Oligarchy or Class War?
Political Parties and Interest Groups in Unequal Public Influence on Policy Adoption

Matt Grossmann and William Isaac

Michigan State University

Abstract:

In adopting new policies, do policymakers in both parties respond only to the opinions of the richest American citizens, ignoring those of median income? Do they both respond to business interests at the expense of public advocacy groups? High-profile political science research suggests that the likelihood of U.S. national policy adoption is strongly related to the share of the richest citizens who supported the policy and the views of business interests, but—after taking the richest citizens' opinions into account—is unrelated to the opinions of the middle class. We revisit these findings, appending new information on the support of each proposal by the leaders of each political party and advocacy groups. We find that the two political parties primarily represent different interest group sectors, rather than public classes, and that neither party consistently favors the views of the affluent over those of the middle class. In fact, Democrats more often represent the opinions of the middle class over those of the affluent and advocacy groups over business. Yet Republicans do represent affluent views on economic policy and business interests in all areas. The results suggest that partisan and interest group disputes, rather than unequal responsiveness to public classes, may explain the failure of redistributive economic policies: two parties and interest group communities take opposite sides on economic proposals, making it difficult to pass consensus policies through institutions favoring the status quo.

Why are policymakers failing to address rising inequality? Income inequality in the United States has risen dramatically since its low point in the 1960s (McCarty, Poole and Rosenthal 2003) and the top decile of the income distribution now accounts for almost 50 percent of all income (Piketty and Saez 2014). Standard political theories (Meltzer and Richard 1981) suggest that such increases should spur the middle class to pursue redistributive policies that curtail the advances of the wealthy. But, despite continuing public support, the U.S. has not adopted many significant new redistributive policies in recent years. This has led some to argue that the preferences of the wealthy have outsized influence across government (Bartels 2009). To others, these patterns even suggest little (if any) influence for the poor or middle class in American democratic processes (Winters and Page 2009; Hacker and Pierson 2010).

A recent study by Martin Gilens and Benjamin Page (2014) captured widespread attention with its claim that the American government listened only to the opinions of its richest citizens and business interests, leading newspapers to (somewhat hyperbolically) declare the nation an "oligarchy." By comparing public opinion among citizens at different income levels with the results of national policymaking, the study found that the share of the affluent that support the policy is strongly related to the likelihood of national policy adoption, but—after taking the richest citizens' opinions into account—the opinions of the middle class had no effect on adoption. They also found that business interests were more influential than advocacy groups representing the mass public.

The interpretation of these results suggested that American political elites in both parties and across the interest group community are responsive to the opinions of the rich, rather than the public as a whole. During the 2016 presidential campaign, Senator Bernie Sanders argued that the public supports a long list of liberal and redistributive economic policy ideas that fail to materialize because rich citizens buy off politicians, creating a universe of politicians and interest groups supportive of their ideas. Though favoring a Democratic approach, Sanders implied that both parties

share blame for the disproportionate influence of the rich. Yet longstanding class divisions in the voting coalitions and financial support networks of the parties make it difficult to believe that they represent the same class side in policy debates. Republicans often accuse Democrats of "class warfare" as they allegedly vilify the rich to promote tax increases on "job creators." Democrats indeed do propose dozens of redistributive policy ideas in each party platform and legislative session. Are both parties responsive to the opinions of the rich and big business or does each party represent a different economic class?

To better understand how party and interest group divisions can coincide with rich citizens' influence, we supplement the dataset used by Gilens and Page (2014) with new information on interest group and party leader positions as well as the content of policy proposals. This enables analyses of when each party represents high- and middle-income citizens, as well as whether party and group positions may explain the relationship between high-income opinion and policy adoption. We find that affluent influence does not arise through control of both political parties. Instead, the Democratic party leadership is more likely to agree with the middle class than the affluent and represents the views of advocacy groups, whereas the Republican party leadership is aligned with business interests but not consistently with either public class.

The findings suggest that—despite the outsized influence of affluent preferences in shaping public policy—middle-class citizens do have some representation within American political institutions. There are two sides to the American political debate, each representing a different constituency. But that hardly means that everyone gets their way half the time. Instead, numerous veto points and speed bumps along the path to passing legislation and enacting new policy make it difficult for any policy change to achieve wide enough support. American institutions make passing any policy through Congress and the White House difficult, with most successful proposals requiring bipartisan alignment and widespread interest group support. The lack of redistributive

policy may simply be another case of the difficulty to achieve substantive policy change overall, rather than evidence of an oligarchic political system lacking competitive representation.

Unequal Public Influence

In *Affluence and Influence*, Martin Gilens (2012) analyzes the relationships between policy adoption and support for policy changes among public classes and interest groups, offering the first large-scale assessment of whether policymaking consistently aligns with the opinions of the affluent. Gilens compiles public opinion survey questions between 1981 and 2002 asking Americans whether a proposed policy should be adopted by the federal government, recording whether each proposal was adopted within four years. Based on reported cross-tabulations for each survey question, Gilens estimates a non-linear relationship between respondent income levels and the proportion supporting each proposal. He then uses the expected level of support among those at the 90th income percentile (the affluent) and those at the 50th income percentile (the middle class) to predict adoption.

Gilens finds that the levels of support from citizens from the top decile of the income distribution (the affluent) predict policy adoption in addition to the positions of interest groups, but the opinions of median-income citizens have no independent effect. In a follow-up article, Martin Gilens and Benjamin Page (2014) argue that, largely independent of high-income citizens' influence, the level of support from business interest groups is more influential in policy adoption than that of advocacy groups representing broader public interests.

