Are Democrats Really the Party of the Poor? Partisanship, Class, and Representation in the U.S. Senate

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Abstract

Scholars have identified partisan differences in policy representation—with Republicans more often found to represent the rich, while Democrats align with the preferences of less affluent voters. This paper explores these partisan differences, questioning this simple conclusion on both theoretical and methodological grounds. Instead, we develop and test a theory in which elected officials of both parties represent their co-partisans, who agree with one another on many policy issues. Yet, on a subset of issues, upper class and lower class co-partisans have diverging policy preferences: rich and poor Democrats disagree on social issues while rich and poor Republicans disagree on economic issues. We analyze roll call voting in the U.S. Senate and find that, in these cases, senators of both parties better represent the preferences held by affluent members of their party. Our findings underscore the value in examining the content of policy debates and theorizing about different forms of representation.

Keywords

inequality, political parties, representation, Congress

The conventional wisdom among political scientists and journalists alike is that Democrats are the party of the poor, and Republicans are the party of the rich. To be sure, this conventional wisdom is motivated by party platforms: Democrats typically support redistribution of income while Republicans oppose such redistribution. However, this conventional wisdom seems to be at odds with Democrats' efforts to push for liberal moral policies—such as abortion rights and same-sex marriage—despite the fact that lower-class Americans are more conservative on these issues (Ansolabehere, Rodden, and Snyder 2006; Bartels 2009; Flavin 2012; Gilens, 2005, 2009). At least on social issues, the Democratic Party's platform seems to be more reflective of the preferences of the rich than the poor.[1]

To reconcile the conventional wisdom with this reality, we must carefully examine policy positions held by different subgroups. Our analysis is motivated by the following questions: do rich Democrats share the same policy preferences as rich Republicans? On what issues do they agree and on what issues do they differ? It is also necessary to advance the extant literature by probing differences in representational inequality between a senator's geographic constituency and co-partisans in their state. If we want to truly understand representational inequality, then our analysis must reflect the fact that senators represent those who put them in office; senators

do not typically make decisions in an effort to win over strong partisans of the opposite party.

In this paper, we take on these questions and investigate representational inequalities in the U.S. Senate by political party. Using Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES) survey data on Senate roll call votes from 2006 to 2014, we examine rich-poor differences in policy preferences and representation. We find that, on economic issues, the Republican rich are more conservative than the Republican poor, and Republican senators overrepresent the preferences of the rich when compared with the poor. Conversely, the Democratic rich and poor are largely in agreement on economic issues, so there is little room for the rich to be overrepresented vis-à-vis the poor. However, on social issues, we see that the Republican rich and poor are largely in agreement with one another, yet the Democratic rich are *more liberal* than the poor, and Democratic senators overrepresent the preferences of rich co-partisans on these social issues.

Once we look within each party, we see that both Democrats and Republicans consistently represent the

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rich better than the poor when rich and poor co-partisans have diverging policy preferences. We are also able to further extend our analysis to examine the specific votes taken by Members of Congress. This issue-specific analysis allows us to compare the magnitude of preference gaps and the level of representational inequality on the same policy issue. This is an important extension to models often used in the literature, which rely on scaling techniques that capture aggregate policy liberalism (such as state parties' electoral platforms examined by Rigby and Wright [2013] and Wright and Rigby [forthcoming]).

Furthermore, we demonstrate a nearly one-to-one relationship between the degree to which the rich disagree with the poor and the degree to which the rich are better represented than the poor. This analysis suggests that senators of both parties are highly attuned to the policy preferences of the rich, and their roll call voting behavior deliberately reflects the wishes of rich co-partisans. In an era of polarized political parties, this means that both parties are more extreme than they otherwise would be if they weighted the policy preferences of the poor equally with those of the rich: Republicans are more conservative on economic issues and Democrats are more liberal on social issues than they would be if they listened to the poor as much as the rich.

An Often-Biased Political System

Recent empirical investigations have illustrated uneven responsiveness of policymakers to citizens from different income groups (Bartels 2009; Druckman and Jacobs 2011; Gilens 2005; Gilens and Page 2014; Jacobs and Page 2005; Rigby and Wright 2011). Together, these studies suggest that American democracy is falling far short of its ideal of political equality due to policymakers' heightened attention to more affluent constituents and political elites at the expense of the poor. In a seminal work—also examining the U.S. Senate—Bartels (2009) found a strong relationship between the voting records of U.S. senators and the ideology of their more affluent constituents; this relationship was weaker for middle-income constituents, and nearly nonexistent for opinions held by the poorest groups. Later, Hayes (2013) examined this question across multiple Congresses and also found consistent overrepresentation of upper income constituents relative to lower income ones in senators' voting records.

Examining policy outcomes of the federal government, Gilens (2009, 2012) finds that when the views of low- or middle-income Americans diverge from those held by the affluent, there is virtually no relationship between the policy preferences held by those less advantaged and the rate or direction of policy change adopted at the federal level. The rich are also overrepresented at the state level (Flavin 2012), and biases in representation

may begin early on in the policy process, as candidates' platforms are better reflective of the preferences of the rich (Rigby and Wright 2013), and state legislators are more likely to introduce bills that reflect the policy priorities of the rich (Flavin and Franko 2017).

It is important to note that a necessary precondition of the overrepresentation of the rich is divergent preferences between the rich and poor. This point was made eloquently by Soroka and Wlezien (2008) after finding a great deal of similarity in preferences for increasing or decreasing spending across income groups in the General Social Survey. Soroka and Wlezien concluded that this congruence of average opinion across socioeconomic groups places a "healthy limit" on the representational inequality that can occur, as even if the poor are entirely ignored by their elected officials, they will still get what they want—to the degree that their preferences overlap with groups that are better represented in the political system. Enns (2015) points out that even when the rich and poor disagree, the majority of the rich and majority of the poor still both support (or oppose) the issue. Because of this, the poor find themselves represented in American public policy outputs even if politicians are not paying active attention to their interests. On a wide range of issues, Branham, Soroka, and Wlezien (2017) find that across income groups, disagreement between income groups in the public is rare; and they find that, because of this, public policy is only slightly more conservative than it would be if politicians listened to the median as much as they listen to the rich. Likewise, Tausanovitch (2016) finds that the rich are better represented than the poor in Congress, but only to a small degree.

Because the degree to which scholars find representational inequality depends upon where one looks, paying attention to the issues included in a study of representation is vital. On some issues, representational inequality exists—the rich and poor disagree, and the rich are represented much better than the poor. Yet, on many other issues, representational inequality is negligible, which may reflect the reality that, on those issues, the rich and poor are mostly in agreement with one another.

Partisan Differences in Unequal Representation

A number of studies have identified greater differential responsiveness from Republican parties, Republican policymakers, and Republican-controlled government. For example, Bartels (2009) found differential responsiveness for both parties; yet, the greatest skew was among Republican senators. Gilens (2012) similarly found that income-based biases in representation were greatest under Republican control of the federal government when the preferences of the rich and poor diverge, although

both parties exhibit a bias toward the rich. Further research has reinforced the notion that Republicans are the party more likely to represent the affluent—with the Democratic Party showing less bias toward the rich, and was sometimes found to exhibit a bias toward the poor (Brunner, Ross, and Washington 2013; Ellis 2013; Griffin and Newman 2016; Rhodes and Schaffner 2017). In fact, Rhodes and Schaffner (2017) characterize these partisan differences as ones in which Americans represented by Republicans experience an "oligarchic mode of representation," which they contrast with the "populist model" experienced by those represented by Democrats. The fact that Republicans seem more likely to represent the rich is often understood as a function of their generally wealthier constituency (Stonecash 2000) and their heightened attentiveness to co-partisan constituents (Clinton 2006).

However, other research undermines this conventional wisdom. First, when examining all policies—including those where the rich and poor agree—Gilens (2012) finds that policy outputs are *more* responsive to all income groups, including the poor, under Republican control of government when compared with Democratic control.

