

Election Law Reforms and the Equality of Political Representation in the American States*

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Abstract

Whose opinions are reflected in the policy decisions made by state governments? A growing literature in political science documents unequal political representation at the national level, but political inequality at the state level remains under examined. This omission is unfortunate because the rich variation in political behavior, laws, institutions, and culture across the fifty states provides unique leverage for investigating what conditions lead to more or less political equality. Using public opinion measures from the National Annenberg Election Survey and data on state policy outputs, I find that state policy is consistently more proximate to the opinions of citizens with higher “social status” (a composite of income, educational attainment, and occupational prestige). Using this measure of opinion-policy proximity, I generate an index of the equality of political representation that is comparable across the states. I then evaluate the relationship between state election laws and political equality and find evidence that states that allow for “no excuse” absentee voting weigh citizens’ opinions more equally in the policymaking process. These findings suggest that laws and political institutions play an important role in promoting political equality.

Keywords: Election reforms, political equality, political representation, public opinion, policy

Government responsiveness to citizens' political opinions is central to democratic theory and the idea that government ought to be, as Abraham Lincoln remarked, "of the people, by the people, for the people," is a guiding principle for American democracy. This belief in popular sovereignty – that elected officials should be directly accountable to "the people" for their policy decisions – tends also to be the way Americans judge the health and legitimacy of other democracies around the world. Political representation is, simply put, a yardstick by which the quality of a democracy can be measured. Toward this end, a large literature in political science has examined the congruence between citizens' aggregated political opinions and their elected officials' policy decisions in the United States (e.g., Page and Shapiro 1983; Erikson, Wright, and McIver 1993; Monroe 1998; Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002; for a review see Manza and Cook 2002).

However, any assessment of the quality of a democracy must also be concerned with "e"quality. As Robert Dahl (2006, ix) states, "The existence of political equality is a fundamental premise of democracy." In the context of political representation, "political equality refers to the extent to which citizens have an equal voice in governmental decisions. One of the bedrock principles in a democracy is the equal consideration of the preferences and interests of all citizens" (Verba 2003, 663). In short, political equality – the equal weighting of citizens' opinions when elected officials make important policy decisions – is also central to any assessment of democratic performance.¹

Although political equality has remained a paramount normative concern for decades, political scientists have devoted little attention to empirically examining unequal political

¹ Verba and Orren (1985, 8) add 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"

representation in the United States. As the American Political Science Association Taskforce on Inequality and American Democracy (Jacobs and Skocpol 2005, 124) lamented: “Unfortunately, political scientists have done surprisingly little to investigate the extent of actual inequalities of government responsiveness to public opinion – that is, whether distinct segments of the country exert more influence than others.” However, a series of recent studies have responded to this challenge and found that affluent citizens exert more political influence than disadvantaged citizens in the formulation of public policies (Gilens 2005; Jacobs and Page 2005; Bartels 2008).

The existence of unequal political representation presents scholars a question with very concrete policy implications: What laws and institutional arrangements can help promote a more equal weighting of citizens’ opinions in the policymaking process? For example, do certain campaign finance reforms like stricter disclosure laws lead to a more equal weighting of citizens’ opinions? What about the presence and use of the initiative or referendum process? By studying how certain institutional arrangements lead to more or less political equality, scholars can shed light on an important normative question for American democracy.

Unfortunately, most previous studies of “unequal democracy” examine political influence at the national level (but see Gilens, Lax, and Phillips 2011; Rigby and Wright 2011; Flavin 2012), where little institutional variation exists. In contrast, the American states provide rich variation in opinions, policies, institutions, and conditions (Jewell 1982). As Erikson, Wright, and McIver (1993, 2) argued in their landmark study of political representation in the states, “Almost all U.S. studies of the influence of public opinion focus on the national level. However, the ideal place to investigate the relationship between public opinion and public policy would seem to be the American states. With fifty separate state publics and fifty sets of state policies, the states provide an ideal laboratory for comparative research.”

In this paper, I use the variation across the fifty American states to study the impact of election laws on the equality of political representation. One important goal of recent electoral reforms implemented in several states is to make voting easier and less costly. By doing so, reformers hope to both boost voter turnout and reduce the socioeconomic bias in who turns out to vote (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). While scholars have begun to investigate the extent to which certain election law reforms help to equalize the composition of voter turnout (Avery and Peffley 2005; Rigby and Springer 2011), no study to date has assessed whether these reforms actually lead to more equal political representation. By taking advantage of the wide variation in election laws across the states, I am able to assess whether certain reforms lead to a more equal weighting of all citizens' political opinions. My preliminary analysis uncovers evidence that election laws do matter. Specifically, states that allow for "no excuse" absentee voting tend to have a weaker link between "social status" (a composite measure of income, educational attainment, and occupational prestige) and political influence. There is some evidence to suggest Election Day registration and early voting might also contribute to more equal political representation, but the estimates fall outside the traditional boundaries of statistical significance. Together, these findings underscore the importance of laws and institutional design in promoting political equality in the United States.

Background

Political scientists and political observers more generally have long warned that political representation in the United States is tainted by an upper class bias such that wealthier citizens have more influence over government policy decisions than the poor (e.g., Schattschneider 1960; Dahl 1961). The most common theoretical explanation for unequal political representation is the

fact that the more affluent tend to participate more in politics – whether it be voting, contributing to or volunteering for a campaign, contacting elected officials, or any other participatory act – compared to disadvantaged citizens (Verba and Nie 1972; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980; Rosenstone and Hanson 1993; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). If elected officials are more responsive to citizens who actively get involved in politics (Martin 2003; Griffin and Newman 2005) and affluent citizens are significantly more likely to get involved than citizens with low incomes, then the fact that elected officials are more responsive to the political opinions of their high income constituents should come as no surprise.²

While political scientists have devoted considerable attention to documenting unequal political participation, or “inputs” into the political system (Piven and Cloward 1988; Hill and Leighley 1994; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; Verba 2003), most have tended to shy away from actually assessing whether elected officials equally weigh their constituents’ opinions when making important policy decisions.³ As Larry Bartels (2008, 253) aptly points out, “For the most part, scholars of political participation have treated actual patterns of government responsiveness as someone else’s problem.” A series of very recent studies have sought to correct this problem

² Another possible explanation for unequal political representation is a “selection effect” of those who are elected to serve in government (Bartels 2008, 281). If a state’s governor and legislators are disproportionately affluent compared to the general population, their policy decisions may most closely mirror the political opinions of the wealthy simply because they are “like minded.”

³ One reason for the large literature on unequal levels of political participation is that it is relatively easy to measure in a way that inequalities in political representation are not. As Verba and Orren (1985, 15) point out: “Political equality cannot be gauged in the same way as economic inequality. There is no metric such as money, no statistic such as the Gini index, and no body of data comparing countries. There are, however, relevant data on political participation.”

and more fully understand unequal political representation in the United States. Jacobs and Page (2005) use parallel opinion surveys of the public and political elites to show that internationally oriented business leaders leverage more influence over American foreign policy decisions than the opinions of the general public. Gilens (2005) collects data from nearly 2,000 individual public opinion poll questions and finds that subsequent federal government policy decisions disproportionately reflect the views of the affluent, and this is especially true when the preferences of the rich and poor diverge. He concludes that congruence between the political opinions of the poor and government policy tends to arise only in instances where the poor share similar attitudes with the wealthy. Bartels (2008) examines the link between political factors and growing economic inequality and demonstrates that the opinions of affluent constituents strongly predict the voting behavior of their Senators (both their revealed general voting ideology and specific roll call votes) while the opinions of those with low incomes display little or no relationship. In short, this emerging literature points to “unequal democracy” in American politics.⁴

Amidst growing evidence at the national level, scholars are only beginning to identify and investigate unequal political representation at the state level.⁵ Rigby and Wright (2011)

⁴ However, a set of recent studies have called these findings of unequal political representation into question (Soroka and Wlezien 2008; Ura and Ellis 2008; Erikson and Bhatti 2011). These studies argue that because so little variation in political preferences exists across income groups, it is nearly impossible to distinguish whose opinions are being reflected in the public policy decisions made by elected officials.

⁵ At the city government level, an earlier study of public opinion and policy in 51 American cities found that city policies tended to respond most to the opinions of citizens with higher socioeconomic status (Schumaker and Getter 1977). In contrast, Berry, Portney, and Thomson (1993) found little economic bias in policy responsiveness for the cities they studied.

uncover evidence that the general ideological tone of state economic policies tend to be most responsive to the opinions of the rich and hardly at all to the poor.⁶ Flavin (2012) finds that citizens with low incomes tend to have little influence on state policy incomes measured both as general policy liberalism and specific social policies like the death penalty, abortion, and gun control. Gilens, Lax, and Phillips (2011) also find some evidence that citizens with low incomes are underrepresented in the state policymaking process compared to the more affluent. In sum, a growing body of literature has documented that the unequal political representation found at the national level extends to the states as well.

Despite this growing literature, our understanding of the precise mechanisms that lead to more or less political equality remain limited. As stated above, studies of unequal political representation at the national level run into the methodological roadblock that there is little institutional variation that might help explain why some citizens exert more political influence than others. In contrast, the fifty states provide rich variation in terms of laws, institutions, political culture, and a host of other factors. Moreover, the information learned from studies that use the states as comparative units of analysis can help to inform policymakers interested in institutional reforms that might promote greater political equality.

⁶ Rigby and Wright (2011) derive separate summary measures of citizens' general economic and social attitudes by (after imputing a significant amount of missing data across survey items) factor analyzing multiple opinion items from the 2000 and 2004 National Annenberg Election Surveys and collapsing the mean opinion measure of low, middle, and high income respondents within each state. They then derive separate summary measures of state policy on economic and social issues by factor analyzing a set of state policies for each area.

I use the variation across the states to examine the effect of election laws on unequal political representation. Previous studies of state electoral reforms have tended to focus on their effectiveness in promoting a more equal composition of voter turnout, and have come to mixed conclusions. Some studies have found that reforms intended to make voting easier and less costly lead to increases in turnout among disadvantaged citizens (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980; Mitchell and Wlezien 1995; Highton 2004; Avery and Peffley 2005) while others have uncovered few equalizing effects (Stein 1998; Knack and White 2000). Some studies even warn of the “perverse consequences” electoral reforms could bring by primarily mobilizing affluent voters (who are already the most likely to vote) and inadvertently exacerbating political inequality (Karp and Banducci 2000; Southwell and Burchett 2000; Berinsky, Burns, and Traugott 2001; Berinsky 2005).

Rigby and Springer (2011) attempt to reconcile these conflicting findings by drawing a helpful theoretical distinction between reforms intended to make registering to vote easier and those intended to make voting more convenient. They argue that because certain reforms like Election Day registration “make it easier for individuals to enter the electoral system, it seems reasonable to expect these sorts of registration-focused reforms to disproportionately benefit those who are underrepresented in the electorate prior to their enactment” (422). In contrast, they theorize that reforms intended to make voting more convenient will primarily aid citizens who are already registered to vote, thereby exacerbating political inequality (also see Berinsky 2005). Using data on the composition of voter turnout from 1978 to 2008, their empirical findings generally support their expectations: Election Day registration and “Motor Voter” registration laws help to reduce the income bias in voter turnout while reforms that allow for early voting actually serve to exacerbate political inequality in voting.

To date, however, no study has assessed whether state election laws help to promote the final, and arguably most important, link in the chain of political representation: equal weighting of citizens' political opinions in state policymaking decisions (Dahl 1971). As a result, we have little knowledge about the extent to which reforms intended to make registration and voting easier are ultimately successful in equalizing political influence. This shortcoming in our understanding is unfortunate given that "the ability of citizens to influence public policy is the 'bottom line' of democratic government" (Gilens 2005, 778). To further our understanding of the effects of laws and institutional design, I investigate whether certain state electoral law reforms promote more equal political representation.

Evaluating the Equality of Political Representation in the States

Although political representation is central for American democracy, there is little consensus on how best to measure the concept. For years, political scientists have experimented with different ways of assessing the link between the people and their government (Achen 1978). One crucial distinction has been whether public opinion is compared to the behavior of individual elected officials (Miller and Stokes 1963; Achen 1978; Powell 1982; Bartels 1991; Clinton 2006) or to government policy more broadly (Page and Shapiro 1983; Erikson, Wright, and McIver 1993; Erikson, Mackuen, and Stimson 2002; Wlezien 2004). I choose to focus on the latter, *policy representation*, because government policy is the final link of the chain that begins with citizens' inputs (their political opinions and behaviors) into the political system. More importantly, regardless of how a citizen's particular state house member or senator votes on any given bill in the state legislature, citizens are ultimately affected by the decisions of the legislature as a whole and the actual policies that are implemented.

I measure policy representation using a “proximity” approach that places public opinion and policy on the same metric and compares the “distance” between them. Using this method, as the ideological distance between a citizen’s opinion and policy grows, the quality of representation suffers (Golder and Stramski 2010). Matching opinion and policy in a common ideological space, however, has proven to be a very difficult task. For decades, scholars of representation have tried to confront this challenge and have devised various methods to match up citizens’ opinions and their legislators’ in-office behavior to make meaningful comparisons (Miller 1964; Achen 1978; Wright 1978; Kuklinkski 1978; Powell 1982; Burden 2004; Gershtenson and Plane 2007; Griffin and Flavin 2007). To date, however, no study of political representation at any level of government has attempted to extend this proximity method to match up opinions and policy using a common metric.

To evaluate political equality, I construct a measure of distance between the opinions of individual citizens and state public policy to assess whether policies are ideologically “closer” to the opinions of some citizens compared to others.⁷ For example, in Figure 1, I compare two hypothetical citizens, Citizen A and Citizen B, who both live in the same state. When the two citizens’ political ideologies are placed on the same metric as state policy, there is less ideological distance between Citizen A and state policy as compared to Citizen B and state policy. Under this conceptualization, Citizen A is “better” represented than Citizen B. Applying this to the study of political equality, I assess whether there is a systematic relationship between a citizen’s social status and the distance between their ideology and state policy.

[Figure 1 about here]

⁷ Just as political representation is difficult to define, political equality is as well. As Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995, 12) state, “If political equality is hard to achieve, it is almost as hard to define.”

To measure ideological distance, I require two pieces of data: (1) a measure of citizens' opinions and (2) a measure of state policy. To measure public opinion, I combine data from the 2000, 2004, and 2008 National Annenberg Election Surveys (NAES), three random digit dialing rolling cross sectional surveys conducted in the months leading up to that year's presidential election. For years, scholars of public opinion in the states have wrestled with the problem of not having enough respondents in public opinion polls to make reliable state-level estimates and inferences. One way to address this problem is to pool surveys over a long period of time (Erikson, Wright, and McIver 1993). Another way is to simulate state opinion by using national polls and multi-level modeling to derive estimates for the states based on demographic characteristics (Park, Gelman, and Bafumi 2006; Lax and Phillips 2009a, 2009b). The major advantage of pooling these three NAES surveys is their sheer sample size which allows a large enough sample without having to aggregate across a long time period or simulate state opinion (Carsey and Harden 2010). This large sample size is especially important because I later assess the relationship between social status and proximity within individual states.⁸

I measure citizens' general political ideology using the following item from the NAES: "Generally speaking, would you describe your political views as very conservative, conservative, moderate, liberal, or very liberal?" I code the measure such that it runs from -2 (very conservative) to +2 (very liberal). Data on citizens' self-reported political ideology have been

⁸ A total of 116,188 respondents across the three survey waves answered the ideological self-placement item and all three items that make up the measure of "social status" (income, educational attainment, and occupational prestige). All states except Delaware (N=329), North Dakota (N=324), South Dakota (N=384), and Wyoming (N=263) have a sample size of over 400 respondents. Alaska and Hawaii were not surveyed, so all analyses in this paper report results from the remaining 48 states.

commonly used to measure public opinion in previous studies of political representation (e.g., Erikson, Wright, and McIver 1993; Griffin and Flavin 2007; Bartels 2008; Flavin 2012). There are, however, concerns that citizens' self-reported or "symbolic" ideology does not accurately reflect their operational ideology when queried about specific issues (Knight 1985; Jacoby 1995; Jennings 1992; Ellis and Stimson 2009). Accordingly, previous studies have questioned whether a person who identifies him or herself as a liberal (conservative) actually holds liberal (conservative) policy opinions. Without attempting to reconcile this ongoing debate, there is reason to be confident that self-reported ideology is an accurate measure of citizens' "actual" political opinions in the NAES data used for this paper. Table 1 shows the percentage of respondents from the 2000 and 2004 NAES who report a particular opinion categorized by their self-reported political ideology. Looking across the columns, it is clear that respondents who identify themselves as liberal are more likely to report liberal policy opinions. For example, only 38% of respondents who place themselves in the "very conservative" category believe that "Government should reduce income differences between rich and poor." In contrast, fully 77% of respondents who place themselves in the "very liberal" category support that policy proposal. These differences across ideological classifications provide some degree of confidence that self-reported ideology is an accurate measure of citizens' "actual" political opinions.

[Table 1 about here]

Next, to measure public policy, I require a general measure of the "liberalism" (Klingman and Lammers 1984) of state policy outputs that comports with the survey item that asks citizens their general political ideology. In their seminal book on state opinion and policy, Erikson, Wright, and McIver (1993) developed a composite index of state policy liberalism using eight policy areas for which liberals and conservatives typically disagree. Gray, Lowery, Fellowes,

and McAtee (2004) updated this policy liberalism measure for 2000 using the following five policy items: (1) state regulation of firearms as measured by state gun laws; (2) scorecard of state abortion laws in 2000; (3) an index of welfare stringency that accounts for Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) rules of eligibility and work requirements for 1997-99; (4) a dummy measure of state right-to-work laws in 2001; and (5) a measure of tax progressivity calculated as a ratio of the average tax burden of the highest five percent of a state's earners to the average tax burden of the lowest forty percent of a state's earners.⁹ These five components are then standardized and summed in an additive index such that more liberal state policies are coded higher. I use this index as my first measure of the general ideological tone of state policy.

Second, a recent article by Sorens, Muedini, and Ruger (2008) provides a rich source of data on state policies in twenty different areas ranging from public assistance spending to gun control to health insurance regulations.¹⁰ In addition to specific statutes and spending data, the authors provide a summary index of policy liberalism for each state that they derive by factor analyzing their entire range of policies. I use this composite score as a second measure of general policy liberalism.¹¹ Together, the two policy liberalism measures represent the uni-dimensional liberal/conservative ideology of state policy decisions that correspond well to the measure of citizens' general political ideologies described above.

⁹ Gray et al. (2004) argue that using these policy items, as opposed to a measure of per capita expenditures for different policy areas, precludes the possibility that policy liberalism is simply a proxy for a state's wealth. The five measures produce a Cronbach's alpha of .63.

¹⁰ The state policy data can be accessed online at www.statepolicyindex.com.

¹¹ The Gray et al. (2004) and Sorens, Muedini, and Ruger (2008) policy liberalism measures correlate at .79.

To measure ideological proximity (see Figure 1), I require some method of placing citizens' opinions and state policy on a common scale. I approach this task in three different ways. First, I standardize all ideological opinions to a mean of zero and a standard deviation of one and take the two recent measures of general state policy liberalism described above (Gray et al. 2004; Sorens, Muedini, and Ruger 2008) and standardize them as well. After standardizing both opinion and policy, they are now on a common (standardized) metric, similar to the strategy used by Wright (1978). To measure proximity, I take the absolute value of the difference between a respondent's ideology score and the policy liberalism score for his/her state using both of the measures of policy. This creates the first measure of distance for each respondent in the NAES sample which I term the *Standardized* measure.

Second, I simply rescale the two measures of state policy to the same scale (-2 to +2) as ideological opinion. This process is similar to that used in early studies of congressional representation (Miller 1964; Achen 1978) and one that is still advocated by representation scholars today (Burden 2004; Griffin and Newman 2008). I again take the absolute value of the distance between a citizen's ideology and policy liberalism for their state and term it the *Same Scale* measure.

Third, I rescale policy to a tighter range (-1 to +1) than citizens' ideologies. I do so because we can expect citizens' ideological opinions to have a wider range and take on more extreme values compared to actual state policy outputs. This transformation to a tighter scale is suggested and implemented by Powell (1982, 1989) in her studies of congressional representation. Again, I take the absolute value of the difference between a citizen's ideological opinion and policy and term it the *Restricted Scale* measure.

Together, I have three different measurement techniques and two different measurements of state policy liberalism, for a total of six different measures of ideological proximity between citizens' opinions and state policy. I am now interested in whether there are systematic differences in proximity between opinion and policy across citizens. Previous studies of political inequality have tended to focus on representational inequalities based on income (Bartels 2008; Rigby and Wright 2011; Flavin 2012), although others have looked at differences based on occupational classification (Jacobs and Page 2005) and level of education (Gilens 2005). One concern with focusing exclusively on income inequalities is that an individual's level of income (or household income) may be an imprecise approximation of their potential political influence. For example, we might expect a college professor to have greater potential political influence than a certified electrician even though the electrician might have a higher annual income.

To create a more encompassing approximation of potential political influence, I generate a measure of "social status" that is a composite of a respondent's household income, educational attainment, and occupational prestige. Although the three indicators are linked, they are by no means measuring the exact same thing.¹² Table 2 illustrates the positive but not overwhelming correlations between the three indicators. In the NAES, all three of these indicators are coded from 1 to 9, so I simply sum the three for each respondent to create a "social status" variable with a range from 3 to 27.¹³

¹² The three indicators produce a Cronbach's alpha of .66.

¹³ The nine categories for household income are (1) Less than \$10,000; (2) \$10,000 to less than \$15,000; (3) \$15,000 to less than \$25,000; (4) \$25,000 to less than \$35,000; (5) \$35,000 to less than \$50,000; (6) \$50,000 to less than \$75,000; (7) \$75,000 to less than \$100,000; (8) \$100,000 to less than \$150,000; and (9) \$150,000 or more. The nine categories for educational attainment are: (1) Grade eight or lower; (2)

[Table 2 about here]

Because I am interested in unequal political representation within each state and state populations can vary widely in terms of their income distribution, levels of education, and proportion of citizens with various occupations, it would be unwise to compare the social statuses of citizens in one state to the social status of citizens in another state. Simply put, we might expect a lawyer making \$100,000 per year living in West Virginia to exert comparatively greater political influence than a lawyer making \$100,000 per year living in New York. To account for differences across states, I generate a measure of state relative social status that compares a respondent's score for the three components with the average score for a resident in his or her state. A positive score for state relative social status indicates that a respondent is above the mean status while a negative score indicates that a respondent is below the mean.