Prior research had suggested a high degree of policymaker responsiveness to aggregate public opinion and a strong linkage between policy outcomes and public preferences (Erikson 2015; Page and Shapiro 1983). Changes in aggregated opinion measures are associated with the liberal or conservative direction of federal policy changes (Stimson, Mackuen, and Erikson 1995; Erikson,

Mackuen, & Stimson, 2002). Spending levels in particular areas are also linked to changes in public support for that spending (Bartels 1991; Wlezien, 1995).

Yet recent evidence points to an asymmetric partisan pattern that may help reconcile the two sets of findings: the Republican Party may support the views of the affluent while the Democratic Party represents broader public views. New data demonstrates that voting records of Republican Members of Congress better match the ideology of their richest constituents, but Democratic Members better match the ideology of their poorest constituents (Rhodes and Schaffer 2017). Issue-specific measures of public opinion at different income levels also show that Republican Members of Congress are more responsive to their affluent constituents on key votes, whereas Democrats are less responsive to their affluent constituents (Rhodes and Schaffer 2017). Evidence from the Senate confirms the same differential partisan pattern over 39 roll-call votes and 8 legislative sessions, adding that Republican Senators match the opinions of their affluent constituents in part because they follow the opinions of Republican identifiers in their state (who are usually richer), rather than their full electorate (Lax, Phillips, and Zelizer 2017). A recent study of responsiveness on federal spending opinions finds that racial group differences are more apparent than income class differences, but Democratic Control eliminates most of the bias in responsiveness (Griffin, Hajnal, Newman, and Searle Forthcoming).

These studies all seek to build on Gilens' findings, but not everyone has been convinced to abandon the prior model of public responsiveness. Several studies have questioned Gilens' central conclusion that the opinions of high-income citizens—but not the opinions of middle-income citizens—matter for policy adoption (Enns 2015; Bashir 2015; Branham, Soroka, and Wlezien 2016). Gilens' measures of opinion at different income levels are highly correlated. He used an assessment of correlated measurement error to reduce the covariance, but opinions at different income levels remain difficult to distinguish. Others' models have not always produced similar results to those of

Gilens and Page (2014) and have shown sensitivity to their particular modeling choices. To help synthesize these competing perspectives, both Gilens and his critics call for more research into the places where affluent influence is most disproportionate and the mechanisms of that influence.

Political Parties, Interest Groups, and Public Opinion

Gilens (2012) finds that the influence of rich citizens and interest groups on policy adoption are largely independent. Gilens and Page (2014) further argue that the greater influence of business interests over advocacy groups constitutes another example of economic elite influence. Yet other research suggests that although business interests numerically dominate Washington, the advocacy community outperforms its resource disadvantages in reputation and policy influence (Baumgartner et al. 2009; Grossmann 2014). Many issue debates feature business and advocacy groups on both sides and few policy proposals have universal group support or opposition.

By design, Gilens' dataset includes positions from many more business interests than advocacy groups. He began with a list of the interest groups with reputations for influence but appended an additional ten business industries. He excluded additional advocacy groups because "those groups are too broad or simply channel the preferences and resources of the individual members of the public that support the groups."[1] As a result, among the 35 most influential interest groups identified in an analysis of policy history (Grossmann 2014), Gilens includes all of the most influential business groups but only 3 out of the 25 most influential advocacy groups. Within Gilens' dataset, business interests overwhelmingly opposed policy proposals whereas advocacy group support and opposition was more even. For both types of groups, the success rate for opposing proposals was much higher than that for supporting them.

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[1] "Representational Inequality Data Coding" from Martin Gilens. Available at: http://www.russellsage.org/sites/all/files/u137/Representational%20Inequality%20Data%20Coding.pdf (accessed 10/14/14).

Whether or not interest groups are responsible for disproportionate high-income influence, Democratic and Republican leaders may represent the opinions of rich citizens and further their preferred outcomes. Party leaders have a direct role in determining policy; support from the President and congressional leaders can nearly guarantee success but clear opposition from one or both parties can doom proposals. Gilens (2012) investigates partisan representation only by tracking the relationships between citizens' opinions and policy adoption during periods of Republican and Democratic control, but these patterns do not reveal whether each party's leaders led the fight for policies enacted during periods of their control (Gilens 2012, 178-190). After all, most landmark laws pass with majority support from both parties (Krehbiel 1998; Mayhew 2005). Rich citizens may also influence policy by stimulating bipartisan consensus or by dividing the parties.

Although the parties disagree on many issues, they may each represent high-income opinion in some issue areas (*e.g.* Republicans on economics and Democrats on social issues) and take more proactive positions where their ideas line up with economic elites. State-level scholarship finds that both parties largely ignore low-income preferences in developing their policy positions (Rigby and Wright 2013). Rising inequality could thus possibly support polarized party politics while failing to lead either party to consistently represent the opinions of the middle class or the disadvantaged. But even if the Democratic Party and advocacy groups often support redistributive economic policies, their support may not be enough to produce new policy if the two parties are increasingly taking opposite positions.

Neither Gilens' analyses nor our new research can definitively establish that government officials follow the opinions of the public, rather than shape it. Longstanding political science suggests that the path of information from governing elites to the public is stronger than the reverse (Zaller 1992). More troubling, affluent Americans may hear official opinions first, meaning we would observe a greater association between their opinions and policy even if the true channel of

influence were from government to the affluent (Erickson 2015). Analyses of the associations among party, interest group, and public class support for policy proposals can nonetheless help untangle the links between public representation and policy adoption.

