economic success is also contingent on government policies in ways that are less visible but can powerfully reinforce advantage, especially through tax expenditures, bankruptcy laws, trade regimes, monetary policy and financial regulation.”²⁰¹ Analysis by the Tax Policy Center in Washington reveals that approximately two-thirds of the more than \$1 trillion in annual tax expenditures from the federal government go to the top 20 percent of income earners, with the top 1 percent receiving more in tax expenditures than the bottom 60 percent combined.²⁰² Federal housing subsidies are a major case in point, as households with incomes above \$100,000 receive the majority of housing subsidy dollars through the mortgage interest deduction and other programs. Indeed, families earning \$200,000 or more receive four times the amount of federal housing subsidies than those earning \$20,000 or less.²⁰³

If the scholars are correct and the fates of both rich and poor Americans are tied to public policy in Washington—from the minimum wage and public education to tax expenditures and financial regulation—then both groups have a compelling need for political representation to ensure their needs are met. The evidence strongly suggests that poor and middle-class citizens are severely under-represented today.

Poor people interviewed overwhelmingly agree. According to Troy in New Orleans, “Politicians can say, ‘We’re gonna make your life better, give you more

housing, jobs,' but when you get in office, you don't even know me no more!" Troy expresses little confidence that representation of low-income people in politics will improve as long as money continues to play an important role in politics. "If you go and vote for any law, any rule that you want changed, [people with money] are just gonna veto it, throw it on the side like it don't even matter," he says, adding, "We're trying to get things done and we can't get 'em done regardless." He points to recent budget cuts as evidence that low-income people in need of government services do not have a say in Washington. "When you say we gonna cut Medicare, Medicaid then you're cutting the little man. The big man, he don't need that."

Randall, a 23-year-old unemployed sales associate in New York City, echoes Troy's sentiments about poor people lacking a voice in politics. Although he maintains that some politicians are trying to do good for the public, he has yet to see a politician with his own eyes. "Never spoken to a politician, never asked my views," he says. According to Randall, money is the primary reason politicians do not seem to represent his needs. "More income means more opportunity to make your voice heard." He sees money as more than a means of being heard—it is also "a big corrupter" of people in power. "Things are corrupted now, people are in it for themselves." At the end of the day, he says, "If you don't have money, you ain't sh**."

Justin, a 32-year-old medical assistant from Boston who has a disability and is out of work, believes he has a voice, but "as to whether or not anybody pays attention is another story." He says he regularly votes and signs petitions for groups and causes he supports, but with little expectation that he will ever be heard. Like the other people interviewed, he sees money as the primary currency for accessing people in power. "You don't see anybody working on the issue of homelessness having closed-door meetings with [politicians] to decide policy." He believes that for the last 30 years or more, "the haves have been stacking the deck in their favor" and he offers Wall Street banks and oil companies as a case in point. According to Justin, "most of those policies [on finance and fossil fuels] are basically so that they can gut existing regulations so they can make even more money." He would like to see an end to all subsidies for oil, natural gas, and coal, and "take all that money and put it towards doing something for

those that have nothing.” But he does not believe it will happen. “If you don’t have money you don’t have a voice.”

4.3 The (Un-)Representatives

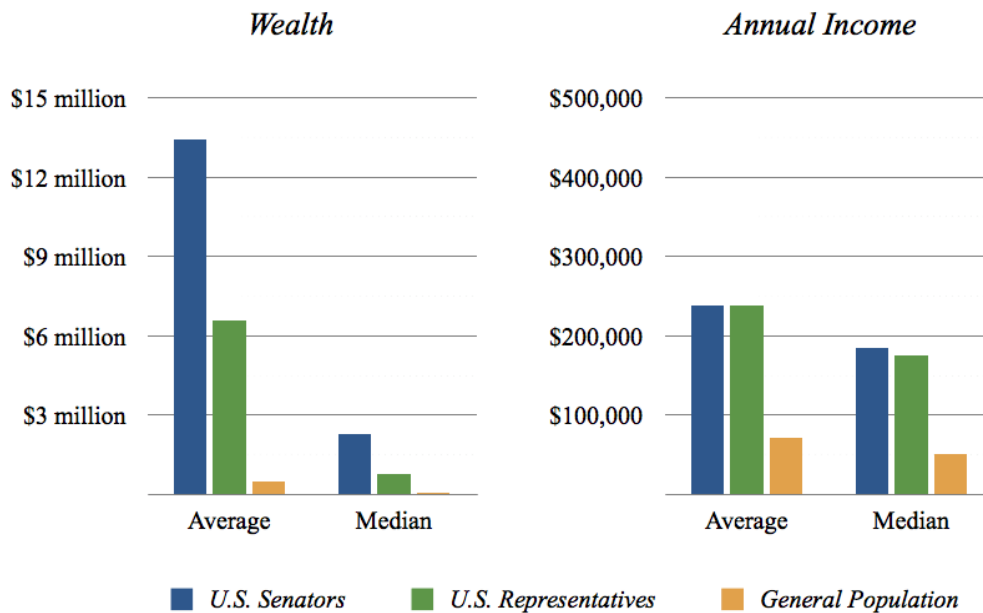
For a final, critical component in measuring political representation, I turn to elected representatives themselves. Far from being disinterested actors who base their votes on the preferences of a majority of their constituents, U.S. senators and representatives come into office with fully formed opinions and pre-defined agendas on many of the important issues of the day. Nor do they simply wait to vote on legislation that has already been introduced; instead, they frequently partner with likeminded interest groups to pursue joint policy goals, to considerable effect.²⁰⁴ Their policy preferences naturally emanate from their own socioeconomic positioning and life experience, with legislators from different class backgrounds holding distinct views on the central economic issues of the day like unemployment, tax policy, labor rights, corporate protections, and the idea of government itself.²⁰⁵ As political scientist Nicholas Carnes observes, “Whether our political system listens to one voice or another depends not just on who’s doing the talking or how loud they are; it also depends on who’s doing the listening.”²⁰⁶ Who, then, are the men and women who serve in the U.S. Congress and how do they descriptively represent, or fail to represent, their constituents?

The Economic Standing of Representatives

A wide and growing economic gulf separates our nation’s leaders from the general public and particularly people in poverty. According to official disclosures for the 112th Congress, which require all lawmakers to report their personal assets within a specified range, the average representative in the House enjoyed a net worth of \$6.6 million, 13 times the average net worth of American families.²⁰⁷ The median representative had assets of \$773,000, approximately 10 times the median net worth of the average family. Nearly one-half of all representatives had more than \$1 million in assets and 85 percent reported assets of \$100,000 or more. In contrast, only around one

in 10 had assets below the median family value of \$77,300 in 2010.²⁰⁸ The gap increased in 2013 with the median net worth of the 94 incoming lawmakers at more than \$1 million, 14 times the median net worth of the average American family in 2013.

Figure 31. Average and Median Wealth and Income of Members of Congress vs. General Population

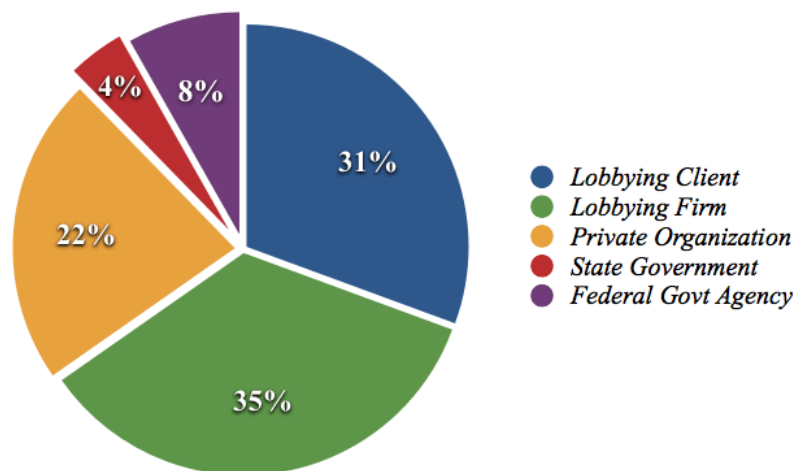


U.S. senators are in a different league altogether. Sometimes referred to as the “millionaire’s club,” the Senate is currently comprised of 63 millionaires with fortunes that sometimes reach into the hundreds of millions of dollars. During the 112th Congress, 80 serving senators enjoyed assets of \$500,000 or more. According to official disclosures, the average net worth of senators stood at \$13.4 million, 27 times the average American family, while the median senator reported \$2.3 million in assets, 30 times the median net worth of families. Only seven senators (7 percent) had assets below the median family value of \$77,300.²⁰⁹ Taken together, the combined net worth of all 535 senators and representatives was \$4.5 billion.

Moving from assets to income, the salaries of \$174,000 plus benefits currently paid to ordinary members of Congress place them comfortably within the top 5 percent

of American family incomes.²¹⁰ After adding approximately \$30 million in outside income reported by senators and representatives in 2011 (mostly in the form of dividends and capital gains) to congressional salaries, the average annual income of members climbs to \$232,000. At 4.5 times the median household income and more than 10 times the poverty line for a typical family of four, members of Congress are financially far removed from the middle and lower classes. Furthermore, for many senators and representatives, serving in elected office is a stepping-stone to far more lucrative careers as private-sector lobbyists, lawyers, and advisors to major corporations. In recent years, more former members of congress have undertaken paid lobbying work than any other job, commanding incomes that often exceed \$1 million per year. Of the 44 retiring members of the 112th Congress who had confirmed employment as of mid-2013, two-thirds were actively involved in lobbying their former colleagues on behalf of private clients.²¹¹

Figure 32. Percentage of Retiring Members of Congress Working for Various Employer Types



Social Standing of Representatives

Income and assets are not the only things separating Members of Congress from the general public and people in poverty. Education and occupation, long

considered by scholars to shape the process of individual political identification and engagement, vary considerably between members of Congress and the American public at large.²¹² Analyzing the Congressional Research Service's biennial survey of Congress for 2013, the three most common occupational fields for members of Congress prior to their election to federal office are politics, business, and law, at roughly 30 percent each, followed by education at 12 percent.²¹³ The specific professions most common to senators and representatives include state legislators (262), congressional staffers (100+), educators (102, including administrators, counselors, and coaches), mayors (33), prosecutors (32), farm owners (28), physicians (20), media hosts/producers (13), accountants (11), and business/finance executives (8).²¹⁴ Fewer than 10 members practiced other professions. Taking a long-range view, lawyers and businesspeople made up fully three-quarters of elected members of Congress during the 20th century.²¹⁵

The professional experiences of U.S. senators and representatives in the 112th Congress stand in stark contrast to those of Americans in general. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics in 2012, less than 1 percent of Americans worked in law or politics and less than 5 percent worked in business and financial operations.²¹⁶ Instead, average Americans were far more likely to make a living in nonprofessional occupations such as retail sales, office support, production and transportation, and a range of human services.²¹⁷ Only three representatives (0.5 percent) reported prior work experience in occupations familiar to low-income Americans, namely autoworker, welder, and union representative.²¹⁸ For much of the past century, approximately 10 members in each Congress (2 percent) held these types of nonprofessional jobs.

