

**Political Inequality in America:
Who Loses on Spending Policy? When is Policy Less Biased?**

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Abstract

Rapid growth in America's economic inequality and endemic disadvantages among racial minorities have deepened fears about unequal political influence. From separate studies, it appears that government responds more to the wealthy and to whites. But critical questions remain unanswered. What are relative contributions of race and class to government responsiveness? Why do these inequalities exist in the first place? And under what contexts are disparities in responsiveness reduced? To answer these questions, we assess the congruence between individual-level policy preferences and policy outcomes using the General Social Survey. We match individual spending preferences in 11 policy areas with actual federal spending to see whose preferences are realized. We find that race, more regularly than class, shapes government responsiveness. We also find that Democratic Party control eliminates most of the racial bias in responsiveness. Economic growth also narrows racial inequalities.

Equality is central to democratic politics. Yet fears of bias and unequal political influence have been a part of the American brand of democracy almost since its inception. The rapid growth of economic inequality in the U.S. over the last several decades has renewed and deepened these fears, sparking widespread scholarly attention (e.g., American Political Science Association 2004; Page and Jacobs 2005; Bartels 2008; Hacker and Pierson 2010; Gilens 2012; Butler 2014; Piketty and Goldhammer 2014). Until recently, scholars have had a difficult time proving that government responds more to some groups than others (Hajnal 2009). That has changed with a series of studies that demonstrate that different segments of the polity have different levels of influence over the actions of government. Using an impressive array of data, scholars have shown that policy follows the wishes of the wealthy over those of the poor (e.g., Page and Jacobs 2005; Bartels, 2008; Gilens 2012; Gilens and Page 2014). Others have shown that legislative action tracks the preferences of white Americans more than those of Blacks or Hispanics (Griffin and Newman 2008).

These are important developments in our understanding of American democracy but they leave critical questions unanswered. Whites and the wealthy garner most of the government's attention, but is class or race really driving responsiveness in American politics? Since existing studies tend to employ research designs that only allow them to look at one demographic characteristic in isolation, we do not know which factor is really behind differential responsiveness. More than just an academic question, this is also practically important as efforts currently directed toward decreasing income-based disparities in political influence may be ineffectual unless they also attend to racial disparities. It also remains unclear how political inequalities based on class and race intersect. Are the views of poor Blacks even more likely to be snubbed than those of poor whites? Do wealthier Blacks make the same gains in political

representation that wealthy whites enjoy? Finally, we should learn more about how racial and class differences in responsiveness vary across issue areas and over time. These are all good reasons to examine the roots of unequal responsiveness more comprehensively.

Equally important, existing studies have offered few viable solutions to inequality in responsiveness (but see Ellis 2013, Flavin 2015). To help identify potential solutions, we look at variation in responsiveness across contexts. We investigate two factors that may reduce racial inequalities. First, we expect racial differences in representation to decrease when Democrats control the White House and Congress. Second, we hypothesize that racial inequalities will also decline during periods of economic growth.

We seek to address these questions using a novel but relatively straightforward research design. Namely, we assess the congruence between individual-level preferences for federal spending in 11 core areas and actual spending outcomes over an extended time period (1972-2010) to see who gets what they want from government. We do not claim that our new method is better than existing studies but by focusing on individual-level preferences rather than on measures aggregated to the group level as existing studies have largely done (e.g., Bartels 2008; Gilens 2012), we can simultaneously account for a range of different individual characteristics that could be driving unequal responsiveness. This enables us to see whether class, race, or some other factor like partisanship or ideology is the primary driver of political inequality. As such, we don't seek to refute existing studies. Rather, we hope to add to them.

Our evidence strongly points to the conclusion that the severity of racial differences in responsiveness has been underappreciated. To be sure, the well-educated and higher income earners have been more likely to be policy winners over the last four decades. Class matters. However, racial inequality in policy responsiveness also matters. Racial inequality is not simply

reducible to class inequality. In fact, the racial inequalities we uncover are as large as, and often larger than, income-based bias. Blacks are significantly less likely than whites to be policy winners, even after we control for income, as well as Blacks' greater propensity to identify with the Democratic Party, to hold liberal policy views, and to prefer increases in government spending. Moreover, while the impact of class is inconsistent across time and issue area, Blacks are almost always disadvantaged regardless of the year and regardless of the issue domain we explore. There are, however, contexts under which black representation improves.. Democratic Party control greatly reduces racial inequality in responsiveness. Likewise, the racial gap in responsiveness fades significantly when the economy grows. All of this suggests that although there are important barriers to Blacks' representation in American politics, there are also potential pathways to greater inclusion.

Class, Race, and Policy Representation

Democratic theory demands that, at least to some degree, the government's actions and policy outputs should be responsive to the public's preferences. That is, when the public wants more spending, government should typically spend more. We call this policy representation—when government outputs coincide with public preferences.¹ Generally speaking, systematic research has found clear evidence of such representation in U.S. politics (e.g., Miller and Stokes 1963; Page and Shapiro 1983; Wlezien 2004). However, concerns about inequalities in responsiveness to subgroups of the public are widely shared. The vast majority of recent attention to political inequality has focused on class-based, and specifically, income-based inequalities in influence. We have strong evidence that the decisions of policymakers and the

¹ We recognize that representation is a complex phenomenon and that we are only examining one of many of its facets (Pitkin 1967).

policy outputs that result are significantly more consonant with the policy preferences of high income earners than low income earners (Page and Jacobs 2005; Bartels 2008; Druckman and Jacobs 2011; Ellis 2012; Gilens 2012; Gilens and Page 2014).² This is a set of findings of deep practical and theoretical significance.

Critically, these studies almost completely ignore the role of race. This is, to put it plainly, a significant omission. Although income inequality is certainly growing, and there is little doubt that “class politics is alive and well” in the current competition between the two major parties (Bartels 2008, 96), there is also little doubt that racial dynamics profoundly shape American politics. Indeed, judged by the vote, the post-war era has clearly been split more by race than class. From 1944 to 2012, the difference in the percentage of Blacks and whites voting for Democratic presidential candidates was on average 43 points. In contrast, the parallel difference in Democratic support for working class and middle class voters was only 12 points (Abramson, et al. 2014, Ch. 4).

Race is also a primary factor behind policy choice. On policy questions as diverse as welfare, healthcare, education, criminal justice, and social security surveys show that there are pronounced racial divides (Segura and Bowler 2011, Tesler 2012, Peffley and Hurwitz 2010, Kinder and Winter 2001). Indeed, Kinder and Sanders declare that "Differences in opinion between Blacks and whites... are simply staggering" (1996, 17).³ On most policy questions

² Government can only respond unequally to two groups when the groups hold different preferences (Ura and Ellis 2008; Soroka and Wlezien 2010).

³ There is no single source for these racial divides but there seems little doubt that racial resentment on the part of whites (Kinder and Sanders 1996) and a strong sense of linked fate among blacks and other minorities (Dawson 1994) helps drive these divergent preferences.

class divides pale in comparison. This is not to suggest that high and low income earners agree on all political questions, far from it. Our point is simply that, since Blacks and Whites disagree about policies more frequently, and to a greater degree, than do income groups, the possibility of widespread race-based inequality in representation is greater than that of income-based inequality.

Indeed, existing evidence shows clearly that race matters for policy representation as well. At the local and state level, a range of different studies have demonstrated whites' undue influence (e.g. Hajnal and Trounstein 2013; Hero and Preuhs 2007, Browning, Marshall and Tabb 1984). Research at the federal level has found that the decisions of members of Congress and federal government policy outputs are considerably more aligned with the policy preferences of whites than the preferences of racial minorities (Griffin and Newman 2007, 2008).

All of this leaves us with a sense that both race and class may shape political inequality, and also deep questions about the relationship between the two. In particular, because studies of income-based inequalities in representation almost never account for race and studies of race-based inequalities almost never account for income, we do not know how the two factors interact to shape political inequality. This lack of cross examination is especially important in light of the fact that race and class are deeply intertwined in the U.S. For example, 66 percent of the poor in this country are non-white, while 9 percent of the wealthy is non-white (Keister 2014).⁴ Given the close relationship between race and class it seems clear that one should not be studied without consideration of the other. Yet this is precisely what work in this area has done.

Reducing Inequality in Representation

⁴ Figures for the 'poor' are for those below the official poverty, while "wealthy" refers the top 1% of income earners.

Recent studies have done well in helping to identify inequalities in policy representation. Unfortunately, despite some real effort, they have been less successful in offering viable solutions to the problem of uneven representation.⁵ Is there anything we can do to diminish bias in the policy world? We attempt to help answer this question by looking at variation in responsiveness across different contexts that we believe are likely to lead to different outcomes and less severe imbalances in representation.

First, we explore partisan control, which has been shown to affect the magnitude of income inequalities (e.g., Ellis 2013; Bruner, et al. 2013). There are several reasons to expect a strong relationship between the party in government and responsiveness. The most obvious reason is that minorities and to a lesser extent the lower classes disproportionately favor the Democratic Party. In 2010, for example, 89% of Blacks, 60% of Hispanics, 58% of Asian Americans and 57% of individuals with incomes below \$30,000 supported Democratic candidates for Congress.⁶ Members of these groups may be supporting the Democratic Party

⁵ Studies disagree about whether voter turnout helps mitigate inequalities (see Griffin and Newman 2008, 2013 and Bartels 2008) or whether party control matters (see Bartels 2008 and Gilens 2012). There is some evidence that party competition, descriptive representation, and campaign donations can matter (Bartels 2008; Griffin and Newman 2008; Gilens 2012; Ellis 2013). Rigby and Wright (2011), Ellis (2013), and Flavin (2015) have begun to identify other contexts that may be important for representation. Unfortunately, none of these studies examines the effectiveness of different policy levers or contexts while simultaneously incorporating both race and class into the analysis.

⁶ By contrast, a clear majority of whites (63 percent) and the wealthy (64% of those earning \$200,000 or more) favored Republicans. Data from CNN National Exit Polls.

precisely because it enacts policies that they favor. The logic from the perspective of the Democratic Party is equally clear. Democrats are likely to pursue policies minorities and the working class favor because they want to appeal to their core constituency.

Economic conditions may also affect government's ability to respond to citizen demands. During periods of robust economic growth, government generally has greater revenues to expend to try to accommodate the interests of its citizens. And if citizens want greater spending – as we will find minorities and the poor disproportionately do – it may be easier for government action to coincide with the policy preferences of racial minorities and the poor during periods of economic expansion. Thus, we explore whether economic expansion increases the policy representation of minorities and the poor and diminishes representation gaps.

Explaining Racial Inequality

If, as expected, we find that racial imbalances in responsiveness are more consistent than imbalances across other dimensions, it is important to begin to theorize about why that might be the case. One possibility, as outlined by Frymer (1999) is that Blacks tend to be ignored because of their overwhelming and unwavering support for one of the two major parties. Frymer persuasively argues that because Blacks are effectively 'captured' by the Democratic Party and because the Republican Party cannot compete for Black votes without losing white support, there is little incentive for either party to respond to Black interests. If true, we shouldn't see a lot of responsiveness by either party to Black preferences.

Alternatively, Blacks might be especially prone to lose out because they often hold more liberal views than the rest of the American public. As Dawson (2001) and others have pointed out, Blacks tend to fall at one extreme end of the policy spectrum. To the degree that politicians respond to the median voter, there may again be little incentive to respond to Black interests.

Yet another possibility is that Blacks are less influential because they are less active than others in the political arena. Compared to whites, Blacks vote less, donate less, and are active on campaigns less (Segura and Bowler 2011). Since Blacks participate less in the political process, they may exert less pressure and hence have less influence.