Methodology

We appended new data to the dataset originally compiled by Gilens (2012) of 1,863 policy proposals considered by the federal government from 1981 to 2002. For each proposal, the original dataset includes measures of public support at the 50th percentile of the income distribution and the 90th percentile, the support or opposition of interest groups, and whether the policy was adopted.[2] Our small army of student coders supplemented Gilens original dataset with the positions of party leaders and a broader range of interest groups on each proposal as well as details on the content of each proposed policy. These new measures provide a unique avenue for clarifying the scope of disproportionate affluent influence.

We coded each proposal for support or opposition from the Democratic and Republican party leaderships in Congress and the White House. Following Gilens' treatment of interest group support and opposition, our party measures range from +2 for strong support to -2 for strong opposition, with zero standing for no observable and clear support or opposition from party leaders. We asked coders to find evidence that Democratic or Republican leaders actively attempted to influence the outcome of the proposed policy change. They reviewed sources such as *Congressional*

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[2] Our models of party and interest group support, as well as policy adoption, use multiple regression. But several critiques of Gilens and Page (2014) have just compared the win rates (how often majorities win or lose in a policy adoption battle) of the middle class with those of the affluent (e.g. Branham, Soroka, and Wlezien 2017). Critics' objections have been dismissed by Gilens and Page because these analyses do not incorporate adjustments for correlated measurement error. To address these concerns, we use Gilens' preferred adjustments to the measures to account for correlated error.

Quarterly and media coverage for "tic toc" narrative reports of policy discussions as well as commentary by party leaders. For our coding, we defined party leaders as members of Congress in leadership positions (*e.g.* Speaker of the House or Minority Leader) or senior members of the White House (Chief of Staff or Cabinet officials). Following Gilens' procedures for interest groups, we then asked coders to consider both the magnitude and direction of the difference between the party leadership's stated position and the proposed policy change from a range of -2 (strong opposition) to +2 (strong support). For example, if the party leaders in the House or Senate (and President if he is a co-partisan) are unanimously in agreement with the proposed policy change, it was coded as +2. If party leaders stated position is generally aligned with the proposed policy change but somewhat moderated, it was coded as +1. It was also coded as +1 if there was a mixture of support or some disagreement between party leaders, but they were generally favorable. Proposed policy changes without a stated position from party leaders were coded as 0.

We also coded additional interest groups to expand the number of advocacy groups included. Gilens provided the materials used for his coding of interest group positions. The interest groups and industries he tracks are representative of the most influential business interests by all prior measures we compiled. But Gilens includes few of the most influential advocacy groups that policy historians identify as the most influential (Grossmann 2014); the missing include all environmental, governmental, and civil rights groups and some of the top providers of congressional testimony (Grossmann 2012). Given this significant gap in the types of interest groups considered, we appended information on the support or opposition to each proposal for 26 additional advocacy groups that historians credit for landmark laws, regularly provide congressional testimony, and/or are among the top spenders on lobbying.[3]

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[3] The new groups include NAACP, U.S. Conference of Mayors, American Civil Liberties Union, Sierra Club, National Urban League, National Farmers Union, National Organization for Women,

As with coding the party positions, our coders were asked to determine if each of the groups participated in the policy debate by finding evidence that the interest group actively attempted to influence the outcome of the proposed policy change. Activities included mentions of the interest group as supportive or opposed in media publications, mentions of a proposed policy position in press releases, or evidence of involvement by organizational leaders. Next, coders were again asked to consider both the magnitude and direction of the difference between the groups' stated position and the proposed policy change from a range of -2 (strong opposition) to +2 (strong support). For example, if the interest group's stated position is in complete agreement with the proposed policy change, it was coded as +2. If the interest group's stated position is generally aligned with the proposed policy change but somewhat moderated, it was coded as +1. Groups without a stated position on the proposed policy change are coded as 0. This matches the instructions Gilens provided to coders for his initial coding of business interest positions. For comparison and ease of interpretation, we aggregated individual groups into "Business" and "Advocacy" sectors (following Gilens and Page 2014) and calculated Gilens' Net Interest Group Alignment measure for each.[4]

We also coded the policy topic of each proposal using the Policy Agendas Project (PAP) codebook at policyagendas.org. Here, we use a simpler division grouping the topics into three broad issue areas: economic, social, and foreign policy. Both Gilens (2013) and Branham, Soroka, and Wlezien (2016) analyze differences across issue areas, but neither connect survey data to comparable

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National League of Cities, Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, Brookings Institution, National Council of Churches, American Cancer Society, Americans for Democratic Action, Wilderness Society, National Association of Counties, American Enterprise Institute, Common Cause, Public Citizen, Natural Resources Defense Council, National Academy of Sciences, American Bar Association, American Conservative Union, Americans for Tax Reform, Center for Strategic and International Studies, Council on Foreign Relations, and Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. They do not all take official positions on legislation, but many are seen as regularly having clear and publicly articulated views.
[4] See page 569 of Gilens and Page 2014 for the detailed specification of the measure.

data from other universes of policy discussion. The PAP coding scheme has been successfully

applied to analyze congressional, media, and public data, including other universes of survey

questions. We have found that the role of public income classes on policy adoption differs between

the economic, social and foreign policy domains (Grossmann and Isaac 2017).[5] These differences

may affect estimates of influence on policy adoption. The proposals in Gilens' dataset cover

economic issues (48%) more than social issues (28%) or foreign policy (24%). But more than half of

foreign policy proposals pass (55%) compared to fewer than 30% of other proposals.

