Representational Effects of Campaign Spending in U.S. Congressional Primaries

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Representational Effects of Campaign Spending in U.S. Congressional Primaries, 2006-2016

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Abstract
The average member of Congress is increasingly wealthier than the average citizens they represent, despite evidence that voters disapprove of wealthy candidates. This paper advances a potential explanation: wealthy legislators have advantages during party primaries, thereby limiting the pool of viable candidates in a general election. By combining F.E.C. donor files from the 2006-2016 congressional elections with demographic data from the U.S. Census Bureau, I find that congressional candidates come overwhelmingly from a district’s wealthiest neighborhoods. Wealthy candidates are successful in congressional primaries primarily because of their fundraising advantage—which is driven by donors from their same neighborhoods. Once elected, wealthy legislators are significantly more responsive to the preferences of their campaign contributors than they are to their co-partisan supporters or general election voters.
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In memory of Professor Horst Mewes, whose many conversations on American civic life inspired this study and to whom it is dedicated.
1 Introduction

The average member of Congress is significantly wealthier than the citizens they represent. The median member of Congress has a net worth of over a million dollars, compared with a median of $56,355 for their constituents\(^1\). Millionaires make up 3% of the total U.S. population, yet constitute a majority of the U.S. House of Representatives and a filibuster-proof majority of the U.S. Senate (Carnes 2015).\(^2\)

This is a meaningful division. Just as in the cases of race\(^3\) or gender\(^4\), a legislator’s economic background shapes their interpretation of policy and how they prioritize competing agendas. Because government must allocate scarce resources between competing demands, the votes legislators take involve trade-offs between representing citizens of diverging preferences.

Differences in preferences, especially in economic and fiscal policy, may be determined by economic class (Page, Bartels and Seawright 2013). Research has found that—when faced with such decisions—legislators from high-class occupations systematically follow the preferences of those from their own economic class (Carnes 2015). This bias extends to supporting certain industries over others (Carnes et al. 2017) or voting for policies that advance legislators’ own material (Griffin and Anewalt-Remsburg 2013).

These trends take place against the backdrop of historic income inequality. This trend has been attributed to many causes—contemporary phenomena such as technological change, globalization, and industrial realignments have facilitated this shift (Pikkety 2013; Rodrick 1998; Feenstra and Hanson 1996).

Adding to economic drivers, there is evidence that congressional policy has contributed to income inequality. Wealthy citizens are more adept at influencing the political system (Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995), blocking unfavorable legislation (Hacker and Pierson 2010), and benefit from a status-quo bias in the policy process (Enns et al. 2014). In cases when preferences diverge between constituents of different classes, legislators almost always follow the preference of the wealthy (Gilens 2011).

This effect, however, has not been lost upon the public. Given a normal distribution of wealth, average citizens should have an economic interest in combating income inequality (Bonica, McCarty, Poole and Rosenthal 2013). Voters express concern over the concentration of wealth among decision-makers and express significant biases against wealthy candidates (Griffin, Newman and Buhr).

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\(^1\)Center for Responsive Politics 2015
\(^2\)Millionaires also hold a 5-4 advantage on the Supreme Court and three-quarters of the presidential cabinet—not to mention the President’s own worth of $3 billion.
\(^3\)Preuhs 2006
\(^4\)Taylor-Robinson and Heath 2008
These findings present contradictory evidence: voters prefer non-wealthy candidates and have an economic interest in redistributive policies, yet consistently elect wealthy candidates who vote against their interest.

This paper tests one possible explanation: that wealthy candidates have advantages during primary elections, which—in the American context—effectively crowds out viable non-wealthy candidates.

Candidate’s from wealthy neighborhoods raise substantially larger sums than non-wealthy candidates, through a combination of self-financing and donorship from other wealthy citizens. After controlling for spending advantages, I find that a candidate’s likelihood of electoral success decreases with their wealth.

I then examine the link between campaign donorship and congressional decision-making. By comparing survey responses with congressional roll-call votes, I find that a legislator’s donors are significantly better represented than their co-partisan supporters or general election voters. This is particularly true for wealthy legislators, who are responsive to the preferences of high-income donors to a greater degree than their non-wealthy peers.

5Given geographically-bound & single-member districts, viable candidates have incentives to consolidate into two ideologically distinct parties. For more information, see (Riker 1982).
2 Background

Concerns over the economic composition of legislative bodies is not a recent phenomenon. Framers of the U.S. Constitution devoted significant debate to countering class-based factionalism (Federalist #10) and concerns that occupational factions would abuse powers of taxation to the detriment of the majority (Federalist #35). Political philosophers as far back as Aristotle (Politics IV, 350 BC) have noted the overwhelming power of elected officials to enrich themselves as the expense of a greater population. Until recently, however, the contemporary academic coverage of class-imbalanced representation has received limited consideration.

This section proceeds in three stages. First, I provide the theoretical traditions underpinning studies of representation—focusing on theories of voting power and descriptive representation. I then briefly summarize relevant research into legislative responses to campaign finance, with a special attention paid to the composition and motivation of individual donors. Third, I note the contemporary evidence of class-biased lawmaking and research governing the social composition of the legislature. Finally, I detail the objectives of this paper and its role in furthering our understanding of legislative compositions.

2.1 Dyadic Representation

The behavior that constitutes effective representation is multifaceted. Lawmakers are elected from geographically-bounded, single-member districts in part because of the great variation in demands from government between communities (Federalist #62). Legislators are tasked with fulfilling the unique demands of their districts, such as sponsoring policy to benefit key industries (Wawro 2001) or directing appropriations toward their district (Kiewiet and McCubbins 1985). They hold many social roles: as civic leaders, celebrities, and conduits between citizens and the federal bureaucracy (Ansolabehere and Jones 2013).

The primary understanding of representation, however, is the degree to which representatives act as their constituents’ delegate during roll-call voting. While not the only model of representational voting, viewing the legislator as an intermediary between citizens and government has wide popular and academic appeal.

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6A recent example of the idiosyncrasies of representation comes from Senator Angus King (I-Maine), whose lobbying of the Unicode Consortium led to the adoption of a lobster emoji. The senator thanked the consortium for “recognizing the impact of this critical crustacean, in Maine and across the country.”