It may, however, be that a lack of responsiveness is more directly tied to race or racial discrimination. One possibility is that policy makers simply dislike Blacks and choose to discount their views. This is essentially what Butler and Broockman (2011) find when they show that legislators ignore emails from Black constituents more often than emails from white constituents. Of course, race could also work in less blatant or nefarious ways. A population of primarily white policy makers might not feel animus toward Blacks but instead might simply not understand their views as well. If a politician isn't Black and his friends and neighbors aren't Black, it may be hard to fully apprehend what Blacks want from their government.

Finally, it is also possible that the institutional framework of our democratic system is skewed against Blacks. Scholars claim that racial gerrymandering, at-large electoral districts, population imbalances in the Senate, felon disenfranchisement, voter identification laws, plurality voting, and any number of other institutional structures serve to diminish minority representation in the U.S.. We cannot adjudicate between all of these different explanations here, but we demonstrate below that inequities persist after some of these factors are taken into account (e.g., extreme partisanship, extreme views, and voter turnout) and we show that inequalities diminish under some circumstances.

Method and Data

We answer these questions using a novel but relatively straightforward research design. Unlike most existing studies, we gauge the congruence between *individual* level policy preferences and policy outcomes rather than *group* level policy preferences. Specifically, using the General Social Survey (GSS)⁷, we have compiled the spending preferences (increase, decrease, no change) for individual Americans on 11 core policy areas for the years 1972 to 2010: welfare, the military, education, health care, foreign aid, parks and recreation, law enforcement, solving the problems of big cities, improving and protecting the environment, highways and bridges, and space exploration.

We then match those individual preferences with actual federal government spending outcomes in each area in the subsequent year. Fortunately, the 11 policy areas in the GSS match up nicely with ‘functions’ defined in the federal budget, enabling us to observe whether the public’s preferences for spending on a given issue match up with actual government behavior.⁸ Combining individual preferences and governmental spending, we can observe whose policy preferences are enacted by government. If, for example, an individual favored a decline in federal welfare spending and the federal government significantly decreased welfare spending in the following year, that individual is a policy ‘winner’ on welfare policy that year.⁹

⁷ The GSS is a nationally representative survey administered in most years. The average sample size for our 28 surveys is 1,967.

⁸ The online appendix details the matching of GSS and official budget categories.

⁹ We recognize that total dollars represents only one dimension of policy. How money is spent and where money is spent may be just as important. Thus, our analysis represents an incomplete picture of policy responsiveness in the American context.

Focusing on individual rather than group preferences (which has been the typical approach) is not a panacea but it does have a critical advantage. By focusing on individual preferences we can simultaneously incorporate race, class, and a range of other individual demographic and political characteristics into our models. Given that race and class and many other factors that could be driving unequal responsiveness are all closely correlated, this kind of analysis enables us to see whether class, race, or some other factor is the primary driver of political inequality.

Our dependent variable, policy winning, is a measure of policy congruence. It is coded 1 if subsequent government spending matched the respondent's preference and 0 otherwise. In particular, if the respondent favored a spending increase and government increased spending in the next year, they are viewed as a policy winner. Those who wanted no change when government spending did not change and those who sought a decrease when spending decreased were likewise coded as winners. All others were coded as policy losers. We match individual spending preferences on a given issue in a given year with changes in government spending on that same issue in the following fiscal year. All spending data are taken from the government budget historical tables and are converted to real dollars. These 11 areas do not cover all issues of concern to the public, but they do address many of the most important spending decisions the government makes and collectively cover the majority of the federal budget.

One issue that we had to consider is how to define what constitutes an increase or decrease in spending. Is a 2% increase in spending the "same amount" of spending or an "increase"? There is no simple empirical cut-off that is theoretically satisfying so we tried a range of different cut-offs to ensure the robustness of our findings. The exact cut-off does not

effect our results. In our main analysis, we consider any change that is at least one standard deviation above (below) the average annual change a spending increase (decrease).

The main independent variables are fairly straightforward. Respondents self-identify their race. For most years, the GSS only coded for three racial groups- respondents are asked if they are white, Black, or “Other” race. After 2000, we are able to identify each respondent as white, Black, Hispanic, or Asian. Income is measured as family income (in constant dollars). Education reflects the amount of schooling completed. Other demographic measures include age (in years), gender, unemployment, marriage status (married or not), and religion (Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Athiest, or non-religious). All independent variables are standardized from 0 to 1 to more easily allow for comparison. Since we incorporate each respondent’s preferences on each of the 11 spending areas, we cluster errors by respondent. We also include fixed effects for each policy area.

Results

We begin simply, by presenting the percentage of cases in which individuals in various demographic categories were policy winners (see Table 1). This is the most basic indicator of responsiveness—did government do what the individual wanted. Looking across the entire table, we see that for no group does policy responsiveness exceed 50 percent. This may at first be somewhat surprising. But it is more understandable when one considers that there are three different possible spending preferences (increase, decrease, no change) and three different spending outcomes (increase, decrease, no change) so it is unlikely that the two will be perfectly aligned. Also, the fact that governments have limited funds while citizens in our surveys favor spending increases twice as often as spending decreases suggests that there will often be mismatches between preferences and spending.

At first blush demographic differences in policy representation do not appear all that large. There is some variation in who gets what they want from government, but government responds to all groups to some degree. Women “win” about as often as men (37.1% compared to 36.7%), and those over 65 win only slightly more often than those under 30 (37.8% compared to 37.2%). Differences across religious groups are slight as well. The biggest gap for religious groups, between the non-religious and Catholics, is just 1.6 points (37.6% for Catholics and 36.0% for non-religious).¹⁰

TABLE 1: DESCRIBING UNEQUAL RESPONSIVENESS

	Percent winning
Race	
White	37.6
Black	31.9
Hispanic ¹	37.0
Asian American ¹	40.9
Class	
Income – high	37.6
Income - middle	36.7
Income – low	36.1
Education – high	38.9
Education – low	35.8
Gender	
Male	36.7
Female	37.1
Religion	
Protestant	36.8
Catholic	37.6
Jewish	37.3
Non-Religious	36.0
Age	
Age – Over 65	37.8
Age – Under 30	37.2

¹Data on Hispanics and Asian Americans are limited to 2000 - 2010 and are thus not strictly comparable to other figures in the table.

