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RICHARD SCOTT COOLEY

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To My Family

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ABSTRACT

Is the U.S. political system necessarily “rigged” in favor of the affluent? There is no shortage of people, both inside and outside of political science, who believe so. Using an underexploited resource, party platforms, I contend that the Democratic Party generally offers better representation than Republicans to the non-affluent and groups such as trade unions—but not in issue domains outside of economics. Meanwhile, the Republican Party generally best represents the affluent—but not for areas such as social issues, where the party’s official stances are more in line with the preferences of lower-income Americans. I therefore argue for a more-nuanced view of inequality and representation, one that focuses not just on structural factors but on issue types and the contributions of each major political party.

The first essay focuses on U.S. national party platforms, the importance of which many professional politicians and political scientists have disputed. Politicians regularly claim that American party platforms are irrelevant documents that virtually no one reads, while some political scientists contend that they may be nothing more than “cheap talk.” Using data for more than 2,500 proposed federal policy changes and the positions of party platforms on those proposed changes, I find that both major parties’ platforms are positively associated with the actions they will take in the future. As a result, I argue that party platforms are an underused data source for studying both party coalition-building and topics such as inequality and representation. Based on interviews with officials involved in the platform-drafting process, I further argue that platforms represent a key means of solving coordination problems among key interest-group stakeholders.

The second contribution focuses on inequality and representation during the Obama Administration. Using a new dataset of public opinion data and federal policy outcomes during the Obama Administration, I find that federal policy changes during the Obama years more closely

reflect the preferences of lower- and middle-income Americans, rather than the preferred policies of the affluent. I find the association between lower-income Americans' preferences and policy outcomes to be strongest for domestic economic issues, which account for about 70 percent of the issues in the dataset. These findings complicate the narrative that structural factors in the American political system necessarily lead to economic policy outcomes that favor the affluent.

The third part of the dissertation focuses on the extent to which the two major American political parties contribute to unequal representation. Using an underutilized data source, party platforms, I find that the Democratic platforms tend to be consistent with the preferences of lower-income Americans and mass economic organizations such as trade unions, whereas Republican platforms generally favor the preferences of the affluent, and business and socially conservative interest groups. I further find that, even conditioned on public opinion and interest group preferences, party platforms have a statistically significant association with federal policy outcomes. These results suggest that increasing Democratic control of the federal government should be associated with policy federal outputs that favor the non-affluent and mass economic organizations. However, the strength of this relationship differs by issue domain. For economic issues, the non-affluent may receive better representation than previous research suggests: over a more than thirty-year period, I find that lower-income Americans achieve their desired policy outcomes on economic issues just as frequently as the well-to-do. However, the preferences of the affluent are strongly associated with policymaking for foreign policy and social issues, with the latter area showing that Democratic platform positions are more closely associated with the preferences of the affluent than of lower- and middle-class Americans.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Is the American political system rigged against those with moderate or modest means? And, if it is rigged, who is to blame?

These are undoubtedly important questions for political scientists to answer, but no scholarly consensus has emerged. Some scholars describe the United States as a country in which the affluent generally get their way, or at least see their policies enacted far more frequently than the non-affluent. Indeed, one prominent scholar finds that when the federal policy preferences of the well-to-do diverge from those of the poor and the middle class, there is no evidence that the latter two groups exercise any independent influence over policy outcomes (Gilens 2005, 2012). In addition to federal policy outputs that favor the affluent, some scholars (e.g., Bartels 2005, 2008) have found that individual legislators of both major political parties also seem especially responsive to the rich, making it difficult for the poor and middle class to achieve dyadic representation. Still other scholars contend that differences in representation by income level result from partisan differences, with the Republicans favoring the highest income-earners and Democrats advocating for policies on behalf of the non-affluent (Lax, et al. 2019).

If it is true that those with relatively low incomes are essentially shut out of influence over federal policymaking, that raises troubling questions about the nature and quality of U.S. democracy. Scholarly conceptions of democracy do not require absolute equality of influence over policy outputs, but they do demand that groups not be shut out completely from policymaking. Measuring how much influence over policymaking is a fraught exercise. Some scholars have argued that groups should be represented in proportion to their overall percentage of the population. Others contend that groups might be entitled to greater influence over issues that are especially important to them, as is the case with minorities and civil rights (Griffin and Newman

2010). Still others argue that “democracy implies a certain degree of political equality—if not full equality of political representation among citizens, at least some limit to political inequality” (Verba and Orren 1985). While scholars might disagree on exactly what constitutes an acceptable level of inequality, they all agree that any fair conception of democratic equality does not all for major groups in society to be shut out of policymaking all the time.

This dissertation seeks to answer at least some questions about the pervasiveness and nature of American democratic inequality, and to explore the role of the two major political parties in it. Even an introductory exploration of such a large topic requires significant methodological choices. Do we care most about substantive representation, which seeks to measure the influence of the citizenry over governmental policy outputs? Or do we, like many scholars, prefer to study conceptions of dyadic representation, which seek to measure the responsiveness of individual representatives to the preferences of their constituents? Are we more interested in representation at the state or the national level? When we study the influence of parties on representation, do we care primarily about only what policies are adopted when they are in charge? Do we focus, as some scholars do (e.g., Grossman, et al. 2020) on the statements of party leaders? Do we care most about the votes of each party’s Members of Congress? Do we rely on party platforms, which purport to represent the official party stance on important issues of the day? Or some combination of the above?

For the purposes of measuring representation, this dissertation focuses in large part on substantive federal policy outputs. To be sure, dyadic approaches have their advantages, including, in some cases, the benefits of additional data per issue studied. For a vote on a tax cut in the Senate, for example, dyadic-focused scholars have the statistical leverage provided by the individual votes of 100 senators. By contrast, scholars focused on substantive representation can really evaluate

whether the policy was adopted—an N of 1 instead of 100. Nevertheless, a substantive approach has its advantages as well. Most important, constituents undoubtedly care how their individual senator votes on a topic of interest, but they likely care much more about whether their preferred policy was adopted. Therefore, this dissertation privileges substantive over dyadic representation.

To measure each political party’s contribution to representation, this dissertation relies on both official platform positions and policy outputs. As with the overall discussion of representation, there are legitimate reasons to pursue other approaches. For example, some scholars have obtained tremendous analytical leverage by analyzing the statements of key party leaders and relating them to public and interest group preferences (e.g., Grossman, et al. 2020). Such statements by public figures are easily sourced; moreover, party leaders can address topics that arise in between party conventions, when party platforms are approved. But platforms have their merits as well. For one, they provide the official positions of the parties, developed after consultation with key party constituencies (Victor and Reinhardt 2018). They therefore may be more meaningful than a comment from a party leader. For another, an analysis of the platform process lends insight into which key interest groups have input into the parties’ decision-making process—which itself has implications for who gets represented. This dissertation therefore uses public polling data and interest groups’ publicly announced positions, along with the parties’ platform positions, to evaluate whose interests are represented by which party.

Of course, party platforms would mean less for the study of representation equality if they were, as some scholars have alleged, perhaps nothing more than “cheap talk” (Noel 2010). As a result, this dissertation first establishes whether party platforms are reliable guides to actions the parties will take in the future. To do so, it evaluates the parties’ official positions, if any, on more

than 2,500 proposed federal policy changes included in a dataset of public opinion polls ranging from 1980 to 2012¹, and then determines whether those pledges were translated into policy.

This dissertation also extends previous research focusing on public opinion and substantive representation. To do so, I added polling questions about federal policy initiatives for the years 2008 to 2012, along with the associated subsequent policy change, if any. To study differential responsiveness by income level, in keeping with previous research I used the raw polling data to estimate preferences for policy changes among lower-, middle-, and upper-income Americans, and then used a variety of sources to determine whether those policy changes were enacted.

In this dissertation, I also determine whose interests are associated with platform positions for each of the major parties. More specifically, I examine what type of individual 's preferences (poor, middle class, or affluent) are most closely associated with the stances of each party. I repeat this analysis for three substantive areas: economic issues, social issues, and foreign policy/international issues. I also conduct this analysis for three types of key interest groups representing businesses, social conservatives, and mass economic groups such as trade unions.

This dissertation proceeds as follows:

In Chapter 2, following this introductory chapter, I present evidence about party platforms and subsequent policy enactments. I find that parties do follow through on platform commitments. That is, they tend to seek policy outcomes that are in alignment with their platform promises. Moreover, I present qualitative and quantitative evidence that is consistent with the notion that the

¹ The dataset covers all 32 years, with the exceptions of 2003, 2004, and 2007. The questions for 1981 to 2002, and 2005 to 2006, come from the influential dataset prepared by Martin Gilens.

parties use the platform-drafting process as a coordination mechanism for key party constituencies, and to make credible commitments to interest groups and voters.

In Chapter 3, I present new public opinion and policy outcome evidence for the Obama Administration. These findings suggest that, during the Obama years, the preferences of poor and middle-class Americans were reflected in policymaking to a greater extent than were the public policy priorities of the affluent. These findings differ from previous research on substantive representation, which found that the preferences of the affluent trump those of the poor and middle class, regardless of which party was in power. However, I find that improved representation of lower- and moderate-income Americans only occurred for economic issues, not for foreign policy and social matters.

In Chapter 4, I present findings showing whose interests get represented in party platforms. In general, I find that the Republican platform pledges are positively associated with the preferences of business groups, social conservative organizations, and the affluent. By contrast, Democratic platform positions favor lower-income citizens and mass economic organizations. However, these relationships do not hold for all issue areas. Republicans' stances on social issues are more closely tied to the preferences of lower-income Americans, while Democratic platform planks on social issues like abortion relate more closely to public opinion among the affluent. In terms of policy outcomes, overall I find that they favor higher-income Americans, but in the domain of economic issues, over the long term the policy output data suggest that lower-income Americans are represented just as well as the well-off.

In Chapter 5, I argue these findings suggest that the American political system is not hopelessly biased against lower- and middle-income citizens. Indeed, in the economic arena, the evidence suggests that, over the long term, they are represented just as well as the affluent.

Moreover, with the notable exception of social issues, the non-affluent can receive representation from one of the two major political parties, the Democrats.

Chapter 2: The Overlooked Importance of Party Platforms

“Have you ever met anybody who has read the party platform? I’ve not ever met anybody.”

Former Speaker of the House, John Boehner, 2012

“I’m not bound by the platform. I probably agree with most everything in it, but I haven’t read it.”

Republican presidential nominee Bob Dole, 1996

“...party platforms are fatuities; they persuade no one, deceive no one, and enlighten no one.”

E.E. Schattschneider, 1946

To paraphrase the late comedian Rodney Dangerfield, US national party platforms get little respect. Political scientists regularly dismiss the importance and relevance of American party platforms. Professional politicians regularly claim that they do not read them. And they seem to attract little attention from the mass public. If politicians and political scientists deny its importance, and hardly anyone reads it, how important can the party platform be?

And yet, for such an allegedly unimportant document, the parties spend a great deal of time drafting it, including feedback not only from party insiders but from interest groups that represent key parts of each party’s coalition. For example, the 2004 Democratic platform drafting process took six months, included input from more than 100 party officials, and prompted 193 organizations to provide feedback on it. (Reinhardt and Victor 2018) Similarly, the 2016 Republican platform included contributions from 112 state and territory party officials, and feedback from scores of interest group representatives. (Republican Platform Committee 2016) One interest group representative who worked over decades to influence the Republican platform,

Phyllis Schlafly, called the platform “the flag soldiers carry into battle” and “the standard to which public officials may be held accountable.” (Gantner 2020)

The argument in this paper is that the conventional narrative about party platforms is wrong: Parties spend so much time and effort drafting platforms because they reflect real compromises between, and commitments to, key interest groups that make up the party coalitions. In short, parties tend to deliver on their platform commitments. This is not simply a matter of parties making, and delivering upon, policy commitments that are popular with the public, in which case public opinion, rather than platform commitments, would drive policy outcomes. I find that, even after accounting for public opinion, party platforms predict which policies will ultimately be enacted. As such, party platforms convey important information about the interest group membership of party coalitions, and platform positions provide data for studying important phenomena in American politics. The evidence that parties follow through on platform commitments is consistent with the idea that platform positions represent credible commitments by the party to interest groups that are key parts of its coalition.

Related Literature

This paper touches on two relevant bodies of literature, that which relates to the importance (or lack thereof) of US party platforms and a larger body of literature relating to political parties. Few, if any, scholars have drawn explicit links between the two literatures, likely because party scholars tend to consider platforms relatively unimportant.

Although many political scientists have incorporated platforms in their research, (see, e.g., Gerring 1998; Schickler 2015; Carmines and Stimson 1989; Mayhew 2005) most scholars appear to be skeptical of their importance. As noted above, Schattschneider (1948) wrote that “party platforms are fatuities; they persuade no one, deceive no one, and enlighten no one.” Truman

(1951) argued that the platform “is generally regarded as a document that says little, binds no one, and is forgotten by politicians as quickly as possible after it is adopted.” Ostrogorski (1964) called the platform “the biggest farce” promulgated by political parties, one that has “little significance and authority for Congress” and does not bind the party. Key (1964) claimed that party platforms “are not blueprints for action.” Rozell, Wilcox, and Madland (2006) contended that platforms “often embody nothing more than the momentary sentiments of a majority of party activists.” Although he occasionally referred to party platforms, Karol (2009) also argued that party platforms are written too infrequently—and too often avoid taking stands on unpopular issues—for them to be a primary source of information for a study of party position-taking and change. According to Noel (2010), party platforms must be read with caution because they may amount to “little more than cheap talk, are not binding on any elected official, and candidates routinely distance themselves from them.”