We also coded for the ideological direction of each proposed policy based on whether it

expanded (liberal) or contracted (conservative) the scope of government spending, regulation, and

responsibility (the same influential distinction used in prior analyses, such as Erickson, Mackuen,

and Stimson 2002). Some proposals had no clear ideological direction or were categorized as a mix

of liberal or conservative elements. We supplemented this distinction with a coding of whether the

specific proposal was usually considered liberal or conservative by contemporary observers,

accounting for some areas where government expansion is usually considered conservative (such as

on defense spending); we use the adjusted (second) version here, but using either measure produces

near-equivalent results. We also coded for how much the proposed policy change moves away from

the status quo, which we denote as either a substantial shift (large), an intermediary shift (medium),

or a marginal shift (small). Our approach focuses on the size and scope of the proposed policy's

impact. The ideological direction and scale measures together create a seven-category ideological

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[5] Economic issues include macroeconomics, health, agriculture, labor, energy, transportation, welfare, housing, banking and commerce, technology, and public lands; foreign issues include immigration, defense, foreign trade, and international affairs; social issues include civil rights, education, environment, law and crime, and government. Reasonable alternative categorizations (such as moving trade to economic policy) did not substantially alter results.

measure from most conservative (large move to contract government) to most liberal (large move to expand government). Inter-coder reliability estimates for all measures were moderate or high.

Democratic and Republican Party Support for Policy Proposals

We first model each party's level of support or opposition as a function of three sets of factors: public income class preferences, interest group preferences, and policy details, incorporating Gilens' adjustments for measurement error. Tables 1 and 2 show the results for the Republicans and Democrats respectively. We predict party positions with only the opinions of public classes in the first model in each table, then add the positions of interest groups in the second column, and then add measures of the issue area and ideology of each proposal in the third column.

[Tables 1 and 2 Here]

Republican leaders are more likely to support policies preferred by the affluent and oppose policies advocated by the middle class, but neither preferences are statistically significant after controlling for interest group preferences and the details of the policy proposals themselves. One possibility is that the influence of the affluent may be mediated through business interests; another is that the Republican party may respond to business interests, who also happen to share views with the most affluent Americans. Either way, it is apparent is that Republican party leaders support proposed policies preferred by the Business lobby, as well as more economic and foreign policies than social policies (the excluded category) overall. They also (of course) oppose more liberal policies designed to expand the scope of government. Republicans may be indirectly responsive to affluent public opinion, but the public appears to have a minor independent effect. Including interest group positions and policy content also substantially improves the fit of the model.

Do Democrats exhibit the same behavior? Quite the opposite. The findings in Table 2 show that Democratic party leaders are much more likely to support policies as middle-class support for

the policy increases. Affluent preferences are negatively associated with Democratic positions in the baseline model and remain negatively signed (but insignificant) after adding controls. They also support policies that are advanced by advocacy groups and oppose those advocated by the business lobby. Unsurprisingly, they favor more liberal policy proposals. The results show fewer differences across policy areas. Middle-class preferences continue to be associated with Democratic policy support, even controlling for interest group positions and policy content (though the reduced estimated effects suggest that middle-class opinion could be mediated by advocacy group support or business opposition). Based on fit, the baseline model of class opinion explains more of Democratic positioning compared to the equivalent Republican model, but adding interest group positions substantially increase the fit (and policy details also add to the explanatory power of the model).

Contrary to prior assumptions, the preferences of the affluent and business do not appear to generate universal responsiveness. Figures 1 and 2 visually summarize our findings, comparing estimated effects of public class opinion and interest group support on party positioning from the final models of Tables 1 and 2. The results fit the narrative of "class warfare" better than that of "oligarchy." Democrats represent middle-class and advocacy group preferences, whereas Republicans represent business interests and agree more often with the affluent than the middle class. The parties may have different ways of determining which policies to support, but they symmetrically oppose one another based on the positions of their allied interest group sector.

[Figures 1 and 2 Here]

But middle class and affluent representation, and the factors governing party position taking, may differ across issue area. Tables 3 and 4 report separate models of party support or opposition in each of the three issue domains, with subsets of the dataset containing proposals covering economic, foreign, or social issues. On economic policy, the parties appear to be strongly divided based on income-group preferences, with Democratic positions being positively and strongly related

to middle-class preferences and Republican positions to affluent preferences. Similarly, business preferences lead to support among Republican leaders and advocacy group preferences lead to support among Democratic leaders. The findings again seem at odds with one popular caricature suggesting that the wealthy have near exclusive influence on both parties and interest group sectors.

[Tables 3 and 4 Here]

The results for the foreign and social policy areas appear to diverge from the conventional story as well. On foreign policy, income group preferences play little role in determining party support or opposition to proposed policies. Advocacy group positions appear to influence the Democratic Party whereas business groups are again aligned with the Republican Party. In social issues, the parties' positions are aligned with their interest group sector (with advocacy groups having the most significant effects), but public classes are not directly and independently influential. The ideological direction of a proposed policy has a significant role in party positions in the economic and social issue spheres, but no impact in foreign policy. The models also fail to explain much of the variation in foreign policy positions, compared to the models for economic and social issues (the parties' economic positions are the best explained). There is variability in party position taking by issue and party but there is a consistent theme of opposing forces: parties are responsive to different interest group sectors and public classes. Where public classes do have a direct influence, in economic policy, they also move the parties apart: Democrats speak for the middle class and "public interest" advocacy groups while the Republicans speak for the affluent and business.