¹⁰ The religion measures are broad. More nuanced measures may generate larger differences.

Even for class, the differences are statistically significant, but not all that large, a finding in keeping with some work on income and responsiveness (e.g., Ura and Ellis 2008; Bhatti and Erikson 2011; Wlezien and Soroka 2011). Income, the measure of class typically employed in these studies, shows only a small relationship to responsiveness. High income earners (those in the top third of the income distribution) won 37.6% of the time, compared to 36.1% for those in the lowest third. Moreover, if we look at more extreme categories like the top 10 percent of earners (37.9% winners) or even the top 1 percent (36.8% winners) and compare them to the bottom 10 percent (35.8% winners) or the bottom 1 percent (33.4% winners), slightly larger class differences do emerge but they are far from dramatic. Alternate analysis of other potential markers of class like being unemployed (35.4% winners) also don't reveal major differences in responsiveness. If, however, we think of class in terms of education, we observe slightly larger gaps in responsiveness. Those with a college education win more often than those with less than a high school degree (38.9% and 35.8%, respectively).

By far the largest differences between groups are in the race category. Blacks are the least advantaged, by a considerable margin, in the whole table. Blacks are only winners in 31.9% of cases, compared to 37.6% for whites. This 5.7 point difference is roughly four times larger than the 1.5 point difference between high and low income earners. Although the data are far more limited because the GSS only began to inquire about Hispanic ethnicity and Asian heritage in 2000, we can offer some preliminary conclusions about these two groups. Over this ten year period, Hispanics won in 37.0% of cases, just slightly below the figure for whites for the same period (38.1%). By contrast, Asian Americans won at higher rates than whites (40.9%) and might therefore be viewed as privileged in the political system.

These preliminary results are intriguing, but the principal advantage of our research design is that we can examine several different demographic characteristics simultaneously to determine what most drives policy representation. We do this by modeling the probability of being a policy winner on a set of demographic and political measures. Table 2 provides the basic results. Consistent with the findings Bartels and Gilens have published using different data, we see evidence of class bias. Higher levels of educational attainment and higher income both increase the odds of winning. This is true holding race constant. Table 2 provides more general evidence than we have seen in the past that class shapes policy representation even after accounting for race. The results also demonstrate that Blacks are significantly less likely to win than the comparison category of whites. This is true even when we control for income and education. Race shapes political inequality over and above the well-documented inequalities based on income. We also note that the indicator variable for “other races” is modestly positive, though not statistically significant. This category is likely comprised of mostly Hispanics and some Asian Americans, but is a tiny fraction of respondents for most years.¹¹

Figure 1 demonstrates the relative impact of race, class, and other factors, showing differences in groups’ probability of winning with other variables at mean or modal values. Here we see the uniquely powerful role of race in shaping political responsiveness. The model estimates that - all else equal - the probability of a white person winning is 6.1 points higher than the probability of a Black person winning. Class matters as well, but the gaps are somewhat

¹¹ Unfortunately, because the GSS only asks about Hispanic and Asian identity after 2000, it is difficult to delve more deeply into responsiveness to Hispanics and Asian Americans. At best, we can say that there are some signs that Hispanics may hold a less advantaged position while few clear inferences can be drawn about Asian Americans.

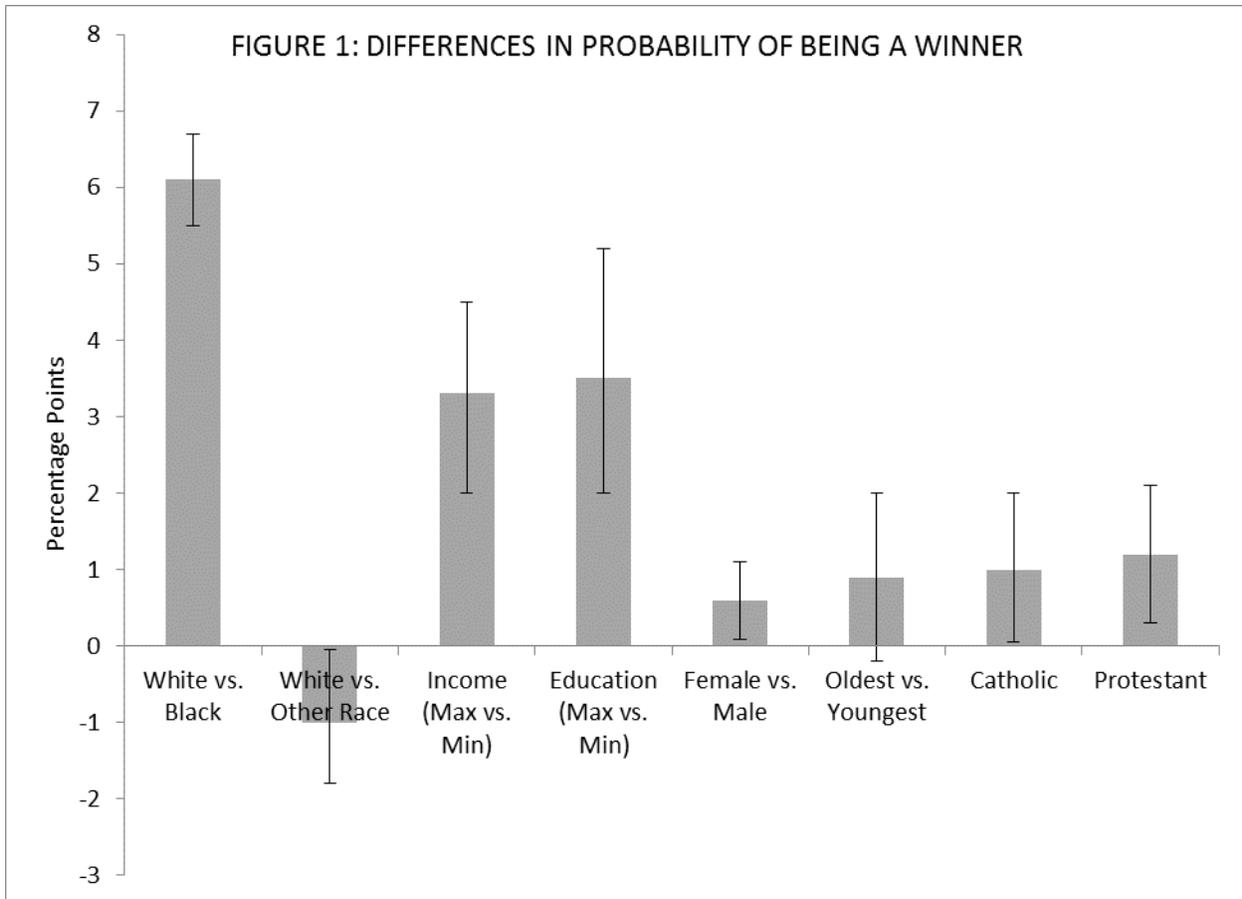
smaller. The comparable difference between the highest and lowest income earners is 3.3 points, and between the most and least educated is 3.5 points. Other group differences are much smaller.