7There are two prominent models of representation: the legislator as a delegate, purely reflecting constituent opinion; or the legislator as a trustee: an autonomous protector of the national interest, regardless of public opinion. The model of a legislator-as-delegate has received disproportionate academic focus—for an exception, see (Aten 2009).
Miller and Stokes (1963) pioneered the methodological study of representation, defined as correspondence between a legislator’s roll-call voting and the preferences of his or her constituents. Achen (1978) modified this understanding to reflect the degree of ‘responsiveness’ between constituent opinion and legislative behavior. Subsequent studies have largely adhered to this definition (e.g. Erikson and Wright 1980; Carson and Engstrom 2005; Hussey and Zaller 2011). The introduction of large-scale data science in political analysis has greatly benefited studies of representation, allowing for increasingly precise measures of constituent-representative congruence (Tausanovitch and Warshaw 2013).

These measurements have a meaningful impact: voters perceive differences between their preferences and the behavior of their representatives, and hold their representatives electorally accountable for missteps (Canes-Wrone, Brady, and Cogan 2002). It is therefore in the representative’s self-interest to conform to the preferences of their district.

Legislators, however, do not weigh the preferences of different constituents equally. Numerous analyses of Congress have found that legislators make distinctions among sub-constituencies in their district and shift representational strategies between them (e.g. Fenno 1978, Bishin 2010).

This differentiation is made in self-interest. Legislators have traditionally been theorized as shaping their behavior to maximize their own chances of re-election (Fiorina 1974, Mayhew 1974)—if so, legislators would have increased incentive to respond to constituents who are more electorally influential (Bartels 1998).

Legislators triage their priorities in coherent patterns according to a constituent’s electoral influence. For example, legislators have been shown to be increasingly responsive to those who vote (Martin 2003)—especially those likely to vote for the candidate (Clinton 2006).

These disparities fall along historical lines of discrimination. Previous work has shown that characteristics such as gender and race are particularly salient in representation rates (Griffin, Newman and Wolbrecht 2012, Griffin and Newman 2008). A similar pattern is observed along economic lines: numerous studies have found that wealthy constituents are disproportionately more likely than their non-wealthy peers to have their preferences enacted into law (Gilens 2012, Flavin 2012, Rigby and Wright 2011). Several explanations have emerged, suggesting that differences in political participation may discourage representation (Piven and Cloward 1988, Schlozman, Verba and Brady 2012).

These differences entrench historical patterns of discrimination: legislators lack political incentive to remedy differences in political participation, the consequence of which is a further entrenching of representational inequality (Griffin and Newman 2012). Legislators, in this theoretical framework, are rational and dispassionate seekers of
reelection. That these legislators are unresponsive to the preferences of certain groups is therefore a reflection of those groups’ lack of electoral efficacy.

2.2 Descriptive Representation

This theory—while compelling—is not comprehensive. Legislators are not apart from citizens; just as with any individual, legislators’ environments impose upon them values and beliefs that shape their worldview. These social underpinnings are shaped by elements in their cultural background: ethnic, religious, gender, and class identities all contribute to an individual’s belief systems. These belief systems shape the legislator’s approach to politics and their interpretation of policy. It is well-documented, for example, that a legislator’s race, religion, and gender influence the decisions legislators make and the policies for which they advocate (Taylor-Robinson and Heath 2003; Castles 1994). Voters likewise make judgements about candidates based upon personal characteristics, making using traits such as ethnicity, religion, and gender to evaluate candidates (Philpot and Walton 2007; Lawless 2015; McDermott 2009).

Economic class is a salient factor in policy-making decisions. Recent research has suggested that legislators from upper- and lower-class occupations have systematically difference voting behaviors, even after controlling for other influences (Carnes 2015). This is particularly significant given the taxation powers of Congress, where legislators may vote on policy to directly affect their personal wealth (Griffin and Anewalt-Remsburg 2013).

There is little indication that voters prefer wealthy representatives. International evidence that voters do not prefer wealthy representatives (Carnes and Lupu 2017; Wuest and Pontusson 2017). Furthermore, there is evidence from the U.S. that wealthy candidates face an electoral penalty compared to their non-wealthy peers (Griffin, Newman, and Buhr). While this disadvantage is somewhat mitigated by partisanship, the finding remains that voters prefer non-wealthy candidates.

2.3 Campaign Finance Effects

Recent research on donations during party primaries has emphasized the ‘extended party network,’ which expands beyond the formal party structure to include the interest groups, activists, and fundraisers who influence party decisions. Specifically, a disproportionate share of attention has been paid to the actions of Political Action Committees (PACs), through which corporations, interest groups and unions, and so-called ‘megadonors’ seek to tilt the scales toward preferred candidates.

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8For further discussion, see: Durkheim 1893; Schwartz 1994; Inglehart 2015
These analyses have largely found the effect of campaign funding on election outcomes to be minimal. For example, Jacobson (1990) finds that there is a weak connection between spending by a campaign and that campaign’s performance during the election. This effect appears to be similarly absent from roll-call voting: a metanalysis by Ansolabehere, De Figueiredo and Snyder (2003) found that contributions from PACs had minimal effect on voting behavior. 9

An alternative interpretation is that individual donors—not corporations or interest groups—play a larger role in driving electoral and policy outcomes. Funding for congressional races has become increasingly reliant on individual donors, as PAC contributions and party contributions have fallen as a share of total funding (Barber and McCarty 2015).

There is substantial evidence that individual donors influence the selection and behavior of candidates. For example, individual donors tend to be clustered near ideological extremes (Hill and Huber 2016) and support candidates who exhibit partisan behavior (Bonica 2012; Barber, Canes-Wrone, and Thrower 2016). This is reflected in candidate selection, where candidates are more ideologically extreme than their own primary voters (Bafumi and Herron 2010). It is also reflected in the composition of legislatures, as lower contribution limits are correlated with lower rates of partisanship (Barber 2016).

The effect of small donors on the selection of legislators has received limited academic investigation, despite substantial public discussion (see: EMILY’s List 2004; Huffington Post 2013; CBS News 2016). Carnes has provided substantial contributions to this field, finding that underrepresentation of working-class candidates is more likely due to “structural and institutional features of the political environment” than to insufficient demand for working-class candidates (2016). Among these structural barriers, Bonica (2017) has found that candidates with broader personal and professional networks gain advantages in early fundraising.

This paper will extend this line of research, examining the extent to which wealthy donors support candidates from similar economic backgrounds, and the effect that this support—if any—has on that candidate’s legislative behavior.

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9This does not suggest that interest groups donations are unimportant. Interest groups do not necessarily donate to candidates in exchange for support of a specific position; rather, their donations are used to amplify candidates who already support their positions (Fournaies and Hall 2014). By supporting friendly legislators, interest group donations have a significant effect on political outcomes despite not necessarily changing a legislator’s voting behavior.
3 Theory

The dynamics underlying this study are that certain candidates may enjoy advantages because of support from influential constituencies: specifically, that wealthy candidates enjoy an advantage in elections because of support from wealthy donors.

3.1 Congressional Selectorates

The unequal distribution of influence between concentric constituencies is referred to by comparativists as ‘selectorate theory’. This theory holds that political leaders have a primary desire to achieve and maintain power, and that their behavior in office satisfies the constituencies with the greatest leverage over their political future (Bueno de Mesquita 2002). Members of the U.S. Congress are examples of selectorate theory in action. Richard Fenno, accompanying and observing members of Congress traveling in their districts, noted that politicians shifted strategies for appealing to constituencies of varying importance (Fenno 1974). Members of Congress represent some 700,000 citizens (geographic constituency), only some of whom will vote for the candidate (reelection constituency); to run in a general election, candidates must first win a party primary (primary constituency) and retain the support of their advisors and family (personal constituency). Legislators present themselves and their achievements differently to each of these constituencies, and prioritize them at different intervals of the reelection campaign.

Citizens of different constituencies have unequal influence over the candidate’s reelection chances. This is described as a citizen’s “voting power” — the ability of any one citizen to affect the outcome of an election (Bartles 1998). For example, because 40% of citizens do not vote in general elections, legislators do not have an incentive to . This is reflected in roll-call voting in Congress, with members following the preferences of voters more closely than non-voters (Griffin and Newman 2005).  

10For example, politicians in authoritarian countries shift benefits to a relatively small constituency of individuals—comprised of military leaders, party elites, or industry oligarchs—to maintain power. Politicians serving in democratic-republics—who must seek reelection from a broad and diverse constituency of voters—will instead prioritize widely-accessible public goods. In the language of comparative politics, the democratic politician is appealing to a wide selectorate while the authoritarian politician must only appeal to a narrow selectorate.

11Voter turnout varies significantly state-by-state: in 2016, the ranges were 74% (Minnesota) to 43% (Hawaii). The national average is 60.2%. For exact data, see www.electproject.org.

12Candidates also have incentives to appeal to swing-voters over reliably partisan voters (Downs 1953). This also creates concerns, given that party-identification rates vary widely by race (Gay 2007).
3.2 Effects from Congressional Primaries

Not every candidate in a general election has a legitimate shot at victory: a successful candidate is nearly always the nominee of a major party. The U.S. electoral system—in which a single-member district is decided by a plurality of votes—incentivizes political actors to consolidate into two parties (Duverger 1959). Given the strategic importance of party-based consolidation, as well as the campaign infrastructure of a state and national party, viable candidates have strong strategic and material incentive to associate with one of the major parties.

Voters in primary elections have a disproportionate influence on candidate behavior. First, voters in primary elections are high-information relative to voters in general elections, meaning that slight shifts in behavior by a candidate will shift perceptions more significantly for primary voters. Second, because turnout is substantially lower in primary elections compared to general elections, individual voters have an increased influence over the outcome of a primary election (Brady, Han and Pope 2007).

3.3 Do Donors Select Candidates?

Motivated citizens have a diverse arsenal of influencing elections beyond their vote. Primary elections yield many candidates—especially without an incumbent and especially in highly-partisan districts—that never compete for a vote. This effect has been well documented at the presidential level (Cohen, Karol, Noel and Zaller 2008), where primaries are decided well before conventions by a selective allocation of resources toward favored candidates. These resources include endorsements from prominent party-leaders, support from activists and interest groups, and access to donor networks.

Of these resources, campaign donors may have the greatest effect on congressional primaries. As opposed to presidential primaries, congressional candidates often do not have outside name-recognition prior to entering the contest. Fundraising pays for campaign literature, television and internet advertising, and hiring talented field organizers—all of which can help an unknown candidate break through a crowded primary field.

Likewise, there are fewer determinants of success in party primaries relative to general elections. Jacobson (1990) finds that there is only a marginal benefit to campaign spending in a general election: more important are the partisan composition of the district, national economic conditions, and approval ratings for the incumbent.

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13Assuming that voters are ideologically sorted into two parties, the entrance of additional parties would draw votes from—and therefore disadvantage—the party with the most proximate ideology. Therefore, it is in the strategic interest of political actors to coalesce into two distinct parties.
These same fundamentals do not apply to party primaries, where ideology and partisanship are more concentrated.

Finally, early fundraising success gives legitimacy to a campaign, which can improve the chances of success later on. Activists and interest groups take a risk when making endorsements and look for signs of a candidate’s viability prior to lending support: achieving a substantial fundraising advantage is a direct and quantifiable measure of a campaign’s success.

We should therefore expect partisan donors to have a wide influence over candidate selection, and for the characteristics and behavior of eventual nominees to reflect donor preferences.

There is a developing body of evidence that donors occupy ideological extremes and make candidate selections corresponding to this ideology. Demand-side selection can be interpreted from survey analysis of partisan donors, which has been found that donors hold ideologically extreme positions (Hill and Huber 2016) and contribute to candidates who reflect their ideological preferences (Barber, Canes-Wrone and Thrower 2016). This would suggest that donors are primarily motivated by ideology and—to the extent that they shape outcomes—reward partisan behavior.

There is significant evidence that donors preferences matter for the composition and behavior of legislatures. This influence can be seen in the ideological bearings of successful candidates, who tend to be ideologically extreme even relative to their primary voters (Bafumi and Herron 2010). It can also be seen in the partisan behavior of legislatures, as states with lower individual contribution levels tend to have less-partisan legislatures (Barber 2016). It can be inferred from these findings that donor preferences are pivotal in shaping the composition—and resulting behavior14—of legislative bodies.

Donors will also bias the composition of candidates toward the wealthy. It is well-documented that campaign donors are wealthier than non-donors (Hill and Huber 2016) and that citizens favor candidates with similar personal characteristics (Philpot and Walton 2007; Lawless 2015; McDermott 2009). While non-wealthy citizens are unsupportive of wealthy candidates (Carnes and Sadin 2015; Carnes and Lupu 2016), there is evidence that this effect is mitigated by partisanship (Griffin, Newman, and Buhr).