This skepticism about party platforms’ importance is surprising, given that much of the empirical research on platforms—admittedly limited in many respects—suggests that parties attempt to follow through on platform commitments. Budge, et al. (2001) score party platforms in 25 countries, using a high-level coding strategy that allows them to compare policy positions across 57 general issue areas (e.g. support for peace, social harmony, or free enterprise), finding that parties, including in the United States, generally follow through on general platform commitments. Admittedly, their analysis does not detail whether parties deliver on more-granular promises. Schickler (2016) and Schickler, et al. (2010) use state political platforms to show how racial issues bubbled up at the state level, long before the national parties took distinct positions on civil rights, but this research focuses on one issue area—civil rights—and deals primarily with state—not national—platforms. It is therefore unclear how generalizable these results are to other

issue areas or to national platforms. Gerring (1998) uses national party platforms as one of many sources to show how parties' ideological positions changed over time, but he contends that, although platforms tend to be consistent with other types of campaign statements, they "often turn out to be a bland and unrevealing source." Moreover, although Gerring offers anecdotal evidence of parties delivering on platform commitments, his influential research does not systematically demonstrate that they do so. Similarly, Jones, et al. (2016) use national party platforms to show that issue topics historical surfaced on party platforms prior to getting on the congressional agenda, but their focus is on agenda setting, not on whether parties enacted policies consistent with their platform planks.

To be sure, there is a considerable, often outdated body of research showing that parties do systematically follow through on platform commitments. In an analysis of party platforms between 1944 and 1976, and subsequent federal policy outcomes, Pomper found that parties fulfilled their platform pledges more than 60% of the time. In a study of public opinion, platforms, and federal policy outcomes, Monroe (1983) found that parties were more likely to enact a specific policy if they had committed to it in their party platform. That is, conditioned on the level of public support for a policy, Monroe found that inclusion of a similar policy provision in a party platform had a statistically significant, independent effect on whether federal policymakers implemented the initiative. Similarly, in a multi-country study Budge and Hofferbert (1990) found that US party platforms predicted subsequent levels of federal spending. If one US political party's platform placed an emphasis on higher defense spending, for example, the party tended to deliver on that commitment. Indeed, Budge and Hofferbert found that US party platforms better predicted subsequent spending levels than platforms in some parliamentary democracies, where party discipline is generally considered to be higher than it is in the United States.

Notwithstanding the seeming importance of national platform positions, however, the major strands of the literature on American political parties largely ignore them. For example, Schwartz (1989) and Aldrich (2011) both present parties as “long coalitions” in which legislators form parties to either deliver benefits to their home districts (Schwartz) or to benefit the legislators themselves (Aldrich). Schwartz’s account is a hypothetical example of why legislators might form a “minimum winning coalition” to deliver benefits to their constituents, whereas Aldrich offers more of a legislator-centered account. But neither identifies party platforms as an important mechanism in cementing these long coalitions.

Nor do proponents of the UCLA School of political parties--which favors a broad-ranging conception of parties that focuses on activists and interest groups—allow for a meaningful role for platforms in party formation and maintenance. The omission of platform positions from UCLA School research is particularly surprising given its focus on party constituents who are not elected officials. For example, Bawn, et al. (2006) argue that interest groups and activists form coalitions to advance their interests, but their research does not appear to contemplate that platforms might help bind together these often-disparate groups. Cohen, et al. (2008) contend that parties take positions not by negotiating them as part of a platform-drafting process, but as a result of the influence of interest groups and others over the nominating process. That is, they contend that interest groups affect a party’s issue positions by ensuring that candidates who share their views capture party nominations. Indeed, in their highly influential book The Party Decides, Cohen, et al. mention the word “platform” only seven times, never claiming that platform negotiations are an important part of party-coalition-building or that they are a source of party position change.

The argument here is that national party platforms are more meaningful than scholars have previously believed, and that they serve as credible commitments of key party members

(legislators and interest groups) to each other. It is inadequate—and is likely tautological—to say that a written party platform is itself evidence of a credible commitment. Rather, I suggest that we might have higher confidence that credible commitments have occurred in platform drafting if two conditions are met: that the platform process includes input from key party constituencies, and that parties tend to follow through on platform commitments. If party platforms are adopted without much regard to interest group input, as scholars such as Aldrich (2011) seem to suggest, that could serve as strong evidence that there are no credible commitments. And if parties make platform commitments but do not fulfill them, such commitments would not be credible.

The available evidence suggests that parties meet both conditions. As noted above, people ranging from elected officials to interest groups representatives expend considerable effort in negotiating and drafting party platforms. And as the remaining portion of this paper seeks to demonstrate, parties do tend to deliver on their platform commitments.

Qualitative Insights

Officials in both parties described writing the platform as a complex, iterative process in which the party attempts to draft a document that satisfies key interest group stakeholders while, importantly, not reducing the ability of the party's general election candidate to win. Two Republican platform insiders, who wished to remain anonymous, noted that social conservative groups such as Tony Perkins's Family Research Council are especially active participants in the Republican platform-drafting process, because they view shaping the Republican platform as their means of influencing federal policy outcomes. That is, they view the platform as a commitment from the party to act on social issues. These insiders describe an implicit bargain between business organizations and social conservative groups in which the businesses supply financial resources, which social conservatives lack, and the social conservative groups register and turn out voters.

As one of these insiders put it, “Have you ever seen a business trade group run a voter-registration drive?”

It should be noted, though, that not all political insiders described platform-writing as a bargaining process. For example, Congresswoman Virginia Foxx (R-NC), a co-chair of the 2016 Republican Platform Committee, described the platform as a simple statement of “where the party is,” rather than as a product of coalitional bargaining. Congresswoman Foxx was not alone in downplaying the importance of the iterative process of platform writing. President Barack Obama’s 2008 campaign manager, David Axelrod, said his primary interest in the platform process was ensuring that the platform contained provisions that would make it easier for his candidate to win. To Axelrod, the process of producing the platform was not all that important, the finished product did not detract from Obama’s strength in the general election.

Other participants in the platform-drafting process incidents in which there were clashes between the platform committees and each party’s presidential candidate. For example, Mark Siegel, a former Democratic National Committee executive director and key member of the party’s 1976 platform committee, said that the party’s presidential nominee that year, Jimmy Carter, wanted to remove a platform provision calling for the United States to move its Israeli embassy to Jerusalem. The Democratic platform committee roundly rejected the request. A Republican operative, who wished to remain anonymous, pointed to 1996 Republican presidential candidate Bob Dole’s unsuccessful effort to amend the party’s platform to strike a less rigid tone on abortion. Like Carter twenty years earlier, Dole’s request was rejected.

A failure to consult grassroots activities likely led to the Republican Party’s embarrassing failure in 2020 to draft a new platform—the first time in well more than a century that either party had failed to write a platform in a presidential election year. According to two Republicans familiar

with the platform-drafting process, presidential advisor Jared Kushner drove the failed effort to draft an alternative to a traditional platform. Kushner wished to avoid some of the loaded language about social issues in the 58-page 2016 Republican platform, including an oblique endorsement of gay conversion therapy, by shrinking the platform to a listing of key Republican principles that would fit on an index card. (Swan 2020) This detail-light approach led to a revolt among party activists, especially social conservatives. The party reached a compromise position that involved the Republican National Committee readopting the 2016 platform (Crump 2020), while expressing support for President Trump's agenda. (Dessem 2020) However, people familiar with the platform-drafting process said this compromise was unpopular with many key Republican constituencies, so with the support of an unnamed senior member of the Republican congressional delegation, activists undertook an ultimately unsuccessful effort to draft a new platform.

It is unclear whether Republicans' inability to draft a platform points to significant fractures in the party's coalition or is just a one-time event. (An RNC spokesperson blamed the pandemic for the party's inability to draft a new platform (Orr 2020), an explanation that rings hollow given that the Democratic Party drafted a new platform in 2020.) One person familiar with past Republican platform deliberations noted that there are ongoing tensions between the party's business and social conservative wings, with the party's business constituency expressing increasing discomfort with the party's stances on same-sex marriage and other social issues. Another party insider, however, said that the inability to draft a platform this year was Trump's and Kushner's fault—and that any plausible future Republican presidential nominee would be better able to unite the party's business and social-conservative wings. This insider also said the two key Republican constituencies need each other: The social conservatives can deliver votes but have little money, while the business groups have abundant financial resources but can deliver few

votes. This Republican official asked, “Have you ever seen a business group conduct a voter-registration drive?” He therefore expects the warring Republican constituencies to make peace with each other before the next presidential election in 2024.

Data and Methods

For the quantitative assessment of issue positions, which represent the bulk of the evidence presented in this paper, I rely on a public opinion database about proposed federal policy changes created by Gilens (2012) covering the years 1981 to 2002, and 2005 to 2006. I extended this public opinion database by collecting similar public opinion data about policy changes for the years 2008 to 2012. In addition, for each of these proposed policy changes, I examined party platforms from 1980 to 2012 to determine on which issues the parties had taken explicit positions. I describe my data collection and coding approach below.

My public opinion and policy outcome database for the Obama years uses a similar approach to that employed by Gilens (2005; 2012) in building his influential public opinion/policy outcome dataset. The core Gilens dataset includes about 1,800 public opinion questions about potential federal policy changes from 1981 to 2002, comparing them with federal policy outcomes during the four calendar years after the polling question was asked. Gilens also collected information for each poll by income level, using these data to estimate preferences for people at the 10th, 30th, 50th, 70th, and 90th percentiles.

In terms of the mechanics of building the Obama-era dataset of public opinion and federal policy outcomes, I used the same methodology as Gilens. To source public opinion questions, I searched the Roper archive at Cornell University for questions that contain the key word “oppose.” I included questions that asked about a potential federal policy change that was sufficiently specific to determine whether the change occurred. For example, I discarded questions asking whether

respondents believed that all workers should earn a living wage but included those that asked whether the government should raise the minimum wage to a specific level. Like Gilens, when pollsters asked an identically worded question repeatedly during a given calendar year, I kept in the dataset only the latest version of that question. However, consistent with Gilens, I included multiple questions covering the same topic in a year, provided that the wording varied, because questions from multiple pollsters about the same topic arguably constitute a measure of an issue's salience. I collected polling data from 2008 to 2012. This approach yielded 422 questions for the five-year period, or about 84 per year, whereas the core Gilens dataset had 1,781 questions for a 22-year period, or roughly 80 per year.

To estimate preferences at various percentile ranks of the income distribution, I again followed Gilens' lead. For each survey, I assigned respondents an income score equal to the midpoint of their weighted² number of respondents in each group. For example, if 20 percent of respondents fell into the lowest income group and an additional 30 percent in the next-lowest group, the former group received a score of .10 ($.20/2$) and the latter a score of .35 ($(.20+.50)/2$). Once again following Gilens, I used these percentile estimates to estimate preferences, using a quadratic function. For each survey question, I used income and income squared to estimate predicted levels of support for the policy change in each question.

Like Gilens, to assess whether a policy change had occurred in the four years following when a question about a policy change, I used a variety of sources, ranging from news accounts to federal budget documents. For most questions, the policy outcome was straightforward (e.g. whether there should be a "surge" of 20,000 US troops in Afghanistan in 2009). Gilens coded a policy change as having not occurred if less than 20 percent of the change was enacted and

² In an email exchange, Gilens reported using the weighted data for each poll, when available, rather than the raw numbers of respondents who fell into each income category.

considered the change to have occurred if more than 80 percent of the proposed change was enacted.³ If 20 percent to 80 percent of a proposed policy change occurred, Gilens removed the question from his analysis. By contrast, to avoid any potential criticism that I selected on the dependent variable, I did not discard partial changes and coded a policy change as having occurred if 20 percent or more of the proposed change was adopted. Such partial changes are exceedingly rare, representing outcomes for only 3 percent of questions, according to Gilens. (2005; 2012)

I used a similar coding strategy to assess each party's platform positions. For each of the 2,508 questions in the dataset about federal policy changes, I examined the relevant national platform for each party to determine whether it had taken a position on that issue. For a question asked during a year in which a new platform was drafted, I used the party platforms from that year to determine each party's position. For example, for a 2008 question about a proposed minimum-wage increase, I used each party's 2008 platform to determine its position, if any. For other years, I used the last available platforms. For example, for a 1981 question about tax cuts, I looked to each party's 1980 platform to determine its position. Using this approach, I built a dataset in which a code was assigned for each party's position on the proposed policy change in each of the 2,508 questions: +1 if the party supported the policy change in the question, -1 if the party opposed the change, and 0 if the platform was silent on the policy proposal. I issued a nonzero code only when the platform position was sufficiently specific to allow me to determine whether the party supported or opposed a particular proposed policy change. This approach yielded a total of 1,272 individual platform positions, 685 for the Republicans and 594 for the Democrats.

Results

³ To take an example, if a question asked whether respondents favored a \$50 billion increase in the defense budget, a \$10 billion hike was coded as having met the policy change criterion. In practice, as Gilens observed, very few questions were followed by changes in the 20 percent to 80 percent range.

Below, in Table 1, I present results in which I regress platform positions on policy outcomes. Columns 1, 2, and 3 include platform positions and all issue positions in the dataset; column 4 adds a control for the percentage of public support for the policy change.

Table 2.1
Platform Positions and Federal Policy Outcomes, 1980-2016

<u>All Issues</u>				
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Republican Position	.072** (.018)		.092** (.018)	.082** (.018)
Democratic Position		.110** (.018)	.124** (.018)	.108* (.020)
% Public Support				.395** (.048)
Constant	.311** (.009)	.310** (.009)	.306** (.009)	.086** (.028)
Observations	2,508	2,508	2,508	2,508
R-squared	.006	.015	.025	.055

Data include public opinion questions from 1981-2002, 2005-2006, and 2008-2012. Policy outcomes include data from 1981-2016. Platform positions are for 1980-2012.

For each regression presented in columns 1, 2, and 3, there is a statistically significant, positive relationship between each party’s platform position and policy outcomes. For example, for all issues the coefficient for Republican platform position is 0.072, which means that if the Republican platform supports a policy change, that change is 7.2 percentage points more likely to occur. When the Republican platform supports a policy change, it is 14.4 percentage points more likely to be enacted than when the Republican platform opposes the change. Similarly, the results in column 2 indicate that a policy change is 11 percentage points more likely to occur if the Democratic platform supports the change versus a situation in which it is silent on a particular issue, and 22 percentage points more likely to happen if the Democratic platform supports a policy change versus opposing it. Or put another way, the federal government enacted a proposed policy

change about 42 percent of the time if the Democratic platform supported the change, versus about 20 percent of the time if the party's platform was opposed. As the results in column 3 suggest, when both parties' platform stances are simultaneously included in the regression, the relationship between platform positions and policy outcomes is largely unchanged versus when they are separately estimated. As column 4 indicates, even after the addition of a overall public support for a policy change is added, each party's platform still has a positive, statistically significant relationship to policy outcomes. The addition of the control for public opinion changes the point estimates for each party's platform stance only modestly.

