

# The Political Representation of the Poor: A Research Note Using CSES Data

---

Karen Long Jusko  
University of Michigan

August 25, 2005

\*Prepared for presentation at the Plenary Meetings of the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems, Washington D.C., August 30-21, 2005. An earlier version of this paper was presented in the EITM Workshop, at the Annual Meetings of the Canadian Political Science Association. Comments are most welcome: [kjlong@umich.edu](mailto:kjlong@umich.edu).

## **Abstract**

Studies of the public opinion-policy link argue that policy changes are representative when they reflect aggregate-level changes in public opinion. The opinions of most citizens, however, do not change very much over time. As result, government policy may reflect the changing interests of only a small subset of attentive, informed, and articulate voters. Who are these voters? Where do the poorest citizens of contemporary democracies fit in? Under what conditions are elected officials likely to be more or less responsive to the preferences of poor voters? What are the distributional consequences of partisan and electoral incentives to be more or less responsive to the poor?

I address these questions in a larger, broadly comparative study of the political representation of the poor. Here, I focus on the question, “How well are the interests of the poor represented in contemporary democratic governments?” and develop a simple model of representation that will serve as a way to evaluate patterns of representation. The parameters of this model are estimated using Comparative Study of Electoral Systems data.

# 1 Introduction

- How well are the interests of the poor represented in contemporary democratic governments?
- Under what conditions are elected officials likely to be more or less responsive to the preferences of poor voters?
- What are the distributional consequences of partisan and electoral incentives to be more or less responsive to the poor?

This discussion contributes to a larger project that addresses these questions. Here, I concentrate on the first question, and propose a simple framework for the study of political representation that travels well across space and time. Then, using individual-level data compiled under the auspices of the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES), I investigate patterns of representation in contemporary democratic societies. (The larger project also draws heavily on the individual-level income data that comprise the Luxembourg Income Study, LIS.) By using the individual as the unit of analysis, and by emphasizing the representation of the poor, this research begins from a different perspective than other studies of political representation. This vantage, I argue, offers important opportunities to evaluate the quality of democratic governance. Before returning to the question that motivates this discussion, “How well do contemporary democratic governments represent the interests of the poor?” in the next section, I revisit current models of political representation, and suggest advantages that derive from an evaluation of democracy from the perspective of the poor.

## 2 Current Models of Political Representation and the Poor

Although most studies of political representation emphasize congruence in the preferences and activities of policymakers, and the preferences of citizens, they differ in the unit of analysis employed (e.g. Przeworski, Stokes & Manin 1999, Miller 1999, Soroka & Wlezien 2005, Soroka & Wlezien 2004, Soroka & Lim 2003).<sup>1</sup> Some earlier studies, for example, investigate patterns of in the preferences of elected representatives and their electoral constituencies (e.g. Miller & Stokes 1963). Many of the more recent studies, however, employ a “thermostatic model” of representation, linking budgetary expenditures to aggregate shifts in public opinion (Erikson, MacKuen & Stimson 2002, develop this model in the American context). According to this account, public preferences shift in aggregate along a policy dimension in response to decisions made by policymakers, who likewise are responsive to relative changes in position of the median voter on this dimension. For example, an increase in spending on welfare, beyond some generally preferred threshold, may result in a decrease in aggregate levels of public support for welfare spending. Responsive policymakers will then divert public funds from defence to other categories. In this way, aggregate public opinion operates as a thermostat, regulating the spending climate within a particular country.

Note, however, that a thermostatic model of representation, following Erikson, MacKuen & Stimson (2002), implies that government responsiveness in general occurs when governments are responsive to the changing preferences of a well-informed and articulate subset of voters. Who are these voters? Soroka and his collaborators emphasize the role played

---

<sup>1</sup>Others in the literature (e.g. Stokes 1999) have distinguished representation from responsiveness, reflecting a political actor’s congruence with their constituents’ ‘best interests’ and expressed preferences, respectively. Stokes (1999), for example, suggests that a representative actor might act directly contrary to her constituent’s expressed preferences. This distinction, however, is less helpful, when the quality of representation is evaluated from the perspective of the constituents: It is unlikely that constituents would distinguish between their expressed preferences and their best interests, without the benefit of hindsight. Therefore, this discussion and the proposed research uses “representation” and “responsiveness” interchangeably.

by the median voter in the policy space – presumably a middle income voter (see Soroka & Wlezien 2005, 2). However, because of the importance of information and preference articulation in Erikson, MacKuen & Stimson’s (2002) account, it also seems plausible that these influential voters are wealthier than the average citizen (Delli-Carpini & Keeter 1996).<sup>2</sup> In any case, it is difficult to imagine circumstances in which the poor would comprise this persuasive subset of voters. (Indeed, an investigation of the mechanisms that induce responsiveness to poor is a central component of the larger project to which this discussion contributes).