Not surprisingly, members of Congress also enjoy considerably higher levels of education than the general public—a benefit for understanding complex policy matters but also a privilege that can serve to alienate elected officials from their less-educated constituents. Ninety-nine percent of U.S. senators and 92 percent of representatives elected to the 112th Congress had a bachelor's degree or higher, more than three times the rate of college completion (28 percent) among American adults.²¹⁹ A majority of senators (55 percent) and more than one-third of representatives (38

percent) held law degrees. Another 16 percent of senators and 20 percent of representatives held master's degrees as their highest qualification, and nearly one in 10 representatives and four senators held either a medical or doctoral degree (PhD).²²⁰ Since the 1950s, one in four U.S. senators and one in six representatives has graduated from 13 prestigious universities whose alumni make up less than 1 percent of the total American population today.²²¹

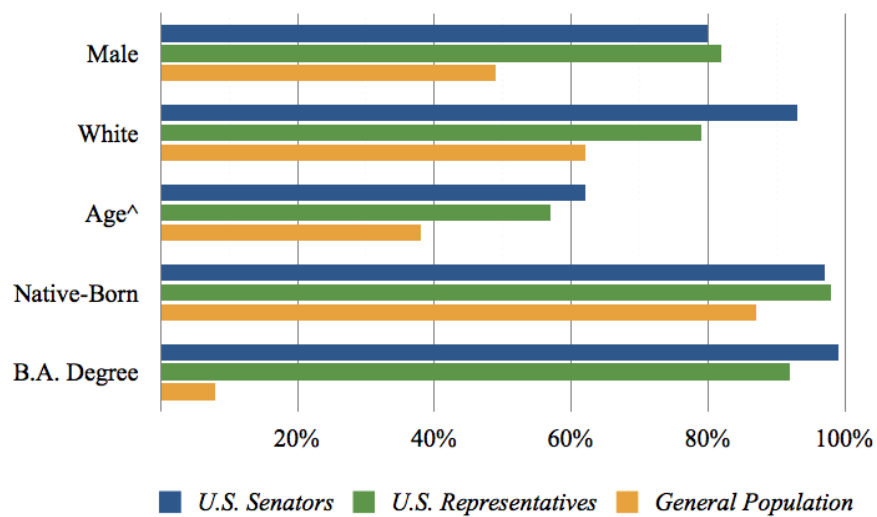
Taken together, income and social class exert a profound effect on the positions held and votes taken by senators and representatives, even when controlling for party affiliation, demographic factors, constituencies, and the source of campaign funds.²²² Legislators from working class backgrounds are far more likely than their white-collar counterparts to introduce and sponsor economic policies amenable to the interests of low-income people, measures that rarely succeed for a lack of working-class votes in Congress.²²³ The evidence suggests that Congress would be significantly more labor-friendly and less business-friendly if its class composition represented the country as a whole.²²⁴ That it does not is undoubtedly related to the financial barrier of entry that stands in the way of seeking public office in the age of the privately-funded, multimillion-dollar congressional campaign: just two percent of congressional candidates come from working-class backgrounds.²²⁵

Female and Minority Representation in Congress

The lack of descriptive representation for low-income people in politics is not limited to socioeconomic factors. Turning to even more basic categories of identification, gender and race or ethnicity, I find that women and members of minority groups remain significantly under-represented in Washington. The 113th Congress that took office in January 2013 included 100 women (80 representatives and 20 senators), 45 African Americans (43 representatives and two senators), 38 Hispanics (34 representatives and four senators), 13 Asian Americans (12 representatives and one senator), and two American Indians serving in the House.²²⁶ Although a marked improvement from past Congresses, women and minorities remain significantly under-represented in politics.

Overall, women hold only 18 percent of the seats in Congress.²²⁷ A total of 274 women have served as U.S. senators and representatives since 1789, 2 percent of the roughly 12,000 Americans who have been elected to Congress in our nation’s history. In city and state executive offices, women fare even worse: one in 10 governors is currently female and one in eight mayors of the nation’s 100 largest cities is a woman. By contrast, the number of American women currently living in poverty exceeds the number of men in poverty by 32 percent.

Figure 33. Selected Characteristics of Members of Congress vs. General Population²²⁸



African Americans are slowly closing the representation gap in the House, with 10 percent of U.S. representatives but only 2 percent of senators. American states have elected a total of eight African American senators and 137 representatives since the Civil War. Hispanic Americans remain severely under-represented in both houses of Congress, currently constituting less than 9 percent of representatives and 4 percent of senators. A total of nine Hispanics have been elected to the Senate and 63 have been elected to the House since 1928, or half of 1 percent of the total elected to congress. African Americans and Hispanic Americans experience poverty at close to three times

the rate experienced by non-Hispanic whites. Under-representation of Asian Americans and American Indians in Congress is also extreme.

Congressional Districts and Apportionment

I conclude my examination of descriptive representation in Washington by examining congressional districting, apportionment, and the spatial distribution of low-income populations. Poor Americans are disproportionately concentrated in large-population states, rendering them significantly under-represented in the U.S. Senate, where all states (excluding D.C. and the island territories) enjoy the same two seats regardless of population. Analyzing poverty rates across all 50 states, I find that 85 percent of impoverished Americans resided in only 25 states and D.C. in 2011, represented by one-half of the votes in the Senate. With 1.6 million poor people per senator in these high-poverty states and more than 3 million per senator in California, low-income people are represented at less than one-third of the rate of non-poor citizens overall. When differential voter turnout between poor and non-poor Americans is considered—with poor people turning out at between one-half and two-thirds of the rate of other citizens in recent elections—poor people in large, high-poverty states enjoy less than one-fifth of the rate of representation of other Americans in the Senate. Under-representation is even worse for poor children and members of minority groups residing in these states.

At the other end of the spectrum, only 10 percent of impoverished citizens currently reside in the 21 smallest states, whose 42 senators are able to effectively block passage of any legislation by means of the filibuster. Although a coalition of these 21 states is hardly assured, a general partisan division exists between large and small states that works to the disadvantage of poor and minority citizens. According to standard ratings of political ideology, small-state senators are more conservative than their large-state counterparts and more likely to amplify their voice by using the filibuster.²²⁹ Furthermore, senior leadership positions in the Senate are more likely to be held by long-serving senators elected in small states.²³⁰ As a result, the Senate has frequently blocked legislation backed by senators representing a majority of the electorate and amenable to the interests of low-income citizens.²³¹ As a case in point,

California's 6 million people living in poverty command approximately 0.01 percent of the voting power of poor people in nearby Wyoming, a disparity that is one-third greater than that between non-poor residents in those two states on account of California's higher poverty rate. The number of poor people in California exceeds the total population of Wyoming by more than 10 to one.

In the U.S. House of Representatives, in which seats are apportioned by population according to the principle of one vote per person, poor people are also under-represented because of their concentration in denser urban areas.²³² A similar analysis of poverty rates in all 435 congressional districts, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico reveals that two-thirds of impoverished Americans resided in less than one-half of congressional districts in 2011. These poor citizens are represented in Congress at around one-half of the rate of Americans overall, or one-third of the rate when differential voter turnout is considered. In certain urban districts, the rate of poverty approaches 40 percent, including 50 percent of children in New York's 16th Congressional District and more than 250,000 poor people overall—10 times the poverty rate of New York's 3rd Congressional District across the Long Island Sound. Even if the concentration of impoverished Americans in urban districts like the New York 16th led to higher levels of representation with those members of Congress, the number of representatives in question would still account for a distinct minority of the Congress.

As in the Senate, the rate of under-representation of poor children and members of minority groups is slightly higher than that of poor people overall. Meanwhile, the 112,000 residents of D.C. currently living in poverty, and more than 1 million impoverished citizens in Puerto Rico and the other Island Territories, have no voting representation in either chamber of Congress.

Finally, congressional districting poses a unique challenge to low-income and minority citizens who already suffer from under-representation in state bodies responsible for drawing district lines.²³³ In the latest round of redistricting that followed the 2010 U.S. Census, Republican state lawmakers controlled the districting process in states with 40 percent of House seats compared with the Democrats' 10 percent; the

remaining districts were drawn by states with divided governments or by state courts or nonpartisan commissions.²³⁴ Partly because of partisan districting and the already disproportionate concentration of low-income and minority voters in certain localities, Republicans won the majority of House seats in multiple states where Democrats received the majority of votes for Congress, including the majority of votes from low-income constituents.²³⁵ Nationwide, Republicans retained a 32-seat or 7 percent voting majority in the House of Representatives despite losing the congressional popular vote by 1.1 million votes.²³⁶ Although income data on state legislators is not widely available, studies of racial parity find that roughly 8 percent of state legislators are African American, 3 percent are Hispanic, 1.5 percent are Asian, and 0.5 percent is American Indian—between one-third and three-fourths less than the actual rate of representation of these groups in the general population.²³⁷ Meanwhile, people earning less than \$25,000 per year were twice as likely to vote Democratic than Republican in the 2012 presidential election.

The under-representation of low-income Americans evident in Congress extends to the Electoral College, in which the number of votes a state casts for president is equivalent to that state's number of senators and representatives in Congress. Ranking states by the ratio of poor citizens per Electoral College vote, I find a majority of electors from smaller states represent only 39 percent of Americans living in poverty. Given the lower rates of voter registration and turnout among impoverished citizens, a president only needs to attract the support of approximately 26 percent of Americans in poverty to win the general election.

These data on the lack of descriptive and substantive representation of low-income people clearly conform to the views of low-income people themselves. Where the politicians come from and how they live their lives matters a lot to Mel, the former nurse from Oklahoma, who has lived with a disability for the last eight years since emerging from a severe car accident with seizures. “I don't really hang out with politicians—I mean they don't hang out with me!” she says, adding that she has never once seen or heard of a politician “listening to someone on the street.” According to Mel, it is meaningless for politicians to talk of helping “ordinary people” when they

have no experience with how those people live. “People that’s never been there are the ones that are gonna help us? How?” she asks. “Unless you’ve been there, you don’t know how to help.” Although Mel is grateful to receive a monthly disability payment of \$800 per month through Social Security, as well as \$16 per month in food stamps, it is not enough to cover her basic needs for housing, food, and transportation—nevermind investing in political outcomes. If politicians knew what it was like to live on \$816 a month, she says, things would certainly change for people like her. Mel’s recommendation for increasing the responsiveness of elected officials is simple: “I would like more people from the poverty level, or people that’s been in poverty, to be in Congress . . . it should be mixed.”

Diane from Cleveland echoes Mel’s contention that people in elected office have little ability—and seemingly little desire—to understand the needs of low-income people. “In order for you to really realize what’s going on, you gotta live the life we’re living,” she says, adding, “If you have not lived in they shoes, you can’t protect them.” As an elderly woman retired against her will since her auto-parts factory packed up and moved out of Cleveland, Diane also depends on Social Security to get by and could not imagine surviving without her monthly check. Nevertheless, the \$700 she receives each month is also not enough to cover basic needs for her and the grandchildren who are currently in her care, placing her a world apart from all her elected representatives. And it’s not just a matter of socioeconomic status for Diane. As an African American woman, she is conscious of a kind of double-exclusion when it comes to descriptive representation in Washington: only one African American woman has ever been elected to the U.S. Senate. “We have nothing, “ she says. “We need somebody [like us] to back us up, help us out.”

Josan, the homeless man in his 30s from Washington, D.C., is even more emphatic in rejecting the notion that politicians understand or take an interest in what people like him think. He does not believe the people in power are looking out for the needs of ordinary folks—“not at all.” When asked if he has ever met a politician or if he can imagine one visiting the Federal City homeless shelter where he lives, less than

three blocks from the U.S. Capitol, he replies, “Hell no, they ain’t gonna come down here.” He figures they’re probably scared. “That’s just how it is.”

5. CONCLUSION: A WAY FORWARD

Walking 3,200 miles across the United States in her 90th year for campaign finance reform, the legendary campaign reformer Doris “Granny D” Haddock (1910-2010) was fond of saying, “Democracy is not something we have—it’s something we do.” Although she stood less than five feet tall, the former secretary and great-grandmother of 16 is considered a giant of civic and political participation by many Americans. Her actions inspired countless disempowered people to put on their walking shoes and reclaim a portion of their democratic rights.²³⁸ But Granny D did not confine her activism to the customary calls for voting and civic engagement. Years of volunteering in her community and careful study of the institutions of democracy convinced her of the fact that sizable barriers, ranging from felon disenfranchisement to the way we fund campaigns, stood in the way of full and equal participation for people with limited means. These barriers, in turn, were a threat to equal political voice and representation for all Americans.

As the foregoing analysis and interviews have shown, political participation and representation are anything but equal in the United States today. Americans with high incomes and education levels are far more likely, on average, to vote and volunteer in elections, contribute money to political campaigns, and lobby the government to advance their interests than people lower down the socioeconomic ladder. High-income earners are also far more likely to find their needs and interests represented on the legislative agenda, to see laws passed consistent with their interests, and to have people with similar backgrounds to themselves holding public office. Meanwhile, Americans living below or near the poverty line account for only a small share of both the inputs and outputs of political power.

Although many possible explanations exist for why certain individuals become active in politics and others do not, socioeconomic status repeatedly emerges as a major determining factor in the extent of participatory inputs citizens, and would-be citizens, command overall. At least three reasons are found to drive this trend, as detailed above. First, legal disenfranchisement and other formal barriers to voting and participation disproportionately affect low-income people, who are far more likely than

wealthy and more educated Americans to obtain a felony conviction, lack citizenship status, or reside in Washington, D.C., Puerto Rico, and the other U.S. territories that do not have voting representation in Congress.

Second, people with limited means are considerably more likely to face informal barriers to political participation in the course of registering to vote, accessing the polls, or obtaining the requisite identification, for reasons that are frequently beyond their immediate control. They are also likely to doubt the efficacy of political engagement, based on longstanding perceptions that politics does not work in their favor. Third, as money increasingly becomes the dominant currency of political participation beyond the ballot box—particularly with regard to funding political campaigns and lobbying the government—the potential for low-income people to influence politics outside of Election Day is severely reduced.

Although these and other inputs of political participation may rightly be considered ends in themselves, the real test of democratic equality is the extent to which policies (and the politicians who make them) actually respond to the needs and preferences of the American people at large. Here, the evidence is even more alarming from the perspective of low-income people. By a host of relevant measures of political outputs—including which issues are introduced as legislation, how much attention they receive, how they are voted on by Congress, and who is elected to positions of influence in the first place—American politics appears woefully unrepresentative of middle- and low-income people alike. However one slices the numbers, it appears that people lower down the socioeconomic ladder face serious, structural disadvantages when it comes to making their voices heard and having their interests represented in politics. They can hardly be considered equal citizens in the public square.

What do the data and interviews teach us about the nature of American poverty itself, and how are we to respond? The answer may be captured in three words: poverty is political. More than just a social or economic concern resulting from bad individual choices, a lack of decent-paying jobs, and the like, poverty is also a function of the systematic (self-) exclusion of low-income people from politics. For politics, economy, and society are inextricably entwined in our complex society.

If poverty is a “democracy problem” stemming from a lack of political voice and representation, then any serious effort to overcome poverty in the United States must include a “democracy solution.” Drawing on a wide range of innovative experiments in the American states, I conclude by outlining three sets of democratic process reforms that have significant potential to amplify the voices of under-represented people in the political process. The reforms correspond to each of the three major inputs of political power outlined above: voting, campaigning and contributing, and lobbying the government. Their purpose is two-fold: to remove unnecessary barriers to full and equal participation of low-income people in politics, and to create new opportunities for under-represented groups to speak and be heard in ways that cherish and expand the First Amendment. Although the reforms that follow cannot promise an end to poverty itself, absent such changes there is little hope that government will ever be able to meet the needs of its low-income population. As such, they are a necessary precondition for enacting policies that seriously seek to alleviate poverty and expand opportunity for all.

5.1 Voting Reform

How are we to conceive of our most basic democratic act in the 21st century? Although many American states still deem voting a *privilege* that can be denied to certain groups, voting is and ought to be the unconditional *right and responsibility* of every adult citizen in the United States. To protect that right, all legal restrictions on the franchise should be removed for the nearly 4 million Americans with prior felony convictions who have reentered society as taxpaying citizens after incarceration. Voting reforms should also be enacted to provide full voting representation in Congress for the nearly 5 million American citizens residing in Washington, D.C., Puerto Rico, and the other island territories, and territorial citizens should receive the right to vote in presidential elections. What’s more, states like Maine, Maryland, and Vermont that seek to proactively extend the franchise to incarcerated citizens or to allow permanent residents to vote in local or state elections—in keeping with longstanding historical norms and the U.S. Constitution—serve as examples of full-enfranchisement for other states.

In addition to establishing the *right* of every American citizen to cast their ballot in elections, voting reforms should simultaneously affirm the *responsibility* of citizens to vote, in the interest of full and informed participation. To achieve an “everyone votes” norm while safeguarding the integrity of elections, Congress and the states should modernize and streamline voting procedures through automatic universal registration that is portable across state and precinct lines. Such a Citizens Vote system, modeled after the automatic registration of every 18 year-old male in the United States by the Selective Service, would ensure that no voter is turned away on Election Day and that no fraudulent ballots may be cast. While implementation of automatic registration is in progress, all states should move swiftly to adopt Election-Day registration systems similar to those found in eleven states and the District of Columbia, where mean and median turnout consistently ranks above the national norm.²³⁹ Voter IDs, where required, should be fully accessible to people with limited means, and polling places should meet mandatory minimum staffing and administration requirements to prevent excessively long wait-times in low-income communities. Finally, straightforward absentee balloting options practiced in certain high-turnout states should be available in all fifty states for people who have difficulty accessing the polls on Election Day, and Congress should establish a national Election Day Holiday to promote civil discourse, public deliberation, and informed participation at the polls. Taken together, these reforms would effectively remove the many formal and informal barriers that stand in the way of voting for low-income people, thereby amplifying the voices of under-represented groups on Election Day.

5.2 Election Reform

If voting reform seeks to ensure that every American citizen is heard on Election Day, campaign finance and election reforms address the wide representational gap that exists long before (and after) voters go to the polls. Although money is indisputably a central feature of modern political campaigns, shifting the source of funds away from the fraction of one percent who presently fund campaigns to a broad cross-section of the American people can effectively enhance the voices of middle- and low-income citizens in elections. To accomplish the first objective of curbing the

undue influence of major contributors, Congress should pass and the states ratify the 28th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution re-establishing the right of Congress to regulate political spending by limiting contributions and “independent” electioneering expenditures. Congress should simultaneously mandate full disclosure of all contributions used for campaign-related activity by candidates and groups, a practice that has consistently been upheld by the Supreme Court. Disclosure and non-coordination requirements may also be implemented under existing statutes by the Federal Election Commission. As of March 2015, 16 American states and over 600 cities and towns have adopted resolutions calling on Congress to pass a Constitutional Amendment.²⁴⁰ As of 2011, 47 states have varying forms of independent expenditure disclosure requirements in place.²⁴¹

To accomplish the second objective of expanding political voice for all, Congress should pass a small donor incentive program to radically enlarge and diversify the pool of contributors to political campaigns. Under such a Citizens Elect program, voters would receive a modest voucher to contribute to the qualifying congressional and/or presidential candidate(s) of their choice in each biennial election and for no other purpose. Candidates would become eligible to receive voucher funding by collecting a large number of small donations upfront from their constituents, and by voluntarily foregoing large private donations. Funding for the Citizens Elect program would come from the first \$50 that every adult citizen pays in taxes to the federal government (directly or indirectly), offset by a tax on large donations to candidate and independent expenditure campaigns.²⁴² Alternate forms of small donor-driven campaign finance reform include a multiple match or tax credit on small donations made to qualifying candidates. As of 2011, 24 states have some form of public financing of campaigns in place, including four states with comprehensive matching systems similar to the alternate model described above for legislative and gubernatorial elections (Arizona, Connecticut, Maine, and Vermont) and two for judicial elections (New Mexico and North Carolina).²⁴³ New York City, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and several other cities also provide multiple matching funds to qualifying candidates for public office. Although candidate participation is voluntary, the large majority of candidates across the several jurisdictions regularly choose to

participate and forego large donations, producing a substantial increase in the economic, gender, and racial diversity of candidates and campaign contributors alike.²⁴⁴

In addition to money in politics reforms, Congress and the states should adopt a menu of complementary reforms aimed at increasing electoral competitiveness and representation of marginalized groups. Redistricting reforms should be implemented at the state level to establish independent nonpartisan redistricting commissions charged with drawing district lines transparently and in accordance with previously-specified criteria of compactness, contiguity, competition, preservation of existing communities, and no undue favoritism towards a person or party. Currently ten states have shifted redistricting authority from partisan legislatures to independent or advisory commissions, with final boundaries subject to review by the courts.²⁴⁵ Other electoral reforms practiced in certain states and municipalities that merit wider consideration include open or non-partisan primaries, incumbent term-limits, multi-member legislative districts, and alternative voting systems such as instant runoff voting. Finally, all states should adopt the National Popular Vote, already approved by ten states and the District of Columbia, to ensure that presidential candidates have an incentive to campaign in all fifty states rather than merely swing states, and that the candidate receiving the most popular votes wins the presidency. The net effect of these reforms would be to amplify the voices of low-income people in the all-important process of choosing the nation's leaders.