Second, although Republicans' policy platforms might be more in line with the rich, both parties are dependent upon the mobilization and resources of the affluent. Both parties increasingly focus their mobilization efforts on the rich, who are more likely to vote and contribute to political campaigns (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1992; Schier 2000). Campbell (2007) documented a sharp increase in both Republican and Democratic parties' efforts to mobilize high-income voters over the last few decades, which has resulted in a world in which both parties depend on the wealthy to finance their campaigns. As Republicans have a natural fundraising advantage given the higher average income of their party's supporters, these resource constraints may be most consequential for the Democratic Party (Rigby and Wright 2013). For example, Rigby and Wright (2013) found representation to be particularly skewed among Democratic parties in states with high levels of income inequality—states where campaigns are more likely to be reliant on the contributions of a smaller but wealthier share of the citizens in the state.

Looking in the Right Places for Representational Inequality

Extant scholarship leaves us with an empirical puzzle. Republicans are the "party of the rich" while Democrats serve as the "party of the poor," with Democrats displaying *less* representational bias than do Republicans. Yet, both parties are dependent on wealthy donors and more generally composed of extended party networks often dominated by wealthier Americans. We explain these conflicting findings by bringing in core theoretical

realities of representation and ideology in America. Most notably, politicians represent those who put them in office—not their geographic constituency.

The unequal representation literature typically overlooks the fact that a legislator will not be able to win over a constituent that strongly identifies with the opposite party. The degree to which legislators try to represent the preferences of a given constituent is dependent upon that constituent's support for the legislator. In particular, Fenno (1977) distinguished between members' *geographic* constituency (all of the citizens of a member's district) and other subconstituencies to whom reelection-motivated Members of Congress are expected to be more attentive—serving policy wins to the *reelection* and *primary* constituencies to stay in office. Subsequent qualitative and quantitative research have validated Fenno's theoretical predictions and demonstrated the importance of subgroup opinion in roll call voting (Bishin, 2009, 2000; Medoff, Dennis, and Bishin 1995). Such evidence calls into question the assumption that American legislators are only minimally responsive to voters. Legislators may not be particularly responsive to the geographic constituency, but they are responsive to the reelection and primary constituencies.

Our investigation looks beyond the geographic constituency, which is the focus of most research on representational inequality.[2] In this paper, concurring with Fenno, we theorize that roll call votes taken by U.S. senators reflect the views held by their strongest supporters, not their geographic constituency overall. This discussion of partisanship leads to our first expectation regarding unequal representation:

> **Expectation 1:** Senators represent the rich better than the poor among their primary constituency (voters who are co-partisans of the senator).

In addition to our focus on the primary constituency, we adopt the view that political conflict among the American public is best understood through issue domains, because the policy space is two dimensional, where the two dominant dimensions of conflict take place on social issues and economic issues (Miller and Schofield 2003). These two dimensions shape political conflict at the mass and elite levels. In the American public, policy preferences are consistent within issue domains—but they are much less consistent between issue domains (Baldassarri and Gelman 2008). For this reason, statistical methods that force ideology to one dimension are inappropriate, as they make individuals who are conservative on economic issues but liberal on social issues, for example, appear to be moderate (Broockman 2016). In Congress, the policy space is also multidimensional (Aldrich, Montgomery, and Sparks

2014; Crespin and Rohde 2010; Roberts, Smith, and Haptonstahl 2016), and, therefore, the process underlying roll call vote decision-making varies depending upon the issue area (Clausen 1973; Wilcox and Clausen 1991).

Across studies identifying income-group differences in opinion (employing a variety of data sources and analytic methods), a consistent pattern emerges: affluent individuals are *less* likely to support more liberal redistributive or spending programs (e.g., increased spending for schools, reduced differences between rich and poor), but are *more* likely to take liberal stands on social or moral issues (e.g., abortion, stem cell research, gay rights; Ansolabehere, Rodden, and Snyder 2006; Bartels 2009; Flavin 2012; Gilens 2005, 2009). Similarly, the average campaign donor—like the average rich American—is liberal on social issues but conservative on economic issues (Schlozman, Verba, and Brady 2012).

Ellis (2016) finds that whether the rich and poor disagree with one another is dependent upon context—with the rich and poor disagreeing the most in Republican-leaning, conservative congressional districts. This contextual effect has also been found to operate differently for economic and social policy issues across the states. Specifically, the biggest differences in economic policy preferences are found between the rich and poor in poorer states, while the class-based divide in affluent states is primarily on social issues (Rigby and Wright 2011). Therefore, both partisanship and policy domain condition whether the rich and poor agree with one another.

Analyzing cleavages within parties, Bartels (2018) finds that Republicans are divided on economic issues, and Democrats are divided on social issues. We posit that these intraparty divisions are driven by class: the Republican rich and poor disagree on economic issues, and the Democratic rich and poor disagree on social issues. This discussion of issue domains and party coalitions suggests that both parties will overrepresent rich co-partisans when the rich and poor disagree, but each party faces different income-based cleavages. For Republicans, the cleavage is economics. For Democrats, the cleavage is social.

> **Expectation 2:** Income-based representational inequality varies by issue domain and political party. The greatest overrepresentation of rich co-partisans exists for Republicans on economic issues and Democrats on social issues.

This notion—that the two political parties respond differently because they are responding to different core constituencies and separate party networks—aligns with Grossman and Hopkins's (2016) notion of asymmetric politics, in which supporters of each party care about different things and hold very different ideas of what they want from their elected officials in terms of representation, legislative strategy, and policy outcomes. Grossman and Hopkins (2016, 13) argue that "The assumption that the parties are more or less interchangeable in their composition, objectives, and behavior must be discarded in order to properly understand the most important attributes of contemporary politics." Instead, the Democratic and Republican parties are two fundamentally different coalitions and must operate strategically, shaped by different constraints and opportunities. To some degree, this divergence is driven by important differences in their electoral supporters, activists, and institutional networks that extend far beyond elected officials and party leaders (Karol 2009). However, what both parties have in common is that they pay close attention to the preferences of their wealthier supporters who engage in politics to pursue specific policy goals (Hacker and Pierson 2014).

Data and Method

To test our expectations, we use CCES data from 2006 through 2014. Survey respondents are asked about their position on roll call votes that were previously or are currently on the congressional agenda. We recode each respondent's preference on the roll call vote such that the conservative position is one (1) and the liberal position is zero (0). There were twenty-five issues where we could match a survey respondent's preference with their senators' roll call vote. Each of these roll call votes is presented in Table 1. As states have different income distributions, we generate income quintiles specific to each state and year using the observed survey data. We define the "poor" as the bottom quintile (the lowest 20% of earners within a state's income distribution) while we define the "rich" as the top quintile (the highest 20% of earners within a state's income distribution). This definition of rich includes those who are on the verge of being upper-middle class but also includes the "super rich" in the top 1 percent of earners.[3] More details on our methodology are located in Section 1 of the Online Appendix.

One limitation of this study is that we only have a small sample of social issue roll call votes that we are using to generalize to the broader population of social issues. Six votes are social issues, while fifteen votes are economic issues. Another limitation is that we are only able to study bills that have already made it to the floor for consideration; however, this concern should be mitigated by the fact that the Senate's agenda is controlled by each party at different times throughout our time-series. Yet, it may still be the case that the congressional agenda is more reflective of the priorities of the affluent, given that state-level analysis has found that political parties' platforms and the introduction of bills in legislatures are

Table 1. Roll Call Votes Included in Our Analysis.