TABLE 2: RACIAL DIFFERENCES IN GOVERNMENT RESPONSIVENESS

	Coefficient	SE
Black	-0.25	(0.01)***
Other Race	0.04	(0.02)**
Income	0.13	(0.03)***
Education	0.14	(0.03)***
Male	0.02	(0.01)**
Age	0.04	(0.02)*
Unemployed	-0.02	(0.02)
Married	-0.00	(0.01)
Catholic	0.04	(0.02)*
Jewish	-0.00	(0.03)
Protestant	0.05	(0.02)***
No Religion	-0.01	(0.03)
Constant	-0.26	(0.03)***
<i>N</i>	459,214	

* denotes $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$, Logistic Regression

To summarize our findings to this point, both race and class matter, though race has the largest single impact on who government responds to. The effect of race on government responsiveness is more than twice the effect of income. Only when the effects of education and income are combined does the effect of class begin to rival the impact of race. By these tests, the magnitude of race-based inequality on who wins exceeds or at a minimum rivals that of class-based inequality.



Note: Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals as estimated by CLARIFY.

Variation across Issues and Time

To further probe the contours of racial differences in government responsiveness, we examined variation across different policy issues as well across the different years of our data. We found that while Blacks lose consistently across all issues, outcomes by class are much more variable across policy areas. Table 3 reports the parameter estimates for race (Black) and class (income and education) for the entire sample (see Table 2) and then for each issue domain separately. Statistically significant effects are bolded ($p < .05$). Doing so reveals that Blacks are disadvantaged in all 11 issue domains. Regardless of what policy the government focuses on, Black opinions hold significantly less sway than white opinions. By contrast, lower income Americans were not significantly disadvantaged for more than half of the policy areas and, on

one policy – education spending – lower income Americans were significantly more influential than were wealthier Americans. Likewise, the impact of a respondent’s education on responsiveness was insignificant in one policy area and was actually negative in three others. Race was much more of an ever present barrier than class.

TABLE 3: EFFECT OF RACE, INCOME, AND EDUCATION BY ISSUE AREA

	Black	Income	Education
All	-.25	.10	.17
Foreign Aid	-.15	.16	.66
Aid to Cities	-.45	.13	.44
Crime	-.11	.23	.48
Education	-.39	-.19	-.80
Environment	-.20	.10	-.71
Welfare	-.17	-.06	.64
Health Care	-.14	-.12	.07
Transportation	-.21	.02	.60
Space	-.62	.44	.88
Defense	-.21	.15	-.63
Recreation	-.25	-.01	.25

Note: Cell entries are parameter estimates, and where bolded denote $p < .05$.

When we look at variation over time, the pattern of results is fairly similar with Blacks losing at a significantly higher rate than whites in almost all years and lower class Americans losing more in some years, winning more in others, and being insignificantly different from upper class Americans in most years. Race matters more consistently than class.

Understanding the Racial Imbalance

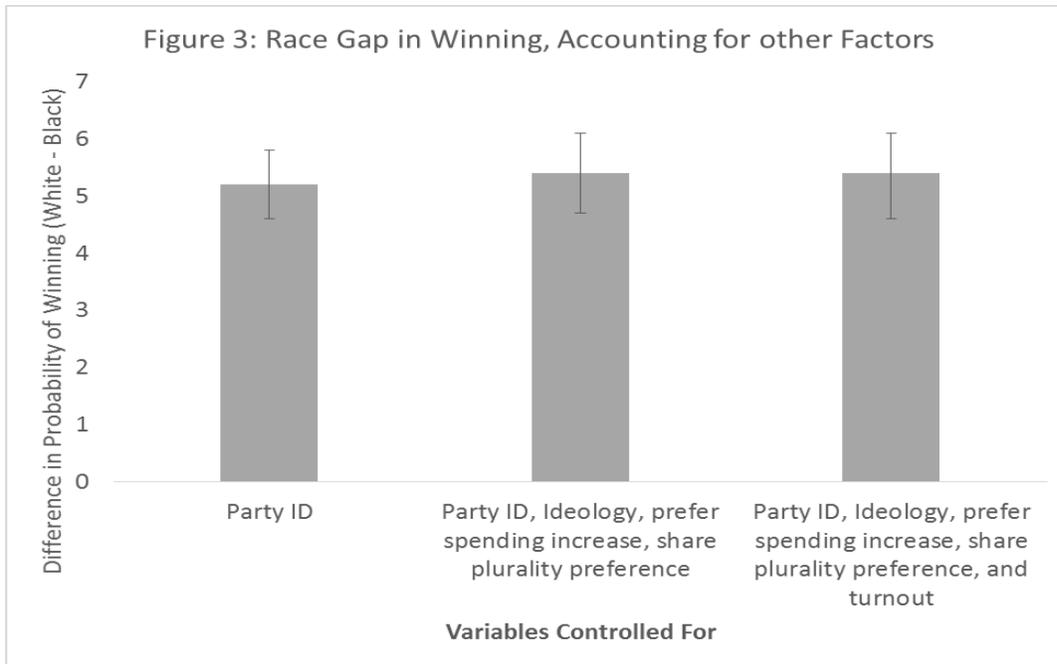
The results to this point suggest that Black preferences matter less than others when it comes to spending policy. But why? Are these differences a function of race and explicit racial discrimination or are they related to some other, unique aspect of Black politics and preferences? Recall that we outlined six potential explanations for the racial imbalance in responsiveness: 1) strong Democratic ties, 2) extreme preferences, 3) low political participation, 4) discrimination,

5) distance to leaders, and 6) structural barriers. We test three of those here to see if they can explain some of the racial inequality in responsiveness.

The two major political parties greatly structure the nation's politics and Blacks stand, relatively speaking, extraordinarily close to the Democratic Party. No other demographic group we examine is as closely tied to one party. If Frymer (1999) is right and Blacks' lack of efficacy in the policy arena is due to their 'capture' by the Democratic Party, we should see racial imbalances decline after we control for individual partisan ties.

We test this possibility by adding each respondent's party identification (the standard 7 point party identification scale) to the basic model. The regression results, which are displayed in the online appendix, suggest that partisanship is critical in understanding responsiveness but not in explaining the disadvantages faced by African Americans. We find that Democrats win less often than do Republicans. There is, in fact, a fairly severe partisan tilt to policy over this 40 year period that to our knowledge has not received prior attention. All else equal, strong Democrats are 6.3 percentage points less likely to win than strong Republicans. Whether this is due to the frequent presence of Republican Presidents, the lower participation rates of Democrats, or some other factor is a question we address below.

But the other part of the alternative explanation that Blacks lose more often simply because they are Democrats is not supported. The important point for our purposes is that the parameter estimates for race do not change much in the face of partisan controls. Working through the predicted effects in Figure 3, the Black policy disadvantage only declines from 6.1 to 5.2 percentage points when we add party identification to the model.



Note: Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals as estimated by CLARIFY.

Another possibility is that Blacks are disadvantaged simply because they hold relatively extreme spending preferences. Any group that regularly expresses preferences that clash with the majority may be likely to lose out. Interestingly, although African Americans do identify as more liberal than many other groups and do favor spending increases more than whites, they are actually marginally more likely than whites to support the nation’s plurality spending position in each issue/year. Nevertheless, we test the impact of extreme views by examining the predicted racial imbalance before and after controlling for the liberal-conservative ideological position of each respondent, whether they favor a spending increase or decrease on that particular policy area, and most importantly, whether or not they favor the most popular spending position on that issue in that year. The predicted effects displayed in Figure 2 suggest that extreme preferences do not offer a compelling explanation for racial inequities in responsiveness. After controlling for spending preferences, ideology, and support for the plurality, Blacks are still predicted to lose 5.4 percentage points more often than whites.

Finally, the underrepresentation of Blacks may be due to lower levels of participation. If Blacks participate less, their policy views may exert less pressure on politicians, and they may have less influence as a result. We begin to test this alternative by adding a measure of whether or not each respondent voted in the most recent national election. Unfortunately, accounting for turnout does not eliminate or even reduce the racial gap. After controlling for voter participation, Blacks are still predicted to lose on policy 5.4 percent more than whites.^{30.8}

Of course, adding one variable that measures turnout in one recent election contest does not represent a complete assessment of the role of political participation. To rule out participation as a factor driving unequal responsiveness, we would need to incorporate much more data on financial contributions, campaign activity, political protests, and other forms of political participation which are unfortunately not available in the GSS.

All of this leaves us without a clear explanation for racial inequities in policy responsiveness. Blacks' disadvantage on spending doesn't appear to be caused by class, a strong affinity for the Democratic Party, extreme spending preferences, or voter turnout rates.

The disadvantage Blacks face in the American policy world seems much deeper. At least three possible explanations remain. What we see here could be a function of pure racial discrimination. Given that many whites hold negative stereotypes of Blacks and given that the political leadership of this nation is overwhelmingly white, this is not a far-fetched alternative. The disadvantages Blacks face in the policy world could also be due to a lack of clear information about Blacks' preferences. Because of social segregation and other aspects of the racial divide in society, white policy makers might not interact with Black constituents the way they do with others. As a result, they may have less clear information about Blacks' preferences. Finally, we might see racial disparities because the institutional framework underpinning our

democratic system is skewed against Blacks. Anything from racial gerrymandering, to voter identification laws, to a majoritarian winner-take-all system could negatively impact the ability of African Americans to translate their preferences into policies. Determining which of these factors plays a larger role will require much more study.

Alternate Tests of Blacks' Disadvantage

To help ensure that our overall story is accurate, we undertook a series of robustness checks. First, we altered in several ways how we measure congruence between an individual's policy preference and government policy outcomes. Since we care about whether individual Americans get what they want, we have been using a dependent variable that is scored 1 for a match between a respondent's preferences and subsequent government spending and 0 for all other possibilities. But we should also care about how far the outcome is from an individual's first preference. Thus, we employed a more nuanced dependent variable in which respondents who get precisely what they want are scored 2, those for whom actual government spending is one category away from their preference (e.g., someone who wants government to increase spending, but spending stayed the same or someone who wanted spending to stay the same, but it increased) are scored 1, and those cases where government does the opposite of what the respondent wants (e.g., someone who wants spending to decrease, but it increased) are scored 0. The results of this analysis are displayed in an online appendix.

The conclusions are essentially identical. Blacks are once again the most disadvantaged demographic group. When we work out the numbers, Blacks are 4.6 percent less likely than whites to have government enact their favored policy change and are 1.6 percent more likely than whites to see government do exactly the opposite of what they want. Class still matters here

but not as much. Wealthier Americans are 1.8 percent more likely than poorer Americans to get their preferred policy change and 0.2 percent less likely to get the opposite outcome.