5.3 Lobbying Reform

The final, critical component of restoring equal representation for all Americans is reducing the corruptive influence of lobbyist money in politics and expanding opportunities for middle- and low-income citizens to communicate with their elected officials in Washington. To safeguard against corruption and conflicts of interest, Congress should limit campaign contributions and fundraising by lobbyists and political committees, permanently close the revolving door between government and the lobbying industry, and prohibit contributions by government contractors and

their political committees and close associates. These and similar provisions contained in the recently-introduced American Anti-Corruption Act have yet to be adequately tested at the federal level, although 19 states and numerous municipalities have implemented various forms of pay-to-play restrictions in response to ongoing corruption scandals at every level of government.²⁴⁶ Because low- and middle-income people lack the means to purchase governmental contracts, earmarks, or other political favors by investing in campaigns, such practices invariably benefit wealthy parties by undermining fair competition in the private sector and diverting limited public resources away from human needs.

As with the voting and election reforms outlined above, the second objective of lobbying reform is to proactively expand the voices of middle- and low-income people in government, especially the policymaking process. Countering the monumental resource advantage that private-sector lobbies enjoy over their low-income and public interest counterparts, without limiting their First Amendment rights, requires a significant increase in the resources available to under-represented groups. Applying the Citizens Elect model of public vouchers to fund qualifying candidate campaigns, Congress should implement a Citizens Lobby program to provide registered voters with modest vouchers to contribute on a biennial basis to any 501(c) advocacy organization(s) of their choice, provided they are in good standing with the IRS.²⁴⁷ Voters would be required to complete a short (nonpartisan) online civics curriculum before gaining access to their voucher, a means of promoting civic literacy and informed participation. Like the Citizens Elect program, funding would come from taxes already paid by every adult citizen to the federal government, offset by a modest tax on the purchase of lobbying services in excess of \$10,000 per year.²⁴⁸ Under both systems, any unused vouchers would revert to the fund and stringent safeguards would be established to prevent fraudulent solicitation of vouchers (including ineligibility of violators to receive future funding). The small-dollar value of individual vouchers would also serve as a disincentive to underhanded solicitation or abuse.

Although a Citizens Lobby program, as such, is untested in the United States, it is an application of the longstanding American practice of investing in legal services

for low-income people in the criminal justice system. Just as state-sponsored public defenders serve as “law firms for the poor,” the Citizens Lobby would provide middle- and low-income people with basic (if still unequal) lobbying resources with which to increase their level of representation on Capitol Hill. Lobbying reforms should be combined with expanded use of public deliberation programs, on an Election Day holiday and throughout the year, to improve the quality and quantity of public debate.

Ultimately, the success of these and other democratic process reforms will be measured in human terms: Will Darius from Los Angeles and other young men in poverty with a criminal record be able to reclaim their basic democratic right and responsibility after serving time? Will their combined votes and voices be enough to shift priorities and erect the urban daycare centers Darius imagines? Will Andy and Maria, the elderly El Paso couple, ever have the chance to meet a politician face-to-face, rather than waiting four hours in line on Election Night to check a box next to his name? Will they be sought after by his campaign to voice their concerns and make a Citizens Elect donation? Will Melanie in Oklahoma find the means to lobby her representatives for a change in healthcare laws that would benefit the “little people” she knows who are racked by medical debt on top of a terminal illness or disability? Will she ever have the chance to “hang out with politicians”—or run for office herself?

Smart and patriotic Americans will openly disagree about what government should do, on poverty, jobs, housing, healthcare or any other issue confronting the United States. But on one thing they cannot disagree: When government acts, whatever it does, it should act on behalf of all of the people, rich and poor alike. That is our basic imperative as a democratic republic. It is going unmet today.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A book, even a modest e-book such as this, is never the work or inspiration of a single individual alone. Oddly enough, this journey into American poverty and political inequality began in South Africa, my home from 2011-13. There, Nkwame, George, and others challenged me to face my privilege and others' poverty head on. I was shaken by the encounters and resolved to stay unsettled on my return home. Where Nkwame and George left off, dozens of fellow Americans (and aspiring Americans) picked up by sharing their stories and making space in their camps, trailers, and shelters for me during my Greyhound tours through thirty states. I owe them much more than this account.

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Finally, I am grateful to my beloved Sindiso, whose faith in one unspeakably greater than I, and corresponding boundless grace and love for me, mean everything. Her starting point in life, in the Southwestern Townships (Soweto) of Johannesburg, could not be more different from, or better-suited to, my own.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Raised in “poverty-lite” in the all-white town of Temple, New Hampshire, backed by generations of college degrees, Daniel Weeks did not encounter systemic poverty until leaving home to serve as an AmeriCorps volunteer with City Year Washington, DC at age 18. That experience, combined with a passion for democracy cultivated in high school by the legendary New Hampshire reformer Doris “Granny D” Haddock (1910-2010), set him on his path as an ardent proponent of democratic reform. As founding director of Students for Clean Elections in 2002, Weeks advocated successfully for comprehensive election reform, including the first legislature-approved public funding law in the country. From 2008-11, he served as president of Americans for Campaign Reform, working with a bipartisan team of former U.S. senators to advance citizen-funded elections in Congress. In 2011, he founded the Money and Politics Project for democratic reform in South Africa, before returning to continue the work in New Hampshire in 2013.

Today, Weeks serves as Executive Director of Open Democracy, a nonpartisan nonprofit working to ensure transparent and accountable governance. Open Democracy’s New Hampshire Rebellion campaign is walking the talk for democracy across the Granite State to build the reform movement — 30,000 miles and counting. Weeks has written and spoken on democracy issues for *The Atlantic*, *New York Times*, *Boston Globe*, *Christian Science Monitor*, and on PBS, NPR, BBC, and other outlets. For his Poor (in) Democracy project, Weeks traveled 10,000 miles through 30 states by Greyhound bus, conducting interviews and participant observations with dozens of people in poverty while maintaining a poverty-line budget of \$16 per day. He was privileged to study Political Science at Yale and Political Theory at Oxford on a Marshall Scholarship. He lives in Nashua, NH with his wife, Dr. Sindiso Mnisi Weeks.

To learn more, visit www.PoorInDemocracy.org.

Notes

¹ Daniel Weeks conducted three poverty research tours through 30 states in October 2012, February-March 2013, and May-June 2013 with the support of a Non-Resident Fellowship at the Edmond J. Safra Center for Ethics at Harvard University. Traveling 10,000 miles by Greyhound bus in six weeks, he interviewed Americans in poverty and conducted participant observations on a poverty line budget of \$16 per day, based on the Census Bureau's 2012 poverty threshold of \$23,283 per year for a typical family of four. For more information on the research project and publications, see www.poorindemocracy.org. Except where quotation marks are used, indicating an alias, interview subjects are identified by their first names.

² Major sources include: Kay Lehman Schlozman, Sidney Verba, and Henry E. Brady, *The Unheavenly Chorus: Unequal Political Voice and the Broken Promise of American Democracy* (Princeton University Press, 2012); Martin Gilens, *Affluence and Influence: Economic Inequality and Political Power in America* (Princeton University Press, 2012); Larry M. Bartels, *Unequal Democracy: The Political Economy of the New Gilded Age* (Princeton University Press, 2008); and Frank R. Baumgartner, et al., *Lobbying and Policy Change: Who Wins, Who Loses, and Why* (University of Chicago Press, 2009).

³ Marc V. Levine, "Race and Male Employment in the Wake of the Great Recession" University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Center for Economic Development, Working Paper, January 2012, https://www4.uwm.edu/ced/publications/black-employment_2012.pdf.

⁴ Carmen DeNavas-Walt and Bernadette D. Proctor, "Income and Poverty in the United States: 2013," U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Reports, September 2014.

⁵ Id.

⁶ Id. and Lauren E. Glaze and Erinn J. Herberman, "Correctional Populations in the United States, 2012," U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, December 2013. Latest combined data (as of November 2014) are for 2012.

⁷ DeNavas-Walt and Proctor, "Income and Poverty in the United States: 2013."

⁸ Id. The latest official count of 6.3 percent for 2013 is not a statistically-significant change from the recession high of 6.7 percent 2010, the highest point since the Census Bureau began counting the number of Americans in deep poverty in 1975.

⁹ Id. Although "basic needs" calculations range geographically based on the cost of living and family size, families of two or more require more than 200 percent of the federal poverty line to meet their needs in even the lowest-COL state (MIT Living Wage Calculator, NCCP).

¹⁰ DeNavas-Walt and Proctor, "Income and Poverty in the United States: 2013"; for comparison purposes, data in figures are current to 2012, the most recent year for which comprehensive data on SPM, elections, participation, etc. are available.

¹¹ Kathleen Short, "The Research Supplementary Poverty Measure: 2012," U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Reports, November 2013.

¹² Id., and DeNavas-Walt and Proctor, "Income and Poverty in the United States: 2013."

¹³ Joel F. Handler and Yeheskel Hasenfeld, *Blame Welfare, Ignore Poverty and Inequality* (Cambridge University Press, 2007); and Peter Edelman, "Why Can't We End Poverty," *New York Times*, July 28, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/29/opinion/sunday/why-cant-we-end-poverty-in-america.html>.

¹⁴ Id.

¹⁵ Analysis of U.S. Census Bureau poverty tables, 2013.

¹⁶ Short, "The Research Supplementary Poverty Measure: 2012"; racial categories are mutually exclusive.

¹⁷ Id.

¹⁸ DeNavas-Walt and Proctor, "Income and Poverty in the United States: 2013"; and Glaze and Herberman, "Correctional Populations in the United States, 2012."

¹⁹ Handler and Hasenfeld, *Blame Welfare, Ignore Poverty and Inequality*; and Peter Edelman, *So Rich, So Poor* (The New Press, 2012).

²⁰ Robert A. Dahl, *On Democracy* (Yale University Press, 1998).

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- ²¹ Except where otherwise indicated, all voting data are from the Current Population Survey (2004–2012) and Current Population Reports (1964–2010) of the U.S. Census Bureau. FN 22 AND PART OF 23 MISSING
- ²² Lorraine C. Minnite, “An Analysis of Who Voted (and Who Didn’t Vote) in the 2010 Election,” Project Vote Research Memo, Project Vote, November 2010, 2.
- ²³ Thom File and Sarah Crissey, “Voting and Registration in the Election of November 2008,” Current Population Reports, U.S. Census Bureau, July 2012, Table 5, 12. Multivariate regression tables calculate the voting odds ratios for seven distinct demographic characteristics: gender, race, age, educational attainment, family income, duration of residence, and region (N = 93,360, statistically significant at .001 level).
- ²⁴ U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, April 2014 and earlier reports. Note: the five income brackets used are collapsed averages of the Census Bureau’s 10 income brackets (family income reported, excluding nonrelative householders), representing approximately one-fifth of the respondent population each. The income brackets for each category are as follows: “Poor” <\$30,000; “Lower Income” \$30,000-\$49,000; “Middle Income” \$50,000-\$74,999; “Higher Income” \$75,000-\$99,999; “Affluent” \$100,000+. Census data on citizenship, registration, and voting are not available by income brackets prior to 2004. For further details on income brackets see Footnote 175.
- ²⁵ File and Crissey, “Voting and Registration in the Election of November 2008.”
- ²⁶ U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, May 2014 and earlier reports.
- ²⁷ Id.; turnout as percentage of voting-age population; Census data not available by education before 1964.
- ²⁸ U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, May 2014 and earlier reports; 1972–1976 White (non-Hispanic) turnout estimate based on white turnout assuming same average turnout deviation as in next three elections (actual); voting-age population; Census data not available for major racial/ethnic groups before 1972.
- ²⁹ Id.
- ³⁰ Id.; voting-age population; prior to 1972, data for the category marked “18–24” are for people ages 21–24, with the exception of those ages 18–24 in Georgia and Kentucky, 19–24 in Alaska, and 20–24 in Hawaii.
- ³¹ Brenda Wright, “Free the Vote: Cutting Red Tape from the Voting Process,” Demos, September 24, 2012, <http://www.demos.org/publication/free-vote-cutting-red-tape-voting-process>.
- ³² Daniel Weeks, “Political Equality from Theory to Practice—A Positive Approach,” MPhil Thesis, Oxford University Department of Politics, April 18, 2008.
- ³³ Pew Center on the States, “Inaccurate, Costly, and Inefficient: Evidence That America’s Voter Registration System Needs an Upgrade,” Election Initiatives Issue Brief, Pew, February 14, 2012, 1.
- ³⁴ File and Crissey, “Voting and Registration,” Table 2, 4.
- ³⁵ Id.
- ³⁶ Id.
- ³⁷ Id.
- ³⁸ Introduced in a handful of states in 2008, early voting has been well received by low-income voters like Wendy who have difficulty going to the polls on a Tuesday because of the demands of work and limited transportation. Ever since the program helped boost voter turnout in swing states like Ohio and Florida in 2008, it has come under heated attack in states legislatures and the courts. Wright, “Free the Vote.” See also, ACLU, “Voter Suppression in America,” <http://www.aclu.org/voter-suppression-america>.
- ³⁹ Milan Simonich, “Ugly Showdown in Chaparral,” *El Paso Times*, February 9, 2013, <http://elpasotimes.typepad.com/newmexico/2013/02/ugly-showdown-in-chaparral.html>; and Russ Pappas, “Residents of Chaparral Complain of Voting Problems,” KTSM News (NBC), November 8, 2012, <http://www.ksm.com/news/2012-elections/residents-chaparral-complain-voting-problems>.
- ⁴⁰ Data on Election Day barriers are from R. Michael Alvarez, et al., “2008 Survey of the Performance of American Elections: Final Report,” Caltech/MIT Voting Technology Project, 2009, 81–84.
- ⁴¹ Id.
- ⁴² Short, “The Research Supplementary Poverty Measure: 2012.”
- ⁴³ Id.
- ⁴⁴ Id., 88–90. Reasons coded as informal external barriers: transportation, registration problems, did not receive ballot/not on time, line too long, bad time/location, did not know where to go, and did not receive absentee ballot

(cumulative 44 percent); reasons coded as voluntary/personal and other: didn't like choices, too busy, illness, out of town, wrong identification, forgot, weather (cumulative 56 percent).

⁴⁵ Alvarez et al., "2008 Survey of the Performance of American Elections"; includes all reasons surveyed except those for which all group responses were less than 25 percent (excluded reasons: bad weather, forgot); substantially similar reasons collapsed into single category and averaged; racial categories are mutually exclusive.

⁴⁶ R. Michael Alvarez, et al., "Voting: What Has Changed, What Hasn't, and What Needs Improvement?" Version 1.1, Caltech/MIT Voting Technology Project, December 2012, 27.

⁴⁷ Id., 35, Table 1.

⁴⁸ Alvarez et al., "2008 Survey of the Performance of American Elections," 23.

⁴⁹ Id., ii.

⁵⁰ Pew Research Center, "Low Marks for the 2012 Election," Pew, November 15, 2012, <http://www.people-press.org/2012/11/15/low-marks-for-the-2012-election>; and Jeremy W. Peters, "Waiting Times at Ballot Boxes Draw Scrutiny," *New York Times*, February 4, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/05/us/politics/waiting-times-to-vote-at-polls-draw-scrutiny.html>.

⁵¹ Charles Stewart III, et al., "2012 Survey of the Performance of American Elections," CA: Caltech/MIT Voting Technology Project, 2012.

⁵² Id.

⁵³ Id.

⁵⁴ Pew Research Center, "Low Marks," 18.

⁵⁵ Analysis of Michael P. McDonald, "Turnout 1980-2012," United States Elections Project, 2013, <http://elections.gmu.edu>; Christopher Uggen, Sarah Shannon, and Jeff Manza, "State-Level Estimates of Felon Disenfranchisement in the United States, 2010," The Sentencing Project report, July 2012; U.S. Census, "Statistical Abstract of the United States - Section 29. Puerto Rico and the Island Areas," U.S. Census Bureau, 2012; and R. Michael Alvarez, Stephen Ansolabehere, Adam Berinsky, Gabriel Lenz, and Charles Stewart III, "2008 Survey of the Performance of American Elections," Caltech-MIT Voting Technology Project, February 18, 2009, <http://www.vote.caltech.edu/sites/default/files/Final%20report20090218.pdf> (accessed 2/6/13). The first two categories (disenfranchised citizens and noncitizens) are the same on both charts. All data are current for 2012 except informal barriers to voting and voluntary abstain, which are derived from 2008 Caltech/MIT Voting Technology Project (Alvarez et al., "2008 Survey") and extrapolated for 2012.

⁵⁶ Jeff Manza and Christopher Uggen, *Locked Out: Felon Disenfranchisement and American Democracy* (Oxford University Press, 2006), 176.

⁵⁷ Marc Mauer, "Voting Behind Bars: An Argument for Voting by Prisoners," *Howard Law Journal* 54.3 (2011): 549-566, 551.

⁵⁸ Id.

⁵⁹ Id.

⁶⁰ Christopher Uggen, Sarah Shannon, and Jeff Manza, "State-Level Estimates of Felon Disenfranchisement in the United States, 2010," The Sentencing Project, July 2012.

⁶¹ Mauer, "Voting Behind Bars," 551; Nicole D. Porter, "Expanding the Vote: State Felony Disenfranchisement Reform, 1997-2010," The Sentencing Project, October 2010, 3.

⁶² Mauer, "Voting Behind Bars," 551.

⁶³ Uggen et al., "State-Level Estimates of Felon Disenfranchisement"; Disenfranchised felons and ex-felons only (other persons in correctional system are excluded). Prison and jail category breakdown: 1,391,123 prisoners/79,949 jail inmates.

⁶⁴ Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, revised ed. (New Press, 2012).

⁶⁵ Id.

⁶⁶ Manza and Uggen, *Locked Out*, 182.

⁶⁷ U. S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics, "National Corrections Reporting Program," Study No. 26521, DS1: Prison Admissions Data, 2004, Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR), <http://dx.doi.org/10.3886/ICPSR26521.v2>.

Note: this data, reported on a human rights blog (<http://filipsagnoli.wordpress.com/stats-on-human-rights/statistics-on-freedom/statistics-on-prisoner-population-rates>) is quite difficult to decipher, but I also found a 2000 Urban Institute report (http://www.aecf.org/upload/publicationfiles/families_left_behind.pdf) citing a 1999 DOJ survey (<https://www.ncjrs.gov/App/publications/Abstract.aspx?id=182335>) of incarcerated parents showing overall poverty-level incomes of 78 percent (higher than those reported from the 2004 survey in my paper) among incarcerated fathers in the month prior to their incarceration; there is sadly very little income/poverty data collected on prisoners.

⁶⁸ Id.

⁶⁹ Mauer, "Voting Behind Bars," 552.

⁷⁰ Porter, "Expanding the Vote"; Manza and Uggen, *Locked Out*, 195.

⁷¹ Porter, "Expanding the Vote," 6.

⁷² Id.

⁷³ Uggen et al., "State Level Estimates of Felon Disenfranchisement," 16.

⁷⁴ Manza and Uggen, *Locked Out*, 189.

⁷⁵ Id.

⁷⁶ Id.

⁷⁷ Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*.

⁷⁸ Jamin B. Raskin, "Legal Aliens, Local Citizens: The Historical, Constitutional and Theoretical Meanings of Alien Suffrage," *University of Pennsylvania Law Review* 141.4 (1993): 1391–1470.

⁷⁹ Ronald Hayduk, *Democracy For All: Restoring Immigrant Voting Rights in the United States* (Routledge, 2006), 3.

⁸⁰ Id.

⁸¹ Id.

⁸² Jeanne Batalova and Aaron Terrazas, "Frequently Requested Statistics on Immigrants and Immigration in the United States," Migration Policy Institute, December 2010, <http://www.migrationinformation.org/feature/display.cfm?ID=818>.

⁸³ Id.; Adam Davidson, "Do Illegal Immigrants Actually Hurt the U.S. Economy?" *New York Times*, February 12, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/17/magazine/do-illegal-immigrants-actually-hurt-the-us-economy.html>.

⁸⁴ Hayduk, *Democracy for All*, 3.

⁸⁵ Batalova and Terrazas, "Frequently Requested Statistics."

⁸⁶ Davidson, "Do Illegal Immigrants Actually Hurt the U.S. Economy?"

⁸⁷ Annette Bernhardt, Ruth Milkman, Nik Theodore et al., "Broken Laws, Unprotected Workers: Violations of Employment and Labor Laws in America's Cities" 2009, <http://www.nelp.org/page/-/brokenlaws/BrokenLawsReport2009.pdf?nocdn=1>.

⁸⁸ U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey poverty data, 2011.

⁸⁹ Hayduk, *Democracy for All*, 2.

⁹⁰ Id.

⁹¹ Davidson, "Do Illegal Immigrants Actually Hurt the U.S. Economy?"

⁹² Id.

⁹³ Mark Thompson, "Non-Citizens Make Better U.S. Soldiers," *Time Magazine*, April 6, 2012, <http://nation.time.com/2012/04/06/non-citizens-make-better-u-s-soldiers>; note: noncitizens serving in the military are now eligible to apply for expedited citizenship after completing a single day of honorable service, thanks to a July 3, 2002 executive order issued by President George W. Bush.

⁹⁴ Hayduk, *Democracy for All*, 3.

⁹⁵ Id.

⁹⁶ Kim Bobo, *Wage Theft in America: Why Millions of Working Americans Are Not Getting Paid-And What We Can Do About It* (The New Press, 2008), 7.

⁹⁷ David C. Earnest, “Voting Rights for Resident Aliens: A Comparison of 25 Democracies,” Paper presented at the Northeast Political Science Association annual meeting, November 2003, 28.

⁹⁸ Sources: Porter, “Expanding the Vote” (felon disenfranchisement), U.S. Census population reports (D.C. voting representation, U.S. territories, and resident noncitizens).

⁹⁹ Randy James, “A Brief History of Washington, D.C.,” *Time Magazine*, February 26, 2009, <http://www.time.com/time/politics/article/0,8599,1881791,00.html>.

¹⁰⁰ *Id.*

¹⁰¹ *Id.*

¹⁰² José D. Román, “Trying to Fit an Oval Shaped Island into a Square Constitution,” *Fordham Urban Law Journal* 29 (2002): 1681-1713, <http://ir.lawnet.fordham.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2233&context=ulj>; Jo McKeegan, “Rossello v. United States and the Right to Vote for Puerto Rico,” Fair Vote, Center for Voting and Democracy, July 5, 2011, <http://www.fairvote.org/rossello-v-united-states-and-the-right-to-vote-for-puerto-rico#.UW6ArqsY0yw>.

¹⁰³ *Id.*

¹⁰⁴ *Id.*

¹⁰⁵ Elise Helgesen, “Puerto Rico and Other Territories Vote in Primaries, But Not in General Election,” Center for Voting and Democracy, March 19, 2012, <http://www.fairvote.org/puerto-rico-and-other-territories-vote-in-primaries-but-not-in-general-election#.UW6JB6sY0yx>.

¹⁰⁶ McKeegan, “Rossello v. United States.”

¹⁰⁷ U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, 2012.

¹⁰⁸ *Id.*

¹⁰⁹ *Id.*; McKeegan, “Rossello v. United States.”

¹¹⁰ Dania Alexandrino, “Study: Puerto Rico’s Children Mired in Poverty That Dwarfs Rest of U.S.,” *CNN*, August 2, 2012, <http://edition.cnn.com/2012/08/01/us/puerto-rico-child-poverty>.

¹¹¹ *Id.*; Felipe Pimentel, “Poverty, Culture and Social Capital in Puerto Rican Urban Communities,” *Centro Journal* 20.1 (2008): 230–245.

¹¹² Analysis of Porter, “Expanding the Vote” (felon disenfranchisement); Lauren E. Glaze and Erika Parks, “Correctional Populations in the United States, 2011”; U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics Bulletin, November 2012 (felon poverty); Census Bureau Current Population Survey 2010 (population and poverty estimates); felon poverty estimates are based on latest available National Archive of Criminal Justice Data 2008 averaging federal (58 percent) and state (70 percent) prisoner poverty rates of less than \$2,000 in the month prior to incarceration (poverty line for family of four); poverty rates are expected to be higher today after the Great Recession, consistent with national trends.

¹¹³ Pew Center on the States, “Inaccurate, Costly, and Inefficient,” 2.

¹¹⁴ Joseph Stiglitz, *The Price of Inequality* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2012), 120.

¹¹⁵ Lawrence Lessig, “Institutional Corruptions,” Edmond J. Safra Research Lab Working Papers, No. 1, March 15, 2013, 15, <http://ssrn.com/abstract=2233582>.

¹¹⁶ Schlozman et al., *The Unheavenly Chorus*, 232.

¹¹⁷ The measure of socioeconomic status is derived by taking the sum of respondents’ family income and educational attainment and dividing all respondents into five equal groups or quintiles.

¹¹⁸ Schlozman et al., *The Unheavenly Chorus*, 122.

¹¹⁹ *Id.*, 124.

¹²⁰ *Id.*

¹²¹ Protest has often been characterized as the “weapon of the weak”; *Id.*

¹²² Reproduced from Schlozman et al., “Figure 5.1 Political Activities by SES Quintile,” 124, based on analysis of Pew Internet and American Life Survey (2008); “socioeconomic quintiles” (marked in economic terms from “Poor” to “Affluent”) are derived by taking the sum of income and educational achievement for individuals and dividing into five groups of equal size.

¹²³ Schlozman et al., *The Unheavenly Chorus*, 125.

¹²⁴ Id., 378. Because more recent representative survey data on participation of specifically low-income people in various forms of “campaigning” (a central concern of this study) are unfortunately not available, the 1990 findings are included for background; they must be interpreted with caution.

¹²⁵ Id.

¹²⁶ Id.

¹²⁷ Id.

¹²⁸ Georgetown University, “Theme: Political Action,” The United States Citizenship, Involvement, Democracy (CID) Survey, May–July 2005; note: income data were not collected in the CID survey to allow for estimates based on socioeconomic status.

¹²⁹ Schlozman et al., *The Unheavenly Chorus*, 456.

¹³⁰ Id., 456.

¹³¹ Id., 474.

¹³² Id., 361.

¹³³ Id.

¹³⁴ Id., 127.

¹³⁵ Id.

¹³⁶ Id., 128.

¹³⁷ Id., 129.

¹³⁸ Id.

¹³⁹ Reproduced from Schlozman et al., *The Unheavenly Chorus*, “Table 5.3: Political Activity in Relation to Benefit Programs by Recipients of Government Benefits Based on Analysis of Citizen Participation Study,” 129; respondents who indicated that they or any family member in the household received a particular government benefit were asked whether they had, in the past five years, taken into account the position of a candidate in relation to the program in question in deciding how to vote, made a campaign contribution with the program in mind, contacted an official to complain about the program, or belonged to an organization concerned about the program.

¹⁴⁰ Except where otherwise indicated, campaign finance data consist of public disclosures to the Federal Election Commission presented by the Center for Responsive Politics (www.opensecrets.org) and analyzed by the author for this study. The Federal Election Commission and its counterpart election enforcement agencies in the 50 states require candidates, political parties, political action committees (PACs), and most classes of independent political spenders to file detailed reports on fundraising and expenditures during elections. At the federal level, records are kept of every person contributing \$200 or more to a given candidate, party, or PAC during the course of an election, including the occupation, employer, and address of the individual. Records are also kept when parties and PACs take the monies they have raised from individuals and corporations and make contributions to candidates or spend on their behalf. Donors giving less than \$200 are not disclosed, but fundraising committees must report the total amount of un-itemized monies raised.

¹⁴¹ Gilens, *Affluence and Influence*, 15–20.

¹⁴² Jack Gillum and Luis Alonso Lugo, “Minorities Donating Little to Presidential Races,” *Associated Press*, November 3, 2012, <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/minorities-donating-little-presidential-races>; neighborhood analysis is by Census Block, the most precise demographic measurement available.

¹⁴³ John Green et al., “Individual Congressional Campaign Contributors: Wealthy, Conservative and Reform-Minded,” Center for Responsive Politics, 1998; note annual family income adjusted to 2014 dollars (\$100,000 in 1996).

¹⁴⁴ Id. Also see Paul D. Jorgensen, “Political Money in 2012,” Edmond J. Safra Center for Ethics blog post December 24, 2012, <http://ethics.harvard.edu/blog/political-money-2012>.

¹⁴⁵ Lessig, “Institutional Corruptions.”

¹⁴⁶ Analysis of Center for Responsive Politics data, based on federal campaign finance disclosures filed with the Federal Election Commission.

¹⁴⁷ Schlozman et al., *The Unheavenly Chorus*, 591.

¹⁴⁸ Center for Responsive Politics analysis of federal campaign finance disclosures filed with the Federal Election Commission.

¹⁴⁹ Id.

¹⁵⁰ O'Connor, Clare, "The Election's Billionaire Winners And Losers," *Forbes Magazine*, November 7, 2012, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/clareoconnor/2012/11/07/the-elections-billionaire-winners-and-losers-or-sheldon-adelson-kisses-53-million-goodbye>; note: for the eight donors in the top 25 list for whom net worth data was not available, I took a conservative estimate of average net worth at \$500 million, less than all the other donors; the average net worth of the top 17 donors for whom published estimates exist is \$6 billion.

¹⁵¹ Forbes Magazine, "The World's Billionaires - Sheldon Adelson," Forbes.com, Mar. 2013, <http://www.forbes.com/profile/sheldon-adelson>.

¹⁵² Center for Responsive Politics analysis of federal campaign finance disclosures filed with the Federal Election Commission; estimates of donor net worth obtained from *Forbes Magazine* and other sources.

¹⁵³ Baumgartner et al., *Lobbying and Policy Change*; Matt Grossmann, "Interest Group Influence on U.S. Policy Change: An Assessment Based on Policy History," *Interest Groups & Advocacy* 1 (2009): 171–192; Marie Hojnacki, et al., "Advocates and Interest Representation in Policy Debates," Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Washington, D.C., September 2010.

¹⁵⁴ Schlozman et al., *The Unheavenly Chorus*, 321.

¹⁵⁵ Id.

¹⁵⁶ Id.

¹⁵⁷ Id.

¹⁵⁸ Id., 332; Schlozman et al., *The Unheavenly Chorus*, report that zero groups in the 2001 Washington Representatives Directory consisted of "recipients of social welfare or tax benefits—for example, jobless workers, public housing tenants, or those who benefit from the Earned Income Tax Credit—advocating on their own behalf" and only a very few such organizations appeared in earlier directories. The authors make no reference to more recent directories, which were not subject to detailed analysis in their study.

¹⁵⁹ Data compiled by Schlozman et al., *The Unheavenly Chorus*, 321 and 588. Share of total interest groups in the 2001 Washington Representatives Directory; business shares of congressional testimonies and Supreme Court amicus briefs are estimates based on available information in Schlozman et al. (business delivered highest number of testimonies and second-highest number of amicus briefs after state and local governments).