Candidates are frequently instructed to solicit donations from family, friends, and professional colleagues (EMILY’s List 2004), creating an implicit bias toward candidates with expansive and affluent personal networks. This bias is meaningful:

\footnote{This study focuses on donors as shaping the demographic and ideological composition of legislatures: a separate question is the extent to which donors continue to influence the behavior of candidates post-election. For analysis of these effects, see (Barber 2016) or (Canes-Wrone and Gibson 2016).}
candidates who gain an early fundraising advantage from their professional networks are significantly more likely to attract further donations and ultimate win the election (Bonica 2017). Fundraising success can therefore be partially attributed to the affluence of a candidate’s donation network, substantively biasing the composition of Congress toward wealthy candidates.

There are several drivers of social capital. Bonica has found that educational background is a significant determinant of candidate entry and success (Bonica 2017). Candidates with higher levels of education—particularly lawyers—are more successful in part due to support from their educational and professional networks. This finding has significant implications for the descriptive composition of Congress, given the wide gap in educational attainment by class (Postsecondary Education Opportunity 2012).

This is not limited to education: across multiple measures, wealthy citizens have increased access to social capital than non-wealthy citizens. This is in part due to uneven access to social organizations such as churches (Monitoring the Future, 2012) or voluntary organizations (Current Population Survey 2010), both of which are crucial avenues for building communal bonds.

As an effect, wealthier citizens have larger and more diverse social networks than non-wealthy citizens (Pew Research 2010). The depth of these networks is also skewed toward wealthy citizens, who report having a greater number of close friends than their non-wealthy peers (Social Capital Community Benchmark Survey, 2000).

It follows that unequal social access affects the communities that citizens form. The neighborhoods that house citizens are increasingly separating along class lines (Pew Research 2015). Class-based geographic segregation is partly a result of local policies—such as redlining, placement of public housing, and eviction procedures—but can also be traced to residents’ self-sorting into homogenous neighborhoods (Sampson 2012). Wealthy neighborhoods tend to be more connected and with higher rates of social trust (Pew Research, 2016). Because wealthy neighborhoods will tend to be more affluent and better connected, it follows that candidates coming from these neighborhoods will have an improved fundraising advantage compared to lower income neighborhoods.
4 Expectations

**H1:** Citizens from high-income backgrounds will be more likely to run for office than citizens from low-income backgrounds

Regardless of campaign effects, it is likely that candidate entry will be higher for high-income candidates.

High-income candidates have more time to devote to developing a campaign. Running for office is the time equivalent of a full-time job, starting months before the election. Candidates from low-income backgrounds are more likely to have rigid and unpredictable working schedules (Sweet and Meiksins 2015), thereby complicating the logistics of running for office beyond what is faced by high-income candidates working traditional schedules.

Additionally, low-income candidates must consider forgone wages, which impact their financial and social well-being at a comparatively higher rate than high-income candidates. Candidates rarely take salaries from their campaigns, given the opportunity cost of diverting funds from advantageous outlets. The unpaid labor given to campaigns excludes potential candidates for whom the financial costs are too great. A recent survey of state legislatures found that representatives were more likely to be independently wealthy, have flexible jobs, or to be retirees (Kurtz 2015)–reflecting the disadvantage working-class candidates face in entering politics.

Running for office is therefore disadvantageous for low-income candidates due to its financial and time constraints, which should lead to a relative overrepresentation of wealthy candidates.

**H2:** The majority of donors will be from high-income backgrounds

**H3:** Donors from high-income neighborhoods will be more likely to support a candidate from a high-income background

Donors to political campaigns will be significantly wealthier than the average citizen of their congressional district. Wealthy citizens tend to be more politically engaged and have more disposable income to put toward consumption goods. This would suggest that donors will be from high-income backgrounds—a finding that is corroborated by survey findings (Hill and Huber 2016).

It is also likely that donors will give to candidates from similar backgrounds. These candidates will be likely to have overlapping social networks and to belong to the same social organizations (Campbell, Marsden and Hurlbert 1986; Petev 2010). Wealthy candidates will also have shared experiences and values with wealthy donors, which improves the donor’s descriptive representation. Finally, because legislators have a tendency to vote for their own material interest, it would also be in the material interest of the donor to support a candidate from a similar background (Carnes
These factors—both intentional and unintentional—will cause wealthy donors to support candidates from similar backgrounds.

**H4: High-income candidates will be more likely to win the party primary, but less likely to win the general election.**

**H5: As the district becomes less competitive, the likelihood of a high-income candidate will increase.**

Wealthy candidates may have an advantage during the primary process. Fundraising plays an outsized role in primary success, due to limited name recognition and a lack of outside measurements of campaign success. Should wealthy candidates have an advantage in fundraising, it is likely that they will have an advantage in winning party nominations.

It is not clear, however, whether wealthy candidates will have an advantage in the general election. Fundraising has a limited effect on general election outcomes, and voters tend to have negative views of wealthy candidates. All else being equal, it is expected that wealthy candidates will fare worse in general elections.

The extent of the disadvantage may depend on district conditions, with wealthy candidates having greater advantages in more partisan districts. First, the level of primary competition is correlated with the partisanship of the district—meaning that a more partisan district will tend to have more primary candidates. A wider field limits the ability of candidates to stand out through messaging and events, thereby increasing the relative importance of fundraising and advertising. If wealthy candidates are more successful at fundraising, it is likely that their advantage will increase with the district’s partisanship.

Parties in partisan districts also fewer concerns over the candidate’s performance during the general election. Parties in competitive districts do not share this confidence—they have incentives to support candidates capable of defeating the candidate of the other party. If a candidate’s wealth is a disadvantage during the general election, it is in the party’s best interest to support a candidate from a non-wealthy background.

Given the advantages wealthy candidate enjoy in partisan environments, and the disadvantages they face in competitive ones, we should expect a positive correlation between a district’s partisanship and the likelihood that a wealthy candidate is nominated.
5 Methodology

5.1 Data Collection

Electoral data collection begins with the 2006 congressional elections—the subsequent election following the enactment of the McCain-Feingold Campaign Reform Act for which data is available—ranging to the 2014 election. To eliminate incumbency advantage, only open-seat primaries were considered.

The scope of the study was limited to elections to the U.S. House. There are significantly more open seats for the House than the Senate, thereby expanding the pool of available data. Candidates for the House are elected from narrower districts than state-wide elections for the House, providing more context for the socioeconomic status of donors and candidates. Finally, House elections are held every two years—as opposed to the six-year Senate cycle—which standardizes electoral considerations for every legislator.

Likewise, only elections to open seats were considered. The presence of an incumbent would be a prime determinant of donor behavior; in order to eliminate these influences, elections featuring an incumbent were omitted.

5.2 Class Measurement

Studies of representation have previously focused on easily-identifiable categorical variables such as ethnicity or gender, or continuous variables such as age or ideology. Economic class does not provide a similarly identifiable classification.

Complicating measurement, citizens are themselves unsure of their class. A 2015 report from the Pew Research Center found that 87% of survey respondents considered themselves either “lower-middle,” “middle,” or “upper-middle class,” despite only 51% of respondents fitting the income classification of middle-class. (Pew 2015)

Because class cannot be directly observed, methodological differences arise from choice of proxy variable. Nicholas Carnes, for example, has made significant insight into the role of occupation in social class (Carnes 2015). Similarly, Robert Putnam has expounded on the influence of education on determining social class (Putnam 2015). Given that social class is difficult to directly measure, methodological differences arise from choice of which proxy variable to use.

McCain-Feingold is the most recent change to individual contribution limits, raising the limit from $1,000 to $2,000. The exact contribution limit is indexed for inflation every two years, based on the change in the cost of living from the base-year 2001. In 2016—the most recent election—the limit was $2,700.
This study uses neighborhood affluence to infer social class. There is evidence that neighborhoods have become increasingly separated along economic lines (Misra 2016), meaning that neighborhood is a salient proxy for class.

Neighborhood income also presents methodological benefits. First, neighborhood income—in contrast to personal income, education, or occupation—is readily available for every candidate, regardless of electoral results. Second, because neighborhood data is available for both donors and candidates, it allows for cross-comparison.

Median household income of a contributor’s neighborhood was used to infer social class. Contributor data was provided by the Federal Election Commission, including recipient (i.e. candidate), contribution amount, and the mailing address of the contributor. Using geocoding information from the U.S. Census, latitude and longitude estimates were used to place contributors into census tracts. 16

Per FEC regulation, donors are required to disclose their residential address prior to donating to a candidate. Street addresses were then geocoded to a corresponding census tract—the smallest unit used by the U.S. Census Bureau to represent residential neighborhoods. The divisions of each tract are determined by local participants prior to each decennial census and range from 1,200 to 8,000 residents. Detailed demographic data is collected for each tract as part of the American Community Survey; using this data, donors are matched to the median household income of their neighborhood tract.

Candidates’ tracts were measured according to a similar metric. Using registration addresses reported to the FEC, candidates were geocoded according to the median household income of their neighborhood.

Tracts were then classified according to statistical distributions. The top-quartile is classified as 'high-income,' the bottom-quartile is classified as 'low-income,' and the middle two quartiles are classified as 'middle-income.'

5.3 Representation Measurement

Using similar measurements of representation (Griffin and Newman 2012; Tausanovitch and Warshaw 2015), this study uses correspondence between constituent opinion and legislative voting as a measurement of representation. Using data from the 2008-2016 Cooperative Congressional Election Surveys, I measured the percentage of roll-call votes in which the legislator voted the preference of the constituent. A single survey contained 4-12 roll call votes, and data from 35,000-55,000 respondents.

16Tracts are used by the U.S. Census Bureau to represent residential neighborhoods. The divisions of each tract are determined by local participants prior to each decennial census and range from 1,200 to 8,000 residents. Tracts are the most precise geographical unit for which data is available, and are commonly used in academic studies of geography, urban studies, and public policy.
Respondents were then classified according to their self-reported family income and self-reported donorship status. Representation based on these classifications is reported as an average percentage across all relevant respondents.
6 Who Runs for Office? Who Wins?

High-income citizens are over-represented in all stages of the campaign. They are more likely to run for office than their peers: high-income candidates made up 39.2% of all candidates, despite only representing 25% of the population. Because gains by one class necessarily lead to loses by the others, low-income and middle-income citizens are under-represented in candidate entry relative to their share of the population.

This presents evidence for a supply-side explanation of wealthy legislators: their over-representation in Congress can be traced, in part, to their increased likelihood of running. Descriptive representation is, per this argument, simply the consequence of more education, fewer financial concerns, increased political engagement, and larger social networks.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1: Candidate Demographics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>General Population</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Candidates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party Nominees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Winners</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This explanation, while compelling, is not comprehensive. High-income candidates also experience greater success in elections than would be predicted by their number of candidates. They are more likely to win their party’s nomination (40.2%) and more likely to win the general election (43.66%).

This difference suggests that there is also a demand-side explanation of high-income candidate success—the structure of the party primary and general election advantage candidates from high-income backgrounds.

6.1 Campaign Finance Effects

The structural bias in campaigning that most exaggerates the differences between candidate of different class is campaign fundraising and spending.

I have hypothesized that high-income candidates will have higher success in campaign finance. Primarily, high-income candidates have larger and more affluent social networks, meaning that they have a wide pool to solicit donations.

This is reflected in average spending levels during the primary:

Campaigns by high-income candidates are, on average, significantly better funded than campaigns by candidates from lower income classifications. While candidates
Table 2: Campaign Contributions by Class

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Low-Income</th>
<th>Middle-Income</th>
<th>High-Income</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All Candidates</td>
<td>371,779.30</td>
<td>288,157.10</td>
<td>437,976.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary Winners</td>
<td>856,154.20</td>
<td>598,755.70</td>
<td>895,462.40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

who are nominated by their parties continue to call along these lines, the difference is not statistically significant.

High-income candidates also have a secondary advantage: they themselves have the means to contribute to their campaign:

Table 3: Mean Self-Funding by Income-Class

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Low-Income</th>
<th>Middle-Income</th>
<th>High-Income</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All Candidates</td>
<td>14,686.94</td>
<td>22,371.82</td>
<td>53,373.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Winning</td>
<td>43,685.91</td>
<td>24,233.56</td>
<td>136,721.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This hypothesis is reflected in the data. On average, high-income candidates contribute $53,373.60 to their own campaign, compared with $22,371 for middle-income candidates and $14,686 for low-income candidates.

We should also expect that rates of self-funding will be greater for primary winners. This is also reflected in the data: primary-winning candidates from high-income backgrounds contributed an average of $136,721 to their own campaigns, compared with $24,233.56 for middle-income candidates and $43,685.91 for low-income candidates.

6.1.1 Primary Election

It is evident that candidates from different income-classifications have marked differences in rates of campaign fundraising and self-funding. Do these differences in spending have effects on campaign outcomes?

Using a binary variable for whether a candidate won their party’s primary, I use a logit regression to estimate the effect of campaign finance on primary outcomes:

\[
\text{Logit}(y) = \beta_0 + \beta_1(|x_c - x_{avg}|) + \beta_2(\pi) + \beta_3(\theta) + \beta_4(\mu)
\]  \hspace{1cm} (1)

In which \(y\) is a dummy variable which represents whether a candidate secures the party’s nomination and \(x\) represents absolute difference between a candidate’s income and the average income of their district. In model [3], \(\mu\) represents total spending during the primary. There are also two control variables: the two-party presidential
Table 4: Effect of Spending on Primary Outcomes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>[1]</th>
<th>[2]</th>
<th>[3]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Income (ten-thousands)</td>
<td>-0.043</td>
<td>-0.0569*</td>
<td>-0.124***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.023664</td>
<td>0.026787</td>
<td>0.034235</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Candidate Ideology</td>
<td>-0.0501</td>
<td>-0.0139</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.05357</td>
<td>0.062057</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District Partisanship</td>
<td>-0.149</td>
<td>-0.267**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.078598</td>
<td>0.090147</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary Election Contributions (millions)</td>
<td>2.778***</td>
<td>0.218286</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-1.394***</td>
<td>-1.058***</td>
<td>-1.528***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.078127</td>
<td>0.092708</td>
<td>0.110593</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>2171</td>
<td>1362</td>
<td>1362</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*p&lt;0.05, **p&lt;0.01, *p&lt;0.001</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

vote in the district (π) and the candidate’s common-space ideological rating (θ) as reported in Bonica (2014).

There are several takeaways from this model. In model [1], a bivariate logit regression indicates that a candidate’s income does not have a statistically significant effect on primary outcomes. A similar lack of statistical significance is observed in model [2] after controlling for the candidate’s ideology and the partisanship of the district.

After controlling for contributions during the primary, however, candidate income displays a negative, highly-statistically significant effect on electoral outcomes (model [3]). This suggests that the odds of winning a primary election decrease as a candidate’s income moves away from the district average. That this effect is only evident after controlling for campaign spending indicates that the subsequent success of high-income candidates may be attributable to their higher levels of spending.

Interacting the effects of spending during primaries with candidate income yields a similar picture:

I find that campaign spending is positively correlated with primary victories for all candidates. There are meaningful differences in the marginal benefit of spending: low-
Table 5: Interaction Effects with Candidate Class

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>[High-Income]</th>
<th>[Middle-Income]</th>
<th>[Low-Income]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Primary Election Contributions (millions)</td>
<td>1.246***</td>
<td>2.010***</td>
<td>2.224***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.176234</td>
<td>0.256891</td>
<td>0.478399</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Candidate Ideology</td>
<td>-0.132</td>
<td>-0.107</td>
<td>0.0302</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.096664</td>
<td>0.095027</td>
<td>0.206312</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District Partisanship</td>
<td>-0.420**</td>
<td>-0.211</td>
<td>-0.208</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.145804</td>
<td>0.141207</td>
<td>0.269149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-1.354***</td>
<td>-1.595***</td>
<td>-1.805***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.146169</td>
<td>0.14942</td>
<td>0.284203</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>437</td>
<td>460</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Income and middle-income candidates receive far greater benefits per-dollar than high-income candidates. Given the substantial fundraising advantage that high-income candidates hold over candidates of lower incomes, high-income candidates are able to recover the loses in relative benefit.

Interestingly, the partisanship of a district is negatively correlated with primary victories for high-income candidates. Similar findings for low-income and middle-income candidates are not statistically significant.

6.1.2 General Election

It is unlikely campaign spending or candidate income will be as meaningful in a general election as in a primary election. First, voters in a general election are inundated with campaign messaging from party networks and independent PACs–features that are largely absent in primary elections. It is therefore unlikely that an increase in spending will be as meaningful to victory.

Second, voters are better able to differentiate between candidates of different parties. Because candidates in the general election have largely similar ideologies, personal factors such as economic class can factor into a voter’s evaluation. During general elections, however, policy differences between candidates are exponentially more pronounced–meaning that a candidate’s economic background holds far less salience.

To test the effect of candidate income and campaign spending, I use the model:

$$Logit(y) = \beta_0 + \beta_1(|x_c - x_{avg}|) + \beta_2(\pi) + \beta_3(\alpha) + \beta_4(\omega) + \beta_5(\mu)$$  (2)

Similar to the model of primary elections, $y$ is a dummy variable representing whether a candidate won the general election and $x$ represents the absolute difference between
the candidate’s income and the average income of their district. The variable $\mu$ represents spending during the general election. I include three control variables based on conclusions in Jacobson (1990) and Sides & Vavreck (2013): the two-party presidential vote in the district ($\pi$), the (dis)approval rating$^{17}$ of the President ($\alpha$), and the unemployment rate in the fourth-quarter of the election year ($\omega$).

$^{17}$Approval rating is used for candidates of the President’s party. For candidates not of the President’s party, disapproval rating is used.
Table 6: Spending Effects During General Election

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>[1]</th>
<th>[2]</th>
<th>[3]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Income (ten-thousands)</td>
<td>0.0621</td>
<td>0.0284</td>
<td>-0.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.055476</td>
<td>0.065521</td>
<td>0.087133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partisanship</td>
<td>1.154***</td>
<td>1.376***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.221783</td>
<td>0.265502</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presidential</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approval Rating</td>
<td>0.00963</td>
<td>-2.4E-05</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.015886</td>
<td>0.017625</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployment</td>
<td>0.589***</td>
<td>0.577***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.089487</td>
<td>0.105345</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Election Spending</td>
<td>2.223***</td>
<td>-1.058***</td>
<td>-1.528***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.347063</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-1.451***</td>
<td>-5.835***</td>
<td>-6.480***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.190019</td>
<td>1.018585</td>
<td>1.147979</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>333</td>
<td>295</td>
<td>295</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001

Contrary to the findings during the primary election, a candidate’s income does not have a statistically significant effect on their odds of victory. While spending by a campaign is positively correlated with victory, the economic conditions and partisanship of the district account for much of the predictive power of the model.

One potential explanation is that, given increased odds of success for high-income candidates during the primary stage, voters are unable to differentiate candidate incomes during general elections.

To test this hypothesis, I run an identical model separating races with two high-income candidates from races featuring a middle-income or low-income candidate.

In races featuring candidates of different economic backgrounds ([2]) there was a negative correlation between increases in incomes and the likelihood of winning the general election compared to elections in which candidates both came from high-income backgrounds.
Table 7: Does Competition Affect Outcomes?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>[1]</th>
<th>[2]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Income (ten-thousands)</td>
<td>-0.0103</td>
<td>-0.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.096408</td>
<td>0.152739</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spending Advantage</td>
<td>0.501*</td>
<td>0.643***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.254259</td>
<td>0.18478</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District Partisanship</td>
<td>1.131**</td>
<td>1.221***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.408605</td>
<td>0.296004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presidential Approval</td>
<td>-0.00617</td>
<td>0.0343</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.025479</td>
<td>0.022026</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployment Rate</td>
<td>0.714***</td>
<td>0.550***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.198783</td>
<td>0.108512</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-5.647**</td>
<td>-6.779***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.716934</td>
<td>1.434758</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>199</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001

While these results were not statistically significant, it does indicate that candidates from high-income backgrounds face electoral disadvantages when voters are able to make distinctions between candidates.

Therefore, it is logical to conclude that candidates face electoral disadvantages as their wealth increases beyond the district average. However, given that high-income candidates have the means to compensate for this disadvantage through increased spending, the effect is rarely realized in electoral outcomes.
7 Donor-Legislator Reciprocity

7.1 Characteristics of Donors

If campaign spending is so important to electoral outcomes, the demographics of contributors to these campaigns hold significant power over the selection of candidates. Just as with candidates, donors tend to come from high-income backgrounds.

Table 8: Economic Characteristics of Donors (2014)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>High-income</th>
<th>Mid-Income</th>
<th>Low-income</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Population</td>
<td>25.00%</td>
<td>50.00%</td>
<td>25.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donations (#)</td>
<td>71.15%</td>
<td>19.81%</td>
<td>9.04%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donations ($)</td>
<td>70.18%</td>
<td>18.92%</td>
<td>10.91%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donations (thousands)</td>
<td>148,000</td>
<td>39,900</td>
<td>23,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n=196,765

As predicted in previous work, donor composition is significantly skewed toward upper-income constituents. While upper-income neighborhoods constitute 25% of the national total, residents of these neighborhoods make 71.15% of the gross number of donations and 70.18% of the total money donated.

Likewise, donors from high-income backgrounds are significantly more likely to give to candidates of their same background.

7.1.1 Intra-class Donations

Table 9: Intra-Class Donorship

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>High-High</th>
<th>Mid-Mid</th>
<th>Low-Low</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High-High Donations</td>
<td>0.754**</td>
<td>0.035</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-0.331</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-2.800</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideology</td>
<td>0.694</td>
<td>0.716</td>
<td>0.667</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.024</td>
<td>0.024</td>
<td>0.024</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-4.540</td>
<td>-3.911</td>
<td>-3.842</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.038</td>
<td>0.026</td>
<td>0.025</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N=196,931

**p<0.05
High-income donors are substantially more likely to donate to a candidate if that candidate comes from the same income-class; for middle-income and low-income donors, however, a candidate coming from the same income-class appears to discourage donorship rates.

Therefore, we can conclude that most donors come from high-income backgrounds and give to candidates who share this background. That high-income candidates are more successful due to increased expenditures is, in part, a reflection of an increased willingness from wealthy donors to give.

7.2 Legislative Behavior

Is there a reciprocal relationship between campaign contributions and legislative behavior? To test this question, I compare the correspondence between the preferences of donors and how legislators respond to these preferences.

After controlling for ideology and income, I find that legislators are significantly more responsive to donors than to partisan supporters or general election voters.

Table 10: Representation of Donors, Supporters, and Voters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>[1]</th>
<th>[2]</th>
<th>[3]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Donated to Candidate</td>
<td>0.182***</td>
<td>0.011776</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary Election Voter (Co-Partisan)</td>
<td>0.126***</td>
<td>0.003541</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Election Voter</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.00808***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td>-0.00141***</td>
<td>-0.00138***</td>
<td>-0.00143***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideology</td>
<td>0.00465**</td>
<td>0.00348**</td>
<td>0.00447**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>0.540***</td>
<td>0.499***</td>
<td>0.535***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>149517</td>
<td>149517</td>
<td>149517</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001
I find that, even compared to a candidates voters during primary elections, legislators are significantly more responsive to the preferences of their donors. While legislators have increased responsiveness to voters as compared to non-voters, both groups experience lower rates of responsiveness compared to co-partisans.

### 7.2.1 Income Effects on Representation

Having previously found that high-income candidates owe much of their success to contributions from high-income donors, do high-income legislators follow the preferences of high-income donors to a greater degree than legislators of lower incomes?

To test this hypothesis, I merge data on first-year legislators and regress voting behavior on an interaction variable between donations and income. This should indicate whether legislators who are more reliant upon high-income donors are more representative of these donors once elected.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>[High-Income]</th>
<th>[Middle-Income]</th>
<th>[Low-Income]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Donated to Candidate</td>
<td>0.183**</td>
<td>0.0927</td>
<td>0.164</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.067514</td>
<td>0.055265</td>
<td>0.102213</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td>-0.00062</td>
<td>-0.00072</td>
<td>-0.00145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.001173</td>
<td>0.000982</td>
<td>0.001487</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donation*Income</td>
<td>0.0468</td>
<td>0.00106</td>
<td>0.002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.05936</td>
<td>0.006536</td>
<td>0.01416</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideology</td>
<td>0.00817</td>
<td>0.00843*</td>
<td>0.00693</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.005362</td>
<td>0.004234</td>
<td>0.007626</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>0.527***</td>
<td>0.532***</td>
<td>0.564***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.023438</td>
<td>0.017777</td>
<td>0.029147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>13965</td>
<td>19072</td>
<td>5963</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001

I find that high-income legislators are significantly more representative of their donors than are legislators from lower incomes. Likewise, while not statistically significant, there is a positive correlation between a legislator’s representation behavior and the interaction between donorship and income. This indicates that as a donor’s personal
income increases, the correspondence between their preferences and their legislator’s behavior increases—especially if their legislator shares their wealth.

Therefore, we can conclude that donors give to candidates with the understanding that these candidates will follow their preferences once in office. This effect is especially true for high-income citizens when giving to high-income donors, who give at substantially higher rates than their peers.
8 Limitations

8.1 Measurement Uncertainty

One such limitation originates from the precision of census-tract measurement. This study measures a representative’s social class by using the median household income of that representative’s neighborhood as a proxy. A neighborhood, by this measurement, contains 4,000-6,000 inhabitants with varying household incomes. The consistency of household incomes varies widely between and within neighborhoods, potentially obscuring the specific conditions of the representative’s environment. These measurements can be further shifted by populations whose incomes do not reflect their economic status, such as large constituencies of students or retirees.

This measurement was chosen for three reasons. Primarily, while elected representatives are required to submit financial disclosure forms, there is no comparable requirement for donors or candidates who fail to be elected. Neighborhood income is standardized and observable for all relevant political actors; it provides a common standard for cross-comparison between donors, voters, and candidates. Secondarily, there is evidence that citizens of different incomes are increasingly segregated by geography (Hertz 2015), making neighborhood a more salient proxy of class than in past decades. It is rational to expect that—given these findings—the accuracy of the measurement improves with the scale of data collection. Finally, class proxies—such as occupation, education, income, and residency—are highly correlated with one another. Opting for an alternative measure of class (such as a legislator’s net worth) would only marginally improve precision while failing to replicate the scope and confidence of the study.

8.2 Survey Uncertainty

There are also legitimate methodological concerns over using CCES roll-call measurements as a measurement of representation.

CCES is an opt-in survey—limiting the pool of potential respondents. This may bias the survey toward politically active respondents. There have also been numerous studies finding that CCES tends to exacerbate demographic biases—especially over-representing Democrats, older citizens, and wealthier citizens.

Likewise, there are concerns over whether survey responses are an accurate barometer of citizen’s preferences or self-interests. Voters do not weigh all issues equally, yet respondents are not asked to rank the salience of each roll-call question. A legislator who is more responsive to high-salience issues while being less responsive to low-salience issues could be credibly considered as more representative. These questions
also omit knowledge-checks, potentially introducing noise from low-information respondents. Statistical analyses of survey responses have found that respondents, with no incentive to remain truthful, may respond randomly to difficult or time-consuming questions (Clark, Gironda, and Young, 2003).

Basic justifications of republicanism correctly assume that not all citizens will have the time or skill to engage in policymaking: the election of a competent, full-time representative is a method of alleviating these concerns. Several CCES questions—such as sanctions on Iran, repeal of the individual mandate, or approval of the US-Korea free trade agreement—presume a dedicated understanding of policy dynamics to discern one’s true self-interest. It is unreasonable and unrealistic to expect that each of the 64,000 respondents has the requisite resources to evaluate these policy questions.


9 Conclusion

The findings of this paper suggest that wealthy donors play a critical role in candidate selection, and often choose to support candidates from similar economic backgrounds. These candidates are more likely to win the primary and general elections; if elected, they disproportionately adhere to the preferences of their donors.

9.1 Implications for Political Groups

This finding—that a lack of early fundraising excludes candidates from disadvantaged populations—holds significant implications for civic groups. EMILY’s List, with the acronym ‘Early Money Is Like Yeast’ (i.e. “it makes the dough rise”), has long understood the role that early funding plays in driving future support. Similar groups focused on remedying demographic imbalances may have an interest in understanding the distortionary effects of primary fundraising.

In fact, several groups have already emerged with focuses on fundraising for first-time candidates from diverse backgrounds. First-time candidates have seen a marked increase since the 2016 election (Lawless and Fox 2017). In response, several candidate-support organizations have emerged with specific focuses, such as providing campaign training and funding for candidates from diverse ethnic or occupational backgrounds.18 Perhaps the most notable finding is the record-breaking 26,000 women who have registered to run for office for the first time, as reported by EMILY’s List. For these organizations, and for those in the future, a robust academic literature on the determinants of candidate emergence is crucial.

9.2 Donor Selectorates

This phenomenon is not intrinsically negative. Citizens of a district doubtlessly benefit from an effective legislator capable of advancing their unique demands. Many of the skills that benefit candidates during the early stages of a primary campaign—mobilizing a network of supporters, advancing persuasive arguments, developing coalitions around shared goals—are integral to legislative entrepreneurship. It is conceivable that wealth is simply a reflection of ability, both in material success and political skill.

The merits of wealthy legislators is an open question; their method of selection, however, has important implications for their priorities in office. Selectorate theory

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18For example, dedicated candidate-entry organizations exist for LGBTQ candidates (Gay & Lesbian Victory Fund); immigrants (New American Leaders Project); veterans (Veterans Campaign); scientists (314 Action); Latinos (Latino Victory Fund); and African-Americans (The Collective PAC)
holds that, as the size of the reelection coalition decreases, the legislator will be incentivized to shift from funding public goods to disbursing private benefits to the legislator’s most influential supporters. In this context, the theory would hold that a wealthy candidate—having won an election due to increased funding from a small group of donors—would be more likely to shift policy toward providing material benefits to their supporters.

This shift may occur in a literal sense: funneling appropriations to companies and neighborhoods close to their supporters. This is not uncommon—members of Congress have been frequently shown to disburse appropriations to serve political goals (Kiewiet and McCubbins 1985). This may also occur in policy that specifically improves the material welfare of one group at the expense of others, such as in repeals to estate taxes or capital gains taxes.

Beyond material implications, legislators who are more reliant on donor support have fewer incentives to represent their voters. This can be seen in rates of representation between legislators of different incomes, with low-income legislators being more broadly representative and high-income legislators following the preferences of donors. By influencing candidate selection and electoral success, high-income candidates and donors are able to influence a host of policy areas beyond the preferences of their district.
10 References