As Table 2 indicates, for domestic economic issues, which account for about one half of all issues in the data, the Democratic platform is much more strongly associated with policy outcomes than is the Republican platform. As column 1 indicates, Republican support for an economic policy change is associated with a roughly 5-percentage-point greater likelihood of enactment, whereas the comparable figure for the Democratic platform is 18.1 percentage points. According to the results in column 2, a proposed economic policy is about four times likelier to be enacted if the Democratic platform supports the policy change (48 percent likelihood) versus if it is opposed (a roughly 12 percent likelihood).

In the social issues domain, the Democratic platform position is associated with future policy outputs, whereas the Republican platform is not. Indeed, the Republican platform position has a slightly negative relationship with policy outcomes, albeit one that is far from statistically significant. By contrast, for social issues the Democratic platform position has a strong, statistically significant relationship with future policy outcomes, with policy changes occurring three times as often when Democrats support a social policy change as when they oppose it. For example, when the Democratic platform expresses opposition to a proposed social policy change,

there is a less than 8% chance of the policy change occurring, whereas if Democrats have taken a position in favor of the change, there is approximately a 1 in 4 change of the policy being adopted. With some notable exceptions, such as gun rights, Democratic positions in the culture wars have often prevailed, with abortion still legal, gays now permitted to serve openly in the military, and same-sex marriage the law of the land. Note, however, that policy change was less likely to occur in this domain than in the other issue areas such as domestic economics and foreign policy.

Table 2.2
Platform Positions and Federal Policy Outcomes, 1980-2016

	Economic Issues		Social Issues			DV: Policy Outcomes			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
Republican Position	.049*		.085**	-.025		-.002	.180**		.179**
	(.025)		(.024)	(.029)		(.029)	(.051)		(.051)
Democratic Position		.181**	.199**		.084**	.084**		-.071	-.064
		(.026)	(.027)		(.022)	(.023)		(.063)	(.062)
Constant	.310**	.303**	.301**	.168**	.162**	0.162	.470**	.487**	.471**
	(.013)	(.013)	(.013)	(.018)	(.018)	(.018)	(.023)	(.023)	(.023)
Observations	1,246	1,246	1,246	444	444	444	487	487	487
R-Squared	.002	.036	.044	.027	.030	.027	.023	.000	.023

Data include public opinion questions from 1981-2002, 2005-2006, and 2008-12. Policy outcomes include data from 1981-2016. Platform positions are for 1980-2012.

In the foreign policy realm, however, the Republican platform was more strongly associated with policy changes than its Democratic alternative. For example, when the Republican platform supported a foreign policy change, it occurred about 65 percent of the time, versus just under 30 percent when the platform opposed the policy initiative. By contrast, as columns 8 and 9 show, the Democratic platform was negatively associated with subsequent foreign policy changes. Overall, though, policy changes were much more likely to occur in the foreign policy realm than in other areas, likely because the president often can act unilaterally in this area. (Howell 2003; Gilens 2012)

One potential argument against the meaningfulness of platform positions is that the parties simply adopt popular positions, meaning that public opinion—not the platform positions—drives

policy outcomes. As shown above and as column 1 of Table 3 indicates, however, even after the addition of a control variable measuring percentage of public support for policy change, the parties' platform positions still have a statistically significant, independent relationship with policy outcomes. That is, the parties' platform positions tell us something more about what policy changes are likely to be enacted than we would learn if we only knew the level of public opinion support for the change.

Table 2.3
Public Opinion, Platform Positions, and Policy Outcomes, 1980-2016

	All Issues	Dom Econ	Social	Foreign/ Int'l
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Republican Position	.082** (.018)	.060* (.025)	.002 (.029)	.198** (.050)
Democratic Position	.108* (.020)	.136** (.028)	.118** (.029)	-.097 (.062)
% Public Support	.395** (.048)	.480** (.067)	.272** (.096)	.485** (.123)
Constant	.086** (.028)	.035 (.039)	.010 (.056)	.214** (.069)
Observations	2,508	1,246	446	489
R-Squared	.055	.081	.067	.052

Data include public opinion questions from 1981-2002, 2005-2006, and 2008-12. Policy outcomes include data from 1981-2016. Platform positions are for 1980-2012.

As above, with the addition of public support for policy change, the degree of correspondence between platform positions and policy outcomes varies by issue area. For economic issues, there is still a stronger association between Democratic platform positions and policy outcomes than there is between Republican positions and policy outputs. Similarly, in the social issues realm, there remains a strong, positive association between Democratic positions and policy outcomes. Indeed, for social issues, a policy is about 22 percentage points likelier to be enacted if the Democratic platform supports rather than opposes a policy change, as the party failed

to deliver on its promises to arrest the advancement of gay rights or outlaw abortion. Meanwhile, the Republican platform has essentially a nil association with policy changes. However, the pattern reverses in foreign affairs, where Republican priorities on foreign aid, military affairs, trade, and defense spending prevailed over Democratic positions. Indeed, in this arena Democratic platform planks are inversely related to policy outcomes—the only issue area where this relationship exists for either party. By contrast, Republican support for a foreign policy initiative is associated with a nearly 40-percentage-point increase in the likelihood of its enactment versus a situation in which the party is opposed.

Conclusions

The data are clear that, historically, both major parties have tended to deliver on platform commitments. This result persists even after conditioning platform support on public opinion. Over the past few decades, even conditioned on public opinion, both parties have followed through on platform promises related to economic issues, with Republicans cutting taxes while they are in power and Democrats engaging in at least limited redistribution when they have controlled the presidency. In other issue domains, the record is more mixed. Consistent with their platform, Democrats have successfully promoted platform positions on social issues, including promoting gay rights while defending affirmative action and reproductive rights. By contrast, Republicans have, for the most part, failed to advance their agenda on social issues, including banning gays from serving openly in the military. However, Republicans have delivered on their promises in foreign and international affairs, such as providing aid to the Nicaraguan contras, while Democrats have not managed to enact their agenda.

Platforms provide significant avenues for future research. Given that parties do tend to deliver on platform commitments, party platforms can serve as an important data source for studying issues such as inequality and representation. Future research should also focus on how party platforms are constructed, including the important role that interest groups play in platform construction and overall party-building.

Chapter 3: Inequality and Representation During the Obama Administration

Gosnell famously described politics as the study of who gets “what, when, how.” A relatively large body of research finds that, in recent decades, the affluent get much of what they want, by exercising disproportionate influence over federal policymaking, whereas lower- and middle-income citizens’ preferences are essentially ignored. These analyses of income inequality and representation vary in their scope and methods, but in general, they claim that following a three-decade period after World War II, when the rising tide of economic growth lifted the fortunes of a vast majority of Americans, economic gains and political influence became less equally distributed, with the affluent gaining a disproportionate share of both. If true, these findings raise significant questions about the quality and extent of American democratic representation.

To be sure, the quality of democratic representation is a slippery concept (Strolovich 2014), but the United States appears to fall short on multiple measures. In one conception, descriptive representation, scholars consider a country to have high levels of representation if policymakers’ demographic characteristics resemble those of the public at-large. American Politics scholars have long noted that US policymakers are much whiter and more male than is the mass public, especially in the Republican Party (Hardy-Fanta, et al. 2007). Another key conception of representation is dyadic, which measures whether individual legislators vote in accordance with the wishes of their constituents. On this measure, too, scholars have generally found the quality of representation in the United States to be poor, with racial minorities (Griffin and Newman 2008) and lower-income citizens’ policy preferences (Bartels 2008) seemingly having little influence over legislators’ votes. Finally, some scholars (e.g., Gilens 2005; 2012) evaluate substantive representation, which

measures whether the federal government enacts policies that the public, or subsamples of the public, want it to enact. Such policy changes may be enacted by the overall legislature (as opposed to votes of individual legislators, as in dyadic representation); the president, through unilateral action (Howell 2003); or by the courts, as in the *Obergefell v. Hodges* decision, which legalized same-sex marriage throughout the United States. Once again, scholars—most notably Gilens (2005; 2012)—typically find that the affluent generally exercise disproportionate influence over federal policymaking.

In this paper, I find that the conventional narrative about substantive representation is, if not wrong, at least incomplete. After building and analyzing a dataset of national public opinion questions and federal policy outcomes covering much of the Obama Administration, I find that policy outputs during those years were relatively strongly associated with the preferences of lower- and middle-class Americans, not the policy preferences of the affluent—and that this relationship was strongest for domestic-economic issues, the domain in which scholars have expressed concern that disproportionate influence of the affluent might be most harmful. However, I do find that in the foreign policy and social issue domains, even in the Obama years, the policy views of the affluent were more closely associated with policy outcomes than were the preferences of the poor and middle class. Nevertheless, at least for economic issues, these findings at least raise the possibility that the problem of unequal representation *may* owe more to parties and individual presidents than to structural problems inherent in the federal political system.

Literature Review

Most scholarly studies of income inequality and representation focus on dyadic and substantive representation—and nearly all find that the well-to-do tend to receive better representation, in terms of individual legislators' votes and federal policy outputs, than lower- and

middle-income citizens. Most prominently, Gilens (2005, 2012) finds that between 1981 and 2006, the preferences of the affluent—those at the 90th percentile of the household income distribution—were strongly associated with federal policy outcomes, while lower- and middle-income citizens appeared to exercise no independent influence over national policy. Similarly, Bartels (2008) contends that US senators' roll call votes reflect the policy preferences of the affluent, rather than those of lower- to middle-income citizens. Other political scientists (see, among many, Tausanovitch 2016) report similar findings to Bartels.

If scholars generally agree that the non-affluent receive poor representation in federal policymaking, there is substantial disagreement about the role of political parties in promoting (or retarding) the influence of the affluent. Bartels (2008, 2002) finds that the Republican senators especially respond to the preferences of the affluent—but that even Democratic senators are more responsive to the well-to-do than to low- or moderate-income citizens. Hayes (2013) also finds that senators favor the policy priorities of the well-to-do, though unlike Bartels, he contends that Democrats are more responsive to the preferences of the affluent, while Republicans respond more strongly to the policy priorities of the middle class. Gilens (2012) contends that Republicans better represent the interests of US citizens at all income levels, even though their policy outputs disproportionately favor the rich. Lax, et al. (2019) find that party trumps affluence in determining senators' roll call votes, but unlike Gilens, they find that Democratic senators' votes tend to be more aligned with majority opinion. (It is unclear whether this difference between Lax, et al.'s findings and Gilens' result from the number of issues in each study—Gilens' set of issue positions is much larger and covers a longer timeframe; Lax, et al.'s focus on dyadic representation rather than Gilens' on federal policy outcomes; or some other methodological difference—but they definitely do not agree.) Meanwhile, Hacker and Pierson (2010) contend that, when in power,

Republicans aggressively promote the interests of the wealthy, but rather than Democrats' taking action to combat rising economic inequality when they are in power, the party engages in "policy drift"—essentially doing no harm to, but also not aggressively promoting, the interests of lower-income Americans. And Enns (2015) finds that, given the high correlation of federal policy preferences among middle- and upper-income Americans, federal policy outputs are relatively consistent with the preferences of those with moderate incomes, though he notes that the preferences of strong partisans differ significantly by party—and therefore one might expect different patterns of inequality and representation based on which party controls the levers of government.

In previous research, the time periods studied may have hampered the ability of scholars to uncover the link between parties, and inequality and representation. The bulk of previous quantitative research on inequality and representation has focused on the period between the early 1980s and the early part of the 21st century. Gilens' primary study, for example, covered policy outcomes between 1981 and 2006—a period that featured 18 years of Republican presidents and a single Democratic president, Bill Clinton, an ideological moderate who famously "triangulated" (Nesmith and Quirk 2016) between congressional Democrats and Republicans. Moreover, the Republican Party controlled Congress for six of the eight years of the Clinton presidency, which arguably may have tilted policy outcomes in favor of the affluent.

Data and Methods

If one were to find greater policymaking responsiveness to the poor and middle class, one might expect to find it during the Obama presidency. Lax, et al. (2019) contend that if voters wish to see the enactment of policies favored by those with lower incomes, they should elect more Democrats—the party they find to be more responsive to the non-affluent. Obama entered the

presidency with large majorities in both the House of Representatives and the Senate. He therefore had the ability to pursue longtime Democratic priorities that are popular with lower- and middle-class Americans, including expanding access to healthcare and raising taxes on the affluent.

To test federal responsiveness to preferences by income level during the Obama Administration, I use a substantive representation approach in line with Gilens' (2005; 2012). Why an approach focused on substantive representation? For one thing, versus a dyadic approach, a strategy relying on substantive representation allows one to include a much greater number of issue positions. Whereas previous dyadic research measures policy outcomes by relying on either DW-NOMINATE scores (Bartels 2008) or only a few dozen key congressional votes (Lax, et al. 2019), an approach focused on substantive representation can include public opinion data and outcomes for hundreds of potential federal policy changes, creating a much larger issue dataset. For another, substantive representation is arguably more important to citizens than dyadic representation. To an individual who opposes the Affordable Care Act, is it more important that her US Representative voted dozens of times to repeal the ACA, or would it be preferable for the ACA to be repealed, which the substantive representation approach captures? Moreover, using Gilens' substantive representation approach, an issue can be included if a pollster considers it important enough to ask a question about it, whereas given the agenda control powers of congressional leadership, many arguably important issues do not receive votes in one or both Houses of Congress. For example, fearing a revolt from his right wing, then-House Speaker John Boehner did not schedule a vote on immigration reform in 2012, whereas public opinion pollsters asked numerous questions related to immigration during the Obama years. Finally, the substantive representation approach allows a range of national-level actors—not just Congress—to respond (or not) to public preferences. For example, in the past substantive federal policy changes have

occurred because of Supreme Court decisions (Clark 2019) or unilateral presidential actions (Howell 2003) that the dyadic approach does not capture.

In building my public opinion and policy outcome database for the Obama years, I mimicked the approach employed by Gilens (2005; 2012) in building his excellent public opinion/policy outcome dataset. Gilens' analysis focuses on about 1,800 public opinion questions about potential federal policy changes from 1981 to 2002, comparing them with federal policy outcomes during the four calendar years after the polling question was asked. Gilens also collected information for each poll by income level, using these data to estimate preferences for people at the 10th, 30th, 50th, 70th, and 90th percentiles.

To evaluate public opinion and policymaking during the Obama Administration, I focused on federal public opinion questions from 2008 to 2012. Like Gilens, I focused on outcomes for four years following when pollsters posed a policy change question. For 2012 questions, then, the four-year period includes policy outcomes through 2016. Therefore, no Trump Administration policy outcomes were included in the dataset.

Like Gilens, to source public opinion questions, I searched the Roper archive at Cornell University for questions that contain the key word "oppose." I included questions that asked about a potential federal policy change that was sufficiently specific to determine whether the change occurred. For example, I discarded questions asking whether respondents believed that all workers should earn a living wage but included those that asked whether the government should raise the minimum wage to a specific level. Like Gilens, when pollsters asked an identically worded question repeatedly during a given calendar year, I kept in the dataset only the latest version of that question. However, consistent with Gilens, I included multiple questions covering the same topic in a year, provided that the wording varied, because questions from multiple pollsters about

the same topic arguably constitute a measure of an issue's salience. I collected polling data from 2008 to 2012. This approach yielded 422 questions for the five-year period, or about 84 per year, whereas the core Gilens dataset had 1,781 questions for a 22-year period, or roughly 80 per year.

To estimate preferences at various percentile ranks of the income distribution, I again followed Gilens' lead. For each survey, I assigned respondents an income score equal to the midpoint of their weighted⁴ number of respondents in each group. For example, if 20 percent of respondents fell into the lowest income group and an additional 30 percent in the next-lowest group, the former group received a score of .10 ($.20/2$) and the latter a score of .35 ($(.20+.50)/2$). Once again following Gilens, I used these percentile estimates to estimate preferences, using a quadratic function. For each survey question, I used income and income squared (measured in percentiles) to produce coefficients that were then used to estimate predicted levels of support for policy change at the desired income percentiles.

Like Gilens, to assess whether a policy change had occurred in the four years following when a pollster posed a question about that change, I used a variety of sources, ranging from news accounts to federal budget documents. For most questions, the policy outcome was straightforward (e.g. whether the federal government should launch a "public option" to compete with private health-insurance plans). Gilens coded a policy change as having not occurred if less than 20 percent of the change was enacted and considered the change to have occurred if more than 80 percent of the proposed change was enacted. If 20 percent to 80 percent of a proposed policy change occurred, Gilens removed the question from his analysis. By contrast, to avoid any potential criticism that I selected on the dependent variable, I did not discard partial changes and coded a policy change as having occurred if 20 percent or more of the proposed change was adopted. Such partial changes

⁴ In an email exchange, Gilens reported using the weighted data for each poll, when available, rather than the raw numbers of respondents who fell into each income category.

are exceedingly rare, representing outcomes for only 3 percent of questions, according to Gilens. (2005; 2012)

Results

Below, in Table 1, I present results of OLS regressions with estimated preferences at the 90th, 50th, and 10th income percentiles as independent variables and a binary dependent variable indicating whether proposed policy changes occur. Logistic regressions (not presented) return similar results. Column 1 shows a negative relationship between preferences of the affluent and federal policy outcomes, while there is a positive association between policy outcomes and preferences of those at the 10th and 50th percentiles. However, the standard errors are very large due to the high correlation between the preferences of those at the 50th and 10th percentiles. (Indeed, Gilens calculated but did not present multivariate analyses because of this issue. Similar to Gilens, I present bivariate regressions below.) In addition, I present estimates for the 90th and 50th percentiles alone (Column 2), and the 90th and 10th percentiles (Column 3). In columns 2 and 3, the results show a negative association between preferences of the affluent and policy outcomes, whereas there is a strong, positive relationship between preferences of the middle class and lower-income Americans, respectively, and policy outcomes.

Table 3.1
Public Opinion and Policy Outcomes During the Obama Administration

	DV: Policy Outcomes					
	All Issues			Domestic Economic Issues		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Preferences at 90th %ile	-0.712 (1.188)	-1.086** (0.309)	-0.241 (0.185)	-0.425 (1.262)	-1.415** (0.360)	-0.448 (0.226)
Preferences at 50th %ile	0.953 (2.375)	1.722** (0.303)		-0.046 (2.535)	2.009** (0.342)	
Preferences at 10th %ile	0.416 (1.273)		0.922** (0.162)	1.130 (1.38)		1.105** (0.186)
Constant	-0.01 (0.083)	0.000 (0.077)	-0.022 (0.078)	0.027 (0.106)	0.061 (0.097)	0.027 (0.098)
Observations	441	441	441	301	301	301
R-Squared	0.104	0.104	0.103	0.135	0.133	0.135

Data include public opinion questions from 2008-12, and policy outcomes from 2008-16.

In columns 4, 5, and 6, a repeat the above analysis but focus on domestic economic issues, a category that includes questions about taxes, the federal budget, the minimum wage, and health care, among other topic areas. (Other questions were assigned to two other categories, social and international/foreign policy.) These domestic economic issues account for about 70 percent of all questions in the dataset, with social issues and international/foreign policy questions accounting for the remainder. The results are similar to those in columns 1, 2, and 3. In each case, the relationship between the preferences of the affluent and policy outcomes is negative, whereas there is a positive relationship between preferences of those at lower and middle incomes and federal policy outcomes. Previous scholars (see, e.g. Strolovich 2014) have raised the possibility that the affluent—already advantaged in influencing policymaking—might use their financial resources to further tilt policymaking in their favor, which in turn would allow them to amass even greater financial resources. If that relationship existed, it would likely be strongest for economic policy,

the issue area where the affluent would be most likely to be able to tilt policy in their favor and then increase their influence over federal policymaking.

In Table 2 below, I present a similar analysis for social issues (columns 1, 2, and 3) and foreign policy/international policy matters. The social issues domain includes questions about abortion, same-sex marriage, civil rights, and gun control, among other topics. The foreign policy/international domain included questions about the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, trade agreements, international treaties, and diplomatic relations with Cuba. In each of these two areas, as above, the high correlation between preferences at the 50th and 10th percentiles inflates the standard errors—and in these two issue domains, the coefficients are also implausibly large, with a high correlation between all three of the independent variables. As above, I repeated the analysis for each issue domain by regressing the 90th percentile preferences and those at the 50th percentile (column 2) on policy outcomes, and again with the 90th and 10 percentiles. For both issue domains—social and foreign policy/international—during the Obama years there was a statistically significant, positive relationship between preferences at the 90th percentile and policy outcomes. However, contrary to the relationship in the economic policy sphere, for social and foreign policy/international issues, there was a negative relationship between low- and middle-income Americans' preferences and policy outcomes. In the foreign policy/international sphere, low- and moderate-income poll respondents were consistently less supportive of Obama initiatives such as the 2009-10 troop surge in Afghanistan. For social issues, lower-income respondents in particular were much less supportive than the affluent of same-sex marriage and the successful Democratic effort to repeal the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy that provided that openly gay service members could be discharged from the armed forces.

Table 3.2
Public Opinion and Policy Outcomes During the Obama Administration

	Social Issues			Int'l/For Pol Issues		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Preferences at 90th %ile	13.516*	1.513	0.927*	-11.358	2.035	1.643*
	5.422	0.869	0.432	10.142	1.098	.660
Preferences at 50th %ile	-24.374*	-0.998		25.250	-0.816	
	10.467	0.896		19.656	1.115	
Preferences at 10th %ile	11.748*		-0.416	-13.113		-0.451
	5.242		0.449	9.873		0.559
Constant	-0.335*	-0.148	-0.143	-0.202	-0.426	-0.414
	(0.139)	(0.114)	0.115	(0.391)	(0.357)	(0.358)
Observations	109	109	109	54	54	54
R-Squared	0.147	0.103	0.099	0.201	0.165	0.167

Data include public opinion questions from 2008-12, and policy outcomes from 2008-16.

Given the high degree of correlation between independent variables, in Tables 3 and 4 I also present a series of bivariate regressions, with preferences for policy change at each income level serving as the independent variable and federal policy outcomes as the dependent variable. For the overall dataset, in columns 1, 2, and 3, each coefficient is positively signed and statistically significant. However, the coefficient for the lowest income group, the 10th percentile, is about 50 percent higher than that for the highest-income group, those at the 90th percentile. In other words, during the Obama years, as support for a particular policy change increased from 0% to 100% for the lowest-income group, its likelihood of enactment increased by about 77 percentage points, versus 51 percentage points for the highest-income group. The preferences of lower- and upper-income Americans diverged, at least to some extent, on many issues, but in general, the affluent were (perhaps unsurprisingly) less supportive of successful Obama initiatives to raise taxes on the wealthy and ensure protection for pre-existing conditions. The well-to-do were also more

supportive than the poor of expanding offshore drilling, which the Obama Administration successfully opposed.

Table 3.3
Public Opinion and Policy Outcomes During the Obama Administration (Separately Estimated)
DV: Policy Outcomes

	All Issues		Domestic Economic Issues			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Preferences at 90th %ile	0.508** (0.134)			0.464** (0.176)		
Preferences at 50th %ile		0.754** (0.129)			0.818** (0.162)	
Preferences at 10th %ile			0.771** (0.114)			0.854** (0.137)
Constant	0.070 (0.079)	-0.067 (0.076)	-0.074 (0.067)	0.153 (0.102)	-0.051 (0.095)	-0.078 (0.083)
Observations	422	422	422	284	284	284
R-Squared	0.034	0.077	0.100	0.026	0.086	0.123

Data include public opinion questions from 2008-12, and policy outcomes from 2008-16.

For the social and foreign/international issues that together account for about 30 percent of the questions in the dataset, however, the affluent were more likely to see policy outcomes that were in line with their preferences. As Table 4 shows, for social issues the bivariate coefficient for the affluent was larger than those for moderate and low-income Americans. Lower-income Americans were less supportive of gay marriage and abortion rights than their wealthier peers. In addition, the less affluent were more supportive of initiatives that the Obama Administration did not pursue, such implementing a national identification card and allowing health-care providers to opt out of providing medical services, including those related to birth control and abortion, that conflict with one's religious beliefs.

The difference between the coefficients was largest for international and foreign policy issues, which accounted for 9 percent of the questions in the dataset and where the preferences of the affluent were more strongly associated with policy outcomes. As mentioned above, lower-

income Americans were far less likely to support Obama’s troop surge in Afghanistan and more likely to support US withdrawal from the war there, which did not happen. Moreover, the less affluent consistently expressed more support than the affluent for building a border wall with Mexico, an initiative that Obama did not pursue.

Table 3.4
Public Opinion and Policy Outcomes During the Obama Administration (Separately Estimated)
DV: Policy Outcomes

	Social Issues			Int'l/For Pol Issues		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Preferences at 90th %ile	0.569** (0.191)			1.334* (0.534)		
Preferences at 50th %ile		0.524** (0.198)			0.986 (0.564)	
Preferences at 10th %ile			0.450* (0.202)			0.359 (0.488)
Constant	-0.157 (0.114)	-0.121 (0.114)	-0.071 (0.112)	-0.472 (0.349)	-0.217 (0.350)	0.175 (0.288)
Observations	92	92	92	37	37	37
R-Squared	0.090	0.072	0.052	0.151	0.080	0.015

Data include public opinion questions from 2008-12, and policy outcomes from 2008-16.

In sum, these findings show that, during the Obama years, there was a significant association between the economic preferences of lower-income Americans and federal policy outputs. But it is important to note that these results qualify existing research, which speculates about the structural disadvantages of the poor and middle class when it comes to policymaking, but the results do not refute previous findings. If Clinton was an outlier due to his moderation, which may have left him less responsive to lower- and middle-class citizens, then Obama may be an outlier in how aggressively he pursued economic policy outcomes that are similar to the preferences of the non-affluent. Extending this research to cover the Biden Administration may shed light on whether the preferences of the poor regularly get represented during the Administrations of the modern Democratic Party.

It is also clear that on foreign policy and social issues, Obama-era policy outcomes were more consistent with the policy preferences of relatively affluent elites than with those of the bulk of the public. In promoting trade agreements, immigration reform, and same-sex marriage, Obama adopted positions that were opposed by some lower-income Americans who were aligned with his economic policy agenda. With the college-educated, who typically have more liberal views on social issues, making up a larger portion of the Democratic coalition (Sides, et al. 2018), it may be increasingly difficult for Democratic Administrations to adopt social policy stances that appeal to lower-income Americans.

Conclusion

These results appear to conflict with some earlier research suggesting that the federal policymaking system is structurally biased in favor of the wealthy, that elected representatives of both parties better represent the well-to-do, or that Democrats no longer strongly advocate for the interests of lower-income Americans. Indeed, to the extent that the affluent have exercised a disproportionate amount of influence over policymaking in recent decades, it may be, as Lax, et al. have said, because Republicans have won a lot of elections.

Of course, it is also possible that the heightened responsiveness to lower-income Americans' economic preferences during the Obama years was an aberration. If subsequent Democratic Administrations, including the current Biden Administration, revert to favoring the preferences of the affluent, previous critiques of the federal government, which suggest that it is structurally biased in favor of the well-to-do, will seem more plausible. If, however, the Biden and future Democratic Administrations show relatively strong responsiveness to the policy preferences of lower-income citizens, that suggests that the federal government does have the capacity to

represent all American, not just the affluent. Additional research is needed to confirm which explanation is accurate.

Chapter 4: Partisanship and Unequal Representation

Are the American political system and economy rigged against the poor and middle class? A lot of people seem to think so. Senator Bernie Sanders (D-VT) said the wealthy have used the political system to redistribute wealth upward: “Wall Street and the billionaire class has (sic) rigged the rules to redistribute wealth and income to the wealthiest and most powerful people in this country” (Wilkinson, 2016). Billionaire Charles Koch argued the political system is “rigged” to produce “a tax code that subsidizes the wealthy” (Mallin and Karl, 2016) Senator Elizabeth Warren (D-MA) has repeatedly argued that the affluent and corporations exercise disproportionate influence over federal policymaking, allowing them to tilt policy outcomes in their favor: “Many (workers) feel that the game is rigged against them, and they are right. The game is rigged against them.” (Jamieson, 2015)

Many social scientists have expressed the same sentiment, albeit in more elegant terms. For example, there is evidence that both Democratic and Republican senators respond more to the preferences of the affluent than to the poor and middle class (Bartels 2002). Another major line of research (Gilens 2005; 2012) finds that, regardless of the party in power, policy outputs favor the affluent. Moreover, some scholars argue that these inequalities in representation are self-reinforcing: The well-to-do and businesses use their resource advantages to tilt policy outcomes in their direction, which leads to even larger resource advantages, which leads to the relatively advantaged having even greater influence over the policymaking process (Strolovich 2014). If this is true, it “raises the specter of a vicious cycle in which low-income individuals are locked out of power, in which economic inequality begets political inequality which begets still more economic inequality” (Lax, et al. 2019).

Another strain of scholarship contends that inequality in representation derives not from a rigged system but from the devotion of one party to the rich and business interests. This line of research (see, e.g., Lax, et al. 2019) finds that the Republican Party favors the interests of the affluent, while the Democrats tend to represent the less advantaged. In this telling, the problem with representation is not so much the system as with the Republican Party. And the solution to inadequate representation of the poor and middle class is for the Democrats to win more elections.

This paper finds evidence to support critique that the Republican Party is the source of the tilt of policymaking toward the affluent—but with caveats. An analysis of public opinion and party platform positions shows that the Republican Party espouses the policy preferences of the affluent and business interests—but not in all issue domains. For example, the Republican platform is more aligned with the preferences of lower-income voters for social issues, perhaps because the party's base of support has become increasingly rural and non-college-educated. And for economic issues, the Democratic platform tends to reflect the preferences of the poor and middle class, as well as mass-based economic organizations such as trade unions and the AARP—but not in the domain of social issues such as abortion, gun control, and LGBTQ rights.

Moreover, in terms of actual federal policy outputs, the relationship between partisanship and unequal representation is less clear. Unified Democratic control of the federal government produced policy outcomes in alignment with the preferences of the non-affluent during the early Obama Administration, but during the early Clinton Administration, unified Democratic control resulted in policy outcomes that dramatically favored the preferences of the well-to-do. Meanwhile, during a period of unified Republican control in 2005-2006, policy outputs were most closely aligned with the preferences of the middle class, those at the 50th percentile of the income

distribution. The 2004 Republican platform would have predicted that preferences at the 90th percentile would have the strongest relationship to policy outcomes.

The picture that emerges is that the Republican Party favors the wealthy, business groups, and social conservatives—but not all the time. And the Democratic Party aligns itself with trade unions and the non-affluent—but with some exceptions. Therefore, it is not clear that, if Democrats controlled the government, “one would likely find little (although not necessarily no) evidence of affluent influence” (Lax, et al. 2019). (It should be noted that Lax, et al. confined their claim about Democratic control to a specific time period that did not include the Clinton presidency.) Indeed, for the purposes of ensuring that the preferences of the poor and middle class are represented, it appears to matter which specific Democrats (and Republicans) the voters select.

Literature Review

A robust and important political science literature finds that the affluent exercise disproportionate influence over policymaking (Bartels, 2002, 2008; Gilens, 2005, 2012; Gilens and Page, 2014), but it disagrees over the extent to which political parties, rather than structural factors, are to blame. (Though see also Enns, 2015, and Branham, et al., 2017, for contrary views about the pervasiveness of inequality and representation.) Indeed, to the extent that scholars attribute inequality in representation to one party or the other, they do not even agree on the party that is responsible.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given that the studies use varying methods and frequently cover different timeframes, scholars have attributed dissimilar levels of responsibility to each party for inequality in representation. One line of research using DW-NOMINATE scores finds that both Democratic and Republican senators respond more to the affluent, though Republican senators are

especially responsive to the well-to-do (Bartels, 2008, 2002). Other research suggests that Democratic senators are especially responsive to the rich, while Republican senators favor the middle class (Hayes, 2013). Still other scholars suggest that the Republican Party aggressively favors the rich, while, when in power, the Democratic Party engages in “policy drift” that does nothing to arrest increases in inequality (Hacker and Pierson, 2010). Using public opinion and federal policy outputs in an analysis over a multi-decade period, there is some evidence that the Republican Party better represents the interests of Americans at all income levels, albeit with the rich exercising disproportionate influence (Gilens, 2012). In an extension of the Gilens research on interest groups, there is evidence that Republicans represent the interests of the affluent on economic issues and business groups more generally, but that Democrats are aligned with advocacy groups and the middle class, not the affluent. And another recent study (Lax, et al., 2019) finds that party trumps affluence in determining senators’ roll call votes, but unlike Gilens, they find the Democrats—in this case, US senators--tend to be more aligned with majority opinion.

Why might the political system favor the interests of the affluent? There is no scholarly consensus on the causes of potential inequality and representation, but researchers have pointed to a few potential factors. The affluent tend to be more engaged in politics, including making more campaign contributions than the poor and the middle class, so they may achieve better representation. (Gilens 2005, 2012) Mass-based interest groups could potentially provide a pathway for representation of the non-affluent, but they arguably exercise little influence over policy outcomes. (Gilens and Page 2014) Another vein of research finds that Members of Congress often privilege the opinions of co-partisans over the preferences of the broader public. (Krimmel, et al. 2016) To the extent that a party’s co-partisans tend to be more affluent and more aligned with business groups, then, it would be no surprise that the party tends not to favor the preferences of

the relatively disadvantaged. Perhaps, as some scholars have speculated, there are multiple ways that the affluent exercise disproportionate influence on policy, all working at the same time (Gilens 2005; 2012)

Data and Methods

To study the issue of parties and representation, I take a somewhat different tack than previous scholars. For one, to measure party positions I use an underutilized data source, party platforms. Whereas other scholars (Grossman, et al., 2020) have used pronouncements by party leaders to measure each party's position on proposed federal policy changes, I use platforms because they are official all-party pronouncements, developed after months of consultation with party members and key outside interest groups, and approved or rejected by delegates at the national party conventions. (See, e.g., Victor, 2018 for a description of the Democratic platform-drafting process.) As I have shown elsewhere in this dissertation, the party platforms are reliable guides for the policies the parties will pursue or seek to block. Like Grossman, et al. (2020), I make use of the highly influential Gilens dataset of questions about proposed federal policy changes, interest group positions on those proposals, and policy outcomes. The Gilens data cover public opinion questions from 1981 to 2002, and from 2005 to 2006, while the dataset's information on interest group positions covers 1981 to 2002. I supplemented this information with public opinion and policy outcome data for the Obama Administration. The Obama-era public opinion data covers 2008 to 2012. I evaluated policy outcomes for up to four years following when each question was asked—in this instance, from 2008 to 2016. The approach for coding platform positions⁵ is

⁵ This approach—coding the platform prior to when a question was asked—raises the possible objection that the platform positions for each party could influence public opinion. In the appendix, I present results for an alternative coding scheme using the platform after each question was posed. For example, for questions between 2009 and 2012, each party's 2012 platform was used. The results are similar to those obtain by using the previous platform. For example, Republican platform positions are still associated with the preferences of the affluent,

identical to that in chapter 2; the process for identifying relevant public opinion questions and estimating preferences by income percentile is the same as is described in Chapter 3.

Results

In Table 1, I present bivariate estimates of the relationship between federal policy preferences at various income levels and the platform positions of each of the major parties. The table depicts the bivariate relationship between preferences at the 90th, 50th, and 10th percentiles, and Democratic (columns 1, 2, and 3) and Republican (columns 4, 5, and 6) platform positions. (I subsequently present multivariate results by income level.) As expected, there is a positive relationship between public preferences at each income level and the platforms of each party.

However, the platforms differ in their levels of association with public opinion, with the Democratic platform exhibiting a higher degree of correspondence with public opinion at all levels, especially the preferences of the least affluent--those at the 10th percentile of the income distribution. This differs somewhat from previous research on the relationship of public opinion and policy outputs (Gilens 2012), which found that Republicans better represent the preferences of Americans at all income levels, albeit with a tilt toward the policy views of the affluent. (It should also be noted that Gilens's finding pertains to policy outputs, not platform positions, though as Chapter 2 of this dissertation shows, there is a positive, statistically significant association between platform positions and policy outcomes.) The Republican platform is most strongly associated with federal policy preferences at the 90th percentile, but that point estimate is less than half as high as that of preferences at the 90th percentile and the Democratic platform positions. Nevertheless, the Democratic platform is more strongly associated with preferences for federal

business groups, and social conservative organizations; Democratic platform positions are consistent the preferences of the non-affluent and mass economic groups. See Tables 10 and 11 in the appendix for details.

policy change at the 10th percentile than at the 90th. Meanwhile, even on a bivariate basis, Republican platform positions are almost entirely unrelated to opinion at the 10th percentile. In some respects, these results are consistent with the popular narrative that Republican policy initiatives favor the well-to-do, whereas Democrats attempt to advance the interests of the middle class (Grossman, et al. 2020).

Table 4.1
Public Opinion and Party Platform Positions

	DV: Party Platform Positions					
	Democratic			Republican		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Preferences at 90th %ile	0.472** (0.052)			0.210** (0.520)		
Preferences at 50th %ile		0.553** (0.050)			0.112* (0.050)	
Preferences at 10th %ile			0.632** (0.050)			0.042 (0.051)
Constant	-0.224** (0.031)	-0.268** (0.030)	-0.306** (0.029)	-0.115 (0.106)	-0.059* (0.030)	-0.02 (0.030)
Observations	2,508	2,508	2,508	2508	2,508	2,508
Adj R-Squared	0.031	0.047	0.060	0.006	0.002	0.000

Data include public opinion questions from 1981 to 2002, 2005-2006, and 2008-12.
Platform positions are from 1980 to 2012.

If Republican platforms reflect the preferences of citizens much less than Democratic platforms do, then what drives the GOP's platform positions? One possible contributor to platform stances is the position of key interest group constituencies on party positions. Indeed, when examining policy outputs, not platform positions, previous research (Gilens and Page 2014; Grossman, et al. 2020) has found that interest groups independently influence federal policy changes. That is, there was no evidence that either business- or mass-based interest groups mediate or moderate the relationship between public opinion by income level and policy outputs (Gilens

and Page 2014). As a result, it seems likely that interest group positions would have a meaningful, independent association with each party's platform positions.

To test this hypothesis, I used Gilens's data on interest group positions and my own data on party platform positions. For approximately 1,800 questions about federal policy changes between 1981 and 2002, a "small army" (Ibid.) of research assistants conducted research to determine whether about three dozen influential interest groups took public positions on each of the issues. There were far more business-oriented than mass-based interest groups in the Gilens and Page dataset—a decision that attracted some mild criticism (Grossman, et al. 2020)—but that may be defensible, given that business groups devote far more resources to lobbying than do mass-based organizations (Drutman 2015). Gilens and Page score interest group positions according to their level of support or opposition, ranging from +2 (strong support) to -2 (strong opposition). Neutral positions are coded 0. This produced a maximum value for business support for a policy change of greater than 30, whereas the highest recorded score for mass-based organizations was 10. To avoid potential criticism that business groups were overweighted and to make the coefficients more interpretable, I rescored the data to a range of +1 (net business support) to -1 (net business opposition). I made one other change to the Gilens and Page coding scheme, breaking the mass-based groups into two parts: one focused on social issues (e.g., the NRA and Christian Coalition) and another that prioritized economic issues like workplace bargaining rights and Social Security (e.g., the AFL-CIO and the AARP). Each of these groups' positions was also scored on a +1 (net support) to -1 (net opposition) scale.

As Table 2 shows, there are strong, statistically significant relationships between interest group positions and party platforms, with the Democratic platform associated with views promoted by labor unions and other mass economic organizations such as the AARP, and the Republican

platform linked to peak business organizations and socially conservative interest groups such as the Christian Coalition. For example, the table reflects that the Democratic platform is about 35.6 percentage points more likely to favor a federal policy change if mass economic organizations support it. This finding is unsurprising, given previous research that has shown that labor unions are an important “anchoring group” for the Democratic Party (Schlozman, 2015). Meanwhile, there is a negative relationship between the preferences of business and social conservative groups, on the one hand, and Democratic platform positions on the other. By contrast, the Republican Party platform is positively related to the stated positions of businesses and social interest groups. If social conservative groups, on net, support a federal policy change, the Republican platform is 60 percentage points more likely to support that change than when they oppose it. Similarly, the Republican platform is about 54 percentage points more likely to support a policy change when business groups support the policy rather than oppose it. By contrast, support from mass economic groups, which frequently find themselves on the other side of policy debates than business groups, makes it less likely that the Republican platform will support a policy change.

Table 4.2
Interest Groups and Party Platform Positions

	DV: Party Platform Positions					
	Democratic			Republican		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Business Groups	-0.102** (0.017)			0.274** (0.016)		
Mass Social Groups		-0.267** (0.027)			0.300** (0.027)	
Mass Economic Groups			0.178** (0.020)			-0.157** (0.020)
Constant	0.038** (0.011)	-0.024* (0.011)	0.052** (0.011)	0.039** (0.010)	0.052** (0.011)	0.024* (0.011)
Observations	1,836	1,836	1,836	1,836	1,836	1,836
Adj R-Squared	0.019	0.050	0.041	0.141	0.062	0.032

Data include public opinion questions from 1981 to 2002.
Platform positions are from 1980 to 2000.

Including the above variables in a series of multivariate regressions does not change the fundamental picture above: Democratic platforms positions are strongly and positive associated with the preferences of lower-income Americans and mass economic organizations such as trade unions, whereas Republican platforms evince a tilt toward the preferences of social issue organizations, business groups, and the affluent. For example, column 1 shows a multivariate regression using preferences at multiple income percentiles as independent variables and Democratic platform positions as the dependent variable, with only public opinion at the 10th percentile exhibiting a statistically significant, positive relationship with the party's platform stances. By contrast, as column 4 indicates, only preferences at the 90th percentile have a positive, statistically significant association with Republican platform positions.

The multivariate specifications show the same pattern as the bivariate regressions, with mass economic organizations' positions positively associated with Democratic platform stances, and social and business groups having a positive association with the Republican platform

positions. Column 2 indicates that, when other interest groups' positions are held at their means, mass economic organizations' support for a policy change makes it 26 percentage points more likely that the Democratic platform will support the change, versus when those organizations are in opposition. Meanwhile, both business and social interest groups' stances have a negative association with Democratic platform planks. On the Republican side, both social and business groups have an extremely strong, positive association with the party's platform positions. Indeed, if either business or social interest groups support a policy change, holding other independent variables at their means, the Republican platform is about 50 percentage points likelier to support that same change than if either the social or business groups opposed it.

In the regression in which public opinion by income percentile and interest group positions are combined, the picture is much the same: As column 3 demonstrates, the Democratic platform has positive, statistically significant associations with preferences at the 10th percentile and mass economic organizations, whereas column 6 demonstrates that the Republican platform is associated with public opinion of the affluent (those at the 90th percentile), and business and social conservative interest groups. Indeed, even in a regression including public opinion variables, the coefficients for business and social conservative groups are quite large and statistically significant. Again, support for a policy change by either of these groups makes it at least 50 percentage points likelier that the Republican platform will support the change, versus a situation in which either of the groups is opposed. By contrast, the point estimate for mass economic organizations and the Democratic platform is half as large, albeit still statistically significant. As in the bivariate specifications, social and business interest groups' positions have a negative association with Democratic platform stances, and mass economic organizations' positions vary inversely with Republican platform planks.

Table 4.3
Public Opinion, Interest Groups, and Party Platform Positions

	DV: Party Platform Positions					
	Democratic			Republican		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Preferences at 90th %ile	-.200 (.147)		-.108 (.161)	.685** (.150)		.451** (.151)
Preferences at 50th %ile	.027 (.216)		0.078 (.218)	-.282 (.219)		-.214 (.205)
Preferences at 10th %ile	.767** (.139)		.306* (.145)	-.242 (.142)		.111 (.136)
Business Groups		-.105** (.015)	-.055** (.017)		.252** (.016)	.250** (.016)
Mass Social Groups		-.232** (.027)	-.239** (.027)		.256** (.025)	.269** (.025)
Mass Economic Groups		.130** (.021)	.100** (.022)		-.040* (.019)	-.050* (.020)
Constant	-.282** (.031)	.034** (.011)	-.119** (.033)	-.090** (.032)	.051** (.010)	-.145** (.031)
Observations	2,508	1,836	1,836	2,508	1,836	1,836
Adj R-Squared	0.061	.085	.097	.013	.191	.209

Data include public opinion questions from 1981 to 2002, 2005-2006, and 2008-12.

Interest groups might provide one pathway to platform representation for people at various income levels. Previous scholarship (e.g. Grossman, et al., 2020; Drutman, 2015) finds that business groups tend to represent the economic interests of the affluent and mass-based groups may provide economic representation to the rest of the population. But the empirical evidence is mixed. There is some evidence that business groups have an impact on policy outcomes that is unrelated to public opinion of even the affluent, whereas mass-based advocacy groups exercise no independent influence on policy (Gilens and Page, 2014). Another study, using the Gilens and Page interest group dataset but adding party leaders' public stances and data on positions of additional mass-based interest groups, finds that, after controlling for party leaders' positions,

business groups' preferences lack a statistically significant relationship to policy adoption, whereas mass advocacy groups' positions have a positive, statistically significant association with federal policy changes (Grossman, et al. 2020).

As a simple, first step, I present information in Table 4 that shows the extent to which interest groups' positions are associated with preferences for policy change by income level. Like Grossman, et al., I relied on the Gilens and Page (2014) data regarding the public positions of about three dozen interest groups on proposed federal policy changes from 1981 to 2002. As a reminder, unlike previous scholars using the dataset, I coded the mass-based groups into two subgroups, one focusing on social issues and the other on economic issues. Therefore, the former, social group includes organizations such as the Christian Coalition and National Rifle Association, whereas the latter, mass economic group includes organizations such as the AFL-CIO and the AARP.

The groups vary significantly in their likelihood of providing pathways for citizen representation. Both business and social groups have negative correlations with the preferences of people at all income levels. Of course, that would not prevent them from representing the interests of the public on specific issues on which they are aligned, but the data below suggest that business and social groups' likelihood of supporting a policy change does not typically rise with increased public support for that change. By contrast, mass economic organizations exhibit a positive correlation with people's preferences all income levels. Moreover, that correlation is twice as high for people at the 10th percentile of the income distribution as for the affluent. Previous research (Grossman, et al. 2020) had found a positive correlation between middle-income preferences and advocacy groups' public positions. However, this relationship likely was attenuated by combining social and economic mass-based organizations that often take opposite sides on issues, as Table 4

indicates. Nor did this research use estimated preferences at the 10th percentile of the income distribution. Based on the positive correlation between mass economic organizations positions with the preferences of those at the 50th and 10th percentiles, it seems reasonable to suppose that mass economic organizations might provide some potential for representation for the non-affluent. But that potential for representation can be realized only if interest groups have a meaningful influence not just on platforms, but also on federal policy outcomes.

Table 4.4
Correlations Between Public Opinion and Interest Group Positions

	90th %ile	50th %ile	10th %ile	Business	Social	Mass Econ
90th %ile	1.000					
50th%ile	0.935	1.000				
10th %ile	0.842	0.929	1.000			
Business	-0.028	-0.097	-0.104	1.000		
Social	-0.081	-0.034	-0.017	0.078	1.000	
Mass Econ	0.111	0.216	0.254	-0.288	-0.158	1.000

Public opinion and interest group data cover 1981-2002.

As column 2 of Table 5 shows, two of the three types of interest groups do have a positive, statistically significant association between their issue positions and policy outcomes. Consistent with previous research (e.g. Gilens and Page 2014), the coefficient for business groups is largest, suggesting that when, on net, business groups support a federal policy initiative, it is 17.4 percentage points more likely to be enacted than when they oppose it. But the coefficient for mass economic groups is nearly as large. When mass economic groups support a proposed federal policy change, its likelihood of enactment is about 15 percentage points higher than when they oppose it. By contrast, the relationship between social groups’ positions and policy outcomes, while positive, does not come close to reaching statistical significance.

As column 1 of Table 5 shows, the addition of the Obama-era public opinion (2008 to 2012) and policy outcome data to the Gilens (1981 to 2002; 2005 to 2006) dataset does not change the overall picture of representation: The opinions of the affluent are most strongly related to federal policy outcomes. With other values held at their means, the coefficient for opinion at the 90th percentile is strongly associated with policy outcomes. For example, as support for federal policy changes at the 90th percentile rises from 20% to 80% (a range of values that captures nearly all observations), the likelihood of policy enactment increases about 34 percentage points. By contrast, the poor and middle class do not appear to have independent influence on policy outcomes. Conditioned on the means for other income levels, preferences at the 50th and 10th percentiles do not have a statistically significant relationship with federal policy outcomes.

Column 3 of Table 5 presents a multivariate regression showing that those at the 90th percentile and all interest group types have a positive, statistically significant relationship with federal policy changes. For example, when conditioned on the means for the other variables, a 1-percentage point increase in the affluent's support for policy change suggests about a 1-percentage-point increase in the likelihood of that change occurring. Similarly, the coefficients for the net interest group positions suggest that when each interest group type supports a policy change, it is between 15 and 18 percentage points more likely to occur than when each of the groups opposes the change. It should be noted, however, that, like other research using the Gilens and Page interest group data (e.g. Gilens and Page 2014; Grossman, et al. 2020), this analysis covers only the period 1981 to 2002, whereas the platform and public opinion data extend through 2012. Column 4 covers the period through 2012, showing again that both parties' platforms have a positive, statistically significant association with policy outcomes.

Column 5 of Table 5 shows the combined effects of platform position and party control of the federal government. As a reminder, the platform position for each party is coded +1 for support of a proposed policy change and -1 if the party platform explicitly opposes the change. Neutral positions are coded 0. The party control variable ranges from +1 to indicate unified Republican control of the federal government in the year pollsters asked about each proposed change, to -1 for unified Democratic control.⁶ If control of the federal government was divided during a given year, the variable was scored 0. During the years covered by this analysis (1981-2002, 2005-2006, and 2008-2012), there were relatively few years of unified control. The Democratic Party had unified control of the federal government in 1993 and 1994, but it lost control of both Houses of Congress during the 1994 elections. The Republican Party had unified control in 2005 and 2006, but it lost control of the Senate and House in the 2006 elections. (The Republican Party also had unified control for less than half a year in 2001 but lost control of the Senate when Jim Jeffords left the Republican Party. Given that the Republican Party controlled the Senate for less than half a year, I coded 2001 as 0 for divided.) The Democratic Party had unified control in 2009 and 2010 but promptly lost its House majority in 2010. Control of the federal government then remained divided through 2016.

Many of the results in column 5 of Table 5 are as one would expect, with affluent opinion continuing to have the strongest, most positive association with policy outcomes. The coefficient for those at the 90th percentile suggests, for example, that an increase in support for policy change from 20% to 80% among the affluent would increase the likelihood of enactment by about 64 percentage points, assuming other variables are held at their means. By contrast, the coefficients

⁶ An alternative coding strategy for the unified control variable, which accounted for the percentage of time control was unified or divided in the four years following when each policy change question was asked, yielded substantially similar results.

for the other income levels are either negative (for the 50th percentile) or positive but fail to reach conventional levels of statistical significance (10th percentile). The coefficients for party platform positions are also statistically significant and, in fact, are nearly identical to each other. For both the Democratic and Republican platforms, a policy change was about 15 percentage points more likely to occur if either party supported it versus when one of the parties opposed the policy initiative.

However, the results for an interaction term for party control and opinion by income level are inconsistent with expectations, suggesting that preferences at the 90th percentile are likelier to be associated with policy outcomes as Democratic control of the federal government increases. Based on the parties' platform positions and the fact that the Obama Administration's policy outputs were more consistent with the preferences of lower-income Americans, this result is unexpected. However, the estimates in column 5 are unreliable due to the high correlation of the base terms, producing implausibly large estimates for the interaction terms. For example, the interaction term for the 90th percentile opinion and party control suggests that, as control of the government moves from 0 (divided control) to unified Republican control (coded +1), a policy supported by 80% of the affluent would become 88 percentage points less likely to occur. By contrast a policy with 80% support among the middle class would, assuming a shift from divided to unified Republican control, be about 191 percentage points more likely to occur.

To address this collinearity, in columns 6 and 7, I dropped one of the highly correlated base terms and the related interaction term. In column 6, I removed the 10th percentile estimate, whereas in column 7, I dropped the 50th percentile estimate. As the correlation matrix above shows, the 50th percentile estimate had the greatest correlation with the measure for the 90th percentile, so the following analysis focuses on column 6, in which the 50th percentile estimate and interaction term

are dropped. Column 7 shows that the coefficient for the 90th percentile falls to about 0.47, suggesting that a 60-percentage-point increase in support among the affluent for a policy change suggests about a 28-percentage-point increase in its likelihood of occurring. The parties' platform positions remain statistically significant; conditioned on the means of the other independent variables, each party's support for a policy change is associated with about a 15-percentage-point greater likelihood of the policy's enactment than if the platforms are opposed to the change. In column 6 the coefficients of the interaction terms for party control and support for policy change, at both the 90th and 10th percentiles, are small and do not reach standard levels of statistical significance. However, in column 8, where I interact party control with the platform positions for each party, I find no statistically significant relationship between that interaction term and policy outcomes. That is, for example, there is no statistically significant relationship between greater Democratic control of the federal government and a higher likelihood of enactment of Democratic platform items.

Table 4.5
Public Opinion, Interest Groups, Party Control, and Policy Outcomes
All Issues

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Preferences at 90th %ile	0.562** (0.132)		1.036** (0.159)	0.540** (0.131)	1.068** (0.276)	0.492** (0.125)	0.469** (0.080)	0.475** (0.080)
Preferences at 50th %ile	0.121 (0.194)		-0.348 (0.216)	-0.109 (0.192)	-1.056* (0.434)	-0.061 (0.121)		
Preferences at 10th %ile	0.064 (0.125)		-0.256 (0.143)	-0.008 (0.125)	0.461 (0.282)		0.042 (0.079)	-0.061 (0.079)
Business Groups		0.087** (0.017)	0.078** (0.027)					
Mass Social Groups		0.039 (0.027)	0.076** (0.027)					
Mass Economic Groups		0.076** (0.021)	0.088** (0.021)					
Rep Platform Position				0.075** (0.018)	0.076** (0.018)	0.079** (0.018)	0.080** (0.018)	0.151* (0.074)
Dem Platform Position				0.115** (0.020)	0.076** (0.018)	0.075** (0.018)	0.075** (0.018)	0.216** (0.078)
Party Control					-0.213 (0.117)	-0.124* (0.057)	-0.113 (0.059)	-0.122** (0.018)
Pty Ctl x 90 %ile					-1.100* (0.488)	-0.405 (0.231)	-0.058 (0.152)	
Pty Ctl x 50 %ile					1.912** (0.743)	0.422 (0.228)		
Pty Ctl x 10 %ile					-0.881 (0.491)		0.057 (0.151)	
Pty Ctl x Rep Position								-0.154 (0.158)
Pty Ctl x Dem Position								-0.265 (0.163)
Constant	0.027 (0.028)	0.330** (0.011)	0.083* (0.033)	0.069* (0.029)	0.161* (0.064)	0.106 (0.055)	0.111* (0.055)	0.067* (0.028)
Observations	2,508	1,836	1,836	2,508	2,508	2,508	2,508	2,508
Adj R-Squared	0.044	0.016	0.068	0.060	0.075	0.073	0.074	0.077

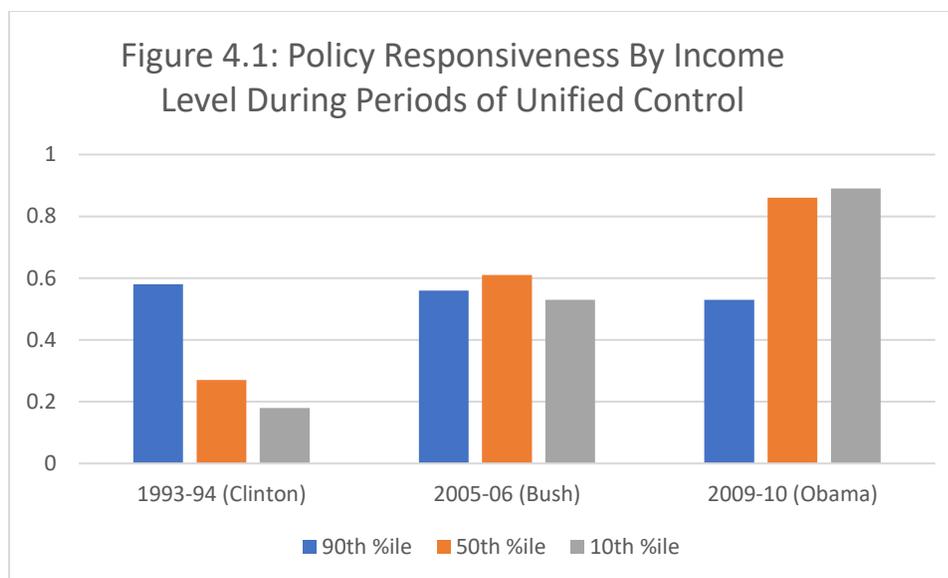
Data include public opinion questions and party platform positions from 1981 to 2002, 2005-2006, and 2008-2012. Interest group positions cover 1981 to 2002.

Nevertheless, these results for the interaction terms are inconsistent with expectations. For example, given that the Democratic platform positions are more positively associated with the preferences of the poor and middle class, and that the parties' platform positions are positively associated with federal policy outcomes, I expected that greater Democratic control of the federal

government would lead to policy outcomes that are more favorable for lower-income Americans. And greater Republican control should lead to policy outcomes that are more favorable for the affluent. But the interaction terms are inconsistent with these predictions.

To some extent, these results may reflect a relative paucity of heterogeneity in party control during the period this paper covers. As noted above, between 1981 and 2016, there was unified control of the federal government for only six complete years: 1993-1994, 2005-2006, and 2009-2010. For the other 30 years in that period, control of the federal government was divided. As a result, the party control variable has relatively variation—and what variation exists could be influenced heavily by a single Administration.

Indeed, the Clinton Administration appears to be an outlier with respect to the analysis of public opinion by income level and party control. Figure 1 shows policy responsiveness by income level during the three periods of unified control included in this study. The figure shows the coefficients for preferences by income percentile regressed against the dummy outcome variable, coded 1 when a policy was enacted and 0 when the policy change did not occur within the four-year window following a particular question. For degree of partisan control, the analysis uses the control of government during the year when a particular question was asked. For example, for a question about a policy change in 1993, the partisan control variable is coded -1 to reflect unified Democratic control. As noted elsewhere in this dissertation, during the Obama period of unified Democratic control, the coefficients were as predicted, with greater responsiveness to lower- and middle-income citizens than to the affluent. The Bush years evinced slightly greater responsiveness to the middle class than to the affluent, but the Clinton policy outputs during unified Democratic control were tilted heavily toward the affluent—exactly the opposite of what the party platforms would have predicted.



Why were early-1990s, Clinton-era policy outputs tilted so heavily toward the affluent? As noted elsewhere in this dissertation, Clinton positioned himself as a moderate and, for his reelection campaign, explicitly pursued a policy of “triangulation,” in which he attempted to chart a middle course between members of his own party and the Republicans—and indeed to coopt some Republican ideas and take credit for them (Nesmith and Quirk, 2016). To some extent, that decision not to ally himself with congressional Democrats might explain some of his Administration’s lack of responsiveness to lower-income Americans. One can also look to specific issue areas where Clinton’s actions deviated from the wishes of lower-income Americans. For example, in 1993 Clinton sought and received congressional approval to increase aid to the then-fledgling Russian democracy—a policy supported by 60% of those at the 90th percentile but only 30% of those at the 30th percentile. Several questions dealt with the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which Congress ultimately approved but which routinely received more support from the affluent than from the poor and middle class. Typical was a 1993 poll that found 55% support for NAFTA among the affluent but only 37% support from those at the 50th percentile and an estimated 34% of lower-income respondents. Lower-income Americans also routinely

expressed greater support for various elements of health-care reform, which the Clinton Administration failed to achieve, but much higher opposition to a proposed assault-weapons ban, which was enacted into law in 1994.

Clinton's policy outputs during unified Democratic control of the government also differed from Democratic patterns in that mass economic organizations such as labor unions appeared to have little influence over policy outcomes. As noted above, among interest groups, mass economic organizations had the greatest correlation with the views of those with relatively modest incomes. To the extent that labor unions and similar groups got shut out of policymaking during the early Clinton years, that would have been to the detriment of those at the 10th percentile. As column 1 of Table 6 shows, during the period of unified Democratic control, there was essentially no relationship between the preferences of mass economic unions and policy outputs. Meanwhile, there was a strong, positive, statistically significant association between the positions of business groups and policy outputs. Indeed, for questions asked during this period of unified Democratic control, a policy was more than 50 percentage points more likely to be enacted if business groups, on net, supported rather than opposed it. This Democratic lack of responsiveness did not arise because the party turned its back on its platform commitments. Indeed, the coefficient of 0.33 is relatively high, suggesting that if the Democratic platform supported a proposed policy change, it was 33 percentage points likelier to occur than if the platform was silent on the issue. Rather, it appears that during the early Clinton Administration, the party simply enacted platform positions that were not favored by its key anchoring group constituents, trade unions and mass-based organizations such as the AARP. Moreover, consistent with the triangulation strategy mentioned above and as column 2 of Table 6 indicates, the Clinton Administration often enacted policies that were consistent with the *Republican* platform.

Table 4.6
Interest Groups, Platforms, and Policymaking, 1993-94

	(1)	(2)
Business Groups	0.264** (0.065)	0.196* (0.076)
Mass Social Groups	-0.018 (0.073)	0.026 (0.074)
Mass Economic Groups	0.024 (0.070)	0.025 (0.066)
Rep Platform Position		0.146* (0.072)
Dem Platform Position		0.330** (0.068)
Constant	0.461** (0.039)	0.420** (0.038)
Observations	210	210
Adj R-Squared	0.072	0.168
Data cover 1993 and 1994		

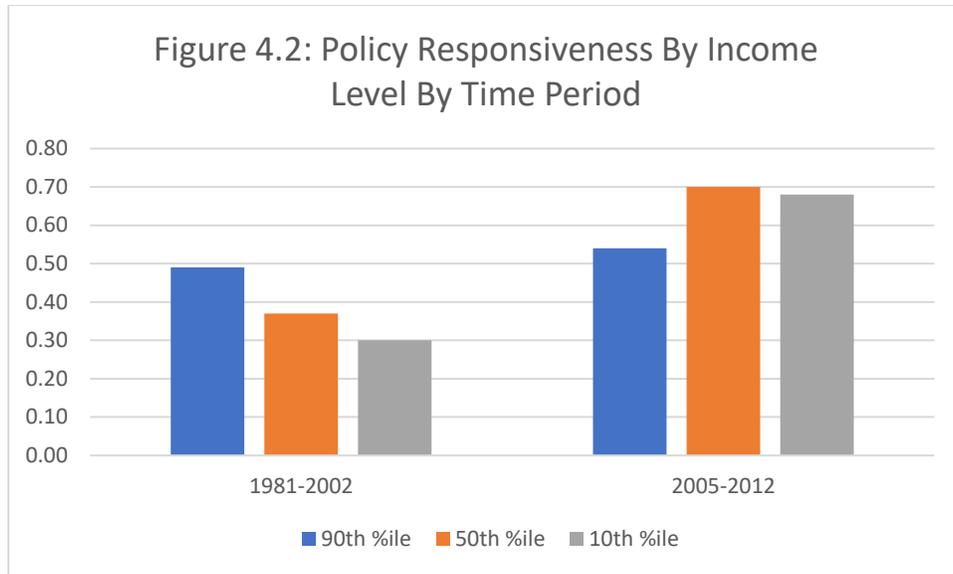
This Democratic catering to business interests in the early Clinton years contributed to the relatively low level of representation of lower-income citizens' interests. As Table 7 indicates, in 1992 and 1993 business groups' preferences were negatively correlated with public opinion at all income levels, but especially for those at the 10th percentile. Meanwhile, mass-based economic organizations continued to exhibit a strong, positive correlation with the preferences of lower-income Americans, but as noted in Table 6, these organizations' views were not strongly associated with policy outcomes during the period.

Table 4.7
Correlations Between Public Opinion and Interest Group Positions

	90th %ile	50th %ile	10th %ile	Business	Social	Mass Econ
90th %ile	1.000					
50th%ile	0.935	1.000				
10th %ile	0.842	0.929	1.000			
Business	-0.028	-0.097	-0.104	1.000		
Social	-0.081	-0.034	-0.017	0.078	1.000	
Mass Econ	0.111	0.216	0.254	-0.288	-0.158	1.000

Public opinion and interest group data cover 1993 and 1994.

In addition to the Clinton-as-outlier explanation, one other possibility is that, after the 1981-2002 period covered in many studies of income inequality and representation (Gilens 2005; Gilens and Page 2014; Grossman, et al. 2020), the less affluent simply received better representation regardless of party. This would also be inconsistent with predictions derived by an analysis of party platforms. For the periods up through 2002 and then 2005 and later, Figure 2 below shows the independently estimated coefficients for preferences by income percentile and federal policy outcomes. As the figure shows, federal policymaking had a decided tilt toward the preferences of the affluent for questions asked in 2002 and before, but middle-class and lower-income citizens’ preferences were more strongly associated with policy outputs in the latter period. That is, one cannot rule out the possibility that the federal government’s policy outputs were inherently biased against lower- and middle-income Americans for a few decades leading up to the early 2000s, but something subsequently changed to ensure that the policy system generate outputs that were more favorable to them. Just what that “something” is, however, is unclear.



REPRESENTATION BY ISSUE AREA

Contrary to previous research (Gilens, 2005; 2012), I find that the degree of representation varies significantly by issue area, with lower-income citizens' preferences more consistent with federal policy outputs for domestic economic issues than in other domains. The addition of the Obama-era public opinion and policy output data account for this apparent change. As Chapter 3 shows, Obama Administration policy outputs more faithfully reflected the preferences of lower-income Americans for economic issues. Below I present results by issue area that include public opinion data from 1981 to 2002, 2005 and 2006, and 2008 to 2012.

As Table 8 indicates, the long-term data show that lower-income Americans did not suffer a representational deficit for economic issues. That is, as the bivariate estimates in columns 1, 2, and 3 indicate, the coefficients for each income level are virtually identical. To take one example, if public opinion for a policy change rose 50 percentage points at the 90th percentile, the estimate suggests a 28-percentage-point greater likelihood of change. For a similar change in the level of opinion at the 10th percentile, the policy's likelihood of enactment would rise by about 28.7

percentage points. In this domain, each party's platform positions are positively associated with subsequent federal policy outcomes. The data in column 4 suggest that Democratic support for an economic policy change makes is 40 percentage points more likely to be enacted than if the platform opposes the change. The Republican platform position is associated with a smaller but still statically significant 16-percentage-point change in the likelihood of enactment. As column 6 indicates, the inclusion of variables relating to party results in preferences at the 90th percentile lacking a statistically significant relationship with policy outputs, whereas preferences at the 10th percentile and the party platform positions remain significant and positively associated with policy outcomes.

Table 4.8
Public Opinion, Party Control, and Policy Outcomes
Domestic Economic Issues

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Preferences at 90th %ile	.560** (.066)				.382* (.188)	.209 (.115)
Preferences at 50th %ile		.544** (.061)			-.315 (.272)	
Preferences at 10th %ile			.573** (.061)		.465** (.178)	.301** (.109)
Rep Platform Position				.082** (.025)	.067** (.025)	.070** (.025)
Dem Platform Position				.200** (.027)	.115** (.029)	.117** (.029)
Party Control					-.146 -.089	-.159 (.087)
Pty Ctl x 90 %ile					.061 (.377)	.265 (.222)
Pty Ctl x 50 %ile					.394 (.580)	
Pty Ctl x 10 %ile					-.313 (.374)	-.095 (.205)
Constant	-.006 (.040)	.003 (.037)	-.004 (.036)	.302** -.013	.007 (.042)	.017 (.041)
Observations	1,246	1,246	1,246	1,246	1,246	1,246
Adj R-Squared	.053	.059	.067	.044	.086	.086

Data include public opinion questions and party platform positions from 1981 to 2002, 2005-2006, and 2008-2012.

The representational picture changes dramatically for social issues, where the preferences of the affluent have shown the greatest correspondence with policy outcomes. Indeed, as the estimates in columns 1, 2, and 3 of Table 9 indicate, the coefficient for public opinion and policy outcomes at the 90th percentile is more than 60% higher than that at the 10th percentile. Or put more straightforwardly, a 50-percentage point increase in support for a policy change at the 90th percentile is associated with a 22-percentage-point greater likelihood of enactment, versus 14 percentage points at the 10th ptcomes, but the Republican platform is not. Throughout the period

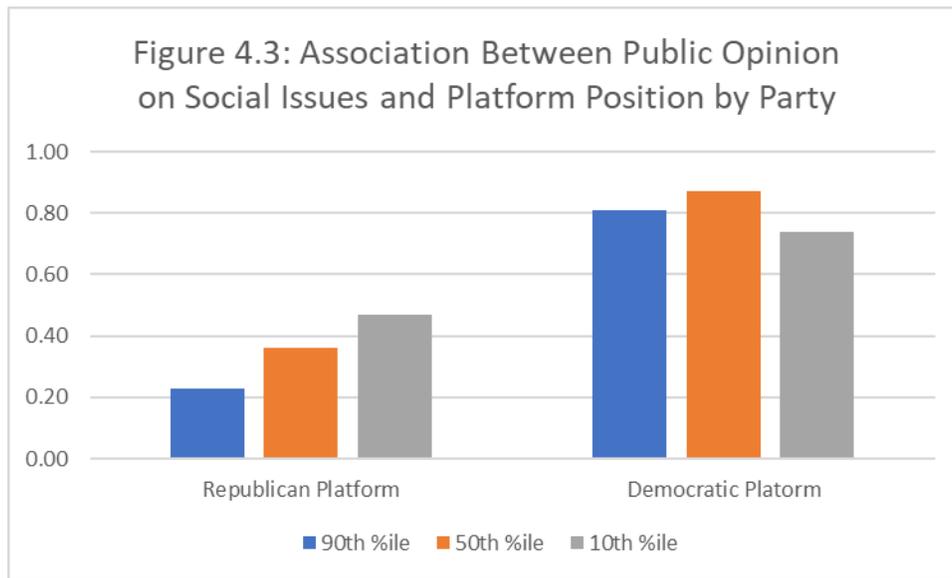
of this study, the Republican platform espoused views on social issues that did not prevail on the policy front. For example, the Republican platform has regularly called for an end to most abortions, a ban on gays serving in the military, and a prohibition on same-sex marriage. To be sure, Republicans have scored some wins, including successfully opposing most meaningful gun control efforts. But as column 6 of Table 9 indicates, the more-liberal views of the affluent and the Democratic Party have generally prevailed in the social arena.

Table 4.9
Public Opinion, Party Control, and Policy Outcomes
Social Issues

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Preferences at 90th %ile	0.446** (0.089)				0.810** (0.260)	0.549** (0.168)
Preferences at 50th %ile		0.351** (0.090)			-0.511 (0.388)	
Preferences at 10th %ile			0.274** (0.093)		-0.110 (0.257)	-0.364* (0.168)
Rep Platform Position				0.017 (0.029)	0.015 (0.028)	0.014 (0.028)
Dem Platform Position				0.142** (0.028)	0.100** (0.028)	0.095** (0.028)
Party Control					0.105 (0.108)	0.101 (0.107)
Pty Ctl x 90 %ile					-0.533 (0.523)	-0.351 (0.326)
Pty Ctl x 50 %ile					0.308 (0.755)	
Pty Ctl x 10 %ile					-0.229 (0.511)	-0.097 (0.358)
Constant	-0.082 (0.053)	-0.025 (0.053)	0.018 (0.054)	0.162** (0.018)	0.023 (0.058)	0.029 -0.058
Observations	446	446	446	446	446	446
Adj R-Squared	0.052	0.031	0.018	0.052	0.142	0.142

Data include public opinion questions and party platform positions from 1981 to 2002, 2005-2006, and 2008-2012.

Although data presented above indicate that the Democratic Party platforms generally reflect the views of the less affluent, the opposite is true for social issues. As a result, the Republican Party’s inability to deliver on its promises about social issues has likely contributed to worse overall representation of the poor and middle class. As Figure 3 below suggests, Republican Party positions are more closely associated with the preferences of the lowest-income Americans than with the policy views of the affluent. And the Democratic platform tends not to favor the views of the poorest Americans, with a greater alignment to the social-issue preferences of the affluent and the middle class.



Similarly, for foreign policy and international issues, including trade and defense policy, lower-income American seemingly receive less representation. As columns 1, 2, and 3 of Table 9 indicate, there is a relatively strong relationship between the preferences of the affluent and the middle class, on the one hand, and policy outcomes on the other. But for those at the 10th percentile, the estimate is much lower and is not statistically significant. As noted in Chapter 3, lower-income Americans consistently expressed less support for overseas military engagements in Afghanistan and Iraq. The non-affluent regularly expressed less support for trade liberalization as well. Typical

was one 1992 poll finding that 55 percent of those at the 90th percentile favored a free-trade agreement with Mexico, compared with 30 percent those at the 10th percentile. Lower-income respondents generally also reported much lower support than the affluent for initiatives such as the Uruguay Round of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, which took effect in 1995. In this foreign domain, Republican platform positions had a positive, statistically significant association with Democratic positions were inversely related to policy outcomes. In the 1980s, for example, many questions related to US aid to the Contra rebels in Nicaragua, sanctions against the South African apartheid regime, and defense spending. In general, the Democratic positions were in opposition to what happened. Overall, as column 6 indicates, in this area Republican Party positions and the preferences of the affluent tended to drive policy outcomes, while the preferences of lower-income American were not positively associated with policy developments.

Table 4.9
 Public Opinion, Party Control, and Policy Outcomes
 Foreign Policy and International Issues

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Preferences at 90th %ile	0.600** (0.118)				1.000** (0.290)	1.169** (0.182)
Preferences at 50th %ile		0.380** (0.119)			0.316 (0.436)	
Preferences at 10th %ile			0.171 (0.121)		-0.813** -0.289	-0.665** (0.186)
Rep Platform Position				0.179** (0.051)	0.159** (0.048)	0.159** (0.047)
Dem Platform Position				-0.064 0.062	-0.119* (0.059)	-0.119* (0.059)
Party Control					-0.280* (0.131)	-0.262* (0.130)
Pty Ctl x 90 %ile					-0.924 (0.468)	-0.491 (0.330)
Pty Ctl x 50 %ile					0.981 (0.754)	
Pty Ctl x 10 %ile					0.048 (0.550)	0.579 (0.357)
Constant	0.169** (0.066)	0.286** (0.067)	0.398** (0.067)	0.471** (0.023)	0.195** (0.066)	0.198** (0.066)
Observations	489	489	489	489	489	489
Adj R-Squared	0.049	0.049	0.002	0.023	0.169	0.168

Data include public opinion questions and party platform positions from 1981 to 2002, 2005-2006, and 2008-2012.

CONCLUSION

In short, we lack adequate data to select among three possible explanations: that the Clinton period of unified government is an outlier that fails to conform to prediction, that the Obama period of unified government is an outlier that does conform, and that something structurally changed in the mid-2000 that caused policy outcomes to be more strongly associated with the preferences of

lower- and middle-income Americans. Collecting additional data for the Trump years, as well as for the Biden Administration as times passes, may provide additional leverage to weigh these competing explanations.

There are a few things that the data do allow us to say, however. The Republican platform generally reflects the preferences of business groups, social conservatives, and the affluent. However, the importance of socially conservatives to the Republican coalition is evident in the Republican platform, leading to one area in which the party's stances do not reflect the preferences of the well-to-do. The Democratic platform tends to be consistent with the preferences of mass economic groups and lower- and middle-class Americans—but not for social issues such as gay rights, where the party's relatively well-educated professional class has much more liberal views than poorer Americans. Both parties' platform positions display a positive, statistically significant association with policy outcomes. Like previous scholars, I found a strong association between business groups' public positions and policy outcomes. But unlike some previous research (Gilens and Page, 2014), I found a strong association between policy outputs on the one hand, and mass social and economic groups on the other. Although social groups such as the Christian Coalition express preferences that are not associated with public opinion at any income level, mass economic groups share many policy preferences with the mass public, especially the relatively disadvantaged. On balance, notwithstanding the Clinton-era policy outputs, the platform data and Obama-era public opinion and policy outcomes suggest that additional Democratic election wins may provide one avenue to improve representation of the non-affluent. Legislation to bolster mass economic organizations such as trade unions may do the same.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

This dissertation began with a question: Is the American political system rigged against those with modest or moderate means? Based on the evidence presented in this dissertation, the answer is no.

First, as Chapter 3 showed, policymaking during the Obama Administration was consistent with the preferences of low- and moderate-income Americans. If the system is rigged against the non-affluent, there was little evidence of that during the Obama years. Lower- and middle-income Americans received especially strong representation in the economic arena. Did they get everything they wanted? Of course not. But on key issues such as tax hikes on the wealthy and the expansion of health-insurance coverage to more Americans, the Obama Administration delivered on their economic priorities. Similarly, even during a period of unified Republican control of the federal government, from 2005 to 2006, the priorities of the affluent were not privileged. Indeed, during that two-year period, the evidence shows the middle class' preferences were most tightly aligned with policy outcomes. And the empirical evidence shows that over the long term, in the economic arena the affluent were no more likely to have their priorities enacted than were those at the 10th percentile of the income distribution.

Second, lower- and middle-class Americans have powerful allies in the political arena: the Democratic Party and mass economic organizations like trade unions. For economic issues, Democratic Party platform positions continue to be most closely associated with the preferences of low- and middle-income Americans. And as Chapter 2 shows, the Democratic Party, like the Republican Party, has shown an ability to get its policy agenda enacted, especially for economic issues. Similarly, there is a strong, positive association between the preferences of lower-income

Americans and the issue positions of mass economic organizations. These trade unions and other mass-based interest groups not only share many of the policy objectives of the non-affluent, but the evidence in Chapter 4 shows they often have the clout to get their priorities enacted.

To be sure, the picture is not entirely positive for lower-and middle-income Americans. For one, the Republican Party's platform positions are driven by the preferences of the affluent, business groups, and social conservative organizations. These trade groups are often at odds with public opinion at all levels, so they are unlikely to become strong political allies for low- and middle-income Americans. And the Democratic Party—so often an ally of the non-affluent—cannot be counted upon to represent the interests of the poor and middle class in the social arena. Indeed, for social issues, the party's platform positions are most closely related to the preferences of those at the 90th percentile. Given the Democratic Party's increasing dependence on white, urban and suburban professionals, who lean left on many social issues, it is unlikely to provide effective representation for the non-affluent in the social arena.

Although it seems like good news that poor and middle-income people won as often as the affluent on economic issues during a 30-year period, even the long-term data on responsiveness are not uniformly positive. In addition to social issues, in foreign policy matters the relatively well-off got their way more than the rest of the public. Lower-income Americans consistently demonstrated less support for foreign wars and trade liberalization—but the federal policymaking apparatus did not respond to them. Perhaps this lack of responsiveness paved the way for a demagogic presidential candidate, Donald Trump, who inveighed against terrible trade deals and took more of an isolationist tack on international affairs.

And yet there may be reasons for hope for more-equal representation. Scholars' concerns about inequality and representation have often focused on economic issues because of fears that

the affluent could tilt policymaking to improve their financial fortunes, which in turn would give them more influence over policymaking—in a self-reinforcing, inequality-exacerbating cycle. But there is no evidence of unequal representation about the long-term data relating to economic issues. And on economic issues, the Democratic Party continued to take position that were aligned with the preferences of the non-affluent, at least up through 2012. Finally, as noted above, even during a period of unified control in 2005 and 2006 by the Republican Party—a party whose platform positions decidedly favor the affluent and business interests—federal policy outputs did not favor the affluent.

Near the end of an academic book or article, it is customary for the scholar to call for more research on a subject. Let this dissertation be no exception to that rule. Some unresolved questions about inequality and representation can only be answered with more data. Did something change in the US political system in the mid-2000s, allowing better representation for the poor and middle class? The limited data from the Obama Administration and second Bush term are suggestive of a change but are hardly definitive. Can the Democratic Party continue to attract urban and suburban professionals, while continuing to advocate for redistributive policies preferred by the disadvantaged? Will the Republican Party, becoming more rural and comprising people with lower levels of formal education, continue to advocate for tax cuts for the affluent? Only time and additional data collection, covering the Trump and Biden presidencies, will shed additional light on these questions.

APPENDIX TO CHAPTER 4

To analyze the relationship between public opinion and platform positions, one might use the parties' platform positions either before or after a question was asked. This paper relies primarily on previous platform positions, but the author recognizes the legitimate criticism that it is possible that platform positions might influence public opinion, meaning that the causal relationship, if any, at least partly goes from platform to public opinion, rather than the other way around. In short, we might be measuring the influence of official party positions on public opinion rather than evaluating which party's platform is more associated with genuinely held opinions.

However, there are reasons to believe the previous platform may be useful as well, especially as regards predicting subsequent government behavior. First, platform policy planks sometimes refer to recent policy changes. For example, the 2012 Democratic platform contained numerous references to approval of the Affordable Care Act. But a platform that was adopted after the ACA's passage is not a reliable predictor of whether the ACA will be adopted. (However, it was a useful predictor of whether the Democrats would resist subsequent efforts to repeal the ACA.) Second, platforms are not widely read by the public and therefore are unlikely to sway public opinion. Third, interest group positions likely reflect the genuine positions of their constituents, rather than a simple adoption of the party's issues positions. It seems unlikely that the Family Research Council would adopt a potential Republican Party pro-abortion provision, or that labor unions often would support a Democratic position to tilt the playing field toward business instead of workers.

But perhaps more compellingly, the data show that the post-question platforms bear the same relationship to public opinion as the pre-question platform provisions. That is, as Table 10

indicates, when using the platform provisions following the posing of a policy change question, the Democratic platform is most positively associated with the preferences of the non-affluent, while the Republican platform positions are most tightly linked with the policy preferences of those at the 90th percentile of the income distribution. These results are substantively similar to those obtained by using the previous platforms. And the Democratic platform also has a positive association with the positions of mass economic groups such as trade unions, whereas the Republican platform shares issue positions with social conservative and business interest groups. Thus, the relationship between preferences by income level and interest group positions, on the one hand, and the parties' platform positions on the other, is substantially similar regardless of whether the previous or subsequent platform is used.

Table A.1
Public Opinion and Party Platform Positions

	DV: Party Platform Positions					
	Democratic			Republican		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Preferences at 90th %ile	0.854** (0.060)			0.304** (0.067)		
Preferences at 50th %ile		0.951** (0.057)			0.144* (0.065)	
Preferences at 10th %ile			1.024** (0.057)			-0.032 (0.065)
Constant	-0.386** (0.036)	-0.439** (0.034)	-0.468** (0.033)	-0.118** (0.040)	-0.027 (0.039)	0.071 (0.038)
Observations	2,508	2,508	2,508	2508	2,508	2,508
Adj R-Squared	0.075	0.100	0.115	0.008	0.002	0.000

Data include public opinion questions from 1981 to 2002, 2005-2006, and 2008-12. Platforms positions are from 1980 to 2012, and represent each party's platform position following a proposed policy change.

Table A.2
Interest Groups and Party Platform Positions

	Democratic			Republican		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Business Groups	-.163** (.021)			.379** (.021)		
Mass Social Groups		-.217** (.034)			.542** (.035)	
Mass Economic Groups			.339** (.024)			-.222** (.027)
Constant	.065** (.014)	-0.055* (.014)	.092** (.013)	.101** (.014)	.126** (.014)	.079** (.015)
Observations	1,836	1,836	1,836	1,836	1,836	1,836
Adj R-Squared	.032	.022	.098	.152	.118	.035

Data include public opinion questions from 1981 to 2002. Platform positions are from 1980 to 2004, and represent each party's platform position following a proposed policy change.

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