Varying our definition of what constitutes a spending increase/decrease relative to the status quo leads to very similar results.

Deeper Concerns

These alternate tests all highlight the robustness of our findings and they help to increase confidence in our conclusions but there may be some deeper concerns that essentially question core elements of our analysis. We raise and evaluate these deeper concerns below.

Important Spending Areas

One concern is that some spending decisions may be more important than others. Blacks may not care at all about spending on space exploration but might be deeply troubled by losing on welfare or education. We sought to test this by focusing only on the five spending areas that tend to be most often associated with Black interests (welfare, health, education, crime, aid to cities).¹² The results suggest that a real racial imbalance persists even in those five areas (see appendix). All else equal, Blacks are 4.9 percent more likely to lose across the five policy areas that we might think are most important to the group.

Are Spending Opinions Meaningful?

Other critics might worry that the public does not hold meaningful opinions on these spending measures. Individual Americans may not have thought much about these spending questions, and may not know what government is doing; as such they may not be able to express coherent or meaningful views in surveys. We readily admit that survey opinions often represent

¹² Similarly, we re-tested the data focusing on the three policy areas where Black and white opinion most differed (welfare, crime, and education). Not surprisingly, the racial imbalance in responsiveness was slightly more pronounced on these policy areas.

ill-informed, top-of-the-head responses (Converse 1964, Zaller and Feldman 1992). All survey analysis should, therefore, be done with a real dose of caution.

Nevertheless, if we find significant patterns despite this ‘noise’, we can be particularly confident of those relationships. Moreover, it is clear that opinions on these particular spending issues are often quite reasoned (Wlezien 1995). As Wlezien’s (1995) thermostatic model has demonstrated, shifts in public opinion on these spending questions illustrate not only that the public knows the rough contours of government spending changes but also that the public reacts to real spending shifts in a rational and coherent fashion. It is also worth noting that elected officials treat these opinions as something worth following (Canes-Wrone and Shotts 2004)

Another way to demonstrate the utility of spending preferences is simply to show that patterns within and across groups in our own data set are predictable and coherent. A brief examination of the racial patterns suggests exactly that. A clear majority of Blacks in our surveys favor spending increases on education (79%), health care (79%), welfare (61%) and cities (58%) while the clear majority of Blacks opposes increases on space (96%), defense (81%), and foreign aid (89%). Compared to whites, Blacks are much more likely to favor spending increase on cities (58% vs 38%) and education (79% vs 65%), and much less likely to favor cuts on welfare (16% vs 38%). All of this fits with our existing knowledge of the politics of Black and white Americans (Kinder and Sanders 1994; Kinder and Winter 2001).

Lastly on this point, if we are concerned that a lack of understanding is behind our results, we can begin to get around this concern by including only the well-educated or the politically involved in our analysis. When we do this we get the same overall pattern of results and find, if anything, that the effects of race are slightly more pronounced.

Is minority status the explanation?

Still others might accept our findings but argue that they are unsurprising or even unimportant because Blacks represent a small minority of the population and as such should have less say than the majority white population. Put simply, the median voter is white and politicians should represent the median voter, both strategically and normatively. We don't dispute this claim but we do engage it in two ways.

The first is logically. The problem with this critique, in our opinion, is that it does not explain why Blacks are the *only* group singled out this way in American democracy. In our data there are many other groups that represent a small fraction of the population. Other racial and ethnic minorities (namely Asians), the poor, the young, the unemployed, Jews, and Catholics all get roughly equal influence or in some cases more influence than their numbers would suggest. Moreover, the smallest minority we examine, the wealthiest one percent, do exceptionally well. Other minorities do not lose disproportionately. Only Black voices are differentially ignored.

Another way to engage this small minority argument is to see if Blacks who have the same kinds of preferences as whites garner less policy influence. We do that in the following manner. Instead of focusing directly on policy congruence, we look instead at policy outcomes – does spending on that policy go up, stay flat, or go down? Then we incorporate each individual's spending preferences. Do they want spending to go up, stay flat, or go down? Finally, we interact those spending preferences with different demographic characteristics. In essence, we ask if different types of individuals who hold the similar preferences are more or less likely to influence policy. This different method leads to the same conclusion. The regression tables and predicted probabilities, which are included in the online appendix, show that policy outcomes were responsive to differences in white preferences and largely unresponsive to differences in Black preferences. A shift from favoring a spending increase to favoring a

spending decrease for a white respondent was associated with a 4 percent increase in the probability of getting a spending decrease. The same shift for a Black respondent made no noticeable difference in the probably of getting a spending decrease. Once again, we found no biases across income and only marginal differences across education. Even when Americans want the same things, it is Black voices that are most muted.

Improving Responsiveness to Racial and Ethnic Minorities

How might we reduce or eliminate differential responsiveness? Is there anything that leads to more representation for Blacks, the most disadvantaged group in the study? One potentially important variable affecting racial differences in responsiveness is partisan control of the levers of power. Blacks voted overwhelmingly for Democrats over the time period we analyze. We might expect Democratic presidents and Democratic Congresses to foster that support and to be at least somewhat more responsive to Blacks. We directly assess the impact of partisan control in the first model in Table 4 by adding a measure that is coded 1 for years in which the Democrats held the White House (0 otherwise), a second measure that is coded 1 for years in which the Democrats controlled Congress (e.g. had majorities in both chambers), and interactions for each partisan control variable and race.¹³ We use the main dependent variable employed in Table 2 (coded 0 or 1), though the results are robust across different versions of the dependent variable.

Table 4 shows the enormous difference political party makes. The two significant positive interactions between Black and Democratic control provide clear evidence that racial

¹³ Since it takes some time to enact policy, Presidential party control and Congressional party control are lagged one year.

inequalities in responsiveness decline dramatically under Democrats. Having a Democratic president reduces the 6.1 point Black-white gap in policy success by 3.8 percentage points. Likewise, having a Democratic Congress cuts the gap by 6.7 percentage points. In other words, under Democrats all of the racial imbalance in policy responsiveness fades away. It very much matters which party is in power for racial parity in responsiveness.¹⁴

TABLE 4: RACIAL DIFFERENCES IN RESPONSIVENESS, INTERACTIVE MODEL

<i>Race</i>		
Black	-0.37 (0.02)***	-0.34 (0.09)***
Other Race	0.04 (0.02)*	0.03 (0.02)
<i>Class</i>		
Income	0.07 (0.03)***	0.07 (0.03)**
Education	0.20 (0.03)***	0.13 (0.03)***
<i>Misc.</i>		
Male	0.05 (0.01)***	0.06 (0.01)***
Age	0.01 (0.02)	0.03 (0.02)
Unemployed	-0.02 (0.02)	-0.01 (0.02)
Married	-0.00 (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)
<i>Religion</i>		
Catholic	0.06 (0.02)***	0.05 (0.02)**
Jewish	0.04 (0.04)	0.02 (0.04)
Protestant	0.05 (0.02)**	0.04 (0.02)**
No Religion	-0.01 (0.03)	-0.02 (0.03)
<i>Political Orientation</i>		
Ideology	-0.01 (0.02)	0.01 (0.02)
Party ID	-0.11 (0.01)***	-0.08 (0.01)***
Majority	0.06 (0.00)***	-0.00 (0.00)
Plurality	-0.62 (0.01)***	-0.68 (0.01)***
<i>Institutional Factors</i>		
Dem President	0.04 (0.01)***	-0.14 (0.01)***
Dem Congress	0.11 (0.01)***	0.11 (0.01)***
Black* Dem President	0.17 (0.03)***	0.11 (0.03)***
Black* Dem Congress	0.29 (0.03)***	0.28 (0.03)***
Year		-0.00 (0.00)
<i>Economic Factors</i>		
GDP		0.02 (0.00)***
Unemployment		-0.09 (0.00)***
Inflation		-0.01 (0.00)***
Black*Unemployment		-0.01 (0.01)
Black*Inflation		0.00 (0.01)

¹⁴ Alternate models revealed that Democratic leaders were significantly more responsive than Republican leaders to the lower class, Democratic identifiers, and liberals.

Black*GDP		0.03 (0.01)***
Constant	0.20 (0.04)***	2.87 (2.38)
N	381,606	336,738

* p<0.1; ** p<0.05; *** p<0.01 Logistic regressions.

The economy may also affect racial differences in responsiveness. Given Blacks’ preferences for more spending noted above, racial imbalances in responsiveness might decline when the economy is growing and governments have the resources to increase spending. That is exactly what we find in the second model of Table 4. Here we interact race with three economic indicators – real per capita GDP growth, inflation, and the unemployment rate.¹⁵ The results show that economic growth tends to boost responsiveness to everyone, but this is particularly true for Blacks. The positive interaction between Black and GDP growth means responsiveness to Blacks grows significantly when GDP is growing. If we could manufacture more growth, we might be able to eliminate some of the inequities in American politics.

Discussion

On one level the results that we have presented here reaffirm existing studies of inequality in responsiveness. Using a new method that focuses on individuals and incorporates a range of demographic and political groups, we find that there are real imbalances in the policy world. Government responds much more to advantaged interests than it does to disadvantaged preferences. Both race and class shape policy responsiveness.

But on other levels we diverge. The most consistent finding in prior research and the one most echoed in the media is that income is the core determinant of policy responsiveness. By incorporating race and class and many other demographic and political attributes in our models, we find that race, perhaps even more than class, shapes who wins and who loses in the policy

¹⁵ All economic figures from the US Census.

arena. Blacks lose by a larger margin than any demographic group, they lose more regularly over time, and they lose more consistently across issues. Moreover, this disadvantage can't be explained by Blacks' partisanship, ideological orientation, preferences for greater spending or preferences that oppose the plurality. Distressingly, racial inequality seems to be driven by a deeper factor. Whether it is racial discrimination on the part of political leaders, limited understanding of Black preferences, or institutional structures like voter ID laws that favor whites is yet to be determined.

On a more positive note, there may be things we can do about the failure of American democracy to more regularly incorporate the views of African Americans. Our analysis reveals that the gap between Blacks and whites does diminish in two key contexts. First, having a Democratic President or a Democratic Congress greatly reduces racial bias. When Democrats control the levers of power, racial gaps are eliminated. Likewise economic growth reduces inequality. When the economy is expanding and governments have more money to spend, they are better able to follow the preferences of Blacks. American democracy is uneven and Blacks lose more than any others, but there are times and places when that imbalance begins to recede. It certainly won't be easy to generate more economic growth or greater Democratic control but it is, nevertheless, critical to know in which direction to head should we want to achieve greater racial equality in government responsiveness.

For all we have done, there is still much more to do. In particular, we have only begun to examine the list of potential solutions to the problem of unequal responsiveness. We have taken steps toward ruling out greater voter turnout as a means of alleviating political inequality. But it is unclear what role, if any, other forms of political participation play. With more money being spent on campaigns and with fewer controls on who spends it, donations are an area of special

concern – especially given that whites donate more than non-whites (Verba et al 1995). Political protests might offer more hope. Protests are not only a form of participation that minorities engage in more regularly than whites but also one that has been shown to have real influence on policy (Verba et al 1995; Gillion 2013).

Other solutions to political inequality – or at least explanations for it – might be found by focusing on electoral institutions. Redistricting is a factor often associated with minority interests in the political sphere (Cameron et al 1996). Could inequality in policy responsiveness also be explained by racial gerrymandering and ultimately alleviated by drawing districts in a more favorable manner? Likewise, what role does descriptive representation play in all of this? We know that minorities are underrepresented in office and that descriptive representation can lead to substantive representation. Could the solution to unequal responsiveness lie in more Black elected officials or more Black representation on key Congressional committees? More radically, could plurality elections be in part responsible for the patterns we see here? Would minorities benefit from a system of proportional representation where there is less of incentive to ignore ‘extreme’ groups like Blacks (Frymer 1999)? Again, there is much work to be done.

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