Survey year	Issue	Domain	Senate Vote (R support vs. D support)	Nearly unanimous	N survey responses	Support for conservative position		
						Public	Poor	Rich
2006	Late-term abortion ban	Social	94% vs. 30%		32,202	59%	57%	57%
2006	Stem cell research funding	Social	35% vs. 98%		32,598	32%	27%	32%
2006	Establish timetable for Iraq	Other	2% vs. 86%		33,401	36%	25%	44%
2006	Amnesty for undocumented immigrants	Econ	42% vs. 91%		33,077	61%	59%	56%
2006	$6.25 minimum wage	Econ	7% vs. 100%		34,482	22%	12%	29%
2006	Capital gains tax cut extension	Econ	94% vs. 7%		31,609	48%	34%	58%
2006	Central American Free Trade Agreement	Econ	78% vs. 26%		28,101	35%	31%	47%
2008	Stem cell research funding	Social	35% vs. 96%		27,440	35%	33%	33%
2008	No warrant for overseas spying on terrorists	Other	100% vs. 44%		28,173	67%	62%	68%
2008	Same-sex marriage ban	Social	87% vs. 5%		29,279	47%	45%	43%
2008	Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP)	Econ	37% vs. 100%		27,651	26%	14%	37%
2008	Foreclosure assistance	Econ	74% vs. 100%	✓	25,702	45%	32%	55%
2008	North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) extension to Peru	Econ	98% vs. 64%	✓	21,388	49%	48%	57%
2008	$7.25 minimum wage	Econ	94% vs. 100%	✓	30,684	18%	9%	29%
2010	Stimulus	Econ	8% vs. 100%		54,692	47%	38%	54%
2010	Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP)	Econ	28% vs. 100%		54,928	26%	19%	34%
2010	Affordable Care Act (ACA)	Econ	0% vs. 100%		54,983	47%	39%	55%
2010	Wall Street financial reform	Econ	7% vs. 98%		54,434	29%	26%	36%
2010	Don't-Ask-Don't-Tell (DADT) repeal	Social	21% vs. 100%		54,454	38%	35%	39%
2012	Keystone pipeline	Other	100% vs. 22%		48,758	73%	70%	73%
2012 & 2014	ACA birth control mandate religious exemption	Social	100% vs. 21%		108,497	40%	35%	43%
2012 & 2014	Korea Free Trade Agreement	Econ	98% vs. 71%	✓	107,170	54%	51%	61%
2012 & 2014	Extend Bush Tax Cuts	Econ	96% vs. 2%		105,895	55%	50%	55%
2012 & 2014	Tax cuts for middle class	Econ	0% vs. 96%		107,040	26%	26%	28%
2012 & 2014	Paul Ryan's Budget	Econ	89% vs. 0%		108,566	22%	16%	30%

"Domain" column denotes the author-determined policy domain. The "nearly unanimous" column is checked if more than 80% of all senators and a majority of each party voted in favor of the measure. Survey weights were used to calculate the percent support for the conservative position.
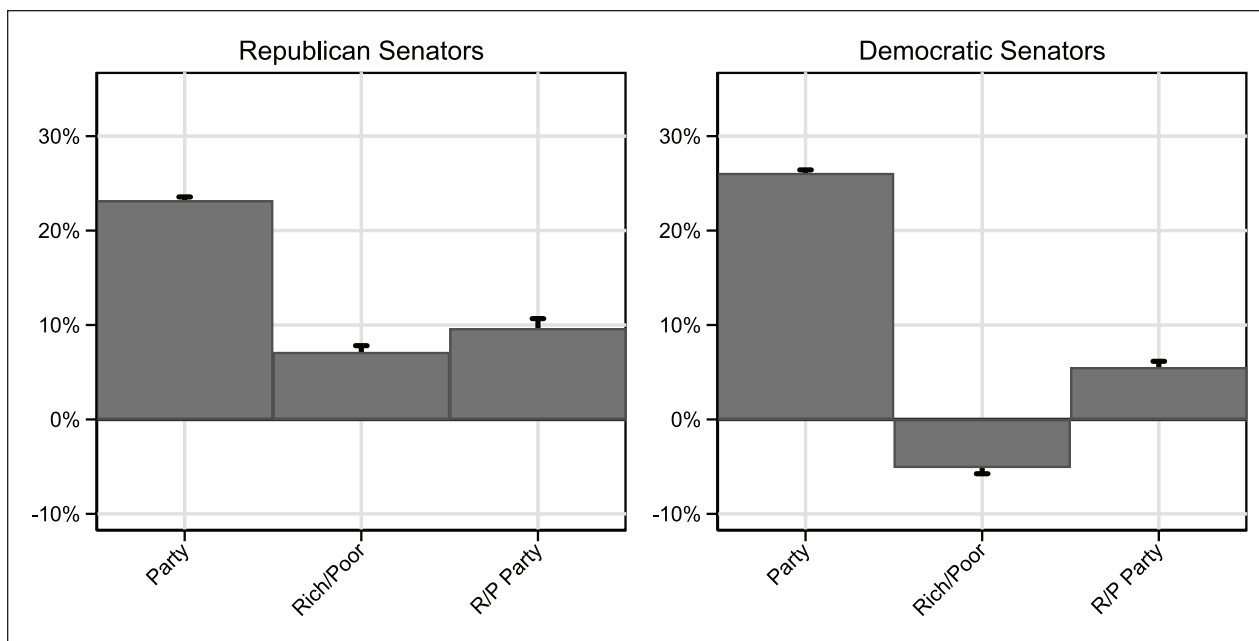
Figure 1. Subgroup representation across all issues.
Point estimates are linear probability model coefficients. The y-axis can be interpreted as the percent one group is better represented over another group. "Party" is the difference in representation between those who are of the same party as the senator and all other constituents. "Rich/Poor" is the difference in representation between the fifth and first quintiles of income. "R/P Party" is the rich-poor difference in representation among respondents who are co-partisans of the senator.

more reflective of the concerns of the rich than the poor (Flavin and Franko 2017; Rigby and Wright 2013).

Ideology and Subgroup Representation

We begin our analysis at the most aggregated level, analyzing representation across all twenty-five roll call votes. To summarize, previous research finds that (1) Republicans are the party of the rich, and Democrats are the party of the poor; and (2) senators' co-partisans are better represented than out-partisans. Before evaluating our expectations, we determine whether these two relationships hold in our dataset. To do so, we transform the combined 2006–2014 CCES dataset such that there is one observation per respondent-senator-issue combination; in other words, each respondent is duplicated every time they can be matched with their senator on a roll call vote.

From this dataset, we can determine the degree to which a senator's co-partisans are better represented than out-partisans, and the degree to which the rich are better represented than the poor, on average pooling across all issues. The dependent variable in these aggregate analyses is a dichotomous measure for whether the senator and respondent do (1) or do not (0) share the same position on an issue. Put differently, if the senator voted the way the

respondent wanted them to vote, the dependent variable takes a value of 1, and if the senator did not vote the way the respondent wanted them to vote, the dependent variable takes a value of 0. Because the dataset is at the respondent-senator-issue level, we use linear probability models with fixed effects for senator and roll call vote while using survey weights and clustering standard errors at the respondent level. Fixed effects ensure that our results are not conflating unobserved heterogeneity between roll call votes or between senators. Clustering standard errors allows us to account for the fact that our effective N (the number of respondents) is much smaller than the number of observations in the respondent-senator-issue dataset. Survey weights allow us to generalize to the average American. The results of these analyses are presented in Figures 1 and 3. All regression output tables can be found in the Online Appendix.

Analyses of representation in the Senate traditionally have the state as the unit of analysis and use scaled policy preferences as dependent and independent variables. However, like Gilens (2012) does in *Affluence and Influence*, we model representation on individual issues, instead of scaling preferences into a composite measure of ideology. Furthermore, we model representation as a dyadic relationship between a constituent and their senator (e.g., as do Leighley and Oser [2018]). By using a modeling strategy with the level of analysis

at the individual level, we are able to understand how the average American is represented in the U.S. Senate—as opposed to how the average state is represented in the U.S. Senate. The disadvantage of this modeling approach is that respondents in particularly large states could distort our results. To assess this risk, we conducted sensitivity analyses that excluded respondents from the four largest states in the union (California, Texas, Florida, and New York). As can be seen in Online Appendix Section 8, we found robust results, suggesting that our findings are not driven by the roll call voting of eight senators representing one-third of the U.S. population.

We begin by comparing the magnitude of representational inequality for three different comparisons. First, the degree to which senators better represent their co-partisans (vs. other constituents); second, the degree to which senators better represent their rich (vs. poor) constituents; and finally—looking only at co-partisans—the degree to which senators better represent their rich co-partisans (vs. poor co-partisans). We compare the magnitude of these three representation gaps, by party, in Figure 1.

In the first set of regressions ("Party"), the only independent variable is a binary measure of whether or not the respondent is a member of the same political party as their senator (including independents who lean toward the senator's party). The linear probability model coefficient on the co-partisan variable is plotted in the bar graph. As can be seen in Figure 1, across all issues, co-partisans of both Republican and Democratic senators are more than 20 percentage points better represented than out-partisans. These results are unsurprising; we expect senators to represent members of their own political party, especially in a polarized era of American politics. These findings help to contextualize our findings of representational inequality by income, described below.

In the second set of regressions ("Rich/Poor"), each income quintile dummy variable is included in the regression except for the first quintile, which is the omitted base category. The coefficient on the fifth quintile is plotted. Therefore, the value can be interpreted as a change in predicted probability of being represented between the rich (fifth quintile) and poor (first quintile). As can also be seen in Figure 1, across all issues, Republicans better represent the rich, and Democrats better represent the poor. However, the effect size is small. The rich are 7 percentage points more likely than the poor to be represented by Republican senators; and the rich are 5 percentage points less likely to be represented by Democratic senators. Representational inequality exists but it is minor.

In the third set of regressions ("R/P Party"), we use the same regression model as Rich/Poor but we subset the data to only include co-partisans of the senator. We similarly plot the coefficient on the fifth quintile. In line with Expectation 1, we expect to see larger representational inequality among Republican senators' co-partisans. We also expect to see that the rich are overrepresented among Democratic senators' co-partisans even though the poor are overrepresented among Democratic senators' geographic constituency. Our results conform with these expectations. Among Republican senators, rich Republican constituents are 10 percentage points better represented than poor Republicans. Among Democratic senators, rich Democratic constituents are 5 percentage points *better* represented than poor Democrats. Once we look within the Democratic Party, we now see that Democratic senators are overrepresenting the rich—and not the poor as the conventional wisdom would predict.

However, representational inequality among co-partisans is still relatively small, especially when compared with the difference in representation between a co-partisan and an out-partisan. This high-level, aggregated analysis obscures the fact that the determinants of congressional voting decisions vary by policy domain (Clausen 1973; Wilcox and Clausen 1991). Different considerations enter a senator's mind when they are voting on a social or economic issue. Furthermore, we know that the degree to which rich and poor Americans agree or disagree on policy issues depends on the domain—and sometimes the specific issue—under debate.

We begin our issue-domain-specific analyses by examining how policy preferences differ between Republicans and Democrats in each income quintile. We compare the economic and social issue domains, which together capture a broad range of domestic policy issues. The policy domain of each roll call vote is listed in Table 1. Note that three issues are categorized as neither social nor economic issues: Iraq timetable, warrantless spying overseas, and the Keystone pipeline. Foreign policies are outside of the scope of social and economic domestic policies. With respect to the Keystone pipeline, conservatives see environmental issues as economic while liberals see environmental issues as moral, so we cannot classify it neatly into the social or economic domains.

To determine how policy preferences between different quintiles vary in the economic and social domains, we build a simple ideological scale. For each respondent, we generate a variable equal to the percent of issues where the respondent took the conservative position for both policy domains. Thus, for each respondent in the dataset, we now have a measure of how conservative they are on economic and social issues where each issue is weighted equally (like in the regression analyses used in Figure 1). With a measure of ideology on economic and social issues, we can now estimate the average ideology of each income quintile. Figure 2 presents the average conservativeness for each quintile (the first through fifth) with a
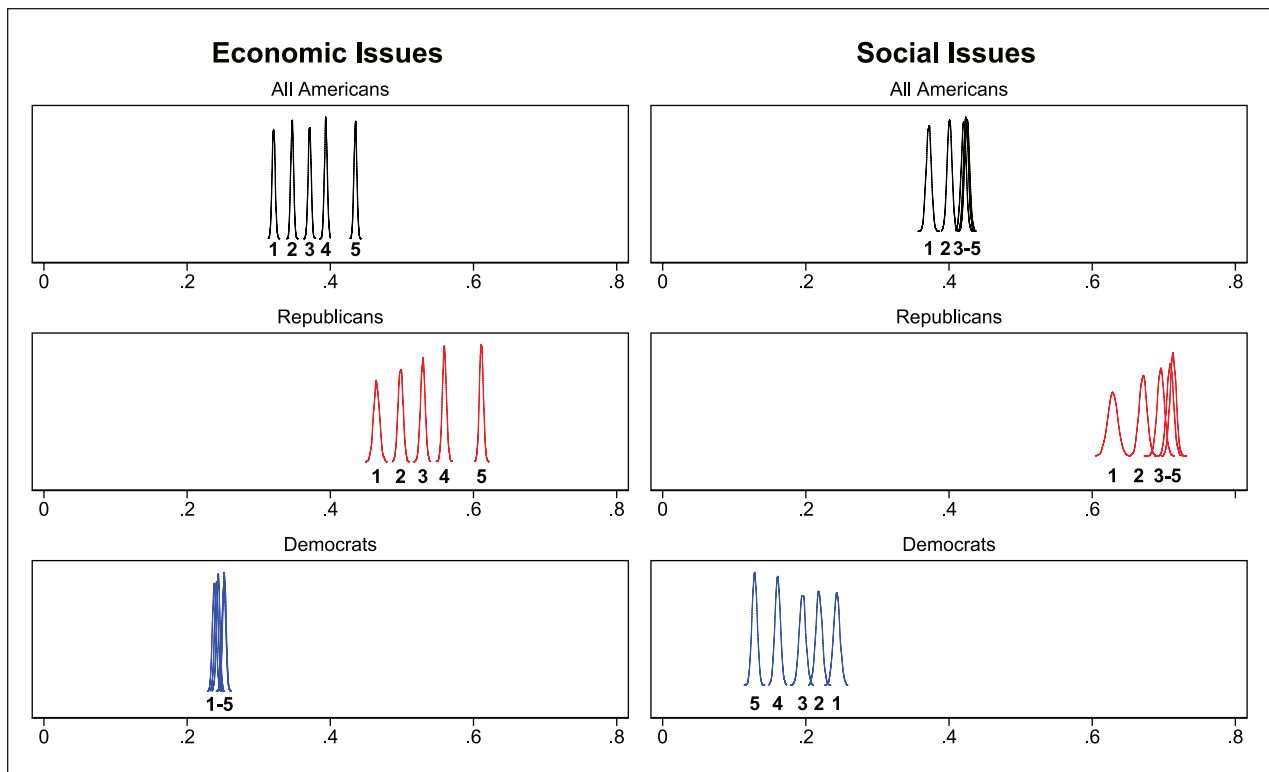
Figure 2. Conservatism across the income distribution.
For each quintile (1 = *poor*; 5 = *rich*), the average ideology is plotted with a normally distributed confidence interval surrounding it. Note that, unlike every other figure we present, this figure is not plotting the difference between two groups; instead, it is plotting the average ideology for each income quintile. The x-axis represents the percentage of issues on which the respondent took a conservative stance, ranging from 0% to 80% of the issues.

normally distributed confidence interval. In each panel, the x-axis ranges from 0 percent conservative to 80 percent conservative.

Examining the left side of Figure 2, we see that the general public and Republicans disagree on economic issues across income quintiles, but Democrats are in agreement across income quintiles. Rich Americans are 12 percentage points more conservative than poor Americans on economic issues (z score = 53.90). The Republican rich and poor are slightly less in agreement on economic issues than the general population; the Republican rich are 15 percentage points more conservative on economic issues than the Republican poor (z score = 41.06). However, regardless of income, Democrats are all in agreement on economic issues (z score = −0.97).

Now, turning to the right side of Figure 2, there is more agreement among both all Americans and Republicans on social issues when compared with economic issues. Conversely, Democrats of different income groups are much more likely to disagree with one another. The average rich American is only 7 percentage points more conservative on social issues than the average poor American (z score = 19.80). When looking within each

party, rich Republicans are 8 percentage points more conservative than poor Republicans (z score = 14.70) while rich Democrats are 10 percentage points more *liberal* than poor Democrats (z score = −28.38).

Summarizing Figure 2, rich and poor Republicans disagree strongly on economic issues but are more in agreement on social issues; meanwhile, rich and poor Democrats disagree strongly on social issues but are in absolute agreement on economic issues. We expect these differences in the policy preferences of the rich and poor to be reflected in how Republican and Democratic senators represent constituents of the same political party. As we suggest in Expectation 2, Republicans and Democrats should both overrepresent rich co-partisans when compared with poor co-partisans, yet representational inequality will vary by policy domain because representational inequality cannot exist if preferences do not diverge.

Also note from Figure 2 that there is a consistent trend by income quintile. When there are differences between quintiles, the rich are always more conservative than the middle class, which is always more conservative than the poor—except for Democrats on social issues, where we
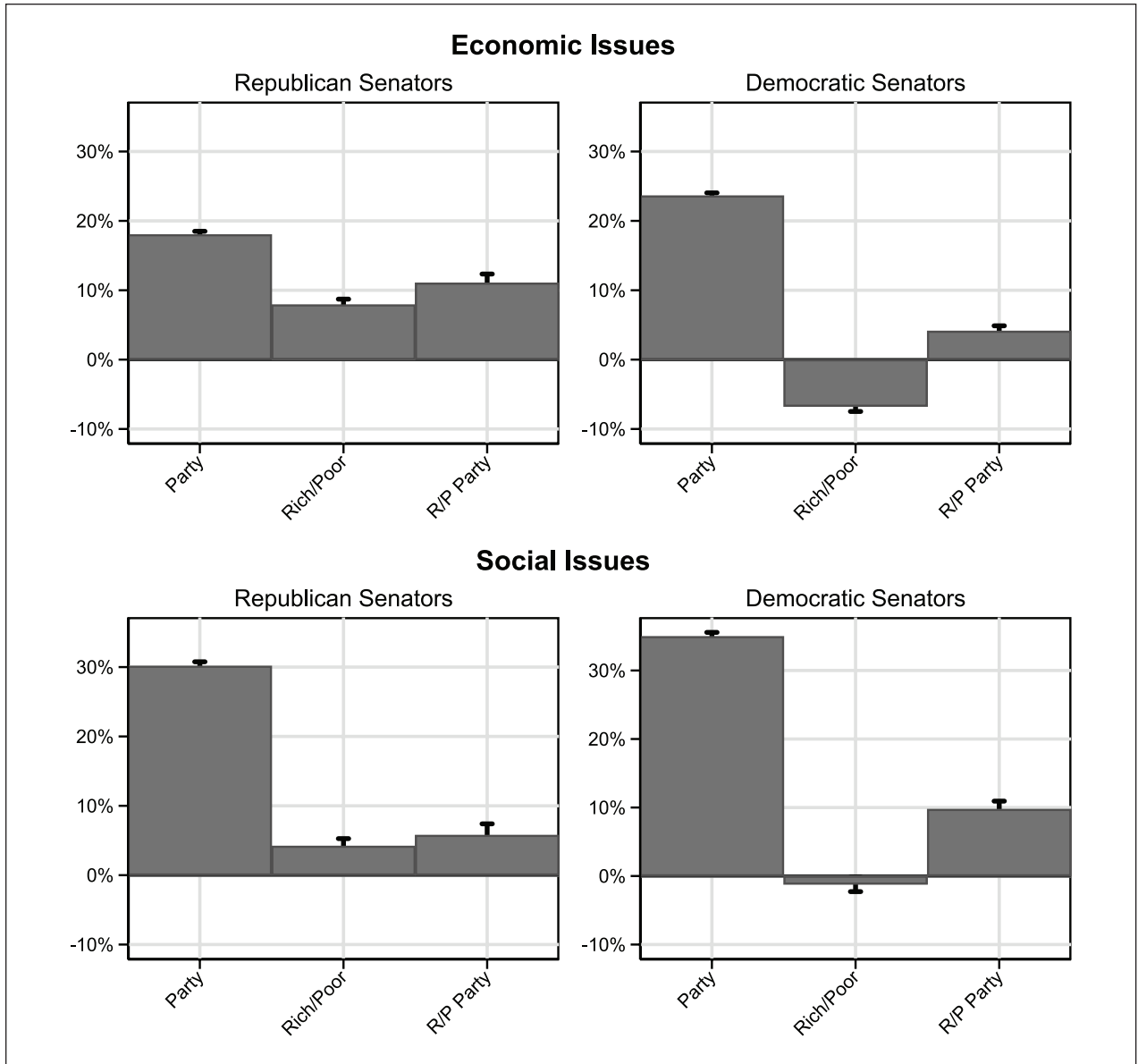
Figure 3. Subgroup representation by policy domain.
Point estimates are linear probability model coefficients. The y-axis can be interpreted as the percent one group is better represented over another group. "Party" is the difference in representation between those who are of the same party as the senator and all other constituents. "Rich/Poor" is the difference in representation between the fifth and first quintiles of income. "R/P Party" is the rich-poor difference in representation among respondents who are co-partisans of the senator.

see the opposite pattern. This justifies our concentration on the difference between the upper class and the lower class. Sometimes, the middle class and the rich agree with one another but the rich never agree with the poor—with the one exception being Democrats on economic issues where all income groups are in agreement.

In light of these income-based differences within policy domains, we now present subgroup representation by policy domain in Figure 3. Comparing Figure 1 and Figure 3, what is immediately striking is that All Roll

Call Votes looks quite similar to Economic Issues but Social Issues are quite different. What this suggests is that economic issues are driving the relationships that we see when we aggregate all issues. Put differently, findings of representational inequality are driven by economic issues because economics dominates the congressional agenda (Poole and Rosenthal 2007).

The story is much different when we examine representation on social issues, as presented in the bottom panel of Figure 3. We still see that the largest

representational inequalities take place between co-partisans and non-co-partisans ("Party"). Interestingly, co-partisans are about 10 percentage points more likely to be represented on social issues than they are on economic issues for both Republican and Democratic senators. For Republican senators on social issues, they slightly represent the rich better than the poor in their geographic and co-partisan constituencies ("Rich/Poor" and "R/P Party"). For Democratic senators, they essentially represent the rich as well as the poor in their geographic constituency ("Rich/Poor").

Aggregating across all issues and only on economic issues, Republican senators have shown greater income biases in representation than Democratic senators. However, when we turn to social issues, we now see that Democrats are substantially overrepresenting rich co-partisans by 10 percentage points ("R/P Party"). This evidence suggests that Democrats may be the "party of the rich" for social issues. Alternatively, Republicans only slightly overrepresent the rich on social issues, in both their geographic constituency and among co-partisans.[4]

Individual Roll Call Votes: Preference and Representation Gaps

To better understand the results from Figure 1, we need to shift our focus to the specific issues and roll call votes on which differential responsiveness could occur. It is easy for a senator to represent their poorer constituents when their preferences overlap with other subgroups in the state. And we know that for many issues, the preferences of the rich and poor do not differ. Differential responsiveness to the rich versus poor requires preference differences that force elected officials to actually choose to represent one set of constituents over the other. To identify when this occurs, we now examine representation gaps on individual economic and social issues.

In this section, we refer to two concepts: *preference gaps* and *representation gaps*. By preference gaps, we mean the difference in support for the conservative position between the rich and the poor. In these analyses, the dependent variable is a dichotomous measure for whether the respondent supported the conservative position on the roll call vote. We plot the linear probability model coefficient that can be interpreted as the difference between the rich and the poor in likelihood that the respondent has a conservative position on the issue.

By representation gaps, we mean the degree to which the rich are better represented (or worse represented) when compared with the poor. The dependent variable takes a value of 1 if the senator and respondent share the same policy preference and 0 if they do not (the same as Figures 1 and 3). We plot linear probability model coefficients that can be interpreted as the difference between the rich and the poor in the likelihood of being represented by their senator.

To measure the gap—preference gap or representation gap—we include dummy variables for each income quintile but omit the bottom quintile. The results that we report in Figures 4 and 5 are the survey-weighted linear probability model coefficient for the top quintile (the rich), relative to the bottom quintile (the poor). In representation gap analyses, we also include senator fixed effects and cluster standard errors by respondent (as there is one observation for each respondent-senator combination).

In this section, we analyze eighteen individual votes—all seven of the social issues and eleven of the fifteen economic issues listed in Table 1. We dropped four votes that were nearly unanimous roll call votes as they can provide little insight at the individual-vote level.[5]

Results

For there to be income-based biases in representation, there must be differences in the policy preferences of the rich and poor. Beginning with economic issues (see Figure 4a), among all Americans, we see the largest preference gaps on the capital gains tax cut and the Children's Health Insurance Program (2008). The average rich American is about 15 percentage points more likely to be conservative on any given economic policy issue than the average poor American.

Although, there are important differences in the magnitude and direction of these preference gaps within each political party. On one hand, rich Republicans were more likely to take the conservative position than were poor Republicans (with preference gaps of 15–30 points). Yet, on balance, rich and poor Americans identifying with the Democratic Party seem to be in general agreement on these policies. Thus, the Republican Party faces an electorate that is divided on these economic issues by income, while the Democrats do not.

These economic issue preference gaps are reflected in representation gaps (Figures 5a and 5b, gray bars). We find that Republicans (Figure 5a) overrepresent the rich vis-à-vis the poor across all economic issues—among their geographic constituency and also when only considering their co-partisans. In contrast, while Democrats (Figure 5b) better represent the poor in their geographic constituency, they represent their co-partisans equally across income levels (as there is general agreement between rich and poor Democrats on these issues). The exception to this trend is major legislation such as the Affordable Care Act (ACA), stimulus, Wall Street reform, and the two tax cut proposals, where Democratic senators represent rich co-partisans about 10 points more than
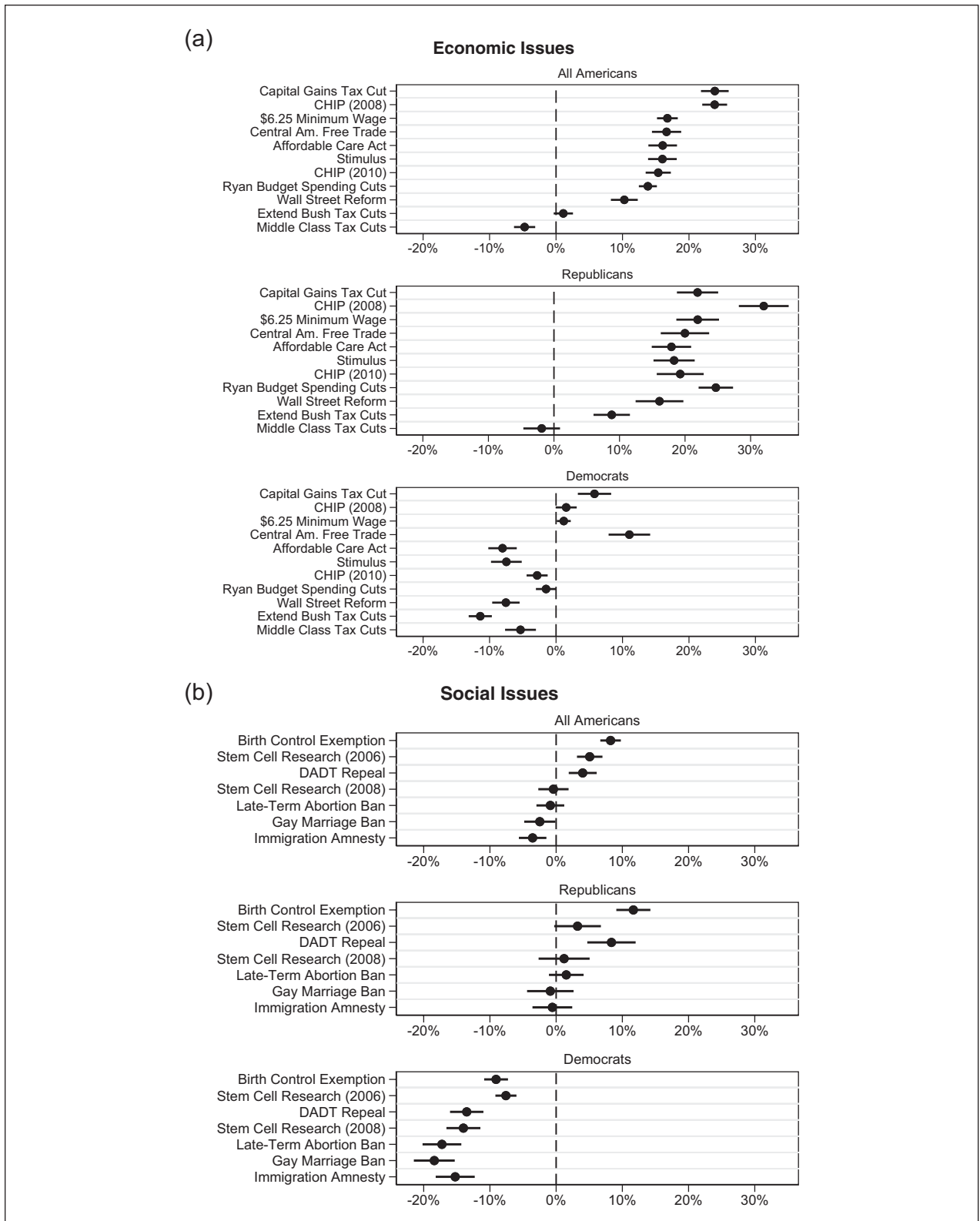
Figure 4. Rich-poor preference gaps on individual roll call votes.

Higher, positive values indicate the rich are more conservative than the poor. The point estimates indicate the difference in support for the policy issue between the rich and poor (the linear probability model coefficient for the fifth quintile, relative to the first quintile base category). All issues are recoded so that a value of 1 indicates that the respondent supported the conservative position. Issues are ordered by the size of the preference gap within the American public with the largest preference gaps at the top.
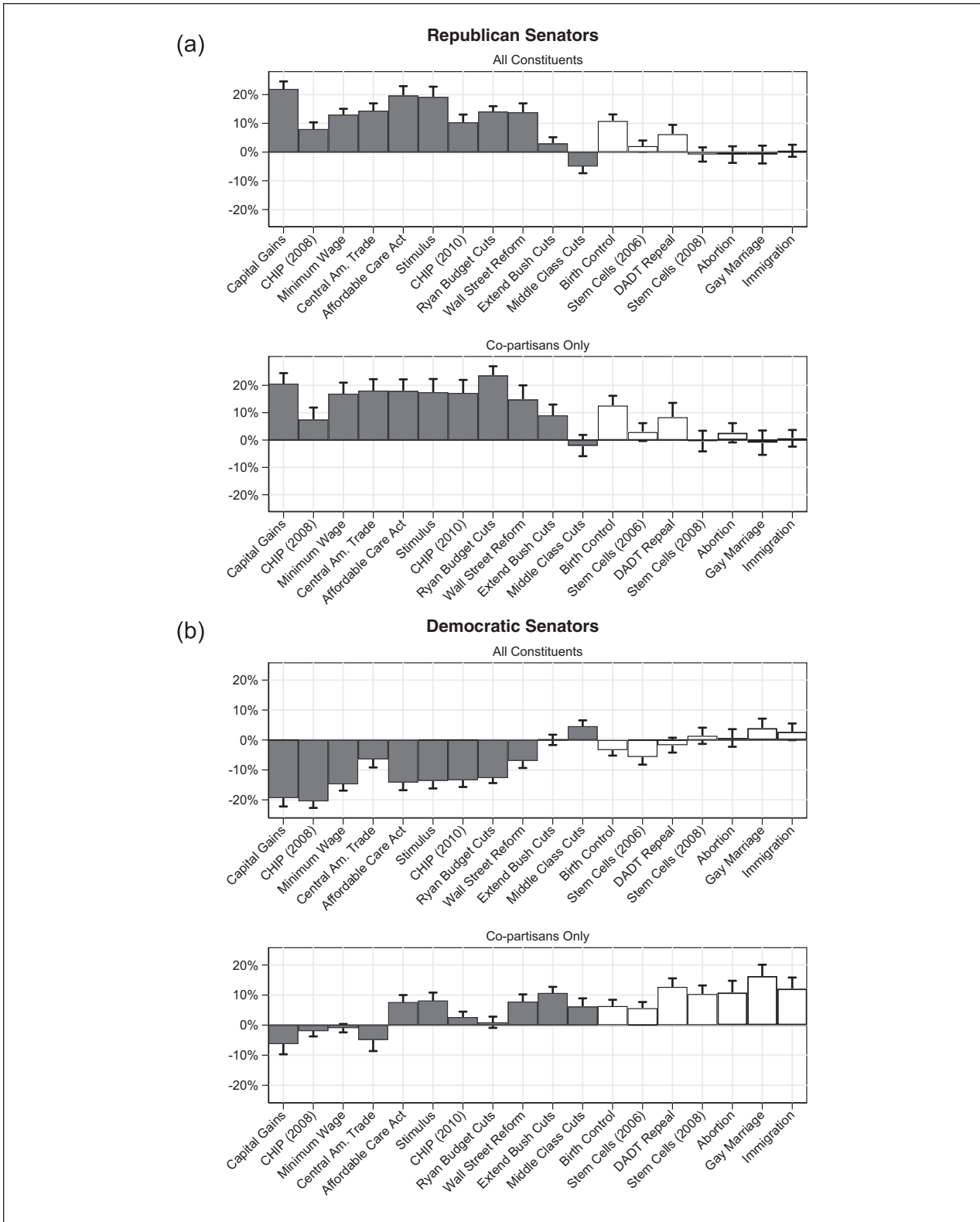
Figure 5. Rich-poor representation gaps on individual roll call votes.
Higher, positive values indicate the rich are better represented than the poor. The point estimates are the linear probability model coefficient on the fifth quintile dummy variable (relative to the first quintile dummy variable base category). Therefore, the point estimates can be interpreted as the difference in likelihood of being represented between the rich and the poor. Issues are ordered by the size of the preference gap within the American public with the largest preference gaps on the left. Gray bars are economic issues; white bars are social issues.

poor co-partisans. Therefore, it is usually hard to distinguish between intentional representation of the poor and coincidental representation that results from Democrats simply representing their co-partisans on economic policy issues.

On social issues, there are few major income-based differences in preferences among all Americans (Figure 4b). Turning to Republican voters, the rich and poor are largely in agreement on social issues, with the exceptions being Don't-Ask-Don't-Tell repeal and the ACA birth control exemption where rich Republicans are more conservative. On these two issues, we see that Republican senators are overrepresenting the rich; however, for most social issues, rich and poor Republicans generally agree, and it is, therefore, not surprising that we find little to no differential responsiveness (see Figure 5a, white bars).

We see more preference gaps on social issues among Democrats, where the rich are significantly more liberal than the poor across all issues but especially on the gay marriage ban and late-term abortion ban, where the rich are nearly 20 percentage points more likely to be liberal than the poor (see Figure 4b). On social issues, there are no strong representation gaps among Democratic senators' geographic constituency (see Figure 5b, white bars). But among co-partisans, Democratic senators better represent the rich, especially on issues with the largest preference gaps.

Section 6 of the Online Appendix provides results for the preference and representation gaps for the near-unanimous and "other" roll call votes that were omitted from the analyses in this section. Because these votes are so dissimilar from one another, it is difficult to generalize. Although, to an extent, the results mirror those presented in this section. Rich Republicans are more conservative than poor Republicans, and Republicans usually overrepresent the rich among their geographic constituency and among co-partisans. Alternatively, there is no clear trend for Democrats. Among these omitted votes, sometimes rich Democrats are more liberal, and sometimes poor Democrats are more liberal. The poor are occasionally better represented among Democratic senators' geographic constituency, but there are no large representation gaps in either direction among co-partisans.

Additional Sensitivity Analysis

To demonstrate the robustness of our individual roll call votes findings, we undertook a series of sensitivity checks—with details provided in the Online Appendix. The first set of results was explained earlier in the paper: our results are robust to the exclusion of the four largest states. In addition, we undertook three other sensitivity checks, described below, that are presented in further detail in Online Appendix Section 8.

First, much of the unequal responsiveness literature has focused on the difference between the median (middle class) and the rich. To ensure that our findings speak to more general income-based difference in representation and are not unique to the selection of the poor as the comparison group, we estimated preference and representation gaps between the rich and middle class (the fifth vs. third quintiles, rather than the fifth vs. first quintiles). Results are similar with two differences: (1) effect sizes are roughly half of the size as when the rich-poor contrast is used, and (2) there are some minor changes in the direction of preference gaps on social issues for All Americans and Republicans.

Second, we estimated rich-poor preference and representation gap models adding in control variables for race and education to ensure that income is not conflating these demographic characteristics, given the fact that African Americans, Hispanics, and the less-educated have lower average incomes. These results are also comparable with those presented in the previous section. The only noticeable differences in effect sizes are for Democrats on social issues, where adding in controls reduces the rich-poor preference and representation gaps by about 5 percentage points.

Third, to provide the sharpest comparison between the behavior of Democratic and Republican senators, we undertook a robustness check where we only include states represented by both a Republican and Democratic senator in the representation gap analyses. This allows us to determine whether representational inequality still exists even when Republican and Democratic senators are representing the exact same geographic constituency. With only a few changes in statistical significance, the results of these analyses are substantively similar to those presented in Figures 5a and 5b, indicating that even when Republicans and Democrats are representing the same geographic constituency, they are representing *different rich and poor people* within that same state.

Representation Gaps Require Preference Gaps

We conclude our analysis by asking how well variation in representation gaps can be explained by preference gaps. For all votes in Table 1 (including the ones excluded from the previous section), we plot the rich-poor representation gap among co-partisans as a function of the rich-poor preference gap among co-partisans. If senators are purposefully overrepresenting rich co-partisans, then we expect to see the greatest overrepresentation of the rich when they disagree strongly with poor co-partisans.

Figure 6 presents a scatter plot with representation gaps on the y-axis and preference gaps on the x-axis. We see an incredibly clear trend for both Republicans and
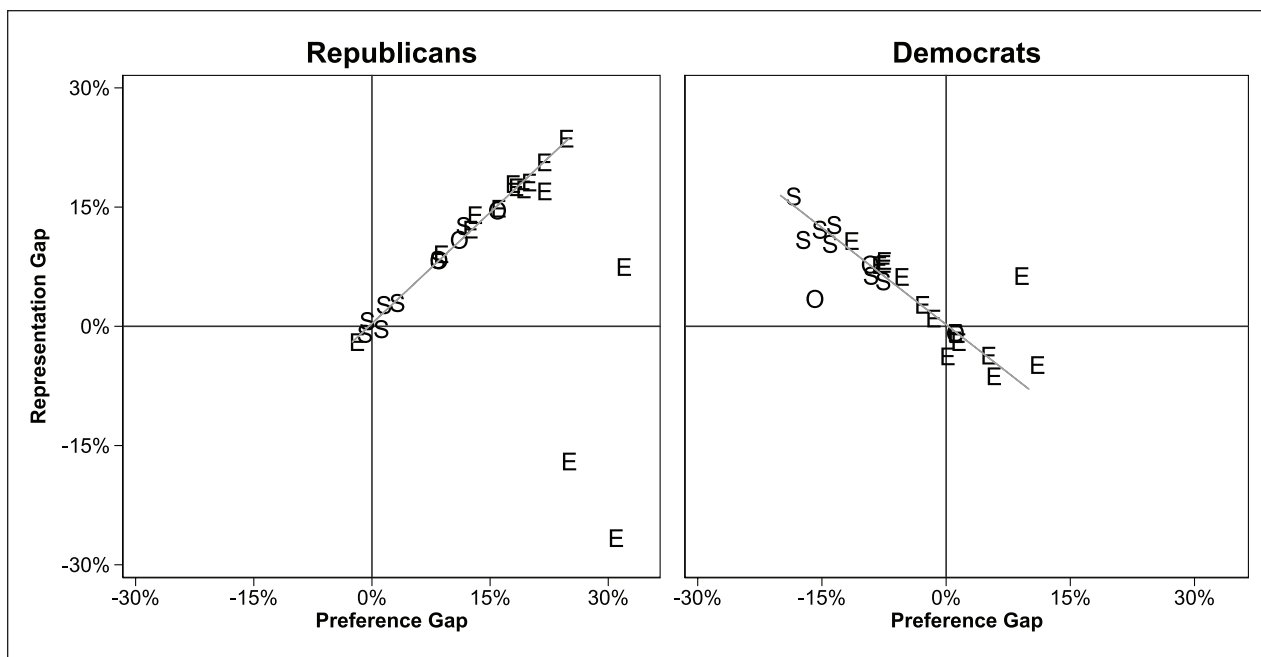
Figure 6. Co-partisan representation gaps as a function of preference gaps.
Each panel shows the rich-poor representation gap among co-partisans as a function of the rich-poor preference gap among co-partisans. A line of best fit is derived from a robust regression (a regression that gives less weight to outliers). The marker symbol for economic issues is "E," the marker symbol for social issues is "S," and the marker symbol for other issues is "O."

Democrats. When preference gaps are larger, so are representation gaps. For both parties, co-partisan representation gaps are usually positive. The largest representation gaps for Republicans take place on economic issues ("E"), and the largest representation gaps for Democrats take place on social issues ("S"). In both instances, this is where we see the largest preference gaps.[6]

The results of a robust regression indicate that preference gaps among co-partisans are strong predictors of representation gaps. Because there is heteroskedasticity in our data, we use robust regression (one that gives less weight to outliers) to determine the relationship between preference gaps and representation gaps. The dependent variable is the representation gap, and the independent variable is the preference gap. We find that the coefficient on the preference gaps variable is .93 for Republicans and −.81 for Democrats.[7] Therefore, for Republicans, there is a nearly one-to-one relationship between the degree to which the rich are more conservative than the poor (the preference gap) and the degree to which the rich are better represented than the poor (the representation gap) among co-partisans. And for Democrats, there is a nearly one-to-one relationship between the degree to which the rich are more liberal than the poor and the degree to which the rich are better represented than the poor among co-partisans. These striking results demonstrate that senators are incredibly attuned to the preferences of the rich

members of their political party—and they vote in line with those policy preferences at the expense of representing the poor.

Discussion and Conclusion

Unlike most literature on representational inequality, we examine and present survey data for individual issues, rather than scaling or pooling together issues of differing policy domains. This allows us to conceptualize representational inequality as an issue-specific (or at least a policy-domain-specific) phenomenon and identify a more nuanced picture of the political dynamics at play. We see this research as heeding the call of Hacker and Pierson (2014) to move toward a more policy-focused political science, and we argue that this approach allows us to better capture the political dynamics at play in the representation process.

In this paper, we reassess the conventional wisdom that Republicans are the party of the rich and Democrats the party of the poor. When pooling all issues together and examining the geographic constituency, as we do in Figure 1, this appears to be the case. Yet, plenty of previous research and theory has determined that senators of both parties represent their supporters (co-partisans) better than their detractors. Thus, we have argued that, to understand income-stratified biases in representation, we

must look within the senator's party. After all, senators are unlikely to get support from strong identifiers of the opposite party. When only examining co-partisans, senators of both parties exhibit a bias toward the rich across all issues.

Our analysis has also elucidated the need to look within issue domains to better understand representational inequality. When we compare representation by issue domain, we see a different trend than when examining representation across all votes. *On economic issues*, Republican senators represent the rich—whether that is their constituency at-large or their co-partisans—while Democratic senators are biased toward representing the poor in their state and show no strong income bias in representation among co-partisans. *On social issues*, Republican senators are not that biased toward the rich; but for Democratic senators, while they are not biased toward the rich for their at-large constituency, they are biased toward the rich for their co-partisans. In sum, Republicans are the party that represents the rich on economic issues, and Democrats are the party that represents the rich on social issues—at least among their own co-partisans.

Unequal representation is even more concerning when considering these trends in light of the composition of each political party. According to our CCES dataset, using survey weights, 16 percent of Democrats are rich, and 25 percent are poor; meanwhile, 21 percent of Republicans are rich, and 16 percent are poor. Given this context, it makes sense that Republicans overrepresent the rich vis-à-vis the poor on economic issues, but they do so by much more than we would expect if they were simply representing each income quintile equal to their share of the party. In contrast, Democrats overrepresent the rich *even though the rich make up a significantly smaller portion of the Democratic Party than the poor do*. If Democrats were representing each income quintile equal to their share of the party, they should be representing the poor substantially more than the rich; instead, they overrepresent the rich (sometimes by a great deal) on social issues.

One central contribution that we make is uncovering the structural nature of representational inequality. If senators are purposefully overrepresenting rich co-partisans over poor co-partisans, then we should see a nearly one-to-one relationship between representation gaps and preference gaps. Indeed, this is what we see. For both Republicans and Democrats, where there are the largest gaps between the preferences of the rich and poor, there are also the largest gaps between the representation of the rich and poor. Preference gaps do, indeed, place a (healthy) limit on representational inequality (Soroka and Wlezien 2008). Nonetheless, our results strongly suggest that senators are still overrepresenting rich members of

their own party and that they are in tune with their policy preferences.

Another important point to underscore is that the Republican and Democratic constituencies are clearly composed of *different* rich people and *different* poor people as there exist preference gaps in opposite directions between the two parties. On one hand, the Republican coalition shares similar policy preferences on social issues—where the rich and poor are both conservative. But the Republican coalition diverges along class lines on economic issues, where the rich are more conservative than the poor. On the other hand, the Democratic coalition shares similar policy preferences on economic issues—where both the rich and poor are liberal. But the Democratic coalition diverges along class lines on social issues, where the rich are more liberal than the poor. These results mirror Bartels's (2018) finding that Republican voters have heterogeneous preferences on economic issues while Democratic voters have heterogeneous preferences on social issues. Our results suggest that these intraparty cleavages can be explained by class-based differences in policy preferences: with rich and poor Republicans divided on economic issues, and rich and poor Democrats divided on social issues.

Thinking about representation of the rich through the lens of partisanship leads us to a more nuanced understanding of the impact of political inequality on party polarization. Rather than expecting to find two parties converging on the policy preferences held by the upper class, we find that each party gives undue influence over policymaking to a small group of *their own* affluent supporters. Our analysis aligns with other research that shows partisan campaign donors hold more extreme policy positions than other members of their party on specific policy issues—most notably, a greater conservatism on economic issues among donors to Republican candidates and greater liberalism on social issues among donors to Democratic candidates (Broockman, Ferenstein, and Malhotra 2019; see also Schlozman, Verba, and Brady 2012). This suggests that the outsized influence of the wealthy in U.S. politics may serve to push the Democratic Party to the left on social issues and the Republican Party to the right on economic issues. By better representing their rich constituents when the rich and poor disagree, both parties move away from the more moderate views of their less affluent constituents. Thus, our findings illuminate a process by which differential representation of the rich could co-exist with and even exacerbate the polarization of political parties.

Authors' Note

Notes

1. Replication material are available at https://corymaks. com/research/.
2. A recent exception is Wright and Rigby's (forthcoming) analysis of state party platforms, which were found to best align with the preferences of wealthy members of each party.
3. We might find larger differences between the rich and the poor if we used smaller income groups, comparing the top 10 percent (or top 1%) with the bottom 10 percent. However, the fact that the Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES) does not oversample the rich and poor precludes us from being able to measure the difference in policy preferences between the top 10 percent (or top 1%) and bottom 10 percent with precision.
4. To determine the statistical significance of the differences between economic and social issues, we use seemingly unrelated regression and test for the equivalence of the coefficients from each model. For both Republican and Democratic senators, co-partisans are better represented on social issues than they are on economic issues, and this difference is statistically significant in both cases (Dem. z score = 33.65; Rep. z score = 32.82). For both parties, the difference between the "Rich/Poor" coefficients on social and economic issues is also statistically significant (Dem. z score = 9.64; Rep. z score = −6.05). Likewise, the difference between the "R/P Party" coefficients is statistically significant (Dem. z score = 8.28; Rep. z-score = −5.31).
5. The following roll call votes were omitted because there was bipartisan support and the vote was nearly unanimous: $7.25 minimum wage, foreclosure assistance, North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) extension to Peru, and Korea Free Trade Agreement. For each of these votes, more than 80 percent of senators and a majority of each party voted in favor of the bill. On these votes, there is little variation in the senators' roll call vote position—most voted in favor of these bills. We would not be able to learn much from studying these

votes individually. (Refer to Table 1 for partisan breakdown of roll call votes.)
6. The two major outliers were Republican senators' votes on the foreclosure assistance bill and the $7.25 minimum wage. In both instances, most of the Republican Party voted with the Democratic Party in support of these bills. However, in the general public and among Republican voters, these two bills were overwhelmingly more popular with the poor than the rich.
7. If we use a standard ordinary least squares (OLS) model, the coefficient is .12 for Republicans and −.62 for Democrats. The difference in magnitude between OLS and robust regression is expected, given the fact that there are clear outliers far from the rest of the data points.

Supplemental Material

Supplemental materials for this article are available with the manuscript on the *Political Research Quarterly* (*PRQ*) website.

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