¹⁶⁰ Id., 331.

¹⁶¹ Although labor and business groups were easily identifiable from existing CRP sectors, assembling new categories for the poor and the general public required a close examination of several overlapping "industries" and hundreds of individual groups within various sectors. Groups lobbying on behalf of the poor were drawn from the non-profit, religious, human rights, education, liberal and conservative, and "other" industries. Groups lobbying on behalf of the general public interest included the remaining entities under the nonprofit, religious, education, and civil servants (state and local governments) industries.

¹⁶² Author's analysis of federal lobbying disclosures from the Senate Office of Public Records.

¹⁶³ The total number of lobbyists retained by groups is approximately twice the number of individual registered lobbyists, as many lobby part-time for multiple clients, especially in the case of nonprofit advocacy groups. The amount of spending per lobbyist was around \$60,000 for poverty advocates, \$110,000 for labor, \$66,000 for public interest groups, and \$163,000 for business.

¹⁶⁴ Center for Responsive Politics, analysis of federal lobbying disclosures from the Senate Office of Public Records; education, state/local governments, and nonprofit & religious sectors added from CRP industry list under CRP sector "other" in order to provide broader coverage.

¹⁶⁵ Id.

¹⁶⁶ Schlozman et al., *The Unheavenly Chorus*, 354.

¹⁶⁷ Id.

¹⁶⁸ Id.

¹⁶⁹ Id., 359.

¹⁷⁰ Id., 355.

¹⁷¹ Id.

¹⁷² Center for Responsive Politics analysis of federal lobbying disclosures from the Senate Office of Public Records.

¹⁷³ With the exception of age and citizenship requirements for contributing to federal candidates, all other forms of participation outlined above are open to anyone resident in the United States, regardless of age, citizenship, and registration status under the First Amendment; political contributions are either capped at a high level of \$5,000 per federal candidate per election or entirely unrestricted in the case of many non-candidate committees and “independent expenditures” (e.g., Super PACs).

¹⁷⁴ Although lobbying and other interest group activities are certainly relevant to overall political power, my focus here is on individual participation.

¹⁷⁵ Although rates of campaign giving are clearly overstated in the survey compared to the actual number of reported donors to federal campaigns, these data more closely correspond with the official disclosures than do alternative surveys examined for this study.

¹⁷⁶ Assumptions about campaign donations distribution across income groups: Top quintile donors give all \$2,300+ donations, 75 percent of \$200–\$2,300 donations, and 40 percent of <\$200 donations. Fourth-quintile donors give 20 percent of \$200–\$2,300 donations and 30 percent of <\$200 donations. Third-quintile donors give 5 percent of \$200–\$2,300 donations and 20 percent of <\$200 donations. Second-quintile donors give 8 percent of <\$200 donations. Bottom quintile donors give two percent of <\$200 donations. Un-itemized donations account for 20 percent of itemized amounts (conservative).

¹⁷⁷ Except where otherwise noted, the survey data are from the biennial Current Population Survey (CPS) of the U.S. Census Bureau. In keeping with my primary focus on income and poverty, I divide the survey population of American families into five roughly equal groups by family income as provided by the Census, including poor (family incomes under \$30,000, 21 percent), lower-income (\$30,000–\$49,999, 21 percent), middle-income (\$50,000–\$74,999, 22 percent), higher-income (\$75,000–\$99,999, 14 percent), and affluent families (\$100,000+, 23 percent). To account for variations in the number of people in each group, I weight the power tallies by population. All data are 2012 estimates except “Campaigned” and “Donated” data drawn from the 1952–2008 American National Election Studies analyzed by Schlozman et al.

¹⁷⁸ Summing citizenship, registration, and voting for analytical simplicity will slightly, but consistently, overstate the political power of each income group—a negligible difference when campaign donations are factored into the final power equation.

¹⁷⁹ According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the average American volunteer spent 5.5 percent of their time, or 2.8 hours, volunteering with “civic, political, professional, and international causes” between September 2011 and September 2012. I assume that approximately two thirds of that time, or two hours per volunteer, is allocated to political/electoral initiatives in an election year, with less time allocated to political pursuits in nonelection years. I also assume from past experience as a staff person and volunteer on various political campaigns that the average volunteer is assigned to one of two major activities—phone-banking or canvassing voters—and makes 10 contacts per hour canvassing and 25 contacts per hour phone-banking. Based on a close review of recent empirical studies of personalized get-out-the-vote campaigns for various political offices across a range of cities and states, the resulting net effect per volunteer in terms of votes delivered by either campaign activity is approximately two (one per hour). (Note: randomized experiments conducted by Green and Gerber [2004], Nickerson [2006 and 2006a], Middleton [2005], Arceneaux [2005], and Bennion [2005] converge around a treatment effect of approximately 10 percent for personalized canvassing and approximately 4 percent for personalized phone-banking aimed at generating voter turnout in elections.) See Donald P. Green and Alan S. Gerber, *Get Out the Vote!: A Guide for Candidates and Campaigns* (Brookings Institution Press, 2004); David W. Nickerson, “Is Voting Contagious? Evidence from Two Field Experiments,” Paper prepared for presentation at the Annual Meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, April 20–23, 2006; David W. Nickerson, “Volunteer Phone Calls Can Increase Turnout—Evidence from Eight Field Experiments,” *American Politics Research* 34.3 (2006); Joel Middleton, “Community-Based Mobilization and the Internet: The Case of MoveOn and the 2004 Election,” unpublished manuscript, Institution for Social and Policy Studies, Yale University, 2006; Kevin Arceneaux, “Using Cluster Randomized Field Experiments to Study Voting Behavior,” in Donald P. Green and Alan S. Gerber, eds., “The Science of Voter Mobilization,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 601 (2005): 169–179; and Elizabeth A. Bennion, “Caught in the Ground Wars: Mobilizing Voters During a Competitive Congressional Campaign,” in Green and Gerber, eds., “The Science of Voter Mobilization,” 123–141.

¹⁸⁰ Estimating the “cost per vote” in electoral campaigns is an inexact science, if it can be called a science at all. Because the nominees of major political parties can safely assume that the “party faithful” have already made up their minds, a disproportionate share of campaign spending is devoted to persuading and mobilizing a relatively small slice of undecided voters, thereby driving up the effective “cost per vote” for swing voters. For analytical simplicity and because candidates are also required to devote a portion of their spending to turning out the partisan base, I treat all votes as having equal “cost” in the model.

¹⁸¹ Rates of campaigning and donating from American National Elections Studies, 1952–2008, analyzed by Schlozman et al., 124. Amounts donated from analysis of Center for Responsive Politics (2013) data on size of donations (see “Assumptions” below). Remaining data are from U.S. Census 2013 Current Population Survey of families (weighted by population in each income “quintile” group, excluding families not reporting incomes; for income thresholds per group, see Footnote 175). Assumptions about campaign donations distribution across income groups: Affluent donors give all \$2,300+ donations, 75 percent of \$200–\$2,300 donations, and 40 percent of <\$200 donations. Higher-income donors give 20 percent of \$200–\$2,300 donations and 30 percent of <\$200 donations. Middle-income donors give 5 percent of \$200–\$2,300 donations and 20 percent of <\$200 donations. Lower-income donors give 8 percent of <\$200 donations. Poor donors give 2 percent of <\$200 donations. Un-itemized donations account for 20 percent itemized of itemized amounts (conservative). These assumption are consistent with the most recent available survey of donor family incomes (reported in Green, *Individual Congressional Campaign Contributors*), which found that over 80 percent of itemized campaign contributors had annual incomes in excess of \$150,000—well above the “Affluent” donor threshold of \$100,000 or more.

¹⁸² A wide range of scholars in political science and political economy has conducted case study analysis of special interest influence in specific policy domains. See, for example, Jacob Hacker, Paul Pierson, Benjamin Page, Larry Bartels, and Jason Seawright.

¹⁸³ Analysis of GovTrack.us open data derived from the Library of Congress legislative tracking service Thomas.gov.

¹⁸⁴ Analysis of interviews and Library of Congress/GovTrack.us data; to enable basic textual analysis of interview results, transcripts were coded by issues mentioned and the frequency with which each issue was discussed, among other analyses; because interviewees do not constitute a representative or statistically significant sample, these results may only be considered a snapshot of some of the issues and concerns felt by low-income Americans.

¹⁸⁵ NPR/Kaiser/Kennedy School Poll, “Poverty in America,” NPR News, 2001, <http://www.npr.org/programs/specials/poll/poverty/staticresults.html>. Note: the comparisons that follow are between people with reported family incomes below the poverty line and those with reported family incomes of twice the poverty line or higher.

¹⁸⁶ *Id.*

¹⁸⁷ Benjamin I Page, Larry M Bartels, and Jason Seawright, “Democracy and the Policy Preferences of Wealthy Americans,” *Perspectives on Politics* 11.1 (2013), <http://faculty.wcas.northwestern.edu/~jnd260/cab/CAB2012%20-%20Page1.pdf>.

¹⁸⁸ Analysis of interviews, responses, and Library of Congress/GovTrack.us data. As noted above, interview transcripts were coded by issues mentioned and the frequency with which each issue was discussed to produce a snapshot of low-income concerns. The results are not based on a representative or statistically-significant sample.

¹⁸⁹ Analysis of LOC Congress.gov “Bills by Subject—Policy Area” for 113th Congress (2013-2014) (Library of Congress, 2014), <https://www.congress.gov/browse/113th-congress>.

¹⁹⁰ Larry M Bartels, *Unequal Democracy: The Political Economy of the New Gilded Age* (Princeton University Press, 2008).

¹⁹¹ Senator positions are derived using the NOMINATE multidimensional statistical scaling method developed by Keith T. Poole and Howard Rosenthal that is standard to political science analysis of roll call votes. For more information, see <http://voteview.com/dwnomin.htm>.

¹⁹² Bartels, *Unequal Democracy*, 251. Income thresholds are defined as follows: low-income: less than \$30,000 per year; middle-income: \$30,000-\$60,000 per year; high-income: more than \$60,000 per year. Public opinion data are from a survey by the University of Michigan’s National Elections Studies (NES) during the elections of 1988, 1990, and 1992 of 9,253 adult citizens in all 50 states on matters before the U.S. Senate. Although dated, the survey is rare in its breadth and scope and therefore considered relevant to this study.

¹⁹³ *Id.*, 255.

¹⁹⁴ Martin Gilens, *Affluence and Influence*.

¹⁹⁵ *Id.*, 1.

¹⁹⁶ Reproduced from Gilens, *Affluence and Influence*.

¹⁹⁷ Lawrence Jacobs, chair, et al, “American Democracy in an Age of Rising Inequality,” American Political Science Association, Task Force on Inequality and American Democracy, 2004, 1.

¹⁹⁸ *Id.*

¹⁹⁹ See, for example, Edelman 2012; Stiglitz 2012; and Hacker, Jacob S. and Paul Pierson, *Winner-Take-All Politics*. (Simon & Schuster, 2010).

²⁰⁰ Jacob S. Hacker, Suzanne Mettler, and Joe Soss, "The New Politics of Inequality: A Policy-Centered perspective," Chapter 1 in *Remaking America* (Russell Sage Press, 2012), 3.

²⁰¹ David Callahan and J. Mijin Cha, "Stacked Deck: How the Dominance of Politics by the Affluent & Business Undermines Economic Mobility in America," Demos, 2013, 21.

²⁰² Tax Policy Center, "Distribution of Tax Expenditures: Overall and By Category," Tax Policy Center, 2013.

²⁰³ Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, "Chart Book: Federal Housing Spending Is Poorly Matched to Need," CBPP, 2013.

²⁰⁴ Hojnacki et al., "Advocates and Interest Representation in Policy Debates," Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Washington, D.C., September 2010. Hojnacki et al., 42, find that "Members of Congress and the executive branch frequently advance their preferences on policy issues, and they do so with substantial effects." Of particular note, they find that "Opposition from the administration can effectively kill a side's prospects for success, and support from Republican members of Congress can be critical to a side's success."

²⁰⁵ K. Sabeel Rahman, "Fighting Inequality in the New Gilded Age," *Boston Review*, September 16, 2014, <http://www.bostonreview.net/books-ideas/sabeel-rahman-inequality-participation-governance-new-gilded-age>.

²⁰⁶ Nicholas Carnes, *White-Collar Government: The Hidden Role of Class in Economic Policy Making* (University of Chicago Press, 2013), 147.

²⁰⁷ Except where otherwise noted, data are from official 2011 financial disclosures filed by Members of Congress in accordance with ethics rules and presented in structured format by the Center for Responsive Politics; data set includes members serving in both the 112th and 113th Congresses covered by 2011 reporting; asset amounts are the average of each specified reporting range in the mandatory financial disclosures.

²⁰⁸ Id., Jesse Bricker, Arthur B. Kennickell, Kevin B. Moore, and John Sabelhaus, "Changes in U.S. Family Finances from 2007 to 2010: Evidence from the Survey of Consumer Finances," *Federal Reserve Bulletin* 98.2 (2012): 17.

²⁰⁹ Id.

²¹⁰ Jeremy White, Robert Gebeloff, and Ford Fessenden, "What Percent Are You?" *New York Times*, January 15, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2012/01/15/business/one-percent-map.html>.

²¹¹ Center for Responsive Politics, June 2013.

²¹² Nicholas Carnes, "Does the Numerical Underrepresentation of the Working Class in Congress Matter?" *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 37.1 (2012): 5-34; and Jeff Manza and Clem Brooks, "Class and Politics" in Annette Lareau and Dalton Conley, eds., *Social Class: How Does it Work?* (Russell Sage Foundation), 201-31.

²¹³ Jennifer E Manning, "Membership of the 113th Congress: A Profile," Congressional Research Service, February 28, 2013.

²¹⁴ Id.

²¹⁵ Carnes, "Numerical Underrepresentation of the Working Class."

²¹⁶ Bureau of Labor Statistics, "May 2011 National Occupational Employment and Wage Estimates United States," U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, March 29, 2012.

²¹⁷ Id.

²¹⁸ Id.

²¹⁹ Manning, "Membership in the 113th Congress."

²²⁰ Id.

²²¹ Carnes, "Numerical Underrepresentation of the Working Class."

²²² Carnes, *White-Collar Government*.

²²³ Id.

²²⁴ Id.

²²⁵ Id.

²²⁶ Sara Johnson, “Diversity in the 113th Congress Looks Pathetic When You Plot It On a Map,” *The Atlantic Cities*, January 11, 2013, <http://www.theatlanticcities.com/politics/2013/01/diversity-113th-congress-looks-pathetic-when-you-plot-it-map/4348/>; racial-ethnic categories are mutually exclusive.

²²⁷ All statistics on women elected officials are from the Center for American Women and Politics, “Historical Information About Women in Congress,” Eagleton Institute of Politics, Rutgers University, 2013, http://www.cawp.rutgers.edu/fast_facts/levels_of_office/Congress-HistoricalInfo.php (accessed August 15, 2013).

²²⁸ Manning, “Membership of the 113th Congress: A Profile.” Average age of Members of Congress and median age of U.S. population (only available statistics); age is in years rather than percentage.

²²⁹ L. Marvin Overby and Lauren C. Bell, “Rational Behavior or the Norm of Cooperation?: Filibuster Behavior Among Retiring Senators,” *Journal of Politics* 66.3 (2004): 906-924.

²³⁰ *Id.*

²³¹ Adam Liptak, “Smaller States Find Outsize Clout Growing in Senate,” *New York Times*, March 11, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2013/03/11/us/politics/democracy-tested.html>.

²³² Jowei Chen and Jonathan Rodden, “Unintentional Gerrymandering: Political Geography and Electoral Bias in Legislatures,” University of Michigan working paper, <http://www-personal.umich.edu/~jowei/florida.pdf>.

²³³ Carol Hardy-Fanta, Christine Marie Sierra, Pei-te Lien, Dianne M. Pinderhughes, and Wartyna L. Davis, “Race, Gender, and Descriptive Representation: An Exploratory View of Multicultural Elected Leadership in the United States,” Paper delivered at the American Political Science Association 2005 Annual Meeting, September 4, 2005.

²³⁴ Griff Palmer and Michael Cooper, “How Maps Helped Republicans Keep an Edge in the House,” *New York Times*, December 14, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/15/us/politics/redistricting-helped-republicans-hold-onto-congress.html>.

²³⁵ *Id.*, and Chen and Rodden, “Unintentional Gerrymandering.”

²³⁶ *Id.*

²³⁷ *Id.*, 7.

²³⁸ Growing up in the town next door to Granny D, I was one of the many people touched by her smile, her spirit, and her hunger for democracy.

²³⁹ Regression analyses of Election-Day Registration in the U.S. generally predict an increase in turnout of three to eight percentage points when compared to current registration deadlines (averaging three to four weeks before Election Day), with one study predicting a 14 percent increase. See Alex Street, Thomas A. Murray, John Blitzer, and Rajan S. Patel, “Estimating Voter Registration Deadline Effects with Web Search Data,” *Political Analysis* 23.2 (2015), <http://pan.oxfordjournals.org/content/early/2015/03/11/pan.mpv002.full> with supporting information http://pan.oxfordjournals.org/content/suppl/2015/03/12/mpv002.DC1/Goog_20jan2015_SI.pdf. It is noteworthy that studies of early voting in the U.S. find a slight decline in turnout that is attributed by scholars to dissipation effects and decreased mobilization by candidates and parties. See Barry C. Burden, David T. Canon, Kenneth R. Mayer, and Donald P. Moynihan, “Election Laws, Mobilization, and Turnout: The Unanticipated Consequences of Election Reform,” *American Journal of Political Science* 58.1 (2014): 95–109; see also Jacob R. Neiheisel and Barry C. Burden, “The Impact of Election Day Registration on Voter Turnout and Election Outcomes,” *American Politics Research* 40.4 (2012): 636-664.

²⁴⁰ “How the States Are Trying to Rein in Dark Money,” Moyers & Company, March 21, 2014, <http://billmoyers.com/2014/03/21/how-the-states-are-trying-to-rein-in-dark-money/>.

²⁴¹ “Campaign Finance Reform: An Overview,” National Conference of State Legislatures, October 3, 2011, <http://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/campaign-finance-an-overview.aspx>.

²⁴² The recommended “large donation” threshold for taxation is \$1,000, which would apply to less than half of one percent of the American population who provided more than 80 percent of total campaign funds in 2012. A tax of 10 percent on all large contributions to candidate and independent expenditure campaigns in 2012 would have generated more than \$500 million, enough to fund 10 million Citizens Election vouchers at \$50 apiece, increasing the number of donors by 125 percent; additional funding offsets would be required to enable more citizens to participate in the voucher program. While subject to legal challenge, the tax on campaign contributions rather than spending adheres to the Supreme Court’s sanction of limits on contributions as a lesser and indirect form of constitutionally-protected speech, in contrast with spending limits which have been deemed unconstitutional since 1976 (*Buckley v. Valeo*).

²⁴³ *Id.*

²⁴⁴ Brief of Amicus Curiae Center for Governmental Studies in Support of Respondents at 11-12, *McComish v. Bennett*, Nos. 10-238 & 10-239, 2011 WL 639368, (U.S. Feb. 22, 2011); “2007 Study Report: Has Public Funding Improved Maine Elections?” Maine Commission on Governmental Ethics and Election Practices, 2007, http://www.maine.gov/ethics/pdf/publications/2007_study_report.pdf; Rayond La Raja, “Candidate Emergence in State Legislative Elections: Does Public Funding Make a Difference?” Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, August 30, 2007; and Michael J. Malbin, Peter W. Brusoe and Brendan Glavin, “Small Donors, Big Democracy: New York City’s Matching Funds as a Model for the Nation and States,” *Election Law Journal* 11.1 (2012): 3-20.

²⁴⁵ “A 50 State Guide to Redistricting,” Brennan Center for Justice at NYU, 2011, <https://www.brennancenter.org/sites/default/files/legacy/publications/50%20State%20Guide%20to%20Redistricting.pdf>; and Justin Levitt, “A Citizen’s Guide to Redistricting,” Brennan Center for Justice at NYU, June 28, 2008, <http://ssrn.com/abstract=1647221>.

²⁴⁶ Karl J. Sandstrom and Michael T. Liburdi, “Overview of State Pay-to-Play Statutes,” Perkins Coie, May 5, 2010, <https://www.perkinscoie.com/images/content/2/1/v2/21769/wp-10-05-pay-to-play.pdf>; and Craig Holman, “Pay-to-Play Laws in Government Contracting and the Scandals that Created Them,” Public Citizen, June 26, 2012, <http://www.citizen.org/documents/wagner-case-record.pdf>.

²⁴⁷ Eligible organizations could include both non-profit 501(c)(3) and 501(c)(4) organizations that engage in legal issue advocacy and/or electoral engagement, without regard to partisanship/ideology. Recipient organizations would be required to adhere to strict transparency requirements and would not be permitted to fund political campaigns.

²⁴⁸ A 10 percent tax on biennial lobbying expenditures of \$6.5 billion would produce \$650 million for 2012-14 according to the Center for Responsive Politics, enough for 13 million Citizens Lobby vouchers of \$50 each or 26 million vouchers of \$25 each.