Explaining Policy Adoptions

Do these findings help to explain any of the prior relationships found by Gilens and Page (2014), elucidating the mechanisms behind disproportionate affluent influence on policy adoption? Table 6 reports several models of adoption. The first model replicates the baseline model from

Gilens and Page (2014) but adds our additional interest group positions. Affluent preferences and interest group positions drive policy adoption and the results confirm their finding that business preferences matter more than advocacy groups. The second model adds variables for the issue areas and ideology of policy proposals; confirming our prior analyses (Grossmann and Isaac 2017), the results show that some types of policies (those covering foreign affairs and those moving in a conservative direction) are more likely to pass.

[Table 5 Here]

The final model adds variables for support from each political party. Support from the affluent and business interests remain significant predictors of adoption (though the effect of business support may be mediated in part by Republican party support). Both Republican and Democratic support predict adoption, though the estimated effects of Republican support are stronger. Although the interest group sectors and parties often line up on opposite sides of a policy proposal, it still helps to have everyone on board in order to pass a new policy. Including the party and interest group positions improves the model's fit, but does not seem to reduce the direct influence of affluent public preferences.

Figure 3 visualizes the estimated effects of party and interest group support on policy adoption, holding other variables constant in the full model from Table 5. Both Democratic and Republican support are associated with adoption, but Republican support is more strongly associated. The estimated probability of adoption moves from .42 to .64 as Republicans move from complete opposition to complete support, whereas it moves from .48 to .57 as Democrats make the same move. According to the model, business interest group support is another critical factor in policy adoption. As business goes from uniformly opposed to uniformly favorable toward a policy proposal, the probability of adoption moves from .43 to .62. Advocacy group alignment is not a significant predictor of policy adoption (though the estimated effect is positive).

[Figure 3 Here]

But these policy adoption relationships are not consistent across policy areas. Table 6 reports models of policy adoption separately for foreign, economic, and social policy proposals. The results show that affluent preferences have disproportionate impact in foreign policy, with insignificant effects on economic and social policy. In economic policy, the estimated direct influence of middle-class opinion is much higher than the influence of affluent opinion after controlling for interest group and party positions. There is no evidence of a dominant role for the affluent in economics.

[Table 6 Here]

There are also important differences in the role of party and interest group positions in policy adoption across issue domains. Business influence appears strongest in foreign policy and surprisingly absent in economic policy. But business influence on economic policy may be indirect: Republican party positions have the strongest estimated influence in economic policy. Democratic party positions are associated with policy adoption on social and economic issues, but only Republican positions are important in foreign policy. Advocacy group preferences are not significant predictors of adoption in these areas. Overall, the results suggest that positions taken by parties and business are important across multiple domains and have more consistent direct effects on policy adoption than public preferences from either economic class. In further (unreported) analyses, we have (surprisingly) not found substantial differences in the effects of Republican and Democratic positions (or of business and advocacy group positions) across periods of Democratic or Republican control of Congress.

Parties, Interest Groups, and Unequal Public Influence

Given considerable research suggesting that public opinion can drive policy adoption (Page and Shapiro 1983; Stimson, Mackuen, and Erikson 1995; Erickson, Mackuen, and Stimson 2002;

Wlezien 1995; Lax and Philips 2009), scholars have been surprised that rising economic inequality has not been associated with significant policy changes designed to redistribute income. One popularly suggested explanation is that policymakers may respond to the preferences of the rich over those of the middle class (Bartels 2009; Winters and Page 2009; Hacker and Pierson 2010). By gathering large-scale data on different income groups' policy preferences and tying them to national policy results, Gilens and Page (2014) substantiated this view and reignited the debate over democratic responsiveness. But other scholars raised questions about the scope of the evidence, the ability to differentiate between the opinions of different income groups, and the mechanisms of potential high-income influence (Enns 2015; Bashir 2015; Branham, Soroka, and Wlezien 2016).

Although we hardly resolve these ongoing debates, our new data on party and interest group positions (the key intermediaries in representation and governance) as well as the content of policy proposals shed considerable light on the patterns of public class representation and the related process surrounding policy adoption. Given our results, one possible interpretation of prior evidence—that the political system constitutes a near-oligarchy where most organized actors represent the same upper-class interests—seems quite unlikely. The view associated with Bernie Sanders and some scholars (*e.g.* Rigby and Wright 2013), which suggests that both parties have been bought off by rich donors to represent the rich and big business at the expense of the middle class, is inconsistent with the patterns we observe.

Instead, our evidence fits the older story that each party represents a different ideological perspective, has different interest group allies, and speaks on behalf of different public views. The Republican Party does seem consistently responsive to business preferences and its positions are more often associated with those of the affluent. On economic policy in particular, Republican leaders much better represent affluent and business preferences. But the Democratic Party is not aligned with business preferences or affluent preferences in any domain—and actually represents

middle-class views over affluent views on economic policy. Democrats are often aligned with the advocacy group community, but not aligned with business in any domain.

Our evidence is consistent with recent findings of partisan differences in responsiveness (Rhodes and Schaffer 2017; Lax, Phillips, and Zelizer 2017; Griffin, Hajnal, Newman, and Searle Forthcoming). New studies matching constituent opinions to specific votes in Congress and the broader roll call record have found that Republicans are disproportionately responsible for heightened responsiveness to the affluent. By returning to the dataset (from Gilens and Page 2014) used for the initial finding that policy results follow the opinions of the affluent over those of the middle class, we confirm the same partisan pattern. Democratic Party leaders do not appear to be responsible for the political system's disproportionate responsiveness to the affluent.

Our models of policy adoption show that both parties influence policy results, but we did find some evidence of tilt toward the right in organized influence. Republican positions are seemingly more influential in policy adoption than Democratic positions and business groups appear more influential than the advocacy community. That could help explain why Democrats and liberals see policymaking failing to live up to their hopes for policy change, even if it is not a product of oligarchic government. But party and interest group positions do not seem to be the only routes through which affluent opinion influences policymaking. The pattern of public class influence that we uncover elsewhere (Grossmann and Isaac 2017) remains present even after accounting for party and interest group influence: the affluent public does seem to have especially influential preferences on foreign policy (but not economic policy).

Of course, all models of policy adoption are dependent on the population of policy proposals considered and the precise mechanisms through which public classes, interest groups, and parties influence the policy process. We remain open to the possibility of reverse causality: the likelihood of policy adoption may lead to public opinion (or even party and interest group

positions). We nonetheless consider it important to describe the alignments in American policy debate, especially when common interpretations of prior findings give scholars and citizens the wrong impression. Just as many citizens have long believed, the U.S. has at least one political party that better represents the views of the middle class than the affluent. The nation also has a party more closely aligned with business, which shares more economic policy views with the affluent. But those patterns constitute a competitive political system more than an oligarchy.

Because rising economic inequality has been associated with partisan and ideological polarization (McCarty, Poole and Rosenthal 2003), a competitive system may nonetheless fail to produce policies that represent median opinions. If the Republicans stick to the views they share with the affluent and nonetheless remain electorally competitive (if not occasionally dominant), middle-class opinions may not win out. Since our institutions also privilege the status quo, competing party and interest group sectors may also produce gridlock—and thus less controversial policy change overall (regardless of who wins and loses elections and lobbying campaigns).

Neither simple story connecting economic and political inequality seems consistent with the patterns we observe. The parties do not compete to follow through on the wishes of the median income respondent to public opinion polls, enabling the public to easily transfer income from the rich to the middle class when inequality rises. But they also do not uniformly follow the opinions of the rich, colluding to pass policy or avoid change. Instead, parties represent different public constituencies, different interest group sectors, and their own ideologies; they seek to influence policy adoption, but they face competition and usually end up seeing the status quo maintained. We see constant partisan warfare, including occasional standoffs associated with the views of different economic classes, but little evidence of an oligarchy that combines the parties and interest groups in support of upper class views.

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Table 1: Models of Republican Leader Support for Policy Proposals

	Opinion	Groups	Full
Middle Class Preferences	−4.820***	−1.127	−1.014
	(1.317)	(1.284)	(1.246)
Affluent Preferences	2.436***	0.834	1.102
	(0.706)	(0.683)	(0.664)
Business Preferences		2.230***	1.653***
		(0.199)	(0.200)
Advocacy Group Preferences		−1.401***	−1.129***
		(0.193)	(0.189)
Economic Policies			0.220**
			(0.070)
Foreign Policies			0.356***
			(0.084)
Ideology			−0.168***
			(0.017)
Constant	0.336***	−0.126	0.561***
	(0.032)	(0.136)	(0.163)
Observations	1,775	1,775	1,774
R^2	0.008	0.100	0.160
Adjusted R^2	0.006	0.098	0.156
Residual Std. Error	1.336 (df = 1772)	1.272 (df = 1770)	1.231 (df = 1766)

Note: *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Table 2: Models of Democratic Leader Support for Policy Proposals

	Opinion	Groups	Full
Middle Class Preferences	6.702***	3.385**	2.948*
	(1.251)	(1.222)	(1.202)
Affluent Preferences	−1.588*	−0.205	−0.157
	(0.671)	(0.650)	(0.641)
Business Preferences		−1.313***	−0.950***
		(0.190)	(0.193)
Advocacy Group Preferences		2.059***	1.805***
		(0.183)	(0.183)
Economic Policies			−0.010
			(0.068)
Foreign Policies			0.043
			(0.081)
Ideology			0.144***
			(0.017)
Constant	0.142***	−0.143	−0.828***
	(0.030)	(0.129)	(0.157)
Observations	1,775	1,775	1,774
R^2	0.046	0.134	0.169
Adjusted R^2	0.045	0.132	0.165
Residual Std. Error	1.270 (df = 1772)	1.211 (df = 1770)	1.187 (df = 1766)

Note: *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Figure 1: Effects of Public Class Preferences on Democratic and Republican Policy Positions
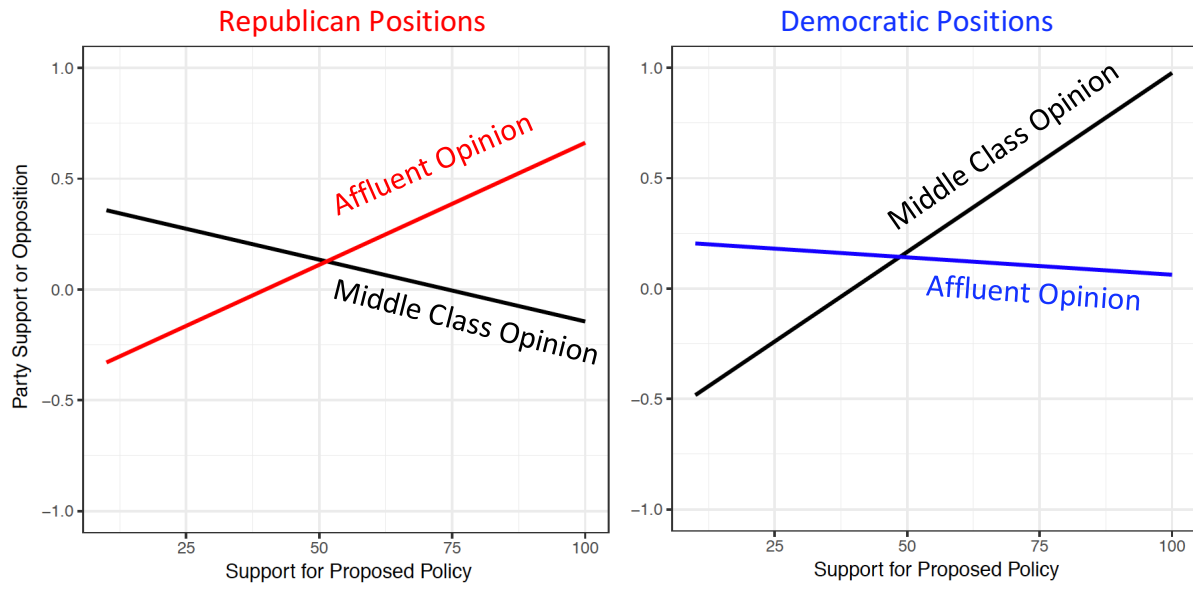
Figure 2: Effects of Interest Group Positions on Democratic and Republican Policy Positions
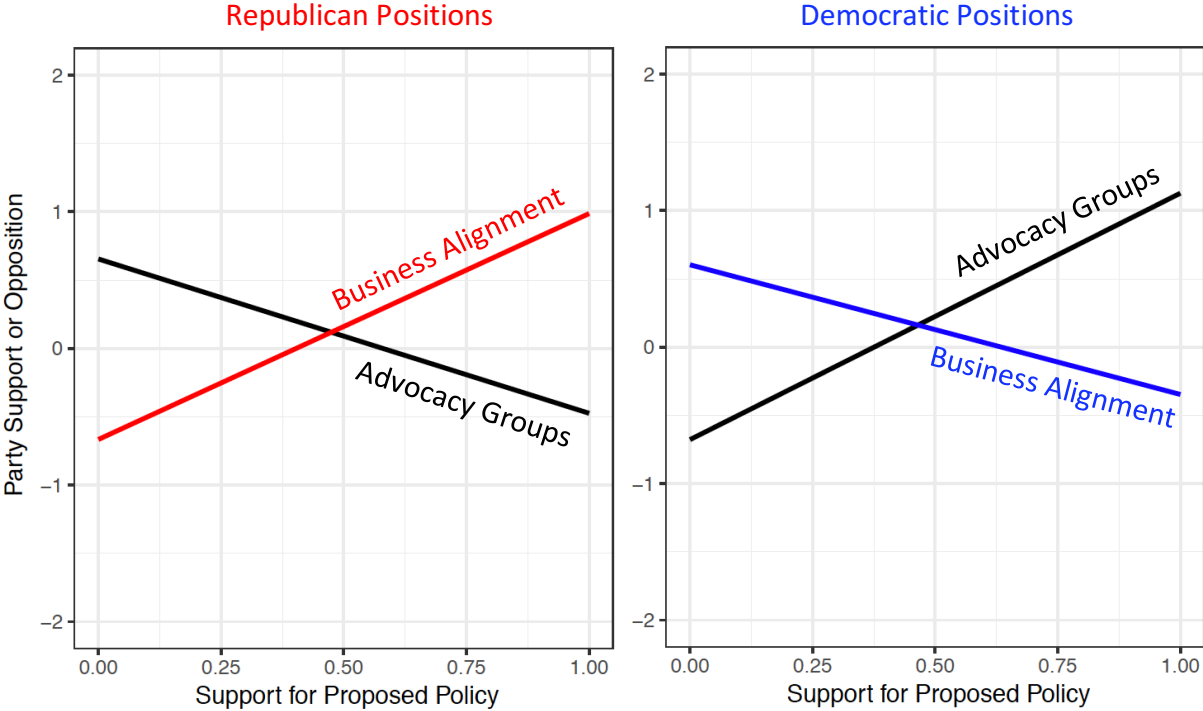
Table 3: Models of Republican Leader Support by Issue Area

	REP-FP	REP-ECON	REP-SOC
Middle Class Preferences	0.934	−3.029	2.568
	(2.736)	(1.695)	(2.578)
Affluent Preferences	−0.174	2.817**	−1.159
	(1.389)	(0.950)	(1.323)
Business Preferences	1.180*	1.731***	1.182**
	(0.529)	(0.267)	(0.395)
Advocacy Group Preferences	−0.634	−1.348***	−1.188***
	(0.391)	(0.288)	(0.340)
Ideology	0.012	−0.203***	−0.211***
	(0.037)	(0.024)	(0.035)
Constant	0.226	0.988***	1.022***
	(0.390)	(0.220)	(0.283)
Observations	428	849	497
R^2	0.026	0.225	0.138
Adjusted R^2	0.014	0.220	0.129
Residual Std. Error	1.192 (df = 422)	1.220 (df = 843)	1.241 (df = 491)

Note: *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Table 4: Models of Democratic Leader Support by Issue Area

	DEM-FP	DEM-ECON	DEM-SOC
Middle Class Preferences	2.455	3.274*	2.311
	(2.714)	(1.648)	(2.456)
Affluent Preferences	0.272	−0.698	0.645
	(1.378)	(0.923)	(1.260)
Business Preferences	−0.136	−1.054***	−0.714
	(0.525)	(0.260)	(0.376)
Advocacy Group Preferences	2.169***	1.569***	1.913***
	(0.388)	(0.280)	(0.324)
Ideology	0.041	0.192***	0.118***
	(0.037)	(0.024)	(0.033)
Constant	−0.972*	−0.880***	−0.872**
	(0.387)	(0.214)	(0.270)
Observations	428	849	497
R^2	0.095	0.213	0.173
Adjusted R^2	0.085	0.208	0.165
Residual Std. Error	1.183 (df = 422)	1.186 (df = 843)	1.182 (df = 491)

Note: *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Table 5: Models of Policy Adoption

	Base	Expanded	Full
Middle Class Preferences	0.444	0.182	0.172
	(0.459)	(0.442)	(0.437)
Affluent Preferences	0.596*	0.864***	0.807***
	(0.244)	(0.235)	(0.233)
Business Preferences	0.435***	0.254***	0.185*
	(0.071)	(0.071)	(0.072)
Advocacy Preferences	0.065	0.084	0.105
	(0.069)	(0.067)	(0.068)
Foreign Policy		0.325***	0.305***
		(0.030)	(0.029)
Economic Policy		0.045	0.034
		(0.025)	(0.025)
Ideology		−0.015*	−0.009
		(0.006)	(0.006)
Republican Support			0.055***
			(0.008)
Democratic Support			0.022*
			(0.009)
Constant	0.088	0.135*	0.123*
	(0.049)	(0.058)	(0.058)
Observations	1,775	1,774	1,774
Log Likelihood	−1,119.021	−1,042.622	−1,021.073
Akaike Inf. Crit.	2,248.042	2,101.244	2,062.145

Note: *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

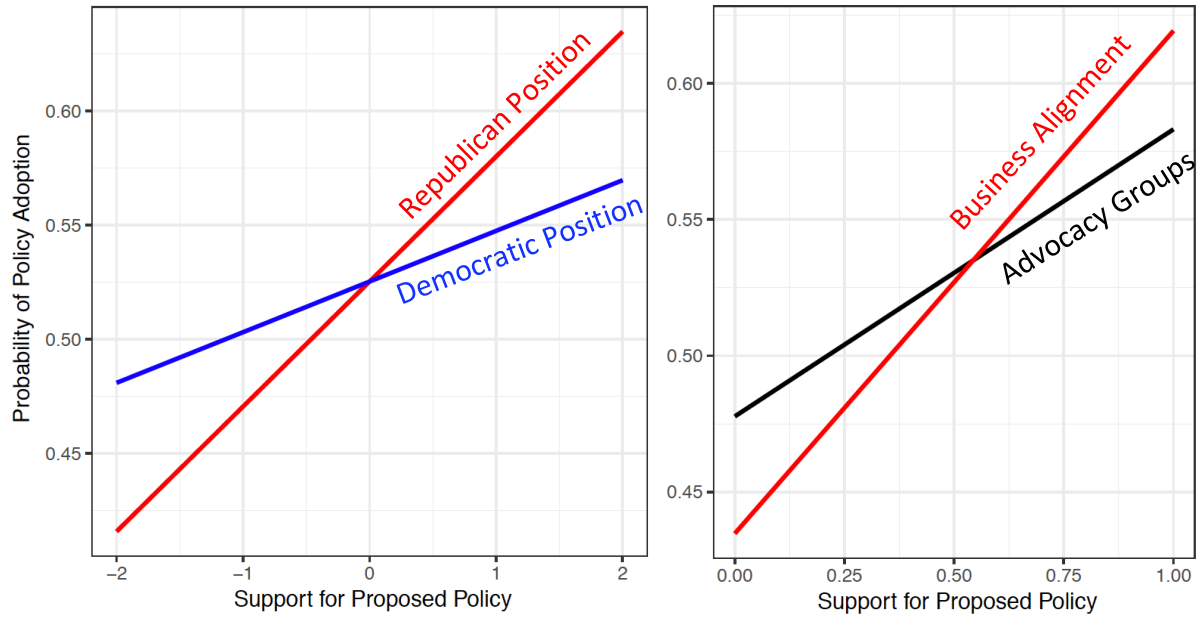Figure 3: Effects of Party and Interest Group Positions on Policy Adoption

Table 6: Models of Policy Adoption by Issue Area

	Foreign	Economic	Social
Middle Class Preferences	−1.047	1.160*	−0.288
	(1.059)	(0.588)	(0.844)
Affluent Preferences	1.914***	0.123	0.841
	(0.537)	(0.330)	(0.432)
Ideology	−0.021	−0.008	−0.013
	(0.014)	(0.009)	(0.012)
Business Preferences	0.574**	−0.017	0.325*
	(0.206)	(0.095)	(0.130)
Advocacy Preferences	0.158	0.189	0.082
	(0.157)	(0.102)	(0.115)
Republican Support	0.045*	0.092***	0.020
	(0.019)	(0.012)	(0.015)
Democratic Support	−0.016	0.029*	0.043**
	(0.019)	(0.013)	(0.016)
Constant	0.264	0.197*	0.084
	(0.152)	(0.077)	(0.094)
Observations	428	849	497
Log Likelihood	−272.664	−468.704	−253.303
Akaike Inf. Crit.	561.329	953.409	522.605

Note: $^{*}p<0.05$; $^{**}p<0.01$; $^{***}p<0.001$