Some high school, no diploma; (3) High school diploma or equivalent; (4) Technical or vocational school after high school; (5) Some college, no degree; (6) Associate's or two-year college degree; (7) Four-year college degree; (8) Graduate or professional school after college, no degree; and (9) Graduate or professional degree. The nine categories for occupational prestige (coded by the author) ranked from least prestigious to most prestigious are: (1) Laborer (plumber's helper, construction worker, longshoreperson, garbage collector, other physical work); (2) Semi-skilled worker (machine operator, assembly line worker, truck driver, taxi driver, bus driver); (3) Service worker (police officer, fire fighter, waiter or waitress, maid, nurse's aide, attendant, hairstylist); (4) Clerical or office worker (typist, secretary, postal clerk, telephone operator, computer operator, bank clerk) (5) Salesperson; (6) Skilled tradesperson (printer, baker, tailor, electrician, machinist, linesperson, plumber, carpenter, mechanic); (7) Manager (store manager, sales manager, office manager); (8) Business owner; and (9) Profession worker (lawyer, doctor, scientist, teacher, engineer, registered nurse, accountant, programmer, musician).

Armed with this new measure, I then assess whether there is a systematic relationship between a citizen's (state relative) social status and the ideological distance between their opinion and state policy. To evaluate this relationship, I regress the measure of ideological distance on social status for every respondent in the sample using the six different measures of ideological proximity described above.¹⁴ The results of these six regressions are reported in Table 3. Reading across the six columns reveals strong evidence of unequal political representation. Specifically, all six coefficients are negative and bounded below zero which indicates that as a respondent's (state relative) social status increases, the distance between their ideology and state policy decreases and they are better represented. Put another way, the lower a respondent's social status, the greater the distance between opinion and policy and the worse that respondent's general political ideology is represented in the general liberalism of his or her state's public policies. These findings comport with the small but growing set of studies (Gilens, Lax, and Phillips 2011; Rigby and Wright 2011; Flavin 2012) that have found that disadvantaged citizens are underrepresented in the policymaking process in the American states.

[Table 3 about here]

As discussed above, the primary rationale behind examining unequal political representation at the state level is to understand and explain variation in political equality across the states. To assess in which states political influence is strongly tied to social status compared to those states that weight opinions more equally, I run a separate regression for each state and compare the coefficient for (state relative) social status. Similar to the nationwide regression reported above, a more steeply negative slope coefficient indicates a stronger relationship

¹⁴ Because residents are clustered within states and experience the same state policy, I report standard errors clustered by state for all regressions in Table 3.

between social status and ideological distance and, accordingly, less political equality. For example, consider the two hypothetical states presented in Figure 2. For each state, the line represents the slope of the relationship between social status and ideological distance. As the figure illustrates, the relationship between social status and distance is rather weak in State C, indicating that citizens' opinions are weighted roughly equally regardless of social status. In contrast, the slope of the relationship between social status and ideological distance is quite steeply negative for State D, indicating that there is a strong degree of political inequality in state policymaking.¹⁵

[Figure 2 about here]

I run a separate regression for each state using each of the six different measures of ideological proximity described above (three measurement techniques x two measures of state policy liberalism). When the six regression coefficients (for state relative social status) are compared across the states, they have a Cronbach's alpha of .95, indicating that all six measures appear to be measuring the same underlying concept. To create a single summary score of political equality that is directly comparable across states, I conduct a principal components analysis on the six slope coefficients and generate a factor score for each state.¹⁶ Because a more steeply negative slope coefficient indicates more unequal representation, a more positive factor score indicates greater political equality. I label this new measure the "Political Equality Index."

[Table 4 about here]

¹⁵ This approach of running separate regressions for each state and comparing the slope coefficients is methodologically similar to Gelman, Park, Shor, Bafumi, and Cortina's (2008) analysis of the varying relationship between income and partisan vote choice across the states.

¹⁶ The eigen value for the lone retained factor is 4.82 and explains 80.5% of the total variance.

The factor scores generated using this procedure are reported in Table 4 where the states are ranked from the most to least equal in terms of political representation. A cursory look at the rankings reveals no clear pattern in regards to region (South vs. non-South), “rich” vs. “poor” state, or “red” vs. “blue” state. Moreover, it is not simply that political equality is an alternative measure of the liberalism of state policy (with the expectation that lower status citizens support more liberal policies). In fact, the correlations between the Political Equality Index and the two measures of state policy liberalisms are actually negative, indicating that political equality and policy liberalism are not the same.¹⁷ Most importantly, however, is the fact that there is significant variation in political equality across the states. In the following section, I use this variation to evaluate whether states that have adopted certain election reforms tend to more equally weigh all citizens’ opinions in the state policymaking process.

Electoral Laws and Political Equality

Sidney Verba (1996, 1) declares that, “[political] participation is a mechanism for representation, a means by which governing officials are informed of the preferences and needs of the public and are induced to respond to those preferences and needs.” Arguably the most important mechanism by which citizens influence their elected officials is through voting – the “electoral connection” (Mayhew 1974). Citizens who vote are able to sanction representatives who are “out of step” with their preferences (Canes-Wrone, Brady, and Cogan 2002) and select representatives who are “like-minded” (Miller and Stokes 1963) and will support policies they desire. Conversely, citizens who do not vote do not enjoy these advantages since “the blunt truth

¹⁷ The Political Equality Index correlates with the Gray et al. (2004) policy liberalism measure at -.39 and with the Sorens, Muedini, and Ruger (2008) policy liberalism measure at -.44.

is that politicians and officials are under no compulsion to pay much heed to classes and groups of citizens that do not vote” (Key 1949, 527).

In light of the findings of unequal political representation revealed in the previous section, one very plausible reason that citizens with low social status are not as well represented by their elected officials is that this group notoriously participates in politics at significantly lower levels than their more advantaged counterparts (Verba and Nie 1972; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980; Rosenstone and Hanson 1993; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995).

Therefore, the bias in political representation demonstrated in this study and elsewhere might simply be an artifact of (1) elected officials giving greater priority to the preferences of citizens who vote and (2) affluent citizens turning out at higher (often much higher) rates than disadvantaged citizens. In regards to political equality, this is normatively troubling because “who votes, and who doesn’t, has important consequences for who gets elected and for the content of public policies” (Lijphart 1997, 4). Or, as Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995, 14) suggest, “inequalities in activity are likely to be associated with inequalities in governmental responsiveness.”

If government in fact listens to those who turn out to vote, then we might expect that disadvantaged citizens would be better represented by their elected officials when this group votes at a higher rate. More specifically, when the difference in turnout between low and high status constituents is narrowed, we might expect disadvantaged citizens to fare relatively better in terms of having their opinions reflected in state policies. Previous studies at the national level have generally found that voting has its rewards because voters are more likely to have their

opinions reflected in government policy (Campbell 2003; Martin 2003; Griffin and Newman 2005).¹⁸

In the state politics literature there is some evidence that state governments tend to enact policies supported by low income citizens when the turnout gap between them and affluent citizens is narrowed. For instance, increased voter turnout among citizens with low incomes (relative to citizens with high incomes) has been shown to be associated with more generous state welfare cash benefits (Hill and Leighley 1992; Hill, Leighley, and Hinton-Anderson 1995; Ringquist, Hill, Leighley, and Hinton-Anderson 1997) and more flexible eligibility requirements (Fellowes and Rowe 2004). In short, this set of studies generally finds that voting matters by rewarding the poor with more liberal policies when they turn out at (relatively) higher rates.

One goal of recent electoral reforms is to equalize the political “playing field” and, by doing so, promote a more equal consideration of all citizens’ opinions in the policymaking process. Have these reforms been effective? In this section, I assess the effectiveness of three common electoral reforms: (1) Election Day registration, (2) “no excuse” absentee voting, and (3) early voting. The first reform is intended to eliminate the barrier of registration for voting while the second two are intended to make voting more convenient. Election Day registration allows citizens who are not registered an opportunity to register to vote when they show up at the polls on Election Day. “No excuse” absentee voting allows citizens to mail in an absentee ballot without needing to provide a reason why they cannot appear to vote on Election Day. Early

¹⁸ Others, however, have come to a different conclusion: “[differences in turnout rates] are seldom explicitly related to any observed or potential impact they may have upon the strategic decisions of candidates or the policy outcomes produced by the electoral process” (Bartels 1998, 45; also see Bartels 2008).

voting allows citizens to cast their ballots in person at public locations for an established period of time before Election Day. All three are coded dichotomously to indicate either the presence or absence of the reform. States have adopted these reforms gradually over time, with several states adopting one or more of the reforms since the year 2000. Because the two policy liberalism variables I use when computing the Political Equality Index are from the early 2000s, for my analysis I code whether a state had a particular election law or not in the year 2000. This ensures that the presence of an election law temporally predates the policy choices made by state governments, which is essential for making the argument that the adoption of certain election laws leads to a more equal weighting of citizens' opinions in state policy outputs. As of 2000, six states had Election Day registration, seventeen allowed for "no excuse" absentee voting, and sixteen allowed for early voting. Tables 5A-C report the 2x2 cross-tabulations for each reform with the other two and reveal that there is some but not an overwhelming degree of overlap across states. In other words, having one reform does not necessarily predict having the other two.

[Table 5 about here]

I then evaluate whether there is a systematic difference in the equality of political representation among states that have a certain election law compared to states that do not. Tables 6A-C report the results from three difference-of-means tests comparing states that have Election Day registration (Table 6A), "no excuse" absentee voting (Table 6B), or early voting (Table 6C) and those that do not. Recall from the discussion above, the Political Equality Index is computed such that a higher score indicates a more equal weighting of citizens' political opinions (i.e. a weaker link between higher social status and opinion-policy distance). Looking at the rightmost column for each table, all three test statistics are positive and indicate that states

with the election reform in question (“Yes”) have a higher mean score on the Political Equality Index than states that do not have the reform (“No”). However, only the difference between states that have and do not have “no excuse” absentee voting reaches traditional levels of statistical significance ($p=.019$). This result suggests that states that allow for “no excuse” absentee voting tend to have more equal political representation.

[Table 6 about here]

Discussion

The correspondence between citizens’ opinions and public policy is the “bottom line” for American democracy. A large political science literature has been dedicated to demonstrating that citizens’ aggregated opinions strongly predict the tone of public policy in both state (e.g., Erikson, Wright, and McIver 1993) and national politics (e.g., Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002). Far less attention has been paid to the question: Are citizens’ opinions represented equally? Recent studies at the national level (Gilens 2005; Jacobs and Page 2005; Bartels 2008) report that the opinions of the disadvantaged are especially underrepresented in the policymaking process compared to the affluent across a wide array of policy domains.

This paper extends this new line of inquiry to the American states and uncovers similar results (also see Gilens, Lax, and Phillips 2011; Rigby and Wright 2011; Flavin 2012). Assessing the relationship between citizens’ general political ideology and state policy liberalism, citizens with higher social status are consistently better represented compared to citizens with comparatively lower social status (see Table 3). If “a key characteristic of a democracy is the continued responsiveness of the government to the preferences of its citizens,

considered as political equals” (Dahl 1971, 1), the democratic process in the American states appears to fall short of this standard.

Moreover, there is significant variation in the equality of political representation across the states (see Table 4). Using this variation, I find that states that allow for “no excuse” absentee voting weigh citizens’ opinions more equally in the policymaking process. This finding suggests that election laws can play an important role in promoting more equal political representation. However, my findings are somewhat at odds with previous studies that examine the effect of loosening absentee voting on the composition of voter turnout. These studies have tended to conclude that wealthier and more educated citizens are the most likely to take advantage of new absentee ballot laws (Oliver 1996; Karp and Banducci 2001). By comparison, Rigby and Springer’s (2011) more recent and comprehensive analysis of the effect of election laws on the composition of voter turnout finds little evidence that “no excuse” absentee voting laws affect the upper class bias in voter turnout in one direction or the other. My analysis further complicates this question by examining a related topic (the relationship between election laws and the equality of political representation) and uncovering evidence that states that attempt to make voting more convenient by allowing easier access to absentee ballots exhibit more equal patterns of political representation. In subsequent analyses, I hope to further probe this question and reconcile these competing findings. For example, one fruitful avenue for future research is to examine the equality of political representation in states before and after they adopt certain election laws.

More generally, the variation in political equality across the states provides a unique research opportunity to examine the causes of unequal political influence. Recent studies of unequal political representation have documented wide disparities between the rich and the poor

but stop short of explaining why these disparities occur. Although political scientists and pundits have speculated for decades about the underlying causes of unequal political influence, empirical investigation of this topic remains startlingly limited. As a result, we still have an inadequate understanding and little concrete evidence about the precise mechanisms by which social inequalities are reproduced as political inequality. To further our understanding, future studies should incorporate other institutional features in the states to explain what conditions lead to more or less political equality.

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Table 1: “Symbolic” and Operational Political Ideology

	Self-Reported (“Symbolic”) Political Ideology				
	Very Conservative	Conservative	Moderate	Liberal	Very Liberal
Government should reduce income differences between rich and poor (% yes)	38	45	58	70	77
Providing health care for people who do not already have it (% spend more)	49	57	73	83	88
Providing assistance to poor mothers with young children (% spend more)	34	39	48	59	67
Financial assistance to public schools (% spend more)	49	58	73	83	87
Laws making it more difficult for a woman to get an abortion (% oppose)	28	42	66	78	81
Constitutional amendment banning gay marriage (% oppose)	29	39	61	74	80
Restricting the kinds of guns that people can buy (% government should do more)	42	52	67	76	76

Data source: 2000 and 2004 National Annenberg Election Surveys.

Table 2: Correlation Among the Three Components of Social Status

	Income	Education	Occupational Prestige
Income	1.000		
Education	.442***	1.000	
Occupational Prestige	.326***	.474***	1.000

Cell entries are pair-wise correlation coefficients. N=116,188.

* denotes $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

Table 3: Less Distance Between Opinion and Policy for Citizens with Higher Social Status

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Distance Measure	Standardized	Standardized	Same Scale	Same Scale	Restricted Scale	Restricted Scale
Policy Data	Gray et al.	SMR	Gray et al.	SMR	Gray et al.	SMR
Social Status (State Relative)	-0.00425** [0.00165]	-0.00487*** [0.00156]	-0.00360** [0.00174]	-0.00323* [0.00169]	-0.00248** [0.00114]	-0.00252** [0.00111]
Constant	1.150*** [0.117]	1.170*** [0.118]	1.191*** [0.102]	1.216*** [0.0717]	0.899*** [0.0310]	0.899*** [0.0231]
N	116,188	116,188	116,188	116,188	116,188	116,188

Dependent variable: Linear distance between a citizen's ideology and state policy.

Cell entries are OLS regression coefficients with standard errors clustered by state reported beneath in brackets.

* denotes $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$. Two-tailed test.

Gray et al. = Gray, Lowery, Fellowes, and McAtee (2004)

SMR = Sorens, Muedini, and Ruger (2008)

Table 4: Ranking the States by the Equality of Political Representation

South Dakota	4.18	Washington	0.20
New Mexico	3.28	Minnesota	0.08
North Dakota	3.09	Tennessee	0.00
Iowa	2.84	Illinois	-0.03
Arizona	2.79	Georgia	-0.20
Montana	2.67	Louisiana	-0.21
Idaho	2.10	Nevada	-0.32
Wyoming	1.71	Rhode Island	-0.32
Missouri	1.67	West Virginia	-0.39
Wisconsin	1.40	Maine	-0.46
Kentucky	1.38	New Hampshire	-0.50
Kansas	1.35	Texas	-0.51
Michigan	1.35	Delaware	-0.67
Pennsylvania	1.15	Arkansas	-0.88
Ohio	1.12	New Jersey	-1.51
Indiana	1.06	Connecticut	-1.60
North Carolina	0.87	South Carolina	-1.80
Virginia	0.62	Alabama	-1.82
Nebraska	0.61	Maryland	-2.76
Utah	0.52	Massachusetts	-3.01
Oklahoma	0.36	California	-3.54
Colorado	0.32	Vermont	-4.47
Oregon	0.31	New York	-5.14
Florida	0.30	Mississippi	-7.23

Cell entries are factor scores from combining six coefficients for state specific regressions.

Larger positive values indicate greater political equality (i.e. a weaker relationship between social status and opinion-policy distance).

Table 5: Cross-Tabulations of the Presence of Election Laws

(A)

		“No Excuse” Absentee Voting	
		No	Yes
Election Day	No	29	13
Registration	Yes	2	4

(B)

		Early Voting	
		No	Yes
Election Day	No	29	13
Registration	Yes	3	3

(C)

		Early Voting	
		No	Yes
“No Excuse”	No	28	3
Absentee Voting	Yes	4	13

Table 6: Do Election Laws Promote Greater Political Equality?

(A) Election Day Registration

Mean Political Equality Index score		
<i>No</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Yes – No</i>
-0.103	0.722	0.826
[0.354]	[0.471]	[0.961]
N = 42	N = 6	p = 0.394

(B) “No Excuse” Absentee Voting

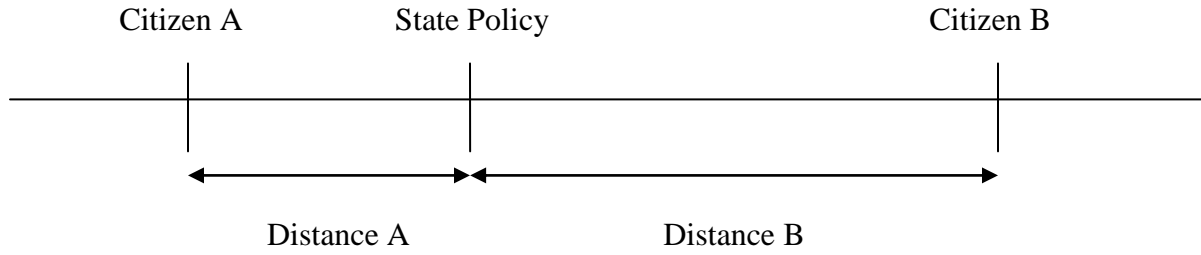
Mean Political Equality Index score		
<i>No</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Yes – No</i>
-0.541	0.988	1.529
[0.410]	[0.403]	[0.631]
N = 31	N = 17	p = 0.019

(C) Early Voting

Mean Political Equality Index score		
<i>No</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Yes – No</i>
-0.314	0.629	0.944
[0.419]	[0.423]	[0.665]
N = 32	N = 16	p = 0.162

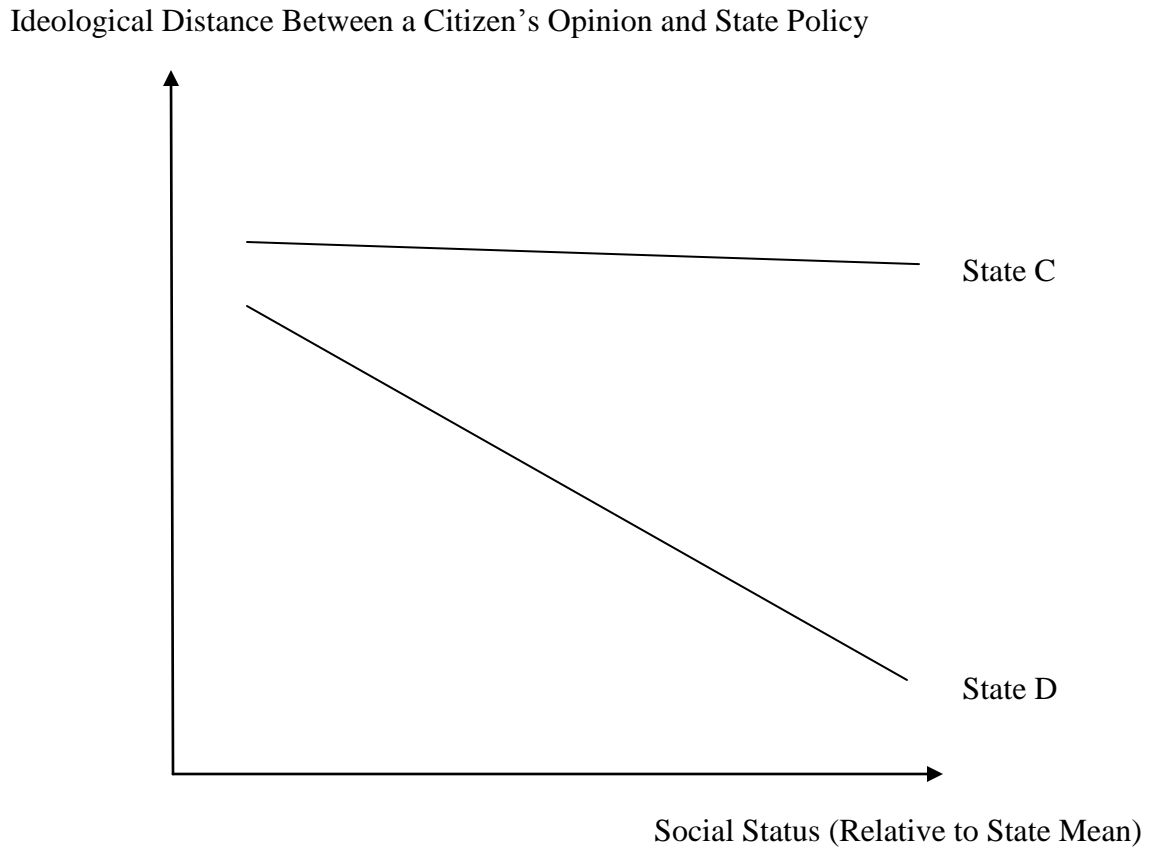
Standard errors of the estimates in brackets, p-value calculated using a two-tailed test.

Figure 1: Computing Ideological Distance Between Opinion and Policy



Using a proximity measure of political representation, Citizen A is better represented than Citizen B because the ideological distance between her opinion and state policy is smaller.

Figure 2: Computing the Effect of Relative Social Status on Ideological Distance, by State



State C has more equal political representation than State D because the relationship (regression coefficient) between social status and opinion-policy distance is weaker in State C compared to State D.