While this discussion does not address this issue directly – this is accomplished in the larger project using extensive time series in public opinion and income data, for a subset of important cases – I do present evidence consistent with the expectation that poor citizens are unlikely to comprise the persuasive subset of voters. Nevertheless, by emphasizing the representation a particular constituency, as suggested earlier, this research begins from a somewhat different vantage than other recent studies of political representation, although with important advantages: First, there is, in general, a clear and monotonic mapping from the political representation of the poor, to policy outcomes. More concretely, societies in which political actors are more responsive to the poor should be characterized by policy outcomes which benefit the poor to a greater extent than those societies in which the poor are less well-represented. (I assume that at least some of these benefits are evident in distributive policy). This mapping may be less clear in studies which emphasize congruence between an individual legislator and her constituents (such ‘dyadic’ representation may have little effect on policy outcomes), and may be obscured by aggregate level analysis.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup>Erikson, MacKuen & Stimson (2002) provide some supporting evidence, in their analysis of the relationship between race, region and age, and macropartisanship.

<sup>3</sup>There are several recent papers in American politics that begin with a group-centered model of responsiveness. In particular, Bartels (2003) and Gilens (2004) have investigated differences in patterns of responsiveness to the poor and to the wealthy using public opinion data. Bartels (2002) also centers on differences in patterns of responsiveness to the poor, although within a dyadic or geographically-based model of representation.

A second advantage of evaluating responsiveness to the poor derives from that fact that, unfortunately, poverty is a concept that travels well, even among contemporary democratic societies. Poverty, in this discussion, and in the larger project, is defined in relative terms: As above, ‘the poor’ are those individuals who comprise the poorest quintile of the disposable income distribution. Other standard measures of relative poverty (e.g. the European Commission defines the poor as those with incomes less than 60 per cent of the national average; Barr 2004) are less well-suited to cross-national comparisons in electoral behavior, for example: What proportion of ‘the poor’ cast ballots? What proportion of the citizens living in a particular electoral district are poor? Using the poorest quintile – indeed, this is how the model is operationalized in the analysis that follows – rather than other relative measures of poverty, maintains a constant denominator across countries that allows these sorts of comparisons, at the cost of obscuring cross-national differences in absolute poverty.<sup>4</sup>

Finally, although policy decisions regarding poverty are not ahistorical, as suggested above, unlike responsiveness to ethnic communities, for example, the distribution of benefits to the poor usually involves issues of more and less, and rarely emphasize context-specific symbolic policy. This is not to suggest that the political representation (or lack of representation) of ethnic communities lacks distributive components; it does not. Rather, this research implicitly assumes that, not only is poverty a portable concept (i.e., it means roughly the same thing to be poor in any of the countries included in this analysis), but that the policies aimed to alleviate poverty are themselves portable (i.e., they can be implemented with more or less the same results in any of the countries included in the analysis).

By focusing on the political representation of the poor, therefore, and thus the relationship between political representation and redistributive policy, this research offers an important opportunity to evaluate the quality of democratic governance in contemporary

---

<sup>4</sup>The use of relative, rather than absolute, measures of poverty is consistent with the formal theoretic models of redistributive politics that provide the theoretical foundations for the proposed research (e.g. Moene & Wallerstein 2001).

democratic societies. The first question posed above, “How well do contemporary democratic governments represent the interests of the poor?” is intended to gauge the cross-national variance in patterns of representation. To this end, the next section of this discussion proposes a model of representation that serves as the basis for the cross-national analysis that follows.

### 3 A Simple Model of Representation

Suppose that how well a political actor,  $P$ , represents her constituency may be characterized by a linear combination of the preferences of different groups of constituents. For example, a model characterizing the extent to which  $P$  represents the preferences of citizens in different income groups can be expressed in the following way:

$$\mathbf{R}_P = R_{MIDDLECLASS} + R_{POOR} + R_{WEALTHY} \quad (1)$$

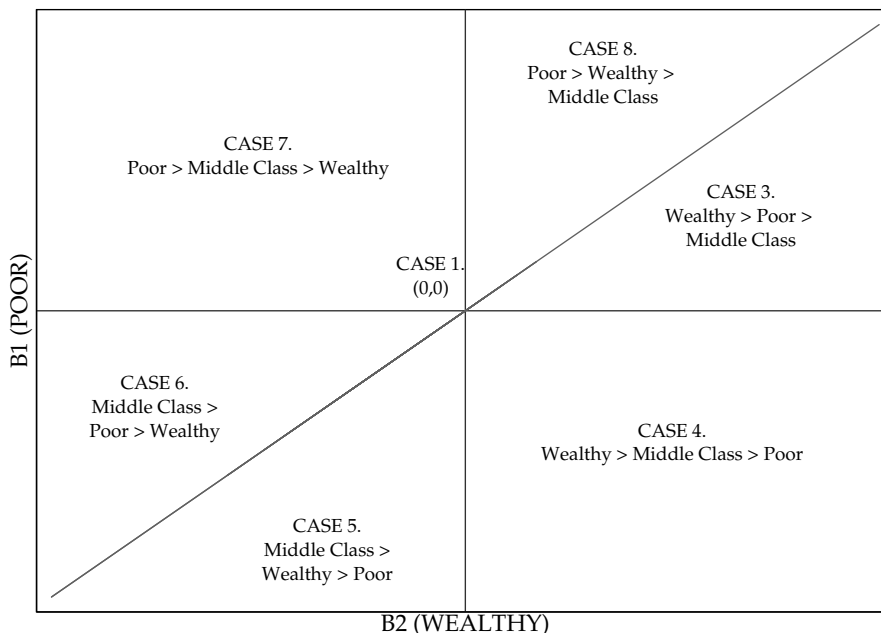
Then, define

$$\begin{aligned} \beta_1 &= R_{POOR} - R_{MIDDLECLASS} & \text{and} \\ \beta_2 &= R_{WEALTHY} - R_{MIDDLECLASS} \end{aligned} \quad (2)$$

and, as Figure 1 shows, the values of  $\beta_1$  and  $\beta_2$  can be interpreted as evidence of  $P$ 's responsiveness to poor and to wealthy citizens, relative to how well  $P$  represents the preferences of the middle classes.

There are several cases to consider: First, consider the case in which  $\beta_1 = \beta_2 = 0$ , which implies that  $R_{POOR} = R_{WEALTHY} = R_{MIDDLECLASS}$  (CASE 1), or that the political actor represents all income groups equally well. This case is slightly different from that in which  $\beta_1 = \beta_2 \neq 0$  (CASE 2, denoted by the diagonal line):  $P$  represents the poor and the wealthy

Figure 1: Patterns of Responsiveness



NOTE: This Figure denotes six patterns of responsiveness to different income classes, implied by equation (2).  $>$  denotes the direction of responsiveness. For example, ‘Wealthy  $>$  Middle Class,’ in the upper left quadrants denotes that the political actor is more responsive to the wealthy than to members of the middle class.

equally well, but may be more ( $\beta_1 = \beta_2 < 0$ ) or less ( $\beta_1 = \beta_2 > 0$ ) representative of the middle class. When  $\beta_2 > \beta_1 > 0$  (CASE 3), the political actor  $P$  is more representative of the wealthy and of the poor, than of the middle class. In the lower right quadrant, when  $\beta_2 > 0 > \beta_1$  (CASE 4),  $P$  is more representative of the wealthy and of the middle class, than of the poor. Finally, when  $\beta_1 < \beta_2 < 0$  (CASE 5),  $P$  is more representative of the middle class, and of the wealthy, than of the poor. (CASES 6, 7 and 8 transpose the patterns of CASES 3, 4 and 5, respectively.)

This simple model of political representation offers a way to evaluate patterns in the extent to which the preferences of different constituencies are reflected in the policy making process.

## 4 Estimating $\beta_1$ and $\beta_2$

The measure of representation,  $\mathbf{R}_P$ , is usually unobserved. We often, however, have measures of how well citizens are represented by different political actors. In particular, survey respondents are often asked to evaluate the policy positions of political parties, as well as to state their own policy preferences. While other political actors certainly have the incentive to be responsive to public interests, political parties are both capable of cultivating a constituency, and are most likely to derive direct benefits from their constituent's support. Using Comparative Study of Electoral Systems data (CSES; Modules 1 & 2), let  $P_i$  denote the political party with whom  $i$  identifies most, then, and from

$$\hat{\mathbf{R}}_i = -(\hat{S}_i - \hat{P}_i)^2 \quad (3)$$

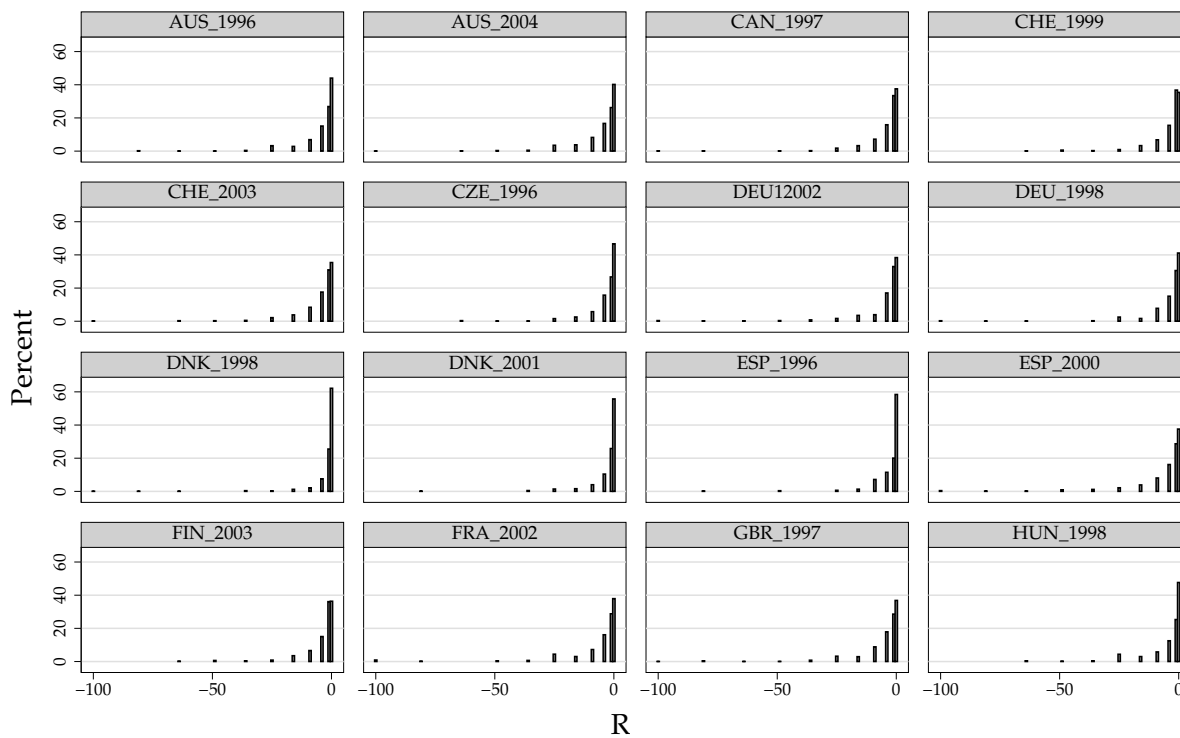
we can infer how well voter  $i$  believes she is represented by  $P_i$ :  $\hat{S}_i$  reports  $i$ 's position in left-right space, on an 11-point scale.  $\hat{P}_i$  reports  $i$ 's perception of her preferred party  $P_i$ 's location, on the same dimension. It seems reasonable to conclude that when the difference between  $i$ 's self-placement and the placement of her party is large,  $i$ 's preferences are not well-represented by  $P_i$ .<sup>5</sup>

Figure 2 reports the distributions of  $\mathbf{R}_i$  for each country included in the analysis. Note that this measure of representation,  $\hat{\mathbf{R}}$ , may provide a particularly difficult test case for an investigation of the representation of the poor: All survey respondents may be more likely to identify with parties that represent their preferences. That is, as seen in Figure 2,  $\hat{\mathbf{R}}_i = \mathbf{0}$  for a large number of respondents. This likely diminishes differences in perceived responsiveness among income groups. Similarly, parties may represent equally well those who identify themselves as their core constituents, regardless of income. Both of these factors may work

---

<sup>5</sup>This analysis pools citizens identifying with any of the six most popular parties (or the maximum number of parties that received at least five per cent of the vote in the observed election, whichever is less) to generate country-level estimates of  $\hat{\beta}_1$ , and  $\hat{\beta}_2$  for 31 elections, held in 23 countries between 1996 and 2004.

Figure 2: Representation: Ideological Proximity



Graphs by Election

NOTE: This Figure reports distributions of  $\mathbf{R}_i$  (Eq. (3)) for each election included in the analysis.

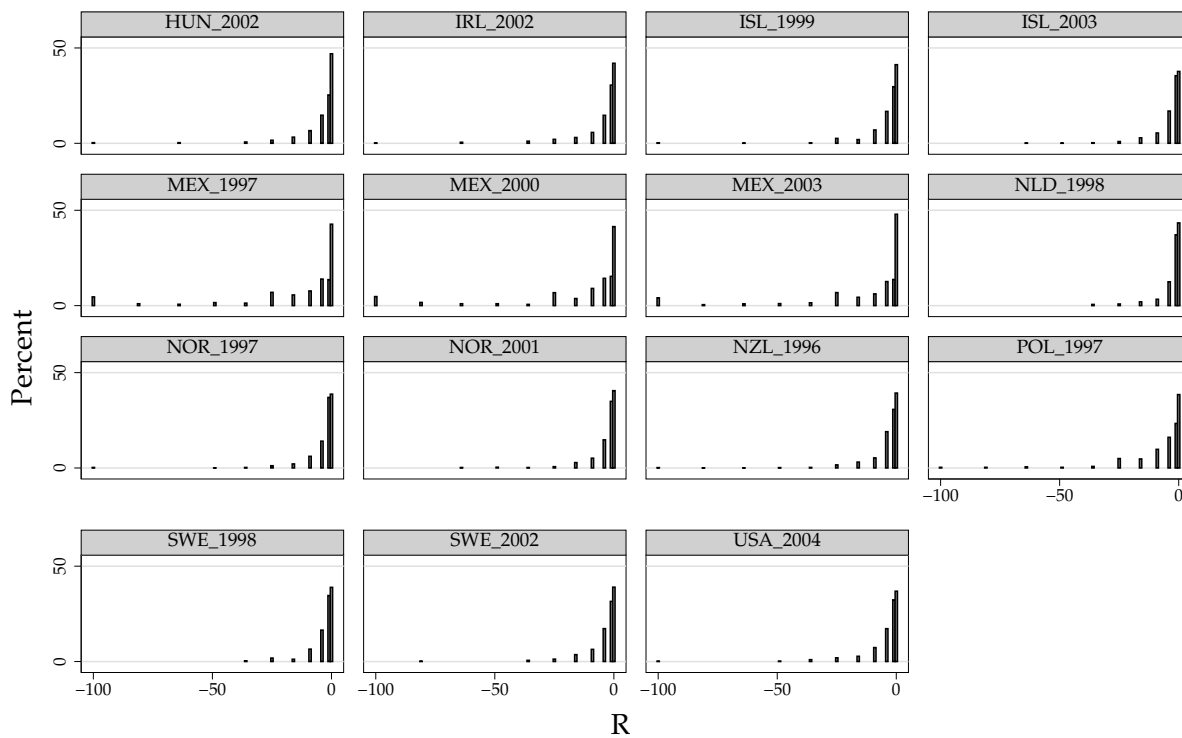
SOURCE: CSES Modules 1& 2.

to obscure differences in the representation of different income groups: Any estimates of  $\beta_1$  and  $\beta_2$  are likely biased towards 0.<sup>6</sup>

Suppose, however, that there are no parties that compete for office in  $i$ 's country, with which she shares any policy preferences. Further, suppose that whether or not  $i$  identifies with a political party is a function of her income group. In fact, as Table 1 reports, it seems to be the case that, in a large number of countries, poor respondents are less likely to identify with any political party. If observation of  $\hat{\mathbf{R}}_i$  depends upon  $i$ 's party identification,

<sup>6</sup>CSES includes several other items that may well serve as direct measures of responsiveness. Two of these will be considered shortly. This measure developed here is used, instead, as the basis of this analysis because it serves as a particularly difficult test of the congruence between evidence of policy responsiveness and perceptions of responsiveness, and because it may serve as most comparable cross-national and over time measure of responsiveness to the poor.

Figure 2: Representation: Ideological Proximity



Graphs by Election

NOTE: This Figure reports distributions of  $R_i$  (Eq. (3)) for each election included in the analysis.

SOURCE: CSES Modules 1& 2.

then there is an implicit selection mechanism at work that may be expressed in the following way:

$$PID_i^* = \gamma_0 + \gamma_1 POOR_i + \gamma_2 WEALTHY_i + \nu_i \tag{4}$$

where

$$PID_i = \begin{cases} 1 & \text{if } PID_i^* > 0 \\ 0 & \text{if } PID_i^* \leq 0 \end{cases} \tag{5}$$

$POOR_i$  and  $WEALTHY_i$  are indicator variables (i.e. equal to 1 if  $i$  is poor, for example, and 0 otherwise),<sup>7</sup> and  $\nu_i \sim N(0, 1)$  is a stochastic residual term. Then, to be explicit,  $R_i$  is

<sup>7</sup>Here,  $POOR$  denotes respondents with incomes in the lowest quintile. CSES data report income coded

Table 1: Patterns of Party Identification Among Poor and Wealthy Respondents

| Election | Poor              |       | Wealthy           |     | Difference | Std. Error of Difference |
|----------|-------------------|-------|-------------------|-----|------------|--------------------------|
|          | Party Identifiers | N     | Party Identifiers | N   |            |                          |
| USA 2004 | 48%               | 392   | 71%               | 177 | 22.41      | 4.25                     |
| DEU 1998 | 31%               | 762   | 52%               | 271 | 20.30      | 3.47                     |
| POL 1997 | 47%               | 643   | 67%               | 345 | 19.81      | 3.20                     |
| FRA 2002 | 52%               | 332   | 70%               | 159 | 17.40      | 4.56                     |
| HUN 2002 | 48%               | 402   | 65%               | 202 | 16.84      | 4.18                     |
| ISL 1999 | 47%               | 472   | 62%               | 269 | 15.63      | 3.74                     |
| FIN 2003 | 40%               | 437   | 55%               | 166 | 14.54      | 4.52                     |
| CHE 1999 | 31%               | 422   | 44%               | 343 | 13.45      | 3.49                     |
| DEU12002 | 35%               | 723   | 47%               | 391 | 12.04      | 3.09                     |
| ESP 2000 | 42%               | 234   | 52%               | 185 | 10.55      | 4.89                     |
| SWE 1998 | 50%               | 402   | 60%               | 207 | 10.15      | 4.22                     |
| MEX 2003 | 52%               | 611   | 61%               | 302 | 8.89       | 3.46                     |
| NOR 1997 | 48%               | 381   | 57%               | 391 | 8.49       | 3.58                     |
| MEX 1997 | 44%               | 1,074 | 51%               | 244 | 7.47       | 3.54                     |
| ISL 2003 | 54%               | 444   | 60%               | 184 | 6.50       | 4.31                     |
| GBR 1997 | 49%               | 683   | 55%               | 381 | 5.25       | 3.19                     |
| CAN 1997 | 50%               | 296   | 55%               | 337 | 5.19       | 3.97                     |
| NOR 2001 | 38%               | 370   | 43%               | 369 | 4.98       | 3.61                     |
| CHE 2003 | 43%               | 215   | 47%               | 261 | 4.34       | 4.58                     |
| NLD 1998 | 29%               | 701   | 29%               | 300 | -0.01      | 3.12                     |
| AUS 1996 | 84%               | 644   | 83%               | 315 | -0.52      | 2.56                     |
| HUN 1998 | 36%               | 597   | 35%               | 240 | -0.68      | 3.65                     |
| AUS 2004 | 0.83              | 700   | 82%               | 293 | -0.75      | 2.65                     |
| ESP 1996 | 46%               | 353   | 44%               | 113 | -1.64      | 5.37                     |
| SWE 2002 | 49%               | 315   | 47%               | 170 | -2.15      | 4.75                     |
| NZL 1996 | 62%               | 652   | 59%               | 913 | -3.52      | 2.50                     |
| DNK 1998 | 48%               | 325   | 44%               | 315 | -4.18      | 3.94                     |
| IRL 2002 | 34%               | 463   | 29%               | 400 | -4.94      | 3.15                     |
| CZE 1996 | 56%               | 399   | 50%               | 201 | -5.89      | 4.32                     |
| DNK 2001 | 56%               | 345   | 47%               | 346 | -8.83      | 3.79                     |

NOTE. This Table reports the proportion of poor and wealthy respondents who identify with a political party, as well as the number of respondents in each income category, the difference in the proportions of party identifiers, and the standard errors of those differences.

SOURCE. CSES Modules 1&2.

into five categories that roughly correspond with income quintiles for the sample of respondents. Although this prevents the identification of respondents whose incomes lie below the poverty line (i.e. with incomes less than one-half of the median income), it was possible to verify the correspondence of these quintiles, to actual income distributions. Specifically, the distributions of CSES data were compared, whenever possible, to the income distributions of respondents in the Luxembourg Income Study. Similarly, *WEALTHY* denotes those respondents coded in the highest CSES income category.

observed if and only if  $PID_i = 1$ ;  $R_i$  is otherwise unobserved:

$$\hat{\mathbf{R}}_i = \begin{cases} \alpha_0 + \alpha_1 POOR_i + \alpha_2 WEALTHY_i + \epsilon_i & \text{if } PID = 1 \\ \cdot & \text{otherwise} \end{cases} \quad (6)$$

where  $\epsilon_i$  is a stochastic term. Here I use  $\alpha$  to distinguish these parameters from estimates of the total effects,  $\beta$ ; nevertheless,  $\alpha_1$  and  $\alpha_2$  can be interpreted as  $\beta_1$  and  $\beta_2$  were in Eq. (2) above, for those respondents who identify with a political party. If  $\gamma_1, \gamma_2 \neq 0$  then  $\nu$  and  $\epsilon$  are jointly distributed with correlation  $\rho \neq 0$ :

$$\begin{pmatrix} \epsilon_i \\ \nu_i \end{pmatrix} \sim \begin{pmatrix} \sigma_\epsilon^2 & \rho\sigma_\epsilon \\ \rho\sigma_\epsilon & 1 \end{pmatrix} \quad (7)$$

Then, to evaluate the effect of, for example, being poor on the quality of representation, the effect of being poor on party identification must also be taken into account. That is, whether or not  $i$  is well-represented by the political parties that compete for office in her country, may depend first upon whether or not her preferences are represented by any political party at all.

Following the usual Heckman selection set-up, the expectation of  $\hat{\mathbf{R}}_i$ , conditional on  $i$ 's party identification is calculated in the following way:

$$E(\mathbf{R}_i | PID_i = 1, POOR_i, WEALTHY_i) = \alpha_0 + \alpha_1 POOR_i + \alpha_2 WEALTHY_i + \rho\sigma_\epsilon\nu \quad (8)$$

with  $E(\epsilon|\nu) = \rho\sigma_\epsilon\nu$ , and  $E(\nu|PID_i = 1, POOR_i, WEALTHY_i) = \lambda$ , where,  $\lambda = \phi(\gamma_0 + \gamma_1 POOR_i + \gamma_2 WEALTHY_i) / \Phi(\gamma_0 + \gamma_1 POOR_i + \gamma_2 WEALTHY_i)$ , is the inverse Mills ratio, with  $\phi$ , and  $\Phi$  as the standard and cumulative normal distributions, respectively. Then, the expectation of  $\hat{\mathbf{R}}_i$ , conditional on  $i$ 's party identification (Eq. (5)) can be re-expressed in the

following way:

$$E(\mathbf{R}_i | PID_i = 1, POOR_i, WEALTHY_i) = \alpha_0 + \alpha_1 POOR_i + \alpha_2 WEALTHY_i + \rho\sigma_\epsilon\lambda_i \quad (9)$$

As  $\lambda_i$  incorporates the effect of income on party identification, an estimate the effect of income on  $\hat{\mathbf{R}}_i$ , then, given that  $\hat{\mathbf{R}}_i$  is observed, must correct for this selection bias. ( $\alpha_1$ , for example, overestimates the effect of poverty on  $\hat{\mathbf{R}}_i$  for those respondents who have a party identification.)

$$\begin{aligned} \frac{\partial E(\mathbf{R}_i | PID_i = 1, POOR_i, WEALTHY_i)}{\partial P_i} &= \alpha_1 + \frac{\partial \lambda_i}{\partial POOR_i} & (10) \\ &= \alpha_1 - \gamma_1 \rho \sigma_\epsilon \lambda_i (\lambda_i - \gamma_0 - \gamma_1 POOR_i - \gamma_2 WEALTHY_i) \end{aligned}$$

To estimate the effect of income on party identification, using the usual probit set-up, the expectation of partisanship is expressed<sup>8</sup>

$$E(PID_i | POOR_i, WEALTHY_i) = \Phi(\gamma_0 + \gamma_1 POOR_i + \gamma_2 WEALTHY_i) \quad (11)$$

Then,

$$\frac{\partial E(PID_i | WEALTHY_i, POOR_i)}{\partial POOR_i} = \phi(\gamma_0 + \gamma_1 POOR_i + \gamma_2 WEALTHY_i) \gamma_1 \quad (12)$$

Finally, the total effect of being poor, for example, can then be estimated by combining the

---

<sup>8</sup>Although not necessary, indicator variables for those respondents over 35, and those who are college educated are also included in the model described by Eq. (11). They are omitted here to simplify the discussion. Although this does alter the interpretation of the parameters estimated, it does not change the substantive conclusions reached in this discussion.

partial effects reported in Eq. (10) and (12):

$$\begin{aligned}
\hat{\beta}_1 &= \frac{\partial E(\mathbf{R}_i | PID_i = 1, POOR_i, WEALTHY_i)}{\partial POOR_i} + \frac{\partial E(PID_i | POOR_i, WEALTHY_i)}{\partial POOR_i} \quad (13) \\
&= \left( \alpha_1 - \gamma_1 \rho \sigma_\epsilon \lambda_i (\lambda_i - \gamma_0 + \gamma_1 POOR_i) \right) + \phi(\gamma_0 + \gamma_1 POOR_i) \gamma_1 \\
&= \alpha_1 + \gamma_1 \cdot \left( \phi(\gamma_0 + \gamma_1 POOR_i) - \rho \sigma_\epsilon \lambda_i (\lambda_i - \gamma_0 + \gamma_1 POOR_i) \right)
\end{aligned}$$

This measure, then, adjusts an estimate of how well the poor are represented by political parties,  $\alpha_1$ , with a measure of how likely the poor are, relative to those in other income groups, to identify with a political party. Similarly, how well the wealthy are represented can be estimated using the following expression:

$$\hat{\beta}_2 = \alpha_2 + \gamma_2 \cdot \left( \phi(\gamma_0 + \gamma_2 WEALTHY_i) - \rho \sigma_\epsilon \lambda_i (\lambda_i - \gamma_0 + \gamma_2 WEALTHY_i) \right) \quad (14)$$

Then, as in Figure 1, the values of  $\hat{\beta}_1$  and  $\hat{\beta}_2$  can be compared as evidence of the patterns of representation in a particular country.

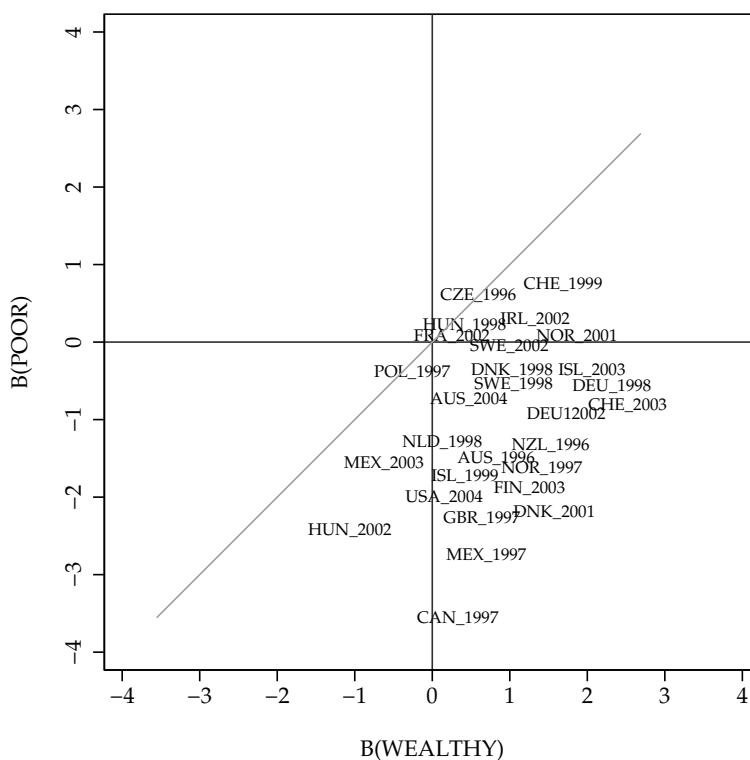
## 5 Patterns of Representation in Contemporary

### Democratic Societies

How well are the interests of the poor represented in contemporary democratic governments? Using the simple model of representation, presented earlier in this discussion, the analysis outlined in the previous section goes some distance towards answering this question.

Figure 3 reports estimates of the parameters in Eq. (13) and (14) for each election included in the analysis. As in Figure 1, the diagonal line denotes  $\beta_1 = \beta_2$ , or the set of cases in which parties are as responsive to the poor as to the wealthy. Several features of Figure 3 are noteworthy:

Figure 3: Patterns of Representation



NOTE: This Figure reports OLS estimates of  $\hat{\beta}_1$ , and  $\hat{\beta}_2$  (from Eqs. (13) and (14)) for each election included in the analysis. The diagonal line denotes  $\hat{\beta}_1 = \hat{\beta}_2$ .

SOURCE: CSES Modules 1& 2.

- *There is a representation gap that favors the wealthy and the middle income groups in most contemporary democracies.*

In the vast majority of election cases,  $\hat{\beta}_1 < 0 < \hat{\beta}_2$ . As suggested earlier, this implies that the preferences of the wealthy, and the middle classes, are better represented than the preferences of the poor. Although this pattern is not unexpected, its prominence is remarkable especially because respondents were not asked to make an explicit assessment (e.g., respondents were not asked to assess how well their preferences are represented).

- *The size of the representation gap varies cross-nationally.*

There is, nevertheless, substantial cross-national variation in the patterns of the representation of different income groups. Herein lies the opportunity for broadly comparative research. Casual observation suggests that patterns in the representation of the poor may not correspond to conventional wisdom about which systems are most representative, nor to traditional classifications of welfare systems.

- *Over-representation of the wealthy does not necessarily imply the under-representation of the poor.*

Note the lack of correlation between  $\hat{\beta}_1$  and  $\hat{\beta}_2$ . A negative pattern of association – in which better representation of the wealthy is associated with less representation of the poor – is plausible, although apparently without empirical support. Party systems with comparable levels of responsiveness to the wealthy vary substantially in the representation of the poor (e.g. Ireland and Canada). This suggests that incentives to represent different income groups may be subject to different incentive structures.

## 6 Conclusion

How well do contemporary democratic governments represent the interests of the poor? Using a simple model of representation, this discussion has illustrated a strategy that will facilitate an investigation of cross-national patterns in the political representation of the poor. With evidence from CSES data, I illustrate how the parameters of this simple model might be estimated and evaluated in a broadly comparative analysis.

## References

- Barr, Nicholas. 2004. *The Economics of the Welfare State*. London: Oxford UP.
- Bartels, Larry. 2002. "Economic Inequality and Political Representation." Unpublished mimeo, Princeton University.
- Bartels, Larry. 2003. "Homer gets a tax cut." Unpublished mimeo, Princeton University.
- Delli-Carpini, M.X. & S. Keeter. 1996. *What Americans Know About Politics and Why It Matters*. New Haven, CT: Yale UP.
- Erikson, Robert S., Michael B. MacKuen & James Stimson. 2002. *The Macropolity*. New Haven: Yale UP.
- Gilens, Martin. 2004. "Inequality and democratic responsiveness: Who gets what they want from Government?"
- Miller, Warren & Donald Stokes. 1963. "Constituency influence in Congress." *American Political Science Review* 57:165–77.
- Miller, Warren E., ed. 1999. *Policy Representation in Western Democracies*. Oxford: Oxford UP.
- Moene, Karl Ove & Michael Wallerstein. 2001. "Inequality, Social Insurance and Redistribution." *American Political Science Review* 95(4):859–874.
- Przeworski, Adam, Susan Stokes & Bernard Manin. 1999. Introduction. In *Democracy, Accountability, and Representation*, ed. Adam Przeworski, Susan Stokes & Bernard Manin. New York: Cambridge UP.

- Soroka, Stuart & Christopher Wlezien. 2004. "Opinion Representation and Policy Feedback: Canada in Comparative Perspective." *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 37(3):531–559.
- Soroka, Stuart & Christopher Wlezien. 2005. "Opinion-Policy Dynamics: Public Preferences and Public Expenditure in the United Kingdom." *British Journal of Political Science* .
- Soroka, Stuart & Elvin Lim. 2003. "Issue definition and the opinion-policy link: public preferences and health care spending in the US and UK." *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 5(4):576–93.
- Stokes, Susan. 1999. What do policy switches tell us about democracy? In *Democracy, Accountability, and Representation*, ed. Adam Przeworski, Susan Stokes & Bernard Manin. New York: Yale UP.