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# Disproportional Representation: A Mixed Methods Analysis of Educational Attainment Representation in State Government

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Disproportional Representation: A Mixed Methods Analysis of Educational Attainment  
Representation in State Government

by

Jayne Neiman

A Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of  
The Graduate College of the University of Nebraska  
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Major: Political Science

Under the Supervision of Professor Kevin B. Smith

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Disproportional Representation: A Mixed Methods Analysis of Educational Attainment  
Representation in State Government

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University of Nebraska, 2014

Advisor: Kevin B. Smith

The present dissertation examines unequal political representation in the United States. More specifically, I ask whether American citizens with low relative levels of education are under-represented by their state governments compared to their well-educated counterparts. I posit that this question is vital to our understanding of the quality of democracy in America.

In order to answer the primary question, I take a mixed-methods approach, using a combination of quantitative and qualitative data to obtain a clearer picture of the representation scene. In the quantitative chapters, I demonstrate that in terms of both service responsiveness and policy responsiveness, those individuals with less education are not being appropriately represented. Additionally, I interviewed legislators from around the country to gain insight into how they perceive their representativeness. This adds depth and a more personal angle to the quantitative studies.

I take additional steps to examine whether the education levels of the legislators themselves affects their representation of less-educated constituents. Not only is legislator education an area that has not been often studied, I use an original data set of state legislator educational attainment that provides the most extensive look at this topic that, to my knowledge, has ever been conducted.

Finally, I conclude by relating this work back to that on state politics and inequality and by highlighting a series of policy recommendations addressing issues in civic education and participation, and the weighting of citizen political interests in the policymaking process.

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For my Julia Grace

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To my parents, thank you for the support, the food, and the free babysitting.

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# Chapter 1: Introduction, Theoretical Background, and Dissertation Overview

## 1.1 Introduction

Government responsiveness to constituents' political desires is an essential part of representative democracy. The belief in popular sovereignty—as Abraham Lincoln put it, that government should be “of the people, by the people, for the people”—is a guiding principle of American governance.

Given its integral place in democratic theory, it is not surprising that political scientists have devoted considerable effort and resources to the study of political representation. There is a massive literature examining representation and its elements and influences, including voter turnout, ideological consistency, political knowledge, and public opinion (e.g. Althaus 2002; Converse 1964; Popkin 1994). Political representation is omnipresent in political science research because “in the end, the link between public opinion and government policy is one of the things that democracy is all about” (Flavin 2010, 2).

One of the things this research teaches us is that not all people are equally represented. Influence over the system is disproportionately held by the socioeconomic elite—policymakers are disproportionately chosen and influenced by those with higher socio-economic status (Ansolabehere and Snyder 1999; Verba et al. 1995). While income and occupation certainly play a role, political scientists have consistently argued that education is the most influential determinant of political participation (e.g. Campbell 2009; Kam and Palmer 2008, 2011; Wolfinger and



Rosenstone 1980). It follows, then, that if the more educated voters are likeliest to play a role in determining their reelection chances, rational policymakers should be attentive to their interests. But what of less educated citizens? If the less educated participate less and also have distinct policy preferences, are those interests meaningfully attended to when lawmakers have less electoral incentive to pay attention to them?

The answer to this question is not clear. The extant research agrees that less education means a lower likelihood of participation, but this does not mean an absence of participation. Some people with low education do participate, and public policy inarguably affects citizens with low education. Unfortunately, we know very little about voters with low levels of education who participate and to what extent lawmakers are responsive to them and their interests. In order to help fill this gap, this dissertation addresses one primary research question: How responsive are elected governments to the interests of less educated voters?

This dissertation examines this question on two different levels. The first is at an individual level, examining how responsive individual policy makers are to individuals with low education levels who participate. This portion of the dissertation seeks to fill a notable gap in the literature on representation--there is no extant systematic research on how elected officials respond to citizens with low levels of education.

The dissertation also examines representation at a macro policy level by looking at the policies of states to see whether their content systematically correlates with the proportion of population that is less educated. The extent to which policy content

reflects the interest of lower educated citizens will provide insight into how those interests are being represented in democratic policymaking. Socioeconomic status, especially educational attainment, is closely related to economic need. Education levels are strongly correlated with the types of policy benefits important to low socioeconomic status: healthcare, welfare, and unemployment benefits, for example. If individuals with relatively low amounts of education are not participating in politics, or are not being heard when they do attempt to participate, elite decisions in these areas may necessarily be biased against those who are actually using the programs (Berinsky 2002; Hill and Leighley 1992; Hill, Leighley, and Hinton-Andersson 1995; Verba et al. 1995; Ringquist, Hill, Leighley, and Hinton-Andersson 1997). Governments do not move on issues that may be salient to certain groups of people because they are unable to turn their private needs into political demands or are even aware that they have a problem (Stone 2002).

## **1.2 Education and Political Inequality**

Many studies have found that those who participate in politics in the United States are not particularly representative of the total population. Notably, individuals who participate tend to be better off and better educated (Bendix and Lipset 1966; Brady et al. 1995; Milbrath and Goel 1977; Verba et al. 1995; Wright 1985). This raises a question of what interests representatives will actually represent, either on an individual level or collectively as embodied in public policy. Elected officials clearly have the choice to be more or less representative of different groups of their constituents. This study examines these choices by looking at responsiveness to constituent communication and policy outcomes.

Research indicates that education is the single best predictor of political participation (Brady et al. 1995; Verba et al. 1995). A plethora of studies find that education correlates positively with political participation, or in other words, uneducated people are less likely to participate than relatively more educated ones (Nie et al. 1996; Rosenstone and Hansen 2003; Verba and Nie 1972; Verba et al. 1995; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980). Indeed, Verba et al. (1995) find that “educational attainment is, in fact, the single most potent predictor of an adult’s political activity” (p. 13).

This relationship has typically been accounted for by the assumption that education provides certain benefits to those who have it, and that those benefits aid in the motivation and ability to participate. This has been broken down further in different studies. For example, education may confer individuals with organizational and communication abilities (Verba et al. 1995), political knowledge (Almond and Verba 1989), interest (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980), civic duty and efficacy (Campbell et al. 1960), or enhanced or higher-level job opportunities (Nie et al. 1996). Though the debate on *why* education is so strongly linked to participation is far from resolved (see Kam and Palmer 2008 for an overview), no one seriously disputes education’s role as an important influence on political participation.

Education’s preeminent role in driving participation is important because of its implications for representation to a large section of the American electorate. Though education levels have increased over the past 60 years, there remains a significant portion of the population with relatively low education levels. As of the 2010 census, 6.1% of Americans have less than a 9<sup>th</sup> grade education, 8.3% have more than 9<sup>th</sup> grade but less

than a high school diploma, and 28.5% has only a high school degree (United States Census Bureau 1).

Education level is clearly linked to socioeconomic and political opportunity. For example, higher levels of education are negatively correlated with unemployment ( $r = -.204, p = .000$ ) (United States Census Bureau 1), most Americans who do not have health insurance (63%) do not have a college degree (United States Census Bureau (2)), and the poverty rate for those without a college degree is more than six times higher than for those with a college degree (United States Census Bureau 1). These relationships highlight the specific issues that may be of particular salience to those individuals with relatively low levels of education and give us some clues as to policy issue areas where we ought to be looking for underrepresentation.

Political participation enables individuals to influence the governmental process through communication of preferences, contributes to trust in government through casework, and provides an overall platform for representativeness (Brady et al. 1995; Verba et al. 1995; Milbrath and Goel 1977; Schlozman and Verba 1979). Particularly at the state level, where there are fewer mechanisms like opinion polls to aggregate interests on specific issues, more direct forms of communication between constituents and legislators are the main gauges of public feeling on any given issue (Herbst 1998).

It is clear that political participation is an important part of representation in the American form of democracy. Verba et al. (1995) posit that “political participation affords citizens in a democracy an opportunity to communicate information to government officials about their concerns and preferences and to put pressure on them to respond” (p.37). Research indicates that the interests represented in government are the

interests of those who participate (Erikson, Wright, and McIver 1993; Erickson, Mackuen, and Stimson 2002; Jones and Baumgartner 2004). This may be especially true of state level governance, with the relative dearth of opinion polling, which raises additional issues. Schattschneider (1960) warned that low participation would produce biases between the larger population and those who are actually being represented. Though his point was a more general one, systematic variation in access to the governmental system through participation is thus an important factor in understanding differences in representation.

There is some evidence of this in the empirical literature. A 2005 study by James Avery and Mark Peffley found that states where lower socioeconomic status voters had higher rates of turnout during elections, lawmakers were less likely to pass highly restrictive welfare eligibility laws (Avery and Peffley 2005). A series of studies in the 1990s by Hill, Leighley and their colleagues similarly found that an electorate with an upper SES bias tended to be associated with less-generous welfare benefit policies. These findings are consistent with Schattschneider's warning, and though they speak more to an income-related class bias, the principles can be easily transferred to the area of educational attainment.

The general findings on education, participation, and representation thus raise some troubling questions for pluralist notions of representative democracy. Pluralist theory posits that the ability to influence government is widely dispersed. In the pluralist framework cohesive interest groups form whenever there is contention over key values, and those interest groups seek representation by lobbying government to produce an outcome favorable to them. This theory assumes that the ability to do this is distributed

throughout society, largely available to everyone (Dahl 1956, 1960, 1961, 1989).

Schattschneider (1960), however, points out that “the flaw in the pluralist heaven is that the heavenly chorus sings with a strong upper-class accent” (p. 34-35). He is asserting that some groups, specifically the advantaged ones, have more power than others. Thus, it is logical that the poorly educated, not tending to be particularly upper-class, may be facing systematic disadvantages in terms of access to and influence over the political system.

Of course there exist groups that have typically been disadvantaged and underrepresented in the past that have, at least to some extent, overcome these barriers. For example, blacks, women, homosexuals, the elderly, and the disabled have all made strides toward greater representation in recent decades, partially through their own initiative and partially through others lobbying on their behalves (Gilmour and Lamb 1975; Kazin 2011), but the uneducated have not. Certainly the fact that many of the barriers that these groups have had to face were institutional ones contributes to the ways in which they have been able to make this progress, makes the study of a group (the uneducated) that is not necessarily facing *institutional* barriers particularly interesting.

One possible factor unique to groups such as the uneducated is lack of group cohesion. Karl Marx asserted that workers would only be able to overcome their subjugation when they are aware of their common bonds of oppression and are ready to act together (Marx 1904). Schlozman and Verba (1979) applied this principle to the unemployed during the recession of the late 1970s and early 1980s, and it seems to be an apt description of the uneducated as well. Verba et al. discuss the idea that lack of communication between members of these “groups”, reluctance to believe that associated

problems are relevant to government intervention and efficacy may all be involved in this lack of cohesion. In terms of those with lower education levels (such as a high school diploma or lower), we must also take into consideration the possibility that basic knowledge levels restrict the ability of many of these individuals to interact with their government in a fruitful way (Converse 1964; Zaller 1992; Althaus 2002; Popkin 1994).

### **1.3 Political Representation**

Political representation is one of the more widely studied topics in political science. From Dahl (1956, 1961, 1971) to Downs (1971) to Mansbridge (2003), scholars have conceptualized and tested theories of representation. One of the more recognized of the works on political representation is Hanna Pitkin's (1967) *The Concept of Representation*. In this work, Pitkin asserts that it is the responsibility of an elected official to act "in the interests of the represented, in a manner responsive to them" (p. 209). Basically, a legislator should not act solely according to his or her own preferences, but is instead obligated to communicate with his or her constituents and allow them to communicate meaningfully in return.

In her book, Pitkin identifies four concepts of representation. The first conception of representation is formalistic, which refers to the specific institutional structures that spark and foster representation. Formalistic representation can be further broken down into authorization, or how a representative obtains his or her position, and accountability, or how representatives can be disciplined for acting contrary to the will of their constituencies. The second is symbolic representation, which refers to the figurative actions that representatives take—particularly in view of the public eye—that are

intended to increase levels of support for them and for their policies among their constituents. Third is descriptive representation, the extent to which a representative “looks like” his or her constituency. This is generally discussed in terms of race, religion, or gender, but can be extended to include things like background and experience. Last, substantive representation is how the representative represents the interests, or will, of his or her constituency.

In the research on representation, descriptive and substantive representation are often used together, though they are distinct concepts. In her 1995 book, *The Politics of Presence*, Anne Phillips presents a theory as to why we should expect a link between descriptive and substantive representation. Focusing on the representation of women, she argues that there are differences in the lives and experiences of women and men and that, to some extent, women share these experiences with one another. She thus expected a logical link between descriptive and substantive representation—female lawmakers will naturally represent the interests of women. This theory can be extended to other groups who share experiences as well: racial minorities, and, perhaps, people of similar education levels.

Heinz Eulau and Paul Karps (1977) expanded on Pitkin’s conception of representation by focusing specifically on responsiveness. They disaggregated this concept into four areas: policy responsiveness, service responsiveness, allocative responsiveness, and symbolic responsiveness. Policy responsiveness is related to Pitkin’s concept of substantive representation, and deals with the relationship between the representative and the constituent on matters of public policy. Service responsiveness refers to how representatives provide particular services to individuals or groups.



Allocational responsiveness is related to the actual provision of benefits to the representative's district or to individual constituents or groups. Finally, symbolic responsiveness, similar to Pitkin's model, refers to the actions that a representative takes to build trust and capital with the people that they represent.

In Chapter 2 of this dissertation, I use experimental manipulations involving communications via email with state legislative offices to examine representation. Responding to email communication falls into a category of the kind of quotidian casework that makes up the bulk of the daily work of a state legislative office (Jewell 1982; Keefe and Ogul 1985). In fact, the frequency with which this occurs led Malcom Jewell to suggest adding a fifth category of responsiveness—communication responsiveness—to Eulau and Karps' model (Jewell 1982).

Casework refers generally to the actions taken by legislative offices to provide a specific benefit for one constituent or a group of constituents. This can take the form of answering questions, assisting with regulation navigation, helping with benefit eligibility, or even job assistance. Though congressional scholars have studied casework at the federal level (Cain, Ferejohn and Fiorina 1980; Serra and Moon 1994; Fenno, 1978; Fiorina 1974, 1977; Mann and Wolfinger 1980; Yiannakis 1981; Wagner 2007; Frantzych 1986; Johannes 1983; Parker 1986), few have examined casework at the state legislative level.

Casework can be viewed as representation or responsiveness as these concepts are described by Pitkin, and Eulau and Karps. Specifically, casework embodies Pitkin's concept of substantive representation and with Eulau and Karps' service responsiveness model. Casework can also be seen as foundational to symbolic representation or

responsiveness. It is important to note that existing research has found significant variation in the amount of casework that state legislative offices perform. This suggests meaningful variation in this particular form of representation or responsiveness. There have been various attempts to explain this variation, including individual factors such as personal enjoyment (Rosenthal 1981), developing relationships with constituents (Diamond 1977), electoral advantage (Patterson 1990; Rosenthal 1993) and political ideology (Cain, Ferejohn, and Fiorina 1987; Johannes 1984). State and district factors, such as urbanization (Johannes 1984), institutional culture (Jewell 1982), and legislative professionalism (Jewell 1982; Patterson 1990; Rosenthal 1993) have also been shown to have an effect. There has been little research, however, using the individual characteristics of constituents to explain differences in casework-based responsiveness or representation.

While casework is clearly related to service, “democratic theory suggests that representation should be associated with both service and policy responsiveness” (Serra and Moon 1994, 200). Addressing multiple types of responsiveness, as I do here in this manuscript is a key contribution. As Eulau and Karps (1978) note, “If responsiveness is limited to one component, it cannot capture the complexities of the real world of politics” (61). Indeed, “what makes it representation is not any single action by any one participant, but the overall structure and functioning of the system” (Pitkin 1967, 221-222). The degree of lawmaker responsiveness to the literal questions and problems of constituents is one, individual-level element of representation. Representation, however, also has a more macro-level component—the reflection of constituent interests in public policy.

Collective, or policy, representation theory (Weissberg 1978), is related to Pitkin's substantive representation and Eulau and Karp's policy responsiveness. It is most often studied through policy outcomes rather than through the behavior of individual representatives, and asks whether or not the will of the people is reflected in the policies that are implemented by the representatives. The answer, at least in a general public opinion sense, seems to be yes (Erickson 1976; Erickson et al. 1993; Wetstein 1996; Fording 1997; Mooney and Lee 2000; Burstein 2003; Bartels 1991; Hill and Hurley 1999; Miller and Stokes 1963; Page and Shapiro 1983; Stimson, MacKuen and Erikson 1995).

Weissberg's conception of collective representation theory is limited, however, to mass public opinion, and while the interests of groups such as women (Dovi 2002; Phillips 1995; Childs and Krook 2006; Chaney 2006; Swers 1998; 2005), racial minorities (Owens 2005; Guinier 1994; Cameron, Epstein, and O'Halloran 1996) and homosexuals (Haider-Markel 2007) have been addressed, the extent to which policy may or may not reflect the interests of the less educated is virtually unstudied. Thus whether government responds to these interests is unknown, a gap this dissertation seeks to fill.

## **1.4 Legislative Motivation and Statistical Discrimination**

The study of legislative behavior has been influenced by the work in rational choice theory in the 1950s by Anthony Downs. His assertion that legislators are motivated purely by the desire to win elections, causing a convergence in the ideological middle, was followed in 1974 in a seminal work by David Mayhew. Mayhew delved deeper into the idea that these individuals act in accordance with their desire to win

reelection, developing the practical and theoretical argument that legislators are “single-minded seekers of reelection” (5).

Five years later, Richard Fenno offered a more complex version of this idea. He had previously argued that in addition to desiring reelection legislators were also motivated by the desire to obtain power in their chamber and to create good public policy. Later, in his 1978 book, he posited legislators do not merely seek the approval of the median voter, as Downs had argued, but had a more nuanced view of the constituency. The way he saw it, legislators divide their geographic and reelection constituencies up further into personal and primary constituencies. Their personal constituency is made of those constituents who are personally close to the legislator. Their primary constituency is comprised of their strongest supporters—ones who donate money or are willing to campaign on his or her behalf. These four constituencies, which he organized into concentric circles, would receive different amounts and kinds of attention and responsiveness. After all, “Public officials don’t stand naked before an undifferentiated mass public. Nor do they jump through ideological hoops. They are pushed—by their partisans, party activists, and fellow officeholders” (Uslaner 1999, p. 8).

Legislators (like most working adults) are busy people with many different responsibilities. They are constantly faced with decisions over how to prioritize the many things that are fighting for their attention. These decisions do not happen in a vacuum. Statistical decision theory is the idea that decision making generally occurs in the presence of statistical knowledge, which provides information where there is uncertainty. This is a specification of the more general rational choice models where “individuals

strive to satisfy their preferences for the consequences of their actions given their beliefs about events, which are represented by utility functions and probability distributions” (Nau 2002). This idea can certainly be applied to legislative behavior. As Fenno wrote, “Every member has some idea of the people most likely to join his reelection constituency” (1978, 9). Bartels agreed, writing, “Rational candidates are impelled by the goal of vote maximization to discriminate among prospective voters” (1998, 68).

These motivations, plus the statistical knowledge, can thus be taken a step further into the area of statistical discrimination. Born from social economics, and largely applied to wage discrimination studies, statistical discrimination refers to discrimination “based on rational expectations given overall statistical trends” (Butler and Broockman 2011, 465; see also Altonji and Blank 1999). For example, if an employer is aware that, in general, historically women have not been as productive as employees as men in terms of their labor force attachment they will prefer to hire a male (Hunt and Rubin 1980). Likewise, if a legislator (who is motivated by reelection) is aware that a certain type of person doesn’t tend to vote, or doesn’t tend to vote for their party, they will instead devote their time and attention to someone who will.

## **1.5 Studying Representation Using the States**

Using the American states to study representation allows us to explore variation in policy, institutions, and populations (Jewell 1982). Indeed, “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” (Erickson et al. 1993, 2). The variation that

this “laboratory” affords us provides useful insight as to why some states are more responsive to their uneducated citizens than others.

Additionally, state governments generally have a more direct relationship with their constituents than the federal government does. From education to electricity to roads, many of the services that Americans use on a daily basis are provided or regulated by the state government. Furthermore, there is reason to believe that the closer relationship between people and state governments leads to increased trust in state governments relative to trust in the federal government. A recent Gallup poll reports that 65% of people express some or a great deal of trust in their state government, compared to 34% expressing a similar amount of trust in Congress (Jones 2012).

State governments are also extremely powerful. The United States has a long history of valuing state autonomy from the federal government—the Tenth Amendment of the Constitution clearly states that “the powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the states, are reserved to the states, respectively, or to the people.” The ensuing years saw a considerable expansion of the size and scope of the central government, however there is evidence that since the 1990s the balance of intergovernmental relations has shifted toward the states (Cho and Wright 2004).

Though some may counter that the Obama administration is wresting some of this power back toward the federal government, it is still the case that the “devolution revolution” did expand the policymaking authority of the states, providing ample variation for study. For example, when the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 was passed, delegating significant regulatory authority to the states, the states came up with many different ways to enact the policy.

States like Michigan and Kansas focus on work engagement, while Wisconsin chooses to emphasize caseload reduction (Nathan and Gais 2001). The policies that stem from these states are thus quite different from each other. By taking advantage of this variation I will be able to better evaluate how political representation may differ across the states and by certain conditions.

## **1.6 Dissertation Overview and Contribution**

The purpose of this dissertation is to better understand how the interests of Americans with low education are represented by the American political system. The dissertation will examine education, participation and representation quantitatively through field experiments designed to measure variation in legislator response to constituent inquiry, and by employing Census data to look at the relationship between education levels and state-level policy outcomes. Qualitatively, the dissertation will also employ case studies of state legislative offices to explore the government side of the representative-constituent relationship more fully. This mixed-methods strategy is chosen to promote a more comprehensive approach to addressing the key research question at the heart of the dissertation--how are individuals with low education levels represented in the American political system?

This study is an important move forward in our understanding of representation in the United States. The uneducated have typically been overlooked in terms of their participation and representation in favor of a focus on how and why participation generally correlates positively with education. Additionally, I use the variation that is provided by the states to identify possible mechanisms that explain why some states are

more responsive to the less educated than others. This, to my knowledge, is the first systematic examination of the variation in the representation of people with little education.

In order to study the unequal representation of the less educated, I must first demonstrate that they are, in fact, treated differently than those with more education. I do this by employing field experiments on a sample of state legislators. The results of these experiments demonstrate that legislators are, in fact, less responsive to communications from constituents who are either perceived as or explicitly stated as having less education. These results are telling in themselves as to the way that people with different levels of education are treated by their representatives, and set the stage for the analysis of policy representation that will take place later in the dissertation.

In Chapter 3, I systematically assess how unequal political responsiveness to the uneducated in the American states translates into unequal policy representation. Using policy outcome variables related to the amount of spending each state devotes to policies that disproportionately affect people with lower education levels, welfare and unemployment, I examine the relationship between these and the education levels of the citizens in that state.

Chapter 4, the qualitative contribution to this dissertation, allows us a more in-depth understanding of the way in which legislative offices communicate with citizens. State legislators in Nebraska, Massachusetts, Delaware, Wisconsin, Kansas, and Oklahoma agreed to participate in the present research through interviews and surveys. Additionally, the legislators have agreed to provide me samples of real constituent



communication. This is key, in that it validates the manipulations that I used in the experiments in Chapter 2, as well as grounding this study in reality.

Finally, in Chapter 5, I review my main empirical findings in the context of the existing state politics, representation, and political inequality literature. I argue that the extant literature is largely disjointed, and attempt to reconcile my own results with similar studies of class and racial biases in representation. I continue by discussing how my dissertation contributes to our growing understanding about the causes of political inequality in the American states, and close with an argument as to why even though the uneducated among us may not see themselves as a cohesive, ignored group they should be treated as such. This discussion may be of utility to those hoping to promote a more equal consideration of citizens' interests in the policymaking process.

In a representative democracy, it is necessary for the political system to be perceived as legitimately contributing to most of the people's well-being in order to be sustained over an extended period of time. State legislators are in a position, due to their "closeness" to the constituents, to encourage the perception of legitimacy, which can, in turn, create increased trust in government. "There must be support of legislators before there is support for legislatures. Eventually, support for legislators will lead to support for legislatures" (Meezy 1976, 124-125). Support for the legislature leads the way to broader support for the entire political system, and thus may lead to increased participation (Almond and Verba 1963).

## **Chapter 2: State Legislator Communication Responsiveness and Education Levels**

### **2.1 Introduction**

Equality of political access and political influence are two of the cornerstones of what makes a democratic system representative (Butler and Broockman 2011; Dahl 1956; Verba 2003). It is thus unsurprising that variation in access and influence among different constituent groups has been a particular research focus of political scientists, though the bulk of such research—at least in the United States—is centered on exploring racial disparities (e.g. Butler and Broockman 2011; Chavez 1992; Fraga 1992; Hajnal 2009; Thernstrom 1987). As far as I am aware, there are no extant empirical studies of variation in access to and influence on representatives (legislators) across levels of education.

Contacting government representatives is an important form of political participation (Dalton 2007; Putnam 2000). Historically postal mail was the most common way that citizens contacted their representatives, but with the advent of new communications technology actual pen and paper letters have fallen into disuse. Currently email is, by far, the most common method constituents use to communicate with legislators (Pindus et al. 2010). One Senator from Wisconsin reports that while at the beginning of his political career he received communication from his constituents exclusively via “snail mail”, these days he is surprised if he receives more than two letters a month—the rest of the contacts are by email. Further, the explosion of outlets like Facebook and Twitter has inspired an effort by many lawmakers to use these forums

to “talk” to their constituents (Anderson et al. 2011; Golbeck et al. 2010; NCSL 2011), and online discussions, surveys, and town hall meetings are becoming increasingly popular (Congressional Management Foundation 2009).

Regardless if it comes in the form of a letter, an e-mail or a tweet, in order to be truly representative, lawmakers should be responsive to constituent input and inquiry (Burke 1774; King and Stivers 1998; Nalbandian 1991; Stivers 1994). Empirical research clearly suggests that such responsiveness varies with constituent characteristics, most notably race (e.g. Butler and Broockman 2011). This chapter explores state legislator communication responsiveness to constituents of varying education levels—both perceived and explicit—using a series of three field experiments. These studies seek to answer the question, “Are state legislators more responsive to communication from more educated constituents?”

## **2.2 Background and Hypotheses**

As discussed in Chapter 1, lawmakers are motivated by their goal of reelection. To achieve this goal public officials undertake certain actions, including being responsive to constituent casework in order to claim credit for helping their people (Mayhew 1974)—in other words they engage in substantive, or service responsiveness. Essentially, if constituents know that the lawmaker was the one that helped them with their problem or inquiry, they are more likely to see that lawmaker as a helpful and effective public official. Further, this kind of helpfulness elicits trust from the constituency, enabling the lawmaker a certain amount of leverage when it comes to his or her in the capitol (Fenno 1978).

Lawmakers, however, cannot give everyone all of their attention all of the time. The idea that legislators have a pretty good idea of who will and who will not be a supporter come election time has been a popular theme in the research on legislative behavior since the 1970s. For example wealthier Americans tend to vote at higher rates than poorer ones, and Larry Bartels (2002) found that U.S. Senators are “vastly more responsive to the views of affluent constituents than to constituents of modest means” (21). In 2005, Martin Gilens found similar, possibly even more disheartening, results—policy outcomes vary with the preferences of the richest Americans, but do not reflect at all the preferences of poor or middle-income ones (Gilens 2005).

This sort of statistical discrimination can be broken down even further. Butler and Broockman (2011) noted that black voters tend to cast their votes for the Democratic candidate nearly all of the time, and thus hypothesized that a rational Republican legislator would be more responsive to a white constituent than a black one. The results of their study did, in fact, indicate that this was the case. Further, they found that when the black “constituent” specified that he was a Republican, this effect disappeared. These results show that legislators may be relying on racial cues when deciding where to allocate their attention and resources.

Research on descriptive and substantive representation often, but not always, posits that the way to ensure the representation of minority groups is to make sure that individuals of similar backgrounds are being elected. Jane Mansbridge’s 1999 article title is quite descriptive of this line of thinking: “Should Blacks Represent Blacks and Women Represent Women? A Contingent ‘Yes’”. There is a substantial amount of research to back this up. For example, along with Mansbridge, many researchers have found that

female representatives, sharing gendered experiences, are more likely to introduce and vote for legislation that is in the interest of women (e.g. Dovi 2002; Phillips 1995; Childs and Krook 2006; Chaney 2006; Swers 1998). There have been similar findings for blacks (Owens 2005; Guinier 1994; Cameron, Epstein, and O'Halloran 1996) and Latinos (Minta 2011; Wilson 2010). Other studies disagree, finding that this sort of direct substantive representation does not occur for all groups all of the time (Hero and Tolbert 1995; Kerr and Miller 2007; Knoll 2009).

The vast majority of research in the areas of descriptive and substantive representation looks at policy outcomes and roll-call voting. In this chapter, I focus on a more literal use of the idea of responsiveness—email responses to a constituent inquiry. It has been argued that researchers are missing critical information about processes when they merely look at the end results (Young 1990). Further, responsiveness in this sense has real-world implications that have been documented in the literature—there is evidence that when historically underserved groups, such as women and racial minorities, perceive their representatives as being responsive they vote at higher rates (Chattopadhyay and Duflo 2004; Griffin and Keane 2006).

Representation of individuals with relatively low levels of education has received virtually no attention in the academic literature, in spite of education's preeminence in the voter participation literature (and thus its clear importance to representation). The studies in race and gender do, however, give us insight as to what results we might expect in terms of the present study. The data consistently show that there is a significant positive correlation between education and voting. It has also been demonstrated that legislators use statistical discrimination—whether it is conscious or not—when it comes to

allocating their time and resources. Consequently, I hypothesize that legislators will be more responsive to constituents who are perceived to have more education (Hypothesis 1).

Statistical discrimination can also provide us with a more specific hypothesis for the studies in this chapter. Voters with relatively low education levels tend to vote for Democratic candidates—Obama, for instance, garnered a majority of the vote from those voters with no high school and no college degrees in the most recent presidential election (New York Times 2012). Accordingly, I expect Democratic representatives to be more responsive to communication from uneducated constituents than their Republican counterparts (Hypothesis 2).

Phillips (1995) argued that the mere presence of women in governing bodies should increase their substantive representation. Shared experiences and a naturally-occurring empathy will necessarily benefit the female members of the constituency. She argues that this principle is transferrable to other historically disadvantaged, or underrepresented, groups. I propose that those members of American society who have relatively lower levels of education may fit this model. Education certainly endows certain types of shared experiences—graduation, classes, coursework, and for many, particular social experiences. *Not* going to college also bestows shared experiences. Those who drop out of high school largely miss out on the specific experiences unique to those who obtain further education. They are often limited in the types of jobs available to them, and tend to be overrepresented amongst those who do not have health insurance and who collect government benefits. They also make up a majority of those Americans who became parents as teenagers.

If the relatively uneducated are, in fact, a cohesive group (even if they don't necessarily see themselves as such) in terms of shared experiences and specific interests, it follows that they may be most appropriately represented by legislators who also lack extended education. Perhaps individual legislators who did not attend college (there are very few, if any, who did not complete high school in the entire country and none in my sample) would be more sympathetic to, or unfazed by, communication from constituents who clearly lack education as well. Hypothesis 3 is, then, legislators with less education themselves will be more responsive to the uneducated constituents than their better-educated counterparts.

Research has indicated that districts with lower socioeconomic statuses tend to field more demands for constituent services, thus tending to be more highly responsive in general. Furthermore, low SES districts are more likely to contain racial and ethnic minorities, and those who have lower relative levels of education (Jewell 1982; Thomas 1992). Studies two and three in this chapter examine this area, expecting to find that districts with higher percentages of minority residents and individuals who did not complete high school will have legislative offices that are relatively more responsive to the uneducated constituent (Hypothesis 4).

Per the relevant literature, I am also including several control variables in my models. Female legislators tend to spend more time on constituency service than males do (Richardson and Freeman 1995; Thomas 1992), so gender is included. Staff size has been found to have an effect on the time that an office is able to allocate to casework (Patterson 1990; Jewell 1982; Rosenthal 1993; Freeman and Richardson 1994), so legislative professionalism/capacity is included. Senate offices, generally having larger

staffs and budgets, tend to devote more time to constituent services than House offices (Rosenthal 1993). Finally, individual legislator's views on government spending have been found to influence casework in that those who favor limited government spend less time on it (Cain et al. 1987; Johannes 1984). These variables may impact overall responsiveness, however there is no specific reason to believe that they would affect the responsiveness to a well-educated constituent over one who is not so well-educated.

## **2.4 Study 1 Design and Results**

The three studies in this chapter employ field experiments on samples of state legislative offices from around the United States. The sample is specifically of legislative offices rather than of legislators themselves because it is logical to expect that many legislators do not answer their own correspondence. The methods used for this experiment are adapted from Butler and Broockman (2011). Their study focused on racially-based differences in legislative responses to inquiries; this project employs a similar research design and employs similar methods to look at differences in legislative responses to constituent contacts based on perceived or declared education levels.

For the first study, a sample of 500 state legislator names<sup>1</sup> was randomly selected from the National Conference of State Legislatures database ([www.ncsl.org](http://www.ncsl.org)) during the spring of 2011. The email addresses for each of the legislators in the sample was then obtained from individual state legislative web pages. This sample consisted of five

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<sup>1</sup> Due to the deception involved in this study, as well as the sensitive nature of the legislators' positions, privacy was a concern for the Institutional Review Board. Thus, all data was anonymized, and no names will be used in this study.



Representatives and five Senators<sup>2</sup> from each state. Though the goal initially was to include all fifty states, there were practical roadblocks preventing full coverage.<sup>3</sup> First, several states do not provide email addresses for their legislators, preferring to use electronic submission forms instead. As this was unduly burdensome considering the time and personnel restraints for this project, those states were omitted. Due to email delivery issues and job turnover due to resignations and retirements, several legislators were dropped from the sample. After this cleaning and attrition, the data set contained 332 legislative offices (51 percent House and 49 percent Senate). The data set is 52 percent Republican, which is not statistically different from the percentage Republican (54 percent) of all state legislators after the 2010 elections ( $t=-.798$ ,  $p=.425$ ). Thirty-three percent of the sample is female, which is slightly higher than the whole population of state legislators nationwide (23.7 percent,  $t=3.754$ ,  $p<.001$ ). While not a truly random sample of all state legislative offices, the sample is broadly representative of that population.

Each of the offices in the sample was sent two emails two weeks apart. The emails were randomly alternated in terms of which was sent first and which was sent second, and both came from generic, name-based Gmail accounts. The emails were sent individually rather than in a large batch to prevent bounce-back from spam filters. One email was high quality, with no spelling or grammatical errors (Email A).

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<sup>2</sup> The names by which these legislators are called in each state vary, but I will use these designations to denote membership in the House of Representatives/Assembly/Lower House and Senate/Upper House.

<sup>3</sup> The states not included in this study are Alaska, California, Idaho, Kentucky, Nebraska, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, South Dakota, Texas and Washington.

Email A

Dear Senator XXXXX,  
 My name is Brian Johnson, and I am trying to figure out how to register to vote for the upcoming election. I am new to the area and unfamiliar with the institutions and procedures here. Due to the current antagonistic political climate, and the historic nature of the next round of elections, I want to make sure that I have plenty of time to register. If you could please let me know who I should call, or where I should go to register, I would really appreciate it. Thank you for your time.  
 Best,  
 Brian Johnson

The other, while substantively similar in content was poorly written and contains serious grammatical and spelling errors (Email B).

Email B

Dear mr XXXXX  
 I am jakemarshall. I would like to lern to registor to vote for the next electshun. I jus moved here and dont know how to do stuff here. I know that importat stuff is happen in the world and I want to make my voice herd. Where can I go or call for signing up?  
 Thanks for youre time  
 Jake marshall

Writing skill is intrinsically linked with education levels in two different ways. First, the ability to write well has consistently been found to predict future academic attainment and success (Graham and Perin 2007; Mattern 2010; Raiscot 2012). Essentially, having developed skills at written communication, either directly or through another related trait, makes individuals more likely to obtain more years of education and to do well at it. Second, in the vein of “practice makes perfect”, having more years of education generally makes people better writers (Dowhower 1989; Ericsson 2006; Newell and Rosenbloom 1980). Given this, the emails can be assumed to be sending

different signals about the likely education levels of the senders and thus serve as the experimental manipulation.

In order to test my hypotheses, I examine three different dependent variables: response/no response, time (in days) to respond, and extent of engagement (measured in number of words in the response email). Analysis of these three different aspects of responsiveness will allow for a particularly nuanced look at how responsiveness works—is it simply that the poorly-written emails will not receive as many reply emails as the well-written ones? Or within the replies, will there be differences as to how and when the legislative offices interact with these “constituents”?

Each legislator/office was coded for several different attributes based on the relevant literature regarding variation in casework effort expenditures, and include legislator gender (Richardson and Freeman 1995; Thomas 1992), legislative professionalism<sup>4</sup> (Jewell 1982; Freeman and Richardson 1994; Patterson 1990; Rosenthal 1993), chamber (Rosenthal 1993) and legislator party (Cain, Ferejohn and Fiorina 1987; Johannes 1984; Rosenthal 1993). Further, in order to test hypothesis 3, each legislator was coded for their highest level of educational attainment<sup>5</sup> (Table 2.1).

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<sup>4</sup> This measure is taken from the National Conference of State Legislatures. They split the states up into 5 groups based on what percent of a full-time job the legislatures require of their legislators. The staff capacity, which is highly correlated with full-timeness, of each legislature is also taken into account.

<sup>5</sup> 1=High School, 2=Some College, 3=Associates or equivalent degree, 4=Bachelor's Degree, 5=Graduate Degree

Table 2.1: Univariate Statistics for Independent Variables

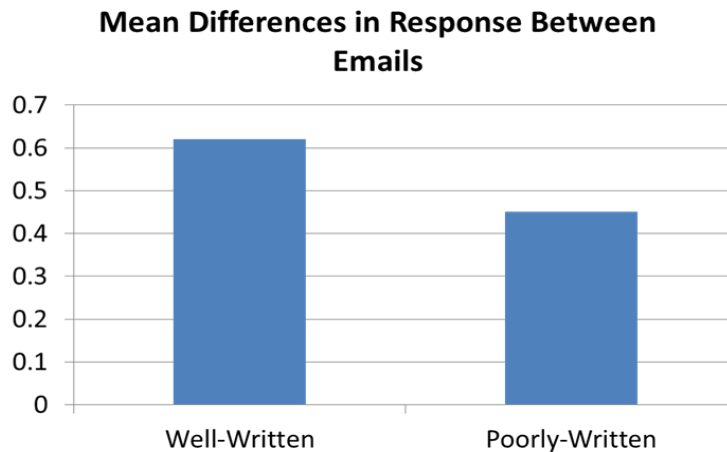
	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard Dev
Gender	0 (male)	1 (female)	.330	.472
Party	0 (Democrat)	1 (Republican)	.520	.500
Chamber	0 (senate)	1 (house)	.490	.501
Legislative Professionalism	1	5	2.621	.987
Education level	1 (high school diploma)	5 (graduate degree)	3.961	1.258

The first area of interest for this study is a comparison of the rates of response to each of the emails—a simple “did they respond” measure. Responses to both emails began appearing almost immediately, with the first one arriving a mere 6 minutes later. Response rates were analyzed in two different ways. First, Repeated Measures Analysis of Variance (RM-ANOVA) was used to examine the difference in means in the rates of response to the two experimental conditions, allowing a test for the first hypothesis. A significant result stemming from this test will indicate that there is indeed a responsiveness difference between Email A and Email B. Next, Chi-Square analysis and multinomial logistic regression (multinomial logit) models were used to test Hypotheses 2 and 3, analyzing potential effects of legislator party and education level. Significant results for variables in these models would indicate that legislator party or gender (or one of the control variables in the logit model) is influencing the responsiveness of the legislative office.

The initial analysis shows a significant difference between the mean response rate to the well-written email ( $M=.62$ ,  $SD=.486$ ) and the poorly-written email ( $M=.45$ ,

SD=.498),  $F(1, 331)=30.526$ ,  $p<.001$  (Figure 2.1). This result supports Hypothesis 1: the skilled emailer was more responded to, or represented, than his less-skilled counterpart.

Figure 2.1: Mean Differences in Response Rate to the Experimental Conditions



I did not, however, find similar support for Hypothesis 2 in these data. In order to test whether Democratic legislators were more responsive to the poorly-written email, I performed a chi-square test of independence (Table 2.2). The relationship between these variables was not significant,  $X^2(3, N = 332) = .563$ ,  $p = .905$ . Democratic lawmakers in this sample did not respond more often to the poorly-written email than Republican lawmakers.

Table 2.2 Crosstabulation of Political Party and Response to Emails

	No Response	Responded to Well-Written Only	Responded to Poorly-Written Only	Responded to Both Emails	Total
Democrat	49	45	14	52	160
Republican	52	43	17	60	172
Total	101	88	31	112	332

There is also no support for Hypothesis 3. A chi-square test was performed to determine whether there is a relationship between response to the emails and the legislators' educational attainment (Table 2.3). The relationship between these variables was also not significant,  $X^2(12, 332) = 17.517, p=.131$ . Having lower personal levels of education was not associated with higher response rates to the poorly-written email.

Table 2.3 Crosstabulation of Legislator Education Level and Response to Emails

	No Response	Responded to Well-Written Only	Responded to Poorly-Written Only	Responded to Both Emails	Total
High School	8	6	1	11	26
Some College	13	8	4	8	33
Associate's Degree	8	0	1	4	13
Bachelor's Degree	33	28	16	38	115
Graduate Degree	39	45	9	51	144
Total	101	87	31	112	332

To more fully test the relationship between the variables, paying particular attention to the expected role of the control variables, I ran a multinomial logistic regression (multinomial logit) model. For this model, the dependent variable is a categorical construction of the response variable (no response, responded to the well-written email only, responded to the poorly-written email only, responded to both emails). There is a relationship present between the response variable and the independent variables (legislator education level, chamber, party, and gender) in the model. In this analysis, the probability of the model chi-square of 59.456 was .003. The null hypothesis that there was no difference between the model without independent variables and the model with independent variables was rejected; the existence of a relationship between the independent variables and the dependent variable was supported. The relationship, however, appears to be largely driven by legislative capacity, and this is the only statistically significant independent variable in the full model ( $X^2=31.622$ ,  $p=.002$ ).

Coefficient estimates for the full multinomial logit model are displayed in Table 2.4. The first column contrasts legislators who responded to the well-written email only to those who did not respond to either email. The second column compares those who responded to the poorly-written email only to legislators who did not respond at all. The third column contrasts those who responded to both to the no-response legislators. Contrasting the “no response” condition with the three other possible conditions allows us to examine whether any of the independent variables accounts for a particular kind of response. Specifically, if a variable explains a move from not responding to responding to

the well-written email only, we might start to understand what *type* of legislators are likely to be less representative of the poorly educated constituent.

In all three, we see that the variables that are significant are the legislative capacity variables. Legislators who work for legislatures with higher levels of legislative capacity, or professionalism, are, as expected, simply more likely to respond. Only one other variable appears to be significant—the gender variable in the last column has a probability value of .05. While the result is in the expected direction (female legislators are more likely to have responded to both emails), it is possible that this is a statistical artifact—the fallout of running a large model.



Table 2.4 Multinomial Logistic Regression Predicting Response to Emails<sup>6</sup>

Variable	Responded to Well-Written Only Coefficient (SE)	Responded to Poorly-Written Only Coefficient (SE)	Responded to Both Coefficient
High School	-.162 (.607)	-.366 (1.146)	.141 (.544)
Some College	-.530 (.520)	.380 (.704)	-.715 (.523)
Associate's Degree	-19.183 (52.51)	-.416 (1.149)	-.980 (.694)
Bachelor's Degree	-.157 (.358)	.883 (.503)	-.067 (.343)
Graduate Degree	---	---	---
Senate	-.002 (.309)	.440 (.432)	-.296 (.292)
House	---	---	---
Democrat	.146 (.320)	-.001 (.440)	.013 (.302)
Republican	---	---	---
Very Low Leg Capacity (.680)**	-18.937 (.894)**	-19.469 (1.076)**	-18.956
Low Leg Capacity (.637)**	-18.945 (.844)**	-19.589 (1.004)**	-19.274
Medium Leg Capacity (.609)**	-18.342 (.834)**	-18.696 (.966)**	-18.013
High Leg Capacity (.001)**	-17.638 (.719)**	-19.445 (1.279) **	-17.959
Very High Leg Capacity	---	---	---
Male	.553 (.327)	.233 (.446)	.608 (.311)*
Female	---	---	---
Intercept (.657)**	18.139 (.867)**	17.087 (1.058)**	18.431
Model X2	59.456**		
Number of Cases	332		

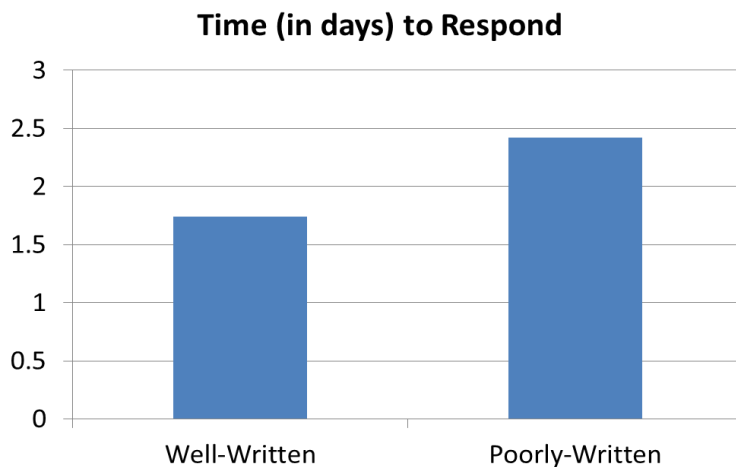
Note: The contrast variable for the model is the “did not respond to either email” category.

\*\*  $p < .01$ , \*  $p < .05$

<sup>6</sup> I tested for interaction effects in each of the models in this chapter, however none were significant and are therefore not included in my analysis.

Next, I examined how long it took for the responses from the legislative offices to arrive. Marginally supporting Hypothesis 1, there was a mean difference (approaching significance at the .05 level) in the time in days that it took the legislative offices to respond to the well-written ( $M=1.74$ ,  $SD=2.857$ ) and the poorly-written emails ( $M=2.42$ ,  $SD=3.977$ ),  $f=3.870$ ,  $p=.052$  (Figure 2.2).

Figure 2.2: Mean Differences in Time to Respond Between Emails



Though there is a difference in the time that it took for the legislators to respond to the well-written and poorly written emails, this difference does not appear to be explained by legislator party or education level, thus not supporting Hypothesis 2 or 3 once more. Repeated-measures ANCOVA, with party, education level, gender, legislative capacity, and chamber as the covariates revealed that none of these variables accounted for the differences between the times it took for legislators to respond to the emails, though the model does approach significance ( $F=3.870$ ,  $p=.052$ , see Table 2.5).

Table 2.5: ANCOVA Tests of Within and Between Subjects Contrasts for Response Time

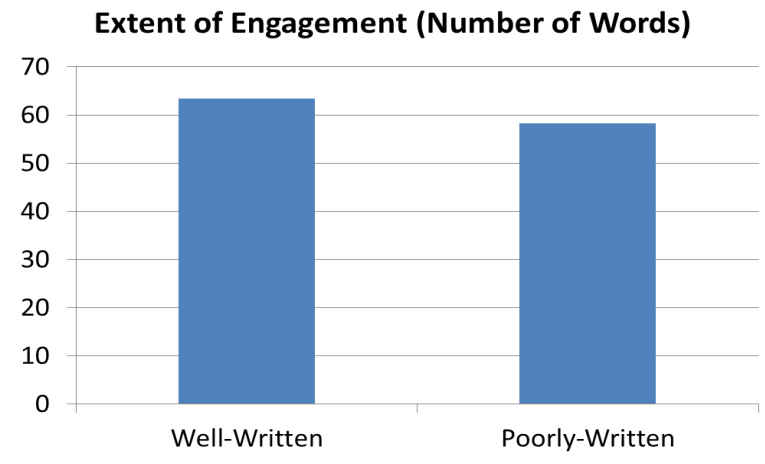
	Between Subjects Mean Square	Between Subjects F-Test	Within Subjects Mean Square	Within Subjects F-Test
Intercept	11.048	.658**		
Education Level	.200	.012		
Chamber	1.888	.112		
Party	12.545	.747		
Legislative Capacity	34.434	2.051		
Gender	9.394	.560		
Error	16.788			
Time Difference			7.842	.006
Time Difference*Ed Level			1.488	.225
Time Difference*Chamber			2.870	.406
Time Difference*Party			.062	.009
Time Difference*Legislative Capacity			.188	.027
Time Difference*Gender			1.514	.214
Error			7.067	

\* $p < .05$  \*\* $p < .01$

The final area of interest for this study concerns the extent to which the response emails engage with the constituent, measured in terms of the number of words in the

response emails. Contrary to Hypothesis 1, there was no significant mean difference in the extent of engagement between the well-written ( $M=63.39$ ,  $SD=44.679$ ) and poorly-written ( $M=58.18$ ,  $SD=44.699$ ) emails ( $t=-.184$ ,  $p=.854$ ) (Figure 2.3).

Figure 2.3: Mean Differences in Extent of Engagement Between Emails



There is no difference in the extent to which the legislators responded to the emails, and there is no relationship with party or education level, again failing to provide support for Hypothesis 2 or 3. Repeated-measures ANCOVA, with party, education level, gender, legislative capacity, and chamber as the covariates revealed that none of these variables are related to the number of words in the response emails ( $F=1.820$ ,  $p=.180$ , see Table 2.6).

Table 2.6: ANCOVA Tests of Within and Between Subjects Contrasts for Engagement

	Between Subjects Mean Square	Between Subjects F-Test	Within Subjects Mean Square	Within Subjects F-Test
Intercept	53795.833	18.129**		
Education Level	6935.647	2.337		
Chamber	1841.032	.620		
Party	14227.165	4.794		
Legislative Capacity	4431.320	1.493		
Gender	1331.711	.449		
Error	2967.446			
Engagement			3569.683	4.087*
Engagement *Ed Level			131.506	.151
Engagement *Chamber			746.955	.855
Engagement *Party			422.461	.484
Engagement *Legislative Capacity			2932.390	3.357
Engagement *Gender			1505.885	1.724
Error			873.520	

\* $p < .05$  \*\* $p < .001$

In summary, the results from Study One, suggest that compared to well-written emails, poorly written emails are less likely to receive a response from a state legislative office and, if a response is forthcoming, it is likely to be slower. There appears to be little difference in the extent of response (number of words) to poorly and well written emails.

## 2.5 Study 2 Design and Results

The overall finding from Study 1 is that the poorly-written email received far fewer responses than the well-written email. It is possible, however, that the extreme nature of the emails was enough to unfairly influence the results (perhaps the “good” email was *too* good, and vice-versa). In order to parse this out, I ran a slightly altered version of the experiment during the fall of 2012. In this replication, the quality of each of the emails was tempered slightly, but with clear quality differences remaining (Emails C and D).

### Email C

Dear Senator XXXXX,  
 My name is Joseph Anderson. I am moving to your district and I am trying to find out how to register to vote. I want to make sure that I can stay involved there, so if you could please let me know where to go, I would appreciate it.  
 Thank you,  
 Joseph Anderson

### Email D

Dear Senator XXXXX,  
 My name is Michael Peterson. Im moving to the area and Im trying to register for voting. I want to make sure that I be staying involved there, so if you could let me know where to go, I would be grateful.  
 Thanks,  
 Michael Peterson

Again, a sample of state legislator names was selected from the NCSL database and the corresponding email address collected from each state’s legislative website. This time, close to two years later, more states had chosen to “tighten up” their email systems

leaving 33 states in the sample.<sup>7</sup> After attrition, 324 state legislative offices remained (54 percent House, and 46 percent Senate). The sample is slightly heavy on female legislators (33 percent, versus the national percentage of 23.7 percent,  $t=2.075$ ,  $p=.039$ ), and is representative of the partisan makeup of state legislatures nationally ( $t=1.362$ ,  $p=.174$ ). Again, though not a random sample, it is relatively representative in terms of the gender, partisanship and chamber membership of state legislators.

Because I am running three separate experiments in this chapter that involve emails to legislators and the overuse of deceptive methods is a concern, for Studies 2 and 3 I opted to split the samples and send half of the legislators the higher quality email and half the lower quality email. The legislators were randomly assigned to one of the two conditions and sent either the high or low quality email. Both emails came from generic name-based Microsoft Outlook email addresses (a different email addresses than those used in study 1 in case of sample overlap with Study 1).

As in Study 1, replies to the “constituents” began arriving very quickly. In fact, 61% of the replies that came in did so within 24 hours. Again, I examine three simple dependent variables: response (yes/no), time to respond (in days), and extent of engagement (measured in number of words). For each dependent variable I examine mean differences between the well-written email and poorly-written email recipients through one-way analyses of variance (ANOVAs) before accounting for the relevant control variables by including a fixed factor (email condition) and covariates to the models. For each of the dependent variables in this study, the models first include the same control variables that were included in the analyses in Study 1 (Legislator party,

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<sup>7</sup> Excluded in this study are AK, CA, ID, FL, IN, KY, ME, MT, NE, NJ, OH, PA, RI, SD, SC, TX and WA.

Legislator gender, Legislator education level, chamber, and legislative professional capacity, see Table 2.7 for the univariate statistics). In order to test Hypothesis 4, I go one step further in this study (and in Study 3, below) and estimate further-specified models to include variables to account for the demographic makeup of the constituency (Jewell 1982; Thomas 1992). By doing this, we are better able to understand whether legislators “know their audience” and might be more or less likely to receive communication from individuals with lower education levels purely based on the demographics of the population in their state (also in Table 2.7).

Table 2.7: Univariate Statistics for Independent Variables

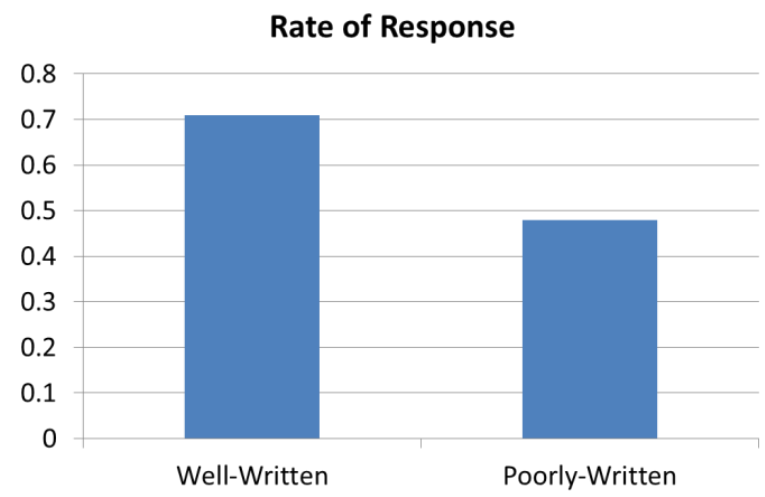
	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard Deviation
Gender	0 (Male)	1 (Female)	.330	.470
Party	0 (Democrat)	1 (Republican)	.560	.497
Education Level	1	5	3.96	1.269
Legislative Professionalism	1	5	2.73	.977
State Percentage with no High School	8.20	19.60	13.051	3.309
District Percentage Black	0	92	12.930	18.644
District Percentage Hispanic	1	75	9.07	11.738

As hypothesized, and consistent with the results of Study 1, the well-written email received a significantly higher response rate than did the poorly-written email ( $F(1,322)=17.045, p<.001$ ). As Figure 2.4 illustrates, recipients of the well-written email responded at a rate of slightly over 70%, while those who received the poorly-written



email responded less than 50% of the time. Clearly, tempering the quality of the emails from the extremes of Study 1 did not diminish the mean difference; in fact, there is a slightly larger mean effect.

Figure 2.4: Mean Differences in Response Rate to the Experimental Conditions



Next, in order to test Hypotheses 2 and 3, I performed an analysis of variance looking at the response rate of the emails using condition (the well-written or poorly-written email) as a fixed factor and chamber, legislative professionalism, party, gender, and education level as covariates. Significant F-tests on the party or education level variables would indicate support for the hypotheses, demonstrating that those variables affect the response differential found in the means comparison above. As the results, presented in Table 2.7, indicate, however, neither legislator party nor legislator educational attainment accounts for the difference. Chamber reaches a significance level of .10, indicating that there may be an effect present (Representatives were more likely to respond to the poorly-written email relative to the well-written one, perhaps due to

shorter terms and more frequent campaigning). There is, however, no support for Hypotheses 2 or 3 in these data.

Table 2.7: Test of Between Subject Effects of Response Differential

	Mean Square	F	Significance
Intercept	5.514	23.947	.000
Condition	3.467	15.056	.000
Party	.188	.819	.366
Education Level	.151	.656	.418
Chamber	.676	2.935	.088
Legislative Capacity	.002	.008	.927
Gender	.294	1.279	.259
Error	.230		
N=320 R <sup>2</sup> =.061			

An expanded model that tests whether controlling for population demographic characteristics alters the story fails to support Hypotheses 2, 3, and now 4 as well. Table 2.8 presents the results of this model that includes the percentage of the population that is black, Hispanic, on welfare, and that did not graduate high school. While the chamber variable is significant (House members were more responsive to the poorly-written email as compared to how responsive they are to the well-written email), and the welfare variable is significant (legislators in districts with more welfare recipients were less likely to respond to the well-written email relative to the poorly-written one), neither education level nor party gains significance, indicating that neither variable affects the response rate

differences. There is no support for Hypotheses 2 and 3, and little support for Hypothesis 4.

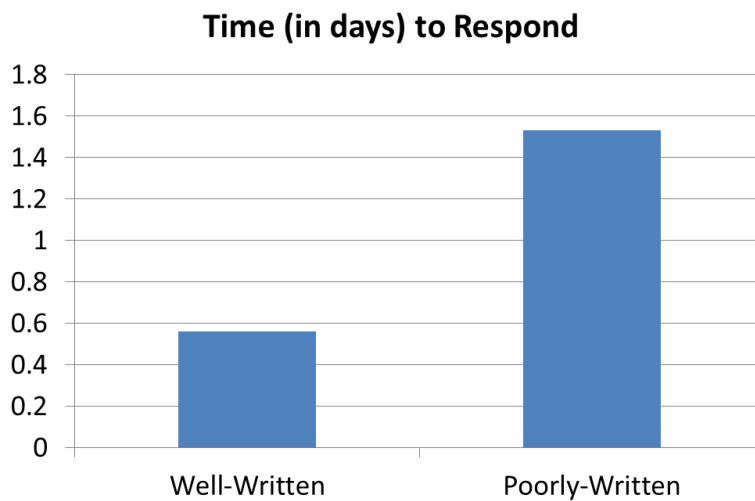
Table 2.8: Tests of Between Subjects Effects of Response Differential (Expanded Model)

	Mean Square	F	Significance
Intercept	7.002	30.968	.000
Condition	2.543	11.249	.001
Party	.414	1.831	.177
Education Level	.090	.397	.529
Chamber	.975	4.313	.039
Legislative Capacity	.298	1.320	.252
Gender	.551	2.436	.120
Black Population	.001	.003	.956
Hispanic Population	.001	.006	.939
Population with No High School Degree	.591	2.613	.107
Population on Welfare	1.398	6.185	.013
Error	.226		
N=320 R <sup>2</sup> =.087			

The next variable of interest is the amount of time that it took for legislators to respond to the emails. The average amount of time to respond also differs significantly between groups (Figure 2.5). The legislators who received the well-written email took about half a day to respond ( $M=.56$ ,  $SD=1.057$ ), while those who received the poorly-

written email responded a full day later on average ( $M=1.53$ ,  $SD=3.414$ ). This difference in means is statistically significant ( $F(1,192)=8.132$ ,  $p=.005$ ), again providing support for Hypothesis 1.

Figure 2.5: Mean Differences in Time to Respond to Experimental Conditions



To test Hypotheses 2 and 3 in terms of response time, I performed an analysis of variance looking at the response time to the emails using condition (the well-written or poorly-written email) as a fixed factor, and chamber, legislative professionalism, party, gender, and education level as covariates. Significant F-tests on the party or education level variables would indicate support for Hypotheses 2 and 3, demonstrating that those variables affect the response rate differential found above. As the results, presented in Table 2.9, indicate, however, neither legislator party nor legislator educational attainment accounts for the difference. There is no support for Hypotheses 2 or 3 in these data.

Table 2.9: Test of Between Subject Effects of Response Time Differential

	Mean Square	F	Significance
Intercept	2.129	.394	.531
Condition	41.799	7.730	.006
Party	7.879	1.457	.229
Education Level	.192	.036	.851
Chamber	8.383	1.550	.215
Legislative Capacity	8.054	1.489	.224
Gender	1.681	.311	.578
Error	5.407		
N=320 R <sup>2</sup> =.059			

The expanded model that examines the potential effects of population demographic characteristics also fails to support Hypotheses 2, 3, and 4. Table 2.10 presents the results of this model that includes the same population variables as I included in the expanded response model above. Again, significant F-tests on these variables would signify that they are systematically associated with the difference found in response time to the two email conditions. In this expanded model, neither the hypothesized variables nor any of the control variables is significant, indicating that none of these variables accounts for the difference in response time to the well-written email versus the poorly-written email.

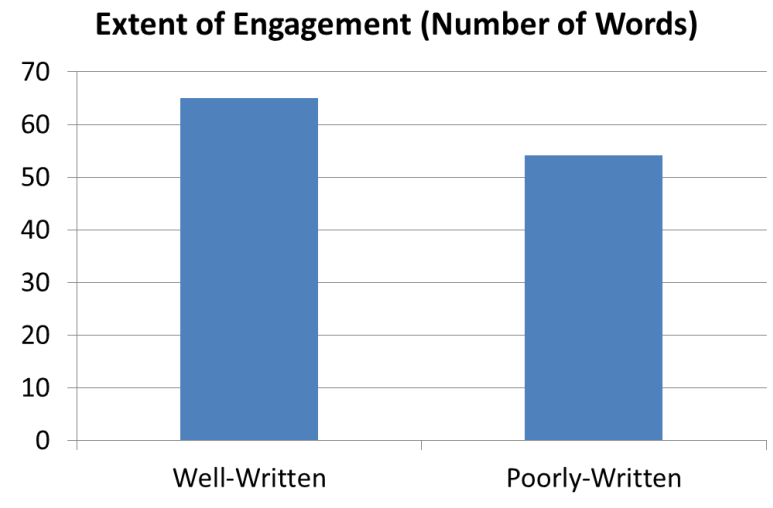
Table 2.10: Tests of Between Subjects Effects of Response Differential (Expanded Model)

	Mean Square	F	Significance
Intercept	6.940	1.182	.278
Condition	40.617	6.920	.009
Party	9.741	1.660	.199
Education Level	.313	.053	.818
Chamber	9.525	1.623	.204
Legislative Capacity	1.202	.205	.651
Gender	2.469	.421	.518
Black Population	2.836	.483	.488
Hispanic Population	1.431	.244	.622
Population with No High School Degree	2.416	.412	.522
Population on Welfare	2.275	.388	.534
Error	5.870		
N=320 R <sup>2</sup> =.069			

Study 1 and Study 2 suggest that emails from people who do not or cannot write well is completely ignored more than 50% of the time by the state legislative offices, and when they do reply they are slower to respond to poorly written emails. The extent of engagement, however, gives us better news (Figure 2.6). Though the difference in means is in the same direction—the well-written email was responded to with more words than

the poorly-written one—it is not a significant difference ( $F(1,191)=2.234, p=.137$ ). This indicates that while there may be dramatic differences between groups in terms of response, those who do respond do so relatively similarly.

Figure 2.6: Mean Differences in Extent of Engagement Between Experimental Conditions



Analyses of variance using condition as the fixed factor and both the reduced (Table 2.11) and expanded (Table 2.12) list of covariates (the same as in the previous models in this study) tell the same story and provide no support for Hypotheses 2, 3, and 4. None of the hypothesized variables show any indication of varying in accordance with the extent to which the legislators engaged with the fictional email writers.

Table 2.11: Tests of Between Subjects Effects of Communication Engagement

	Mean Square	F	Significance
Intercept	15198.692	6.093	.014
Condition	5475.648	2.195	.140
Party	12.209	.005	.944
Education Level	150.937	.061	.806
Chamber	593.685	.238	.626
Legislative Capacity	4978.991	1.996	.159
Gender	536.253	.215	.643
Error	2494.505		
N=192 R <sup>2</sup> =.028			



Table 2.12: Tests of Between Subjects Effects of Communication Engagement  
(Expanded Model)

	Mean Square	F	Significance
Intercept	4518.371	1.691	.195
Condition	7584.373	2.839	.094
Party	767.838	.289	.593
Education Level	455.275	.170	.680
Chamber	450.590	.169	.682
Legislative Capacity	852.446	.319	.573
Gender	126.449	.047	.828
Black Population	3564.175	1.334	.250
Hispanic Population	1122.669	.420	.518
Population with No High School Degree	564.730	.211	.646
Population on Welfare	2580.387	.966	.327
Error	2671.554		
N=192 R <sup>2</sup> =.069			

## **2.6 Study 3 Design and Results**

A potential criticism of the previous two studies is that the critical manipulation—poorly-written versus well-written emails—only indirectly taps the key concept of education levels. Poor writing may be due to other things than education, everything from time pressure preventing editing, to learning disabilities, to a simple lack of attention to grammar and syntax in email communication. And even if the emails do signal poor education, this may be serving as a proxy for constituent cues that legislative offices are

responding to other than education—race for example<sup>8</sup>. Accordingly, I conducted a third study with the aim of replicating the results of the first two, but with a manipulation that more strongly signaled education and not some potential confound.

In order to test education more directly, the third study in this chapter uses a slightly different approach. In this study each email is exactly the same except that one specifies that the writer is a high-school dropout (Email E) and the other has a master's degree (Email F).

#### Email E

Dear Senator XXXXX,

I am worried about unemployment in the United States and in our district. I lost my job six months ago, and have not been able to find a new one. As someone with a Master's degree, this really worries me. I was wondering what our state is doing to help with unemployment.

Thank you very much,

Andrew Collins

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<sup>8</sup> It should be noted that the names that were chosen for the email writers were chosen specifically for their relative popularity among white Americans compared to black ones (Fryer and Levitt 2004; New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene).

Email F

Dear Senator XXXX

I am worried about unemployment in the United States and in our district. I lost my job six months ago, and have not been able to find a new one. As someone who dropped out of high school, this really worries me. I was wondering what our state is doing to help with unemployment.

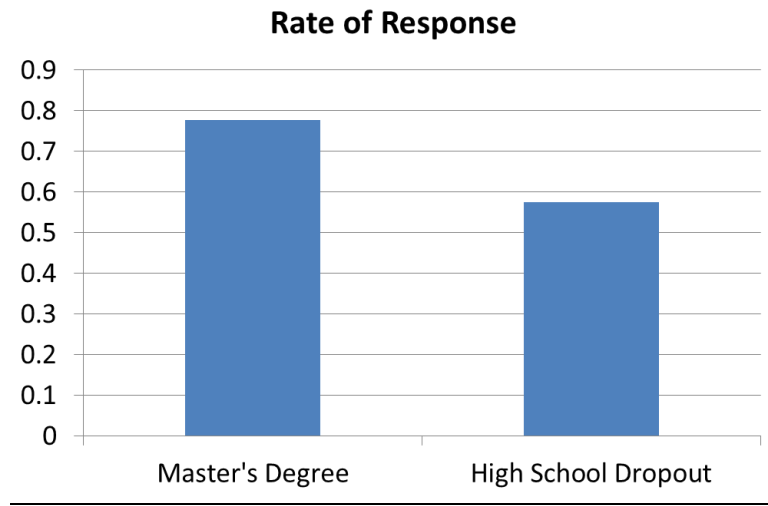
Thank you very much,

James Holman

The experiment for Study 3 ran during the spring of 2013 using the other half of the sample of state legislators drawn from the NCSL website in Study 2. After accounting for attrition, 321 legislators remained in the sample (47 percent House, 53 percent Senate). This group is comprised of 67% males, which is below the national rate of around 76 percent ( $t=3.466$ ,  $p=.001$ ), and 56 percent Republicans, which is descriptive of the broader state legislator population ( $t=.490$ ,  $p=.624$ ). This study will examine the same three dependent variables as the previous two studies: response, time to response, and extent of engagement.

The mean differences in response, as assessed through a one-way ANOVA are significant: the well-educated constituent received considerably more responses than the less educated one did ( $F(1,319)=15.486$ ,  $p<.001$ ). This finding supports the difference of means tests from the previous two studies, but rather than relying on writing quality for a proxy of education it provides a clear and direct cue of education level (Figure 2.7).

Figure 2.7: Mean Differences in Response Rate to the Experimental Conditions



Next, I tested Hypotheses 2 and 3, by performing an analysis of variance looking at the response rate of the emails using condition (Master's degree versus high school dropout) as a fixed factor and chamber, legislative professionalism, party, gender, and education level as covariates. Significant F-tests on the party or education level variables would indicate support for the Hypotheses 2 and 3, demonstrating that those variables affect the response differential found in the one-way ANOVA above. As the results, presented in Table 2.13, indicate, however, neither legislator party nor legislator educational attainment accounts for the difference. Consistent with the previous studies in this chapter, there is no support for Hypotheses 2 or 3 in these data.

Table 2.13: Test of Between Subject Effects of Response Differential

	Mean Square	F	Significance
Intercept	5.112	24.496	.000
Condition	3.423	16.404	.000
Party	.474	2.273	.133
Education Level	.170	.813	.368
Chamber	.091	.435	.510
Legislative Capacity	.132	.631	.428
Gender	.437	2.095	.149
Error	.209		
N=319 R <sup>2</sup> =.066			

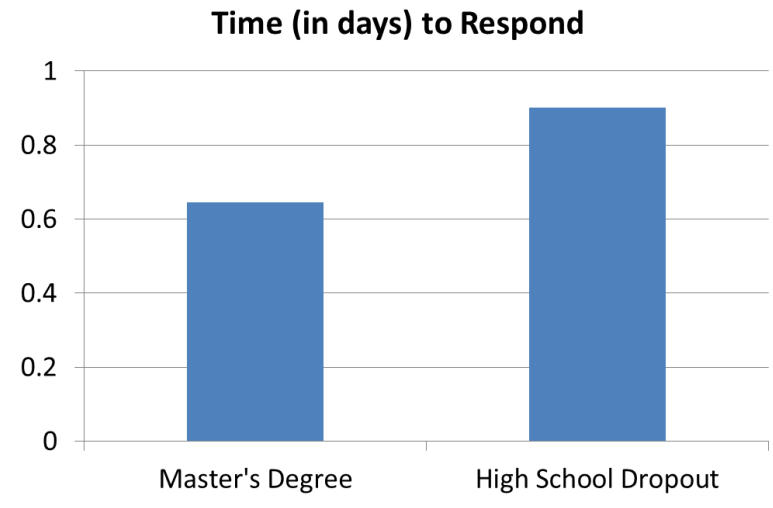
The expanded model testing whether controlling for population demographic characteristics alters the story fails to support Hypotheses 2 and 3, and now 4 as well. Table 2.14 presents the results of this model that includes the percentage of the population that is black, Hispanic, on welfare, and that did not graduate high school. Neither the hypothesized variables, nor the control variables contribute significantly to the model (though party is significant at the .10 level), providing no support for Hypotheses 2 and 3, or 4.

Table 2.14: Tests of Between Subjects Effects of Response Differential (Expanded Model)

	Mean Square	F	Significance
Intercept	1.625	2.115	.023
Condition	2.930	14.167	.000
Party	.590	2.852	.092
Education Level	.228	1.102	.295
Chamber	.110	.532	.466
Legislative Capacity	.108	.522	.470
Gender	.255	1.234	.268
Black Population	.003	.013	.998
Hispanic Population	.056	.272	.603
Population with No High School Degree	.010	.048	.828
Population on Welfare	.083	.399	.528
Error	.207		
N=290 R <sup>2</sup> =.070			

Response time--the amount of time that it took for the legislators to respond to the emails-- is also different (significant at the less-strict .10 level) between the experimental conditions ( $F(1,212)=3.554$ ,  $p=.061$ ), with the high school dropout's responses arriving later on average than his well-educated counterpart (Figure 2.8). As in studies 1 and 2, this provides support for Hypothesis 1.

Figure 2.8: Mean Differences Time to Respond by Condition



An analysis of variance test of the effects of education and party using the same model as above with condition as the fixed factor and party, education level, chamber, legislative professionalism, and gender as covariates indicates that while there is a difference in the amount of time that it took for the legislators to respond to the email from the writer with the Master's degree versus the email from the writer who dropped out of high school, these differences do not vary systematically by the hypothesized variables (or the other control variables). As Table 2.15 demonstrates, the only significant variable in the model was condition, or which email the legislator received. As in Studies 1 and 2, there is no support for Hypotheses 2 or 3.

Table 2.15: Test of Between Subject Effects of Response Time Differential

	Mean Square	F	Significance
Intercept	1.104	1.141	.287
Condition	4.046	4.183	.042
Party	1.035	1.070	.302
Education Level	2.057	2.126	.146
Chamber	1.506	1.557	.214
Legislative Capacity	1.291	1.335	.249
Gender	.402	.416	.520
Error	.967		
N=212 R <sup>2</sup> =.050			

The expanded model (Table 2.16) tells a similar story. Significant F-tests on the hypothesized variables would have provided evidence in support of the hypotheses. The fact that there are no significantly contributing variables other than condition is a clear indication that Hypotheses 2, 3, and 4 do not hold in these data. Neither the legislator-level characteristics, party and education level, nor the population demographic variables (percent black, percent Hispanic, percent with no high school diploma, and percent on welfare) serve to predict the variation in response time to the two emails.



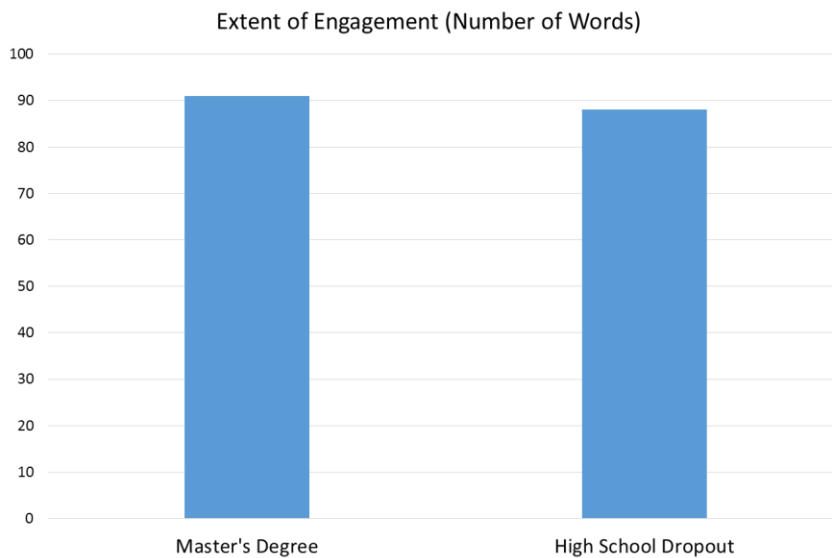
Table 2.16: Tests of Between Subjects Effects of Response Time Differential (Expanded Model)

	Mean Square	F	Significance
Intercept	3.389	3.670	.057
Condition	4.002	4.334	.039
Party	1.843	1.995	.159
Education Level	1.869	2.024	.157
Chamber	.758	.820	.366
Legislative Capacity	1.839	1.991	.160
Gender	.093	.101	.751
Black Population	.078	.084	.772
Hispanic Population	.001	.001	.981
Population with No High School Degree	.607	.657	.419
Population on Welfare	.356	.386	.535
Error	.923		
N=212 R <sup>2</sup> =.075			

As in Studies 1 and 2, there is no difference between conditions in terms of the extent to which the legislators engage with the constituent when they do respond ( $F(1, 212)=.152, p=.697$ ). The highly educated constituent received, on an average, a response of 91 words, while the person who did not complete high school received an average response of 88 words ( $SD=40.34$ ) (Figure 2.9). Though there is a difference in the overall response rate to the different emails and the length of time that it took for the legislators

to respond, those legislators who did respond to both emails did so similarly in terms of email length.

Figure 2.9: Mean Differences in Extent of Engagement by Condition



Analyses of variance using condition as the fixed factor and both the reduced (Table 2.17) and expanded (Table 2.18) list of covariates provide consistent results—no support for Hypotheses 2, 3, or 4. None of the hypothesized variables show any indication of varying in accordance with the extent to which the legislators engaged with the fictional email writers. Chamber does appear to have an effect on engagement such that being a member of a state House of Representatives differentiates engagement between the two conditions (Representatives wrote more words on average to the less-

educated constituent relative to the well-educated one compared to their Senate counterparts).

Table 2.17: Tests of Between Subjects Effects of Communication Engagement

	Mean Square	F	Significance
Intercept	90601.471	31.413	.000
Condition	1443.831	.501	.480
Party	5392.491	1.870	.173
Education Level	405.845	.141	.708
Chamber	13341.035	4.626	.033
Legislative Capacity	1640.447	.569	.452
Gender	376.028	.130	.718
Error	2884.216		
N=213 R <sup>2</sup> =.031			

Consistent with the findings in the first two studies in this chapter, the expanded model that includes the population demographic variables as additional covariates supports the null findings found in the reduced model above. None of the hypotheses are supported in this model. Once more, legislators who respond, respond the same to different education levels.

Table 2.18: Tests of Between Subjects Effects of Communication Engagement  
(Expanded Model)

	Mean Square	F	Significance
Intercept	62199.527	20.460	.000
Condition	643.726	.212	.646
Party	2721.333	.895	.345
Education Level	45.748	.015	.902
Chamber	10692.685	3.517	.062
Legislative Capacity	108.311	.036	.850
Gender	100.442	.033	.856
Black Population	563.466	.185	.667
Hispanic Population	211.879	.707	.792
Population with No High School Degree	6116.966	2.102	.158
Population on Welfare	1066.908	.351	.554
Error	3040.063		
N=213 R <sup>2</sup> =.052			

## **2.7 Discussion and Implications**

The three studies presented in this chapter demonstrate a consistent pattern: communication from constituents with higher education levels, whether measured by proxy through writing level or directly by statement in otherwise identical communication, is responded to at higher rates than communication from constituents with lower levels. Response to the educated constituents varied from 62% to 80%, while response to the less-educated varied from 45% to 60%. Comparing across studies, we see

that the higher response rates were seen in Study 3, where the constituents provided the most information about themselves and where the less-educated constituent's email was well written, indicating that while education clearly matters, the quality of the communication may matter more.

As Hypothesis 1 was about "responsiveness", I also looked at how long it took for the legislators to reply to the constituents. All three studies found that it took longer, on average, for the legislators to respond to the constituent with lower perceived or stated education levels, providing further support for Hypothesis 1. It is important to note, however, regarding the time to respond DV, that though there are significant differences between the experimental conditions, they may not be practically meaningful. In Study 1, we are looking at 1.74 days versus 2.42 days, in Study 2 it is .56 days versus 1.53 days, and in Study 3 responses to both came in less than 1 day on average. If a real constituent was sending these emails, would they notice these differences? Probably not. The responses that came generally came relatively quickly, and considering the fact that the "constituent" in the experiments was not seeking assistance for any kind of emergency situation, the offices that did respond did so in a reasonable timeframe.

Hypothesis 1 was not supported in terms of the third test—extent of engagement. None of the studies revealed a simple mean difference between conditions in terms of the number of words with which the legislative offices replied. Overall, it appears that when legislative offices do respond to constituents, they do so in relatively consistent ways with regard to people with different education levels.

I had also hypothesized that due to voting constituency differences Democrats would be more responsive to the less educated constituents. There was, however,

absolutely no support for this in these data. In all three studies, legislator party identification failed to discriminate the response rate between the emails, signifying that even if the theory of statistical discrimination holds true for some demographic characteristics, as has been found in the research, education level (perceived or explicit) is not one of the ways in which Democratic legislators dole out their time and attention as compared to Republican legislators (or vice-versa). Considering the overall low response rate to the less-educated constituent, statistical discrimination may still be at work—less educated people are simply less likely to turn out on Election Day, so they become a lower priority for busy legislators and slip through the cracks. However, even though voters with lower education levels tend to vote for Democratic candidates, Democratic legislators do not seem to be picking up on this and responding to these people more readily.

There is also no support for Hypothesis 3 in these data. I had expected that perhaps legislators with lower relative levels of educational attainment themselves would be sympathetic to, or identify with, constituents with low education levels. This does not seem to be the case. In none of the three studies and the three tests therein do legislator education levels appear to significantly predict differential responsiveness. This is, perhaps, unsurprising. As discussed in Chapter 1, there are individual characteristics that incite entitativity (race and religion, for example), but there are other characteristics that are simply seen as individual problems. Education may, in fact, be one of the latter. Legislators who did not attend college have “risen above” their relative educational deficit and seemingly do not see themselves as the same as others with lower educational attainment.

Similarly, I did not find in favor of Hypothesis 4. I proposed that legislators who work in areas with higher proportions of constituents that did not complete high school, are poor, or who are racial minorities would be more responsive to the less-educated constituent relative to the better-educated one. This did not prove to be the case. In all three studies I tested for the effects of these population demographic characteristics and found no support whatsoever for the hypothesis.

The tests of engagement extent tell a relatively optimistic story (Chapter 4 delves more into the content of the response emails), but the larger picture is that not only do significant numbers of legislators not respond to emails that they receive at all, their response rates differ based on the quality of the initiating email and education level of the emailer. While statistical discrimination may make it logical for legislators to allocate their time by prioritizing those constituents who are the most likely to vote, and to vote for them, there are more serious implications. Individuals with lower levels of education are already participating in politics at lower rates than those with more education. Furthermore, dissatisfaction with encounters with and service from government officials seems to disincline people from participating. Taken together, doing things to discourage people with low education levels, such as not responding to their inquiries, only continues the cycle in which these individuals do not participate.

## **Chapter 3: State Legislator Policy Responsiveness and Educational Attainment**

### **3.1 Introduction**

This dissertation aims to examine the representation of those Americans with low relative education levels by looking at two types of representation. Chapter 2 examined one type of representation, service (Eulau and Karps 1977) or communication responsiveness (Jewell 1982). This type of representation is centered on the study of individual legislator (or legislative office) behavior and provides insight into how government representatives interact with their constituents, which is valuable both because of the implications for representative democracy and also because of what research has told us about how constituent-representative interactions relate to future participation. This chapter, however, approaches representation from a different perspective: policy responsiveness. In contrast to service or communication responsiveness, policy responsiveness examines whether lawmakers create policy that is responsive to the interests of his or her constituency. Research suggests that overall, this is the case (Erickson 1976; Erickson et al. 1993; Wetstein 1996; Fording 1997; Mooney and Lee 2000; Burstein 2003; Bartels 1991; Hill and Hurley 1999; Miller and Stokes 1963; Page and Shapiro 1983; Stimson, MacKuen and Erikson 1995), but there is some indication that this relationship breaks down when examining smaller, discrete groups.



## **3.2 Background**

A well-established line of research identifies a strong correlation between voters' preferences and the decisions made by their elected representatives (Ansolabehere, Snyder and Steward 2001; Canes-Wrone, Brady, and Cogan 2002; Erikson and Wright 1980, 2005; Erikson, Wright and McIver 1993; Fiorina 1974; Miller and Stokes 1963). These efforts, however, tend to treat the public as a single entity, masking potential differences in policy responsiveness to different groups of constituents. In fact, when researchers pull apart this relationship to test for different levels of responsiveness by party (Clinton 2006; Miller 1964; Stone 1982; Wright 1989), gender (Chaney 2006; Childs and Krook; Dovi 2002; Phillips 1995; Richardson and Freeman 1995; Thomas 1992), income (Rigby and Wright 2013) and race (Richardson and Freeman 1995; Thomas 1992), they find greater responsiveness to some constituents than to others. Such differences in responsiveness are troubling in that they raise questions about the legitimacy of representative democracy, which rests on its ability to insulate political decision-making from other sources of power and influence in society (Walzer 1983).

Research examining differential responsiveness across groups has found that the opinions of wealthy, male, white Americans matter much more than the opinions of the poor. For example, Bartels (2008) found substantially greater responsiveness to high-income constituents than those in lower income brackets. Considering the goal of equality of political representation, this is a troubling pattern.

This sort of responsiveness, such as the response of the political system to the policy demands and preferences of citizens, is generically defined as policy responsiveness, and it is generally studied by testing the extent to which policy outcomes

correlate with public opinion. This can be done en masse, gauging general public opinion (Ansolabehere, Snyder and Steward 2001; Canes-Wrone, et al. 2002; Erikson and Wright 1980, 2005; Erikson, et al. 1993; Fiorina 1974; Miller and Stokes 1963), or by looking at the stated opinions of particular groups of people (Cameron et al. 1996; Chattopadhyay and Duflo 2004; Haider-Markel 2007; Minta 2011; Owens 2005; Swers 1998; Vega and Firestone 1995). This study does not look at opinion surveys of individuals with varying education levels, instead it focuses on two policy areas with disproportionate impact on those individuals with lower education levels: minimum wage and Medicaid. Looking at these issue areas will give us an idea of whether these individuals, though not represented in terms of literal responsiveness (as seen in Chapter 2), might be attended to more appropriately in terms of policy.

The United States has a relatively long history of legislating a minimum wage. The first state minimum wage law was adopted in 1913 in Massachusetts, followed by the national minimum wage in 1938 (Leman 1980). While there have been substantial changes to these laws in the ensuing years, they have remained in place in the majority of the states and at the federal level since their inception (Gow 1986). Throughout these changes the objective has stayed the same: to improve the basic standard of living for those workers earning the lowest wages, thereby reducing the overall poverty rate (West and McKee 1980).

It is because of the minimum wage's disproportionate impact on the under-educated that it is of interest for this dissertation. There is a direct correlation between education and income such that individuals with lower levels of education tend to make less money (U.S. Department of Labor 2013). Research has indicated that people with a

high school degree or less are significantly more likely to work at lower paying jobs (Appelbaum, Bernhardt, and Murnane 2003; United States Census Bureau 2013). In fact, among hourly workers over age 16, more than 11% of those with no high school diploma earn the minimum wage, while only 5% of those with a high school diploma and 2% of college graduates do (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2012). Further, those without a high school diploma are more likely to stay in minimum-wage-paying jobs the longest (Smith and Vavrichek 1992; Long 1999). And this is if they are even able to find a job at all (Neild, Balfanz, and Herzon 2007).

Of course, while minimum wage policy affects lower-tail earners in general (DiNardo, Fortin, and Lemieux 1996) and those with lower education levels, it also affects lower-earning subgroups more specifically. Groups such as teens (Algretto, Dube, and Reich 2011; Kosters and Welch 1972; Williams 1993), immigrants (Orrenius and Zavodny 2008) and blacks (Kosters and Welch 1972; Williams 1993) tend to make up a large proportion of the workforce that earns wages at or close to the minimum.

Any increase or decrease in a state's minimum wage would disproportionately affect those people, largely uneducated, holding the bulk of the minimum wage jobs. Because the objective, as stated above, is to reduce the poverty rate by boosting the standard of living for the lowest income-earners, it follows that a state that is being responsive of the needs of its less-educated citizens (in addition to teens, immigrants, and racial minorities) may respond by increasing the minimum wage.

Though the impact of changes in the minimum wage on low-income earners has been studied extensively, the other side of this coin has not—to what extent does the presence in a state of the type of worker who is likely to be a low-wage earner influence

the setting of minimum wage policy? There have only been a handful of studies looking at the factors for determining the minimum wage. Cox and Oaxaca (1982) examine capitalist influence, union power and manufacturing wages to predict wage policy in the states. Zavodny (1996) looked at both economic variables and partisan strength, finding that both had a relationship with minimum wage change. Finally, Waltman and Pittman conducted a study that added variables to account for the ideology of the public to variables that had been used previously, finding that ideology was the most predictive of the variables for determining state minimum wage policy.

In the relative dearth of research on the determinants of the minimum wage (politics, unions, and cultural factors have all been briefly touched upon in other studies, but not explored extensively, see Belot, Boone, and van Ours 2007; Boeri, 2012; Boeri and Burda 2009; Brown 2009; Checchi and Garcia-Penalosa 2010 in addition to the studies cited above), the varying needs of populations has not been considered. Research has indicated that teens and blacks are more likely to fall among the ranks of the low-income than their older and whiter counterparts and are more likely to be affected by minimum wage policy (Neumark and Wascher 1991, 2006), but thus far, no one has looked at whether variation in the numbers of teens or blacks in a state impacts the formulation of a minimum wage. Similarly, I posit that it is clear that those individuals with relatively low levels of education fall into this category as well, and can be studied similarly. People with low education levels are relatively more likely to be affected by minimum wage policy, so does the presence of the under-educated in a population contribute to the determination of the minimum wage?

The next policy area that I will address in this chapter is Medicaid. Medicaid, created in 1965, is a program financed jointly with state and federal funding and designed to provide health care coverage for the nation's poor (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services). Though held to a framework of federal guidelines, states have a considerable amount of flexibility when it comes to the size and scope of the program (Cromwell, Hurdle, and Schurman 1987). This leeway has resulted in substantial variation in Medicaid programs across the states, both in terms of the services offered and in annual expenditures.

Several different factors have been examined to explain the variation in state-level Medicaid spending. For example, Holahan and Cohen (1986) found that wealthier states spend more on Medicaid programs than poorer states. States that have higher enrollment in the Medicaid program have been shown to spend more on the programs as well (Buchanan, Cappelleri, and Ohsfeldt 1991). Furthermore, Cromwell, Hurdle and Wedig (1986) found that liberal states tend to have higher Medicaid enrollment, thereby increasing annual expenditures on the program, a finding that was bolstered by a similar finding the following year (Buchanan 1987).

The majority of Americans who do not have health insurance—63% of them—do not have a college degree (United States Census Bureau 2013). The strong negative correlation between education and qualifying for/needing Medicaid demonstrates clearly that individuals with relatively low levels of education are likely to be disproportionately affected by Medicaid spending. Medicaid is designed to provide for health care coverage for the nation's poor, so it is logical to think that policy representativeness of the uneducated (who tend to be among the poor), may be reflected in Medicaid spending.

### **3.3 Hypotheses**

While studies of the relationship between education levels and policy outcomes has been largely overlooked, socioeconomic status (SES) more generally has been studied, and considering the relationship that education has with SES, it is largely from this literature that this paper will generate hypotheses, though the implications of this research are mixed as well. For example, a 2005 study by James Avery and Mark Peffley found that states where lower-class voters had higher rates of turnout during elections, lawmakers were less likely to pass highly restrictive welfare eligibility laws (Avery and Peffley 2005). Similarly, a series of studies in the 1990s by Hill, Leighley and their colleagues found that an electorate with an upper-class bias tended to be associated with less-generous welfare benefit policies (Hill and Leighley 1992, 1996; Hill et al. 1995). On the other hand, studies like Bartels' (2008) make it clear that people with lower socioeconomic status are not as represented as their richer counterparts.

Because of the somewhat conflicting findings in the extant literature, the first test in this Chapter will examine competing hypotheses. The Hill et al. and Avery and Peffley findings indicate that when there are smaller percentages of lower-class citizens, the legislature will be more biased against them. As the proportion of lower-class individuals increases, their relative power increases and legislators become more responsive to them. This suggests the following hypothesis:

H1a: Higher proportions of uneducated citizens in a state will be associated with policies more favorable to those with lower education levels.

Conversely, the Bartels line of literature portends a very different outcome. As poor individuals are less likely to vote, resulting in lower legislative responsiveness, individuals with lower education levels are also less likely to vote. Because legislators are aware of this, it is logical to expect that policy may not respond to the needs of those with low levels of education much, if at all. The competing hypothesis is:

H1b: Higher proportions of uneducated citizens in a state will be unrelated to policies favorable to those with lower education levels.

The next area that I test in this chapter is descriptive representation. Descriptive representation refers to how closely those who make up political institutions look like those that they represent. For example, an institution would be considered descriptively representative of women if the proportion of women serving in that institution matched the proportion of women in the population. While the theory of descriptive representation (Pitkin 1967) is not concerned with policy outcomes, much of the research that has been done since 1967 has been. Substantive representation, which Pitkin defines as representatives “acting in the interest of the represented, in a manner responsive to them” (Pitkin 1967, p. 209), specifically looks at outcomes. An institution is substantively representing women if the policies that they enact reflect the preferences and interests of women.

At times these two representation theories come together—descriptive (or not) representation leading to (or not) substantive results. For example, Bullock and MacManus (1981) found, in their study of the Mississippi Legislature, that black

legislators were more supportive of legislation that was in the interest of the black community than white legislators. Similarly, Bratton and Haynie's (1999) study of six different legislatures found that white legislators and black legislators introduced different types of legislation, with black legislators more likely to introduce bills that benefitted the black community, such as bills concerned with implementation or sustaining social welfare programs. Descriptive representation does not always lead to an increase in substantive representation, however. Using a race example again, other studies have indicated that variation in the proportion of black legislators does not influence per-capita expenditures for education, welfare, or healthcare (Nelson 1991; Preuhs 2001).

The substantive effectiveness of descriptive representation also has mixed results in studies examining representation by women. Examining "women's issues" related to reproduction, women's health, and children/family, a 1991 study found that state legislatures consisting of more than 20 percent of female legislators do tend to prioritize these issues (Thomas 1991, 1994). Later studies (Swers 1998; 2005; Osborn 2012) do not disagree, however, they find that there is more nuance to the relationship between female representatives and policy outcomes—specifically that gendered representation appears secondary to partisan representation. As the entire Republican party (including females) has moved to the right, Republican and Democratic women do not share the same concepts about the types of public policies that remedy the problems women face in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Osborn 2012).

Studies on descriptive and substantive representation have largely focused on race and gender. There simply has not been the same kind of systematic approach while



looking at constituent education levels and legislative education levels. Whether or not education represents education in a descriptive or substantive way are empirical questions. The American state populations and state legislatures provide substantial variation with which we can begin to answer those questions. High school diploma attainment in the population varies widely, from a high in Wyoming to a low in Texas. Likewise, there is a substantial difference in the educational attainment levels of state legislators, ranging from Delaware with the most legislators without a 4-year college degree to California with the least.

Moreover, the literature on descriptive representation, though never looking specifically at education, can be applied to this study. Though not all of the studies found group-for-group descriptive representation leading to substantive representation, there is enough of a relationship to build a foundation for the following hypothesis:

H2: Higher proportions of legislators without a 4-year college degree will be associated with policies more favorable to those with lower education levels

The descriptive representation literature also indicates that substantive representation by partisans may substitute for descriptive substantive representation. For example, according to Swain (1995), Democratic lawmakers tend to substantively represent the interests of racial minority constituents as well as minority lawmakers. Liberal (Democratic) policymakers also tend to support spending on welfare programs like Medicaid (Cook and Barrett 1992) and higher state minimum wages (Waltman and Pittman 2002). Further, as mentioned before, constituents with lower education levels

tend to vote for Democratic candidates for office, thus creating more of an impetus for Democratic lawmakers to act in the interest of those individuals. Consequently, this final hypothesis is added:

H3: Higher proportions of Democrats will be associated with policies more favorable to those with lower education levels.

### **3.3 Study Design and Measurement**

To test the hypotheses, I analyze state policy and spending in two areas: minimum wage and healthcare spending.

The data for the present analysis are a pooled time series for 49 of the American states covering the period from 2000 until 2012. Nebraska is excluded from the analysis because I control for legislative partisanship, and the Nebraska legislature is nonpartisan. Pooling enables a comparison between states for variations due to fixed differences at certain points in time. It also allows me to evaluate the dynamics within states as policy responds to changes in independent variables. The dependent variables of interest are per capita Medicaid spending, measured in dollars, and the state minimum wage, also reported in dollars. If there is a second, lower minimum wage for tipped workers such as wait staff, this information was omitted, and the general minimum wage was used. There are federal minimum wage regulations in place, so if a state does not have a minimum wage or if their stated minimum wage is lower than the federal minimum, I coded that state as having the federal minimum.

State budget and demographic data were gathered from the U.S. Statistical Abstract and supplemented with information about each state's legislature, including racial, gender, party, and education demographics gathered from the National Conference of State Legislatures and Project Vote Smart data archives (see Table 3.1 for descriptive statistics and 3.2 for a correlation table). These legislature attributes are used for two purposes, as controls and to test for descriptive representation and partisan effects. The extant research in the areas of party (e.g. Dye 1984; Erikson 1971; Garand 1985; Jennings 1979), gender (e.g. Kaufmann and Petrocik 1999; Pearson 2001; Seltzer, Newman, and Leighton 1997; Swers 2005), and race (e.g. Cameron et al. 1996; Guinier 1994; Owens 2005) indicate that the makeup of legislatures in terms of these characteristics may have an effect on policy outcomes. Moreover, the implications of these effects is such that variation of these attributes may show us if legislator education levels, which have not been studied extensively, serve as a predictor for policy or if the constituent demographics or legislature characteristics in a given state may be driving the relationship.

In order to ensure that the dependent variables are not simply being driven by state wealth, or simply poverty, these variables are also included. State Gross Domestic Product (using data from the U.S. Statistical Abstract) was calculated per capita to enable state by state comparisons. Additionally, the percentage of the state's population living below the federally established poverty line (also collected from the U.S. Statistical Abstract) was included.

Table 3.1: Descriptive Statistics of Independent Variables

	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard Deviation
Average Legislator Education	2.63	3.75	3.21	0.19
Percent Legislature GOP	0.12	0.88	44.99	18.72
Percent Legislature Black	0	0.35	0.08	0.07
Percent Legislature Female	8	41	23.09	7.05
GSP Per Capita	21,555	58,908	35,451	6,669.63
State Poverty Percent	6	22	12.46	3.19
State Percent Black	0.3	37.3	10.43	9.56
State Percent Hispanic	0.6	47.71	9.35	96.59
Percent of State without Diploma	7	25.4	13.9	3.79
State Union Membership	2.3	26.9	11.49	5.6
South Dummy	0	1	0.24	0.43

Table 3.2: Correlations of Dependent and Independent Variables

	Medicaid Spending	Minimum Wage	Average Legislator Education	Percent Legislature GOP	Percent Legislature Black	Percent Legislature Female	GSP Per Capita	State Poverty Percent	State Percent Black	State Percent Hispanic	Percent of State Without Diploma	State Union Membership
Medicaid Spending	1.0000											
Minimum Wage	.5353* (.0000)	1.0000										
Average Legislator Education	.1448* (.0002)	.2110* (.0000)	1.0000									
Percent Legislature GOP	-.4402* (.0000)	-.3397* (.0000)	-.2732* (.0000)	1.0000								
Percent Legislature Black	.0185 (.6387)	-.1264* (.0013)	.1932* (.0000)	-.1429* (.0003)	1.0000							
Percent Legislature Female	.0565 (.1500)	.2906* (.0000)	.1165* (.0029)	-.1436 (.0003)	-.3423* (.0000)	1.0000						
GSP Per Capita	.4360* (.0000)	.6481* (.0000)	.2634* (.0000)	-.2847* (.0000)	-.0496 .2066	.3295* .0000	1.0000					
State Poverty Percent	.2604* (.0000)	.1555* (.0001)	.1687* (.0000)	-.1971* (.0000)	.3378* (.0000)	-.3250* (.0000)	-.2290* (.0000)	1.0000				
State Percent Black	.0620 (.1143)	-.1382* (.0004)	.1122* (.0042)	-.1684* (.0000)	.9384* (.0000)	-.3621* (.0000)	-.0526 .1803	.3420* (.0000)	1.0000			
State Percent Hispanic	-.0081 (.8358)	.1706* (.0000)	.3998* (.0000)	-.0653 (.0995)	-.0712 (.0699)	.3561* (.0000)	1840* (.0000)	.2009 (.0000)	-.1160* (.0031)	1.0000		
Percent of State Without Diploma	-.0161 (.6827)	-.2719* (.0000)	.1703* (.0000)	-.1980* (.0000)	.5142* (.0000)	-.3748* (.0000)	-.3921* (.0000)	.5587* (.0000)	.5220* (.0000)	.2628* *.0000	1.0000	
State Union Membership	.2790* (.0000)	.2287* (.0000)	.1409 (.0000)	-.2712* (.0000)	-.1707* (.0000)	.3127* (.0000)	.2854* (.0000)	-.3624* (.0000)	-.2490* (.0000)	-.0019 (.9608)	-.2424 (.0000)	1.0000

Pooled-time series is a powerful technique, but given the nature of the data it is employed on, it often produces complicated, correlated error structures that violate the basic assumptions of ordinary least squares. Of primary concern in pooled models are heteroskedasticity and auto-correlation, and various estimation techniques have been suggested to control for these problems (Says 1989). To address these issues, I lag the dependent variables and use a Prais-Winsten OLS estimator with panel corrected (Durbin-Watson) standard errors to account for the nonspherical error terms that are typical in pooled analyses (see Beck and Katz 1995). Such unit effects were expected in this data set because of the unique characteristics of individual states. Lagging the dependent variable by a year and including it amongst the independent accounts for the autoregressive serial correlation between years that was expected, and found, in the data.

While these corrections address prominent statistical challenges of pooled analyses, it is important to note that they necessarily change the interpretation of the results. Lagging the dependent variable means that the impact of the independent variables are spread across time. Essentially, this means that this is a model of differences. The lag controls for all the potential causes of the dependent variables at time  $t$ , leaving the independent variables the job of trying to account for changes between  $t-1$  and time  $t$  (Wood 1992).

### **3.4 Results: Minimum Wage**

The results presented in Table 3.3 provide no support for Hypothesis 1a, 2, or 3. As expected, the dominant regressor is the lagged dependent variable, which has a coefficient greater than .8. This highlights the powerful role of incrementalism, or even inertia, in state minimum wage law, as the minimum wage at time  $t-1$  significantly predicted the minimum wage at time  $t$ .

Table 3.3: Determinants of Minimum Wage in the States, 2000-2012 (Corrected Model)

Variable	Coefficient (Corrected Standard Error)
Average Legislator Education	.105 (.172)
Percent Legislature GOP	.0003 (.003)
Percent Legislature Black	.418 (2.188)
Percent Legislature Female	.003 (.006)
GSP Per Capita	.00002 (.0000009)
State Poverty Percent	-.011 (.013)
State Percent Black	-.020 (.019)
State Percent Hispanic	.006 (.004)
Percent of State without Diploma	.0006 (.016)
State Union Membership	.006 (.007)
Lagged Minimum Wage	.873** (.043)
Constant	.024 (.719)
R <sup>2</sup>	.74*
Number of Observations	636

\*p<.05 \*\*p<.01

In Hypothesis 1a I predicted that higher proportions of the population with low education levels would lead to higher state minimum wages, as an increase in those without a high school diploma would be associated with an increase in the number of people relying on low-wage jobs. Holding the other variables in the model constant, this does not pan out. Instead, Hypothesis 1b is supported, as there is no relationship between population education levels and state minimum wage level in these data.

Next, I hypothesized that legislators with lower average education levels themselves would be sensitive to the needs of constituents with low education levels and

would thus be associated with higher minimum wages. I, again, found no support for this hypothesis. Nor did I find the expected relationship between legislative party dominance and minimum wage. I expected that more liberal legislatures would set higher minimum wages, but failed to find this to be true in the data.

Other than the lagged dependent variable, not one other independent variable in the model contributes significantly to the model. The legislature demographics, gender and racial, that tend to influence policy outcomes are indistinguishable from zero, using a traditional  $p < .05$  alpha level indicator. Similarly, the population demographic variables do not contribute significantly to the model, so the variation of black and Hispanic citizens in a state has no effect, nor does the variation in the populations' poverty or education levels, when holding all of the other variables in the model constant.

If the characteristics of neither the population nor the legislature provide sufficient explanations for state minimum wage policy, perhaps simple economics would provide an alternate explanation. The results show, however, that this is not the case. The Gross State Product variable, like all of the others, is not a significant indicator in the model. Essentially, state wealth is not driving state minimum wage policy in this model.

Though using a corrected model with a lagged dependent variable is one way to deal with the problems found in pooled time series analyses, it is possible that the lagged variable is soaking up too much of the variance in this model and suppressing the effects of the independent variables. In order to test this, I ran an uncorrected OLS model and left out the lagged minimum wage variable (Table 3.4).



Table 3.4: Determinants of Minimum Wage in the States, 2000-2012 (Uncorrected Fixed Effects Model)

Variable	Coefficient (Standard Error)
Average Legislator Education	.729** (.241)
Percent Legislature GOP	-.002 (.002)
Percent Legislature Black <sup>9</sup>	1.53 (2.003)
Percent Legislature Female	.010 (.008)
GSP Per Capita	.0007** (.0006)
State Poverty Percent	.128** (.015)
State Percent Hispanic	.194** (.023)
Percent of State without Diploma	-.039** (.016)
State Union Membership	.014 (.021)
Constant	-1.682 (.941)
R <sup>2</sup>	.74**
Number of Observations	636

\*p<.05 \*\*p<.01

In this uncorrected model, we see that variables that were suppressed by the lagged minimum wage variable become significant. Of the legislature characteristics, legislator education level has a positive relationship with minimum wage such that an increase in educational attainment is associated with a \$.73 increase in the state minimum wage. This is the opposite of what I had hypothesized—that legislators with less education would be more sympathetic to the plight of others with relatively low educational attainment and thus work to increase the minimum wage. The other

<sup>9</sup> The variables for percent population black and percent legislature black are highly correlated at .9384. Due to the risk of multicollinearity problems stemming from this relationship, the population variable was dropped from the uncorrected models.

legislature variable of interest was partisanship, which remains non-significant in this model.

Hypothesis 1 asked about the relationship between the population with lower education levels, expecting that either larger numbers in the population would be associated with higher minimum wages or that there would be no relationship whatsoever. Instead, this model finds a *negative* relationship. For every one percentage point increase in the population with no high school diploma, we see a \$.04 drop in the minimum wage. Thus, neither Hypothesis 1a nor Hypothesis 1b are supported by this model.

### **3.5 Results: Medicaid Spending**

The results from the corrected model (presented in Table 3.5) for predicting Medicaid spending, though containing more significant variables than the corrected minimum wage model, indicate no support for the hypotheses. As expected, the lagged Medicaid spending variable contributes significantly, indicating again that incrementalism explains some of the variation in this policy area.

Table 3.5: Determinants of Medicaid Spending in the States, 2000-2012 (Corrected Model)

Variable	Coefficient (Corrected Standard Error)
Average Legislator Education	3.491 (27.076)
Percent Legislature GOP	-.118 (.450)
Percent Legislature Black	-532.561* (167.992)
Percent Legislature Female	1.135 (.954)
GSP Per Capita	.002 (.002)
State Poverty Percent	6.993* (3.377)
State Percent Black	3.629* (1.460)
State Percent Hispanic	-1.229 (.907)
Percent of State without Diploma	2.046 (2.631)
State Union Membership	3.318* (1.469)
Lagged Medicaid Spending	.892* (.053)
Constant	-83.146 (136.216)
R <sup>2</sup>	.87*
Number of Observations	636

\*p<.05

Hypothesis 1a expected that higher proportions of the population with low education levels would lead to increased Medicaid spending, as an increase in those without a high school diploma would be associated with the need for increased entitlement spending. Holding the other variables in the model constant, this does not appear to be the case. While the percentage of the states' populations under the poverty line does predict Medicaid spending, and in the expected direction, percent without a high school degree does not, thus providing no support for this hypothesis, instead

lending credence to the alternative hypothesis that because legislators have less to gain from people with lower education levels, they will not be responsive to them.

Next, I hypothesized that legislators with lower average education levels themselves would be sensitive to the needs of constituents with low education levels and would thus be associated with higher levels of Medicaid spending. I, again, found no support for this hypothesis. Similarly, I expected that more liberal legislatures would spend more money on entitlement programs like Medicaid, but failed to find this to be true in the data. In fact, of the legislator demographic variables included in the model, the only one that significantly predicted Medicaid spending was the percentage of the legislature that is black. Somewhat surprisingly, an increase in black legislators is associated with a *decrease* in Medicaid spending, likely indicating not that black legislators tend to decrease Medicaid spending, but that the states that elect more black legislators (such as states with higher percentages of the population that identify as black, note the correlation in Table 3.2) are the same states that spend relatively smaller amounts on programs like Medicaid for other reasons. While this is certainly a fruitful topic for further analysis, for the purposes of the present dissertation, of more importance is the fact that neither Hypothesis 2 nor 3 were supported by the data.

Similar to my examination of minimum wage policy, I next tested for the effect that the lagged dependent variable might have been having on the other independent variables (Table 3.6). The uncorrected model does not provide additional support for any of the hypotheses, and indeed tells a disturbing story in terms of the representation of those with lower education levels.

Table 3.6: Determinants of Medicaid Spending in the States, 2000-2012 (Uncorrected Fixed Effects Model)

Variable	Coefficient (Standard Error)
Average Legislator Education	-52.386 (62.051)
Percent Legislature GOP	-.575 (.430)
Percent Legislature Black	282.716 (515.527)
Percent Legislature Female	8.704** (2.052)
GSP Per Capita	.0173** (.002)
State Poverty Percent	16.167** (3.804)
State Percent Hispanic	37.711** (5.836)
Percent of State without Diploma	-25.039** (4.219)
State Union Membership	-1.201 (5.446)
Constant	158.724 (242.603)
R <sup>2</sup>	.68**
Number of Observations	636

\*p<.05 \*\*p<.01

Neither Hypothesis 1a nor 1b finds backing in this model. While I had expected to find that either legislators would be responsive to their poorly-educated constituents or ignore them completely, similar to the uncorrected findings for minimum wage policy, there is a negative relationship between Medicaid spending that the percent of the state's population lacking a high school diploma. For each percentage increase in adults without a high school degree, state Medicaid spending decreases by \$25. Also contrary to the hypotheses, neither the presence of legislators who have lower levels of education themselves nor Democratic legislators increases Medicaid spending.

### **3.6 Discussion and Implications**

Americans who have not graduated from high school are far more likely to be financially disadvantaged than their better-educated counterparts. They end up working in many of the minimum wage jobs, and are disproportionately more dependent on government welfare programs like subsidized healthcare. This chapter indicates, however, that even though the uneducated have distinct interests in these areas, they are not being substantively responded to by their state lawmakers.

State minimum wage has a significant bivariate relationship with the hypothesized variables, though not all of them are in the expected direction. There is a correlation between the percentage of the population with no high school degree such that as that percentage increases, minimum wage decreases ( $r(588)=-.2719$ ,  $p<.001$ ). This is contrary to the direction that I had hypothesized. Similarly, there is a positive bivariate relationship between minimum wage and legislator education level ( $r(588)=.2110$ ,  $p<.001$ ). Again, this was unexpected, as I had hypothesized that lower legislator education levels would be associated with higher minimum wages. The only bivariate correlation that panned out as expected was legislature partisanship. There was a relationship between minimum wage and partisanship such that an increase in the number of Republican legislators in a legislature was associated with lower minimum wages ( $r(588)=-.3397$ ,  $p<.001$ ).

The present study, however, did not find support for the hypothesized relationship between any of the variables of interest and state minimum wage in the Durbin-Watson corrected Prais-Winsten model. The corrected models both seem to have the problem of the lagged dependent variable greedily snatching up all of the variance, leaving nothing

for the other independent variables to work with. Understanding the endemic risks involved, I will focus my discussion here on the uncorrected models.

I first looked at competing hypotheses, expecting either a positive relationship between the population in a state with no high school degree and minimum wage or no relationship at all. Instead, I found a negative relationship—as the number of the undereducated in a state’s population increases, the minimum wage decreases. This finding, while normatively concerning, is perhaps not entirely surprising. When there is a larger population of people willing (or forced by circumstance) to take minimum wage jobs, there may not be a need to increase their pay. These people are going to work at these jobs regardless, so why burden the business owners? On the other hand, the yearly salary of someone working full-time at the federal minimum wage is \$14,500, which doesn’t even account for the fact that many minimum wage jobs do not offer full-time hours. The larger the population that works these jobs because they are not qualified for much else, the larger the population will be who are struggling to get by on very little money, which may end up costing the state more on the back end.

Moreover, contrasting with Hypothesis 2, legislatures with lower average education levels do not set higher minimum wages, indicating that education does not serve as an area in which descriptive representation is occurring. In fact, I found the inverse—legislators with higher relative educational attainment are associated with higher minimum wage policies. The less-educated are not being represented in accordance with their presence, nor are they being represented descriptively. This may make sense in light of the earlier discussion in this dissertation of the lack of entitativity, or group cohesion, amongst people with similar education levels. Marx (1904) posited

that individuals facing oppression have to be aware that the oppression is systematic and group-based. Awareness of group membership and the common bond are prerequisites of any action to counter the oppression. If, as Schlozman and Verba assert, problems such as poverty and low education levels are seen as individual crosses to bear rather than systematic issues, not only will individuals in these situations fail to act together toward solutions, legislators who have overcome their low education levels and achieved elected office will not see uneducated constituents as versions of themselves that they have a responsibility to represent and protect. While it may occur to a black legislator to work on issues that disproportionately affect black constituents, this does not hold true for less-educated legislators. The fact that increased legislator education is associated with higher state minimum wages is something for future research.

Also, surprisingly, the partisan makeup of the legislature is not predictive of minimum wage policy. Although there was a significant bivariate relationship, and the previous literature in the areas of minimum wage determination, policy support, and statistical discrimination led me to expect to see support for Hypothesis 3, this was not the case in this study. Holding all of the other variables in the model constant caused the relationship that was seen in the correlation table to disappear.

This finding was especially unexpected in light of the current national discussion of an increased federal minimum wage. By all indications, it appears that Democratic lawmakers are the ones that are driving this movement. On the national level, many of the vocal proponents of increasing the minimum wage are Democrats, from President Obama to legislators such as Elizabeth Warren, Dick Durbin, and George Miller. Further, several states recently passed legislation to increase the state minimum wage moving



forward<sup>10</sup>. The list of states doing so include mostly east and west coast states known for being “blue” (Washington, Oregon, California, New York, Vermont, Rhode Island, Connecticut, and New Jersey), with states with more of a mixed partisan voting history (Colorado, Florida, Ohio) and “red” states (Montana, Arizona, and Missouri) numbering far fewer. At face value, it appears as if partisanship matters. Controlling for the other variables in the model, however, indicates that partisanship may not matter as much as legislator education, state wealth, or population demographics.

Next, I looked at Medicaid spending as the policy outcome variable of interest. As the correlation table indicates, there is no bivariate relationship between the adult population without a high school diploma and Medicaid spending ( $r(588)=-.0161$ ,  $p=.6827$ ). There is a significant correlation between legislator educational attainment and Medicaid spending, though not in the hypothesized direction—increased education is associated with increased Medicaid spending ( $r(588)=.1448$ ,  $p<.001$ ). There is also a strong inverse bivariate relationship between Medicaid spending and proportion of the legislature that is Republican ( $r(588)=-.4402$ ,  $p<.001$ ), providing initial support for Hypothesis 3.

The uncorrected fixed effects model for Medicaid spending tells a story similar to that with the minimum wage outcome variable. Neither Hypothesis 1a nor 1b are supported by these data—the variable for the percentage of the state’s population without a high school diploma contributes to the model significantly with a negative coefficient. Not only are legislators not responsive to their less-educated constituents, it appears that legislators may be actively working against them. This finding is of particular interest

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<sup>10</sup> As these laws were passed after data was collected for the present dissertation, it is not included in the formal analysis.

because the included variable for poverty predicts Medicaid spending in the expected direction, larger proportions of the population who fall under the poverty line are associated with higher Medicaid spending. This is logical in that one must meet certain low-income guidelines for Medicaid eligibility; if a state has fewer impoverished residents, that state will not need to spend as much covering the medical care of the poor. Holding poverty constant in the time-series model, however, reveals this tricky inverse relationship between Medicaid spending and population educational attainment.

As both minimum wage policy and Medicaid spending show this negative relationship, it seems clear that legislators are not being responsive to the policy needs of their less-educated constituents. It seems unlikely, however, that legislators are deliberately going out of their way to “stick it to” the uneducated, especially in light of the fact that Medicaid spending does appear to be responsive to poverty rates. An alternative explanation may come from looking at the reverse relationship: could it simply be that low minimum wages and low Medicaid spending lead to higher high school attrition?

Socioeconomic status has long been tied to dropping out of high school (Battin-Pearson, Newcomb, Abbott, and Hill 2000; Ensminger and Slusarcick 1992; Heckman and LaFontaine 2010; Bridgeland, Dijulio and Morison 2006). Along with race, academic achievement, deviance, pregnancy, and antisocial peers, financial trouble at home is a leading cause of dropout. In a study that surveyed and interviewed actual adolescents who withdrew from high school before graduating, a full 32% of these individuals reported that they had dropped out in order to get a job and contribute to their family’s finances. An additional 22% reported that they had withdrawn to help their families

(Bridgeland et al. 2006). In 2011, the U.S. Department of Education found the dropout rate of students living in low-income families was close to five times greater than the rate of their peers hailing from high-income families (7.5% versus 1.4%) (U.S. Department of Education 2011).

Minimum wages that are not enough to fully support a family and relatively high thresholds for Medicaid leading to increased medical expenses for some impoverished families can certainly cause a financial strain, making it more likely that these families need every able-bodied household member to contribute to the family's income. If teenagers are quitting school in order to contribute to the family's bottom line, state governments are doing a disservice, not only to the poor, but to the undereducated as well. When students drop out of school to work to help support their families, they become more likely to end up amongst the population that works in minimum wage jobs and that qualifies for Medicaid. Then, if the minimum wage is low and they don't qualify for Medicaid, they may end up in the same poverty situation in which they began.

Further, it does not appear that legislator education levels nor their party affiliation serves to increase Medicaid spending, thus making these legislators more responsive to those who are most likely to need it. Again here, it does not look as if legislators with lower educational levels feel a sense of being "the same" as those with lower educational levels in his or her constituency. And while there is evidence that partisanship makes up for descriptive representation in some areas (namely women's issues), that does not seem to be the case in these data. Hypotheses 2 and 3 are not supported.

Policies that states and school districts make regarding dropout rates often focus on the school environment—striving for smaller classes, individual attention, parental involvement, and tracking (Bridgeland et al. 2006). While these are all good things to improve and have been shown to help decrease the dropout rate, they do not address the systematic link between poverty and low educational attainment. Simply put, poor individuals are more likely to need to drop out of school, which in turn often leads to future poverty, which leads to future generations of students dropping out of school. In this way, policy is not being responsive to individuals with low educational attainment.

## Chapter 4: Legislative Perspectives on Representation and Responsiveness

### 4.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to better understand representation— in terms of both service responsiveness and policy responsiveness— and its relationship with education from the legislative perspective. The principle method herein is interviewing 6 state legislators in different states, a mixture of Republicans and Democrats, males and females, and senators and representatives. Of course, the study of representation in state legislators is a very large assignment. Ideally it would involve in-depth surveys and interviews, and observations of all of the nearly 7,500 legislators, or at least a scientifically representative sample. Unfortunately, the time and resources for such an undertaking are not available at this time. The logistics of time and travel funds required that I was limited to six states: Massachusetts, Wisconsin, Oklahoma, Nebraska, Kansas, and Delaware. The states were selected largely out of convenience—I have some connection to each of these state legislatures. The connections range from knowing the state legislator personally to having friends who work as staffers and aides in the offices. Though this is certainly a convenience sample, the mix of partisan affiliation, gender, legislative experience, legislative capacity and chamber is diverse. Indeed, the sample contains 3 males and 3 females, 4 Democrats and 2 Republicans, 3 house members, 2 senate members, and 1 unicameral member, and a range of 4 years of legislative experience to 35 years.

Chapters 2 and 3 demonstrated that Americans with lower relative levels of education may not be receiving representation by their government to the extent that those with higher levels are. I have shown this both in terms of literal responsiveness and policy responsiveness. These studies, however, were executed in a manner such that the perspective of the legislator was not considered. As mentioned previously, legislators are constrained by many things, including their reelection hopes, the rules of the governing body to which they belong, and, of course, time and resources available. This chapter will examine how these constraints affect the manner in which these legislators are able to represent their constituents, and more specifically, how they represent constituents with lower relative education levels.

## **4.2 Communication, Casework, and Priorities**

Congressional research in the 1970s highlighted the fact that lawmaking is but one aspect of the job as legislators see it, and that much of the non-lawmaking activity has important electoral consequences (Mayhew 1974; Fiorina 1977; Fenno 1978). In 1982, when Malcolm Jewell interviewed state legislators, he found that casework, which is a common form of service responsiveness, makes up a large portion of the legislators' jobs. As one legislator stated,

About 98 percent of my job concerns casework. Mostly it is jobs that they want, sometimes food stamps or housing, but usually jobs. As long as you return the call or letter and try to do something, people will appreciate it, and it will help you politically. If I get a job for someone, sooner or later someone else in the family will call about a job. If you don't do constituency work, you don't help yourself... (p. 3).

Later research indicates that while the "98 percent" quoted above may have been hyperbole, state legislators do, in fact, spend a considerable amount of time on casework

(Freeman and Richardson 1994, 1996; Nelson 1991; Thomas 1992; Ellickson and Whistler 2001; Freeman and Richardson 1994, 1996). These requests from constituents vary from simple questions to requests for assistance navigating bureaucratic red tape to job-search help to intervention in local disputes (Freeman and Richardson 1994). One legislator I interviewed reported that “[they] spend at least 10-20 hours a week”<sup>11</sup> on casework, while another (in a more professionalized legislative environment) says, “it varies from week to week, for sure, but I would say that at minimum [they] do about 25-30 hours and [their] assistant does another 30”. The former reports receiving around 10-15 communications a day from their constituents, and the latter roughly twice that.

Furthermore, the legislators who I interviewed indicated that they prefer to do the majority of constituent communication themselves, even when there is staff assistance available. One stated, “My legislative assistant responds to the email request and calls me if I need to contact them directly. Normally she calls me and I give her the response over the phone and she emails them back”. Another “like[s] to see all of the emails so that [they] know if anything is out of the ordinary...those [they] like to do [themselves].” Still another says, “Even though [they are] in a highly populated district, this is one thing that [they] always do instead of passing it off to an aide. This way [they] can make sure that [they are] getting the most contact with the voters that is possible”.

Much of this dissertation is dependent on the hypothesis that state legislators hope to profit electorally from their representation activities, and there is certainly evidence that this is the case, from the scholarly literature since the days of Mayhew and Fenno, as well as the experiments in my earlier chapters and the interviews conducted for this

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<sup>11</sup> As all of these interviews were conducted with the promise of anonymity, I will not be providing formal citations for the quotes from the interviews. All of the interviews were conducted personally by the author.

chapter. In 1987, Cain, Ferejohn and Fiorina asked whether members (of Congress) “believe constituency service has electoral payoffs” (Cain et al., 1987, p. 78). The subject of their study is the U.S. Congress, however it is not unrealistic to assume that state legislators act in similar ways, especially considering that they too are concerned with reelection (Francis and Baker 1986; Carey, Niemi, and Powell 2000) and often display “progressive ambition” toward becoming members of Congress (Schlesinger 1966; Francis and Baker 1986; Berkman 1994 Maestas 2000, 2003; Maestas, Fulton, Maisel and Stone 2006). Cain and his colleagues found that the perception is indeed that service activities have electoral efficacy. In fact, a survey of congressional staff assistants revealed that only 2 of 102 believed that service had “no significant electoral effect” (Cain et al. 1987, p. 78).

The state legislators interviewed for this dissertation agree: “I was elected to make laws, sure, but the people really expect you to actually do work for them. That kind of casework is my biggest responsibility and it really does make a difference come election time,” one legislator reported. They were not alone, “Constituent service is more important than legislation because a lot of people don’t really know about the specifics of laws but you better believe that they know whether you were able to help them when they called in,” said another. “It would be stupid to think that doing service work wouldn’t impact elections,” another stated, “It is really the biggest advantage you get for being an incumbent.”

This is certainly not to say that reelection is the only motivating factor for constituent service. As Cain et al. (1987) stated, “Only the most hardened cynic maintains that winning votes is the sole motivation for service” (pgs. 84-85). They posit that there is



a “general notion that elected officials have duties associated with their positions, which they fulfill as a matter of obligation” (pg. 86). This sense of duty, or obligation, was also a running theme in the interviews that I conducted. When asked about why they devoted so much time to constituent service, one legislator replied, “Well, the way I see it is that it is my job. The people expect that they can call my office for help, and if we don’t do it, who will?” An aide from a different office echoed this sentiment, “People need help with things and they expect us to do it. So we do.”

Summarily, state legislators and their staffers devote a substantial amount of time and energy to constituent service, which places Chapter 2 of this dissertation in an important light. Legislators and their staffers believe casework to be important, both for reelection purposes and because it is simply part of the job. If this is the case, though, why were response rates to the experimental emails so low, particularly for those “constituents” with lower education levels? The answer that I had discussed was that there is simply not enough time to do everything, and someone has to suffer the consequences of that. As Malcolm Jewell pointed out in 1982, “There are two competing job descriptions that are irreconcilable (at least in terms of time available)” (p.2). He is referring to the fact that even though there are only so many hours in a day and days in a week, representatives are expected to meet the demands of policymaking and constituent service (and possibly even campaigning for the next election). Eulau (1978) also spoke to this conundrum, saying,

The circumstances of modern government are such that neither responsibility nor responsiveness can be assured through the technique of representation. Despite all the oratory of the politicians, they cannot possibly be responsive, in the traditional sense, to individual constituents whose numbers are in the hundreds of thousands or millions, whose interests are enormously diverse and

whose understanding of the complexities of public policy is minimal” (pgs. 49-50).

Eulau is referring to the United States Congress, but there is no reason to believe that the same doesn't hold true at the state level. State legislative workload varies widely from state to state, ranging from effectively full-time legislatures like California and Massachusetts, to Montana which only have ninety day sessions every other year. Many of the states limit the length of their sessions either constitutionally or statutorily, though many individual legislators report working much more than they are technically supposed to (Kurtz, Moncrief, Niemi and Powell 2006).

The implication of these time pressures is that something has got to give. Legislators necessarily have to prioritize items on their to-do lists, meaning something—or someone—is going to receive little or no attention. In Chapter 2, I discussed the theory of statistical discrimination, an idea upheld by my field experiments, but one that is more difficult to uncover in conversations with the legislators themselves. To recap, statistical discrimination, in this context at least, is when a legislator is aware—either consciously or subconsciously—of their likely voters, and when prioritizing the items to which they will be devoting time attention, focus on these people. As education is positively related to political participation, those individuals with lower perceived or stated educational attainment would be more likely to suffer the consequences of statistical discrimination and not have their request responded to.

While this is logical maximizing behavior, the representatives themselves are reluctant to admit to it—at least when they are talking about their own behavior and

the protocols of their offices. “We always respond to each and every inquiry that comes in to our office, in the order that they come in,” reports one legislator. Another says, “Every constituent is a potential vote, so I make each one a priority and don’t ever leave anyone out.”

Asking the representatives to speculate about how other offices conduct business leads to slightly different answers, however. Though not all of them were willing to speculate, the ones that did provided answers that were very much in line with the findings in Chapter 2. One legislator, while denying it occurring in their office, says, “I think that people who are only concerned about getting reelected would definitely spend the most time on people who would vote for them. In this office we are more concerned about good policy though.” “I can see how in other offices, people might spend more time dealing with the people who are, say, big donors or something,” says one staffer. He continued, “If I were to do something like that, I think I would maybe deal first with the people who are the most likely to complain the loudest. You know the type—the ones who write op-eds in to the paper and stuff.” While this is not exactly in line with the expectations of Mayhew or Fenno, it is not entirely unreasonable either. If reelection is the ultimate goal of these legislators, one way of going about that, of course, is to cater to the likely voters. Another way, though, would be to quell the voices of the dissenters so that they are not as likely to dissuade other potential voters and supporters.

Research supports the idea that legislators and their staff members may bias their attention toward both supporters and the “squeaky wheel” types. Cain, Ferejohn and Fiorina (1987) addressed this idea as well, stating that “the notion that constituency

service is a duty sometimes shades into another electoral incentive, one which emphasizes the negative consequences of neglect rather than the positive consequences of attention” (pg. 86). There is evidence, for instance, that “legislative elites’ reliance on the accessibility heuristic systematically favors information about certain constituents over other, equally relevant constituents. The information that is most accessible to legislative elites is information made salient by financial contributions or made familiar through constituency-initiated contact with the legislative office” (Miller 2009, p. 864). Similarly, Rosner (2007) divides members of constituencies into groups: squeaky wheel, collector, advisor, random, and bellwether. He asserts that certain groups, including members of the squeaky wheel group, receive legislative attention and influence the actions of the legislator. There has not, however, been a substantial amount of research done on this topic and it certainly deserves further attention in the future.

Campaign contributors and volunteers tend to have higher educational attainment, as do writers of op-eds (Sommer and Maycroft 2008) and letters to the editor (McCluskey and Hmielowski 2011). While none of the interviewees would admit to discriminating themselves, the fact that when asked to speculate about other offices they pointed to supporters and squeaky wheels as being more worthy of attention speaks loudly about the role of education in service responsiveness.

#### **4.4 Constituents and Communication, Topics and Quality**

While remaining reluctant to admit that they may treat different constituents differently, government offices, including state legislative offices do acknowledge

that there are differences in the quality of communications that they receive, and that they develop a pretty good sense of the education of the writer. As one legislator put it, “[the communication that he receives is] either perfect or very poor. It’s pretty easy to tell by the spelling what kind of person I am dealing with—you know, if they went to college, or are from a more disadvantaged neighborhood”. A staffer in a different state agreed, “Most of the policy emails are pretty well written, but some of the angry letters are not well-written at all. And there is a lot more variety with the requests for help with stuff; some of the people who write to ask for help really don’t seem to write very well at all...I am pretty sure that a lot of these people didn’t go to school beyond high school, if that”.

Worries that the emails that I used for the field experiments in Chapter 2 were excessively extreme in terms of quality were seemingly unfounded. Emails include the extremely well-written such as these<sup>12</sup>:

Representative XXX,

I understand that you received a letter from Mayor XXX in support of the proposed gas tax increase. This proposal is disturbing to me, because the hardships stemming from this "fair" tax are staggering.

I live in a section of XXX with many retired citizens. They pride themselves on living frugally, and making do despite the economic ups and downs. I would hate to see a gas tax increase, since it would make it more difficult for them to afford the dignity of driving themselves around. A higher gas tax would also impact the cost of food for these individuals. Since taxes rarely go back down after

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<sup>12</sup> In 2013, the Utah State Legislature began posting their email correspondence for anyone to see on the legislature’s website on an online repository. Examples of communication between these state legislators and their constituents can be found at <http://le.utah.gov/publicweb/menu.jsp>. This program is voluntary, so the emails that have been chosen by the legislators to include in the repository skew toward the well-written and, as of this writing, include only policy-oriented emails.

being raised, this attempt to fund road work could easily result in a big increase of permanently welfare-dependent households. The net result would not be positive for my city, county or state.

Please stand strong against this increase!  
Thank you,

Constituent XXX

and

Dear Senator XXX,

Thanks to both of you for your family friendly work at the Legislature. As your constituent, I want to share my concern about the overturning of Amendment 3. The entire nation will now watch how XXX defends traditional (and voter approved) marriage. I encourage you to support the expenditure of funds to hire experienced attorneys to defend Amendment XXX.

In light of same-sex marriage now occurring in XXX, I would like to know if you, or any of your colleagues that you know of, are planning to sponsor any religious liberty bills?

I also ask you to NOT support upcoming non-discrimination legislation sponsored by Sen. XXX. At first thought, it sounds like a good idea, but it's not. This legislation would pit sexual rights against First Freedoms (religion, speech, right to make a living, conscience). In communities and states that have adopted non-discrimination laws similar to that proposed by Sen. XXX, lawsuits, fines, threat of jail time and ruined businesses are the "unintended" and very unfair consequences. Please see FairToAll.org for more information and links to stories of real people who have been hurt by non-discrimination laws.

Thanks so much for your time and energy to continue XXX's long and strong history of traditional family as the foundation of our thriving society.

Best Regards,  
Constituent XXX

Emails received also include very poorly written ones like this:

To XXX

I am wrighting to you as a very concerned person who currently is on Medicaide. I have read what is being Cut from the Medicaide Program and am ver concerned about these cuts. I currently take more than 10 proscriptions every day as i have a lot of different health problems in your proposal on the Medicaide cuts from what I understand You do not want to let anybody have NO more than 10 proscriptions per month. I am getting ver update and very scared that I am woundering if this states Senete even care about the disabled. When Former Gov XXX was in office he promised to bust up the Mental Health Program. Now we have this new and have had this Govoner for a long time. It just seems like the longer that this Governer and many of the state senate is in office the more the poor disabled and handycaped get screwed. I have read all of the proposed cuts and to me it just seems like all this state is wanting to do with people on Medicaide is just have them curl up in a ball and DIE. It just seems that you do not care about the less fourtunate any more. And as for me it is not my fault that I have several disabilities that does dervent me from being able to hold down a full time job ever agian. I did not choose to have to be on so many medicines by body just has a tendance to head south and begin to shut down. I am asking that the senate might take a relook at this proposal and posibility reconsider on all of these cuts that you are proposing. I am very greatful for time and energy that you may be able to help the good citizens of this state that are Disabled and are lower class.

Constituent XXX

and this:

To: XXX

I believe that the coffee shop jacquies in XXXXXX should be checked out for wrong doing. our boss wont let us ring up orders cause she doesnt want to pay the sales tax of the iteams our customers purches, also she hasnt been paying us employees for the hours wored. the most worst part is she has a tip jar an it says as well as she quotes that all tips made go to breast cancer. we have raised over 9 thousand dollars in that jar an she dumps it in to her account an then brags to family an us how she spent it on her self an her boys. this is my last hope on trying to get thiss bussiness back on the right step. please help!!!!!!!!!!!!!!1

Constituent XXX

In addition to the wide variety of quality levels that government officials receive, they also take in communication on many different topics. “We get mostly personal issues,” one legislator tells me that “A mother will call about a son or daughter with legal issues. A lot of calls about road issues (pot holes) or just a road that needs attention.” This legislator reckons that these types of casework calls account for most of the communication that his office receives. But, “we also get email communication about a certain bill that is in hearing that will be coming up for a vote soon...to voice their opinion.” Others seem to have the same experience. “Most of the time people want something, whether it is a job, or to have something fixed, or to get through some of the red tape...that’s actually a lot of them, they need benefits or unemployment or something and are having a hard time navigating the system,” reports one aide. Another says, “Our office gets a lot of emails about major bills that are coming up—you know, like with gay marriage or stuff like that, but mostly we get calls and letters asking for help with things.”



When asked what types of things, he answered, “a lot of stuff for welfare benefits—people who need help or got denied but think it was a mistake, and then for jobs or unemployment.”

In addition to comprising the bulk of the communication that these offices receive, requests for assistance (or casework) also receive the most individual attention. As discussed previously, legislators spend a considerable chunk of their time on these cases and it is not solely because they are numerous:

People who call or write in for help with something, it's those people that if you spend a little bit more time on them that it will make the biggest difference. Helping someone get their unemployment check or child support payment, well that is a pretty big deal. People who are giving their opinion on a bill or on policy? Well those people either agree with me, which is great, or they don't and there isn't anything really that I can do to change their mind.

This legislator isn't alone in his thinking:

My office definitely spends the most time with constituents who are asking us for help. There are a lot of people who just need a little information about who to contact about something, or heck, who just need to vent a little. If we can provide that kind of service for them and they walk away happy—well that's good for both of us. And then they might tell their friends or their family that they had a good experience talking to ol' Senator XXX's office and then those people might call us. Even if we can't help everyone, they appreciate that we try and then they might come out for us in the future.

These quotes indicate that these legislators are savvy about how to divvy up their time and attention per the expectations of the Mayhew/Fenno research legacy, even if they are not willing to admit that some constituents receive more attention than others. If this is the case, it is important to examine the policy implications involved therein. Jewell noted that, “in most districts the constituents' interests are diverse and perhaps contradictory. When constituents have conflicting interests or

when they are sharply divided in viewpoint, it is impossible to act in the interest of, or to be responsive to, all of them. The larger and more diverse the district, the more frequently a legislator will face this dilemma” (Jewell 1982, pg. 13, see also Pitkin 1967, p. 209). There is a considerable amount of variation in the number of constituents in each state legislative district in the United States. New Hampshire’s State House members represent just over 3000 citizens each, while Texas Senators represent over 800,000 and California Senators represent over 900,000 (National Conference of State Legislators 2010). On average, each state Senator represents around 154,000 and each House member represents just over 66,000.

Though state legislative districts are much more homogeneous than U.S. congressional districts (Jewell 1982; Birkhead 2013), there is, nonetheless, variability in demographics, ideology, and policy opinions in each. Additionally, the legislators have access to, and are knowledgeable about, this information. Organizations such as the National Conference of State Legislators, the Center for American Women and Politics and the National Black Caucus of State Legislators compile information on these subjects and make it available to anyone who wants to access it. Further, individual states provide statistical and descriptive information on the districts to legislators.

## **4.5 Perceptions of Representation**

Perhaps due in part to the availability of this type of information, the legislators’ connections with the communities that they represent, or maybe due to flat out hubris, legislators appear convinced that they are extremely knowledgeable

about the people in their district and what the needs of those people are. For example, one legislator remarked, “I grew up in my district and have lived here most of my life. I feel that I have a pretty good handle on the demographic qualities of my district.” Most of the legislators who I interviewed also acknowledge that they have access to information about which constituents are likely voters and likely supporters. “The party tells us about the demographics and stuff,” says one. Another said, “The caucus provides us with that information and we use it when we send out mailings.”

Legislators seem to be aware of the demographic variability within their districts, however that is not to say that this knowledge is used during the policy decision making process. Although reason and research both tell us that people within a constituency have a wide variety of interests, “fragmented and multi-dimensional with clusterings of issues that voters see as related” (Ingram, Laney and McCain 2011, p. 11), legislators presume that they do a pretty good job voting on policies that are congruent with their people as a whole. One legislator interviewed by Jewell said, “I can’t think of a time when I have voted contrary to what the district wants because I vote the way they want me to. I am a representative—I represent my district. Partly this is because I am really typical of the district, and partly because if conflicts arose I would go along with the district” (Jewell 1982, p. 3).

Further, representatives seem to *want* to accurately represent the will of their constituents. One 2011 study found, using a randomized field experiment, that when given information about public opinion on a spending bill, state legislators in

New Mexico were more likely to vote in accordance with the public than those who were not provided the information (Butler and Nickerson 2011). This finding suggests that not only do legislators think that they are responsive to the people, they want to be. As one legislator I interviewed said, “I spend as much time as possible talking to the people in my district so that I get a better idea of what they want me to do. I get letters and calls, of course, but not everyone does that, so I try to get out there and do the interacting”.

This is not to say, though, that the legislators get it right all of the time. In fact, evidence points to the contrary. As Jewell stated, “misperception arises when a legislator believes that he has an accurate perception of the full range of viewpoints but is actually basing his judgments on a small sample of constituents or misinterpreting some of the inputs that he gets from the district” (Jewell 1982, pgs. 85-86).

While it is reasonable that “one would expect most representatives to believe themselves congruent” (Broockman and Skovron 2013, p. 20), research has indicated that it is more the case that elites are wishful thinkers when it comes to their perceptions of their constituents, overestimating support for their policies (Converse and Pierce 1986; Granberg and Holmberg 2002). For instance, Broockman and Skovron (2013) find that, “politicians consistently and substantially overestimate support for conservative positions among their constituents” (p. 3). The findings of this study hold for both liberal and conservative politicians and are striking—“the misperception[s are] so large that nearly half of sitting office holders appear to believe that they represent a district that is more

conservative...than the most conservative legislative district in the whole country” (p.4).

One of the legislator interviews that I conducted seems to illustrate this: “My district is made up of good Christian Americans. We are a conservative district and tend toward traditional values”, they said. A bit of research into this legislator’s district reveals that they are pretty much correct in their assessment. A majority of the district does self-identify as Republican and Christian. However, almost a quarter of the residents identify as Democratic and 16% as non-Christian. This legislator truly believes that they have an accurate picture of their district, and he does in the aggregate, but if there are systematic policy preference differences between the majority and the minority, the legislator’s perception that they are acting in the interest of the entire population is incorrect.

Of course this kind of systematic misrepresentation of a constituency is not always unintentional—there may even be strategy<sup>13</sup> afoot. The legislator who said that their district consists of white Christian Republicans might truly believe that—perhaps as a result of overlap in the types of places they frequent or the demographics of those most involved in civic life. Alternatively, because white Christian Republicans make up the vast majority of this particular legislator’s supporters, there may be motivation present for the legislator to overestimate their presence in the district.

I asked that legislator if they were aware of the characteristics of those most likely to vote for them. The answer was unequivocally affirmative: “the party

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<sup>13</sup> The author would like to thank the writers of the NBC show, “Saturday Night Live” for coining this word and the Bush administration for adopting it. It is far more descriptive than its proper counterpart, “strategy”.

makes sure that we get the breakdown of our voters—both the local party office and the party leaders in our State House.” Considering this legislator’s acknowledged awareness of their voting public, it seems unlikely that the overestimation of the demographic that comprises the bulk of their voters is unrelated to motivation. This is especially true in light of the research on wishful thinking (Converse and Pierce 1986; Granberg and Holmberg 2002; Broockman and Skovron 2013). For instance, Broockman and Skovron demonstrated that legislators believe their districts to be more conservative than they are in reality but also showed that this effect was stronger amongst conservative lawmakers.

The misrepresentation of the size of groups in a constituency does not even necessarily serve to disenfranchise the smaller group. For instance, in 2013 a measure designed to expand background checks for individuals purchasing firearms was introduced in the United State House of Representatives. At the time the PEW Research Center reported that a full 85% of Americans supported the measure (PEW Research Center 2013). With that unusual level of support and considering the tragic gun-related deaths of children in Newtown, Connecticut from which the bill stemmed, it seemed as if passing the measure would have been a slam dunk. The 15% who opposed it, however, were a particularly powerful and vocal group—engaged and politically active—largely affiliated with the National Rifle Association ([opensecrets.org](http://opensecrets.org)). Many Republican representatives recognized this and voted against the bill.

There is no proof, and there have thus far been no studies indicating the reasons why these representatives voted against the bill—Perhaps, trustee-style,

they were voting with their consciences. There is some evidence, though, that this was not the case. For instance, the organization Open Secrets ([opensecrets.org](http://opensecrets.org)), which tracks campaign donations, reported that there is a correlations between those representatives who voted against the measure and those who accepted campaign contributions from gun rights groups like the National Rifle Association (Opensecrets.org 2013). Further, the four Democrats who voted against the measure all hail from states where President Obama lost by wide margins in 2012. This indicates not only that legislators may be in the pockets of interest groups, but that they are acutely aware of their supporters—those who vote for them and those who contribute to their campaigns—even in the face of overwhelming popular support for the bill. The makeup of the much smaller group opposing the bill mattered.

The fact that legislators are knowledgeable about who their supporters are and are disproportionately responsive to them does not mean that they are necessarily willing to acknowledge that they may be less responsive, in a policy sense, to other constituents. I asked each of the legislators I interviewed if they were aware that different groups of people had different policy interests, and their answers hedged the question, at best. One responded, “If the majority of my district wants something, it is my job to go along with that”. Another echoed this sentiment, “What matters to me is that I am doing what most of the people want me to do. People aren’t going to agree on everything, but if most of them agree, then it is probably the right thing to do.”

It occurred to me that perhaps they did not fully comprehend what I was asking, so I made my inquiry more specific, asking them to acknowledge that some policies favor people with money, white citizens, or people with more education, for example. Again, the legislators uniformly failed to allow for this possibility. One legislator was adamant that, “we are all created equally in god’s eyes” and that “there are no differences between people, no matter what”. Another, in a rather irritated manner, reminded me that “not all black people are poor”. Stymied, I slightly altered my line of questioning, asking if they ever found it difficult to legislate for different people, like the well-educated and not-so-well-educated at the same time. Once more, the legislators fell back on the idea that the majority of the district mattered the most, simply refusing to acknowledge that different people may have different policy interests.

It is possible that these legislators actually believe that there are no systematic differences in policy interests and that what is good for the majority is always the right thing to do. This seems unlikely, for as sophisticated as their answers were in terms of the electoral advantages of certain actions, the demographic makeup of their supporters, and the like, it does not seem credible that they would be so ignorant about policy interests.

It is also possible that they know good and well that this is not the case, but feel they need to answer in a certain way for political reasons. This is a far more likely possibility. Although I have a personal (to varying degrees) connection to each of the legislators interviewed, and was very clear that their names would never be used in my work, it is logical to think that they may have still been concerned



about honest answers to the more sensitive questions leaking and making them look bad.

Still another possibility relates to motivated reasoning. Motivated reasoning, related to the broader concept of confirmation bias, leads people to confirm what they already believe, while ignoring information that would disprove the belief (Kunda 1990; Westen, Blagov, Harenski, Kilts, and Hamann 2006). When people use motivated reasoning, they often respond defensively to contrary evidence, such as the legislators did when I asked them about group interests (recall that one legislator invoked God and another became quite irritated). If the legislators have been acting as if the interests of the majority are the pinnacle of representational importance to the exclusion other groups, it is possible that they have basically talked themselves into thinking that it is true. Obviously, legislator motivation is not the focus of this dissertation and I have not tested for any of these possibilities directly, however the cognitive dissonance present in these answers indicate that this is an area ripe for future research.

## **4.6 Conclusion**

Casework, responding to inquiries and requests made by constituents, is clearly an important part of a legislator's job. Not only do constituents expect it, legislators understand that responding to their citizens in this way confers benefits at the ballot box. This finding is in line with Carl Friedrich's "rule of anticipated reactions" (Friedrich 1946, pp. 589-591). By this, Friedrich meant that because legislators aim to be reelected they act in a manner that they expect will lead to

future votes. Because legislators believe that performing casework is electorally beneficial (Rosenthal 1993; Freeman and Richardson 1996; Ellickson and Whistler 2001), it is logical that they spend a considerable amount of time on it, and they are certainly willing to acknowledge this. And because legislators know who the likely voters are (people with higher education levels, for example) within his or her constituency, it is also logical that they will spend more time being responsive to those voters, even at the expense of other constituents (as we saw in Chapter 2).

The fact, then, that these same legislators uniformly deny that they use this information when it comes to prioritizing attention and time, responding to communication, and formulating and voting on policy, seems particularly implausible. This is especially true in light of the results in Chapters 2 and 3 of this dissertation—clearly individuals with less education are being given less attention than their better-educated counterparts. Thus, it appears that legislators, as political figures, may simply be lying, either to me or to themselves, about how they devote their time and resources.

As troubling as the idea of untruthful politicians is, there is another possible explanation. It is conceivable that the six legislators who I interviewed are truly unaware that there are distinct groups of people with distinct policy interests that are different from the interests of the majority (or the vocal, voting majority). While the former is disconcerting because it means that elected officials are willfully misrepresenting segments of the population, the latter means that these officials are ignorant about their constituencies and the connections between people's interests and policy outcomes. While there is research that may indicate

that ignorance is at play (Butler and Nickerson 2011), there is certainly room for further research in this area.

Summarily, though the legislators in my small sample categorically reject the notion that there are any systematic representation differences based on education, their responses, combined with the evidence from Chapters 2 and 3 tell a different story. First, the assumptions that I had made about communication quality and content in Chapter 2 are clearly realistic. Samples of real emails demonstrate that there is a wide variety of communication reaching the legislators on a regular basis. Further, the legislators acknowledge the quality and content difference and seem to make assumptions about the writers. This combined with the fact that the legislators clearly have a good sense of their likely voters serves to provide further evidence that legislators do, in fact, systematically underrepresent against constituents with low educational attainment.

## Chapter 5: Conclusion

In this dissertation, I set out to answer one primary question: how responsive are elected officials to the interests of less educated voters? Using two quantitative and one qualitative approaches to assessing political representation, my answer to this question is, unfortunately, not very. Citizens with lower relative levels of education, defined as those with no high school degree, are less likely to receive responses to their inquiries, are less likely to have their needs met by policy, and are not even acknowledged to have different interests and needs by their elected representatives. This finding, while certainly a normative downer, is not entirely surprising, as research has shown time and again that diminished resources and voting participation translate into unequal political outcomes (Gilens 2005; Jacobs and Page 2005; Bartels 2008; Rigby and Wright 2010).

In this concluding chapter, I have three goals. First, I revisit education as the primary variable of interest, assessing the reasons it may have been overlooked in the research on representation and arguing for its importance. Next, I review my main empirical findings. I situate the findings in the extant literature on representation and “unequal democracy”, discussing how my findings relate to, and build upon, previous scholarly work in these areas. Finally, I discuss the possible policy implications that can be derived from the empirical findings from this dissertation. There are indications that political inequality as it relates to education is something that can be improved—from both the constituents’ and the lawmakers’ sides. I thus argue that the results I found herein not only advance our scholarly understanding of political inequality, but also readily suggest policy reforms that might help to bring about a more equal policymaking process.

## **5.1: Revisiting Education**

The fact that the less educated are less politically active than the better educated is well documented amongst those who study participation. Beginning with the research of Almond and Verba (1963), it has been demonstrated repeatedly that educational attainment influences the political interest and participation of individual citizens. Philip Converse (1972), went so far as to claim that education is the cure for the “puzzle of political participation” (p. 324). Researchers have suggested that education increases participation in a variety of ways, such as through the increase in cognitive skills and political information (Campbell et al. 1960; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Rosenberg 1988), the development of civic engagement skills (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Verba et al. 1995), and the development of political interest (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980).

Education has also been explored as a possible proxy variable for things like childhood experience (Kam and Palmer 2007), family background (Coleman et al. 1966; Tenn 2007), age (Nie et al. 1996) or income (Parry et al. 1992). When compared to highly educated individuals, those with less education are more likely to come from low income families with parents who are less involved in cultural and political activities (Greenstein 1965; Pye 1962; Hess and Torney 2005). It has been posited (see Kam and Palmer 2007) that if those factors are controlled for, education has no independent effect on participation. More recent research, however, has shown that statistical models that properly correct for the selection bias inherent in educational attainment do, in fact, indicate a causal relationship between education and political participation:

“postsecondary educational advancement has a positive and substantively important causal effect on political participation” (Mayer 2011, p. 644).

It is precisely because of the complex nature of the relationship between education and participation that it is of particular interest for this research. Because education is held disproportionately by socioeconomic elites and because it confers the skills and knowledge necessary for participation, the connection to participation, and ultimately to representation is tenable. Though education is related to income, it also includes a shared experience and set of skills that magnify the simple socioeconomic effects.

Despite all of this, education does not get as much attention in the participation literature as income, gender, and race, and practically none at all in the representation literature. One of the reasons for this may be that groups of people with similar education levels do not tend to organize around their political interests. Groups organize on the basis of gender, religion, race, and ethnicity (Verba et al. 1995), but education-based groups have not mobilized as a defined cohort with clear shared interests, demanding particular rights or improved station. This is true even though there are distinct policy outcomes that disproportionately affect people of differing educational attainment. This is not to say that education is not discussed as it relates to sociopolitical issues, however it is largely thought of as a tool to improve the standing of otherwise defined groups that are disadvantaged in other ways (race, income, etc.).

## **5.2 The Participation and Representation Gaps**

Much attention has been paid recently to an article concluding that “economic elites and organized groups representing business interests have substantial independent impacts on U.S. government policy, while mass-based interest groups and average citizens have little or no independent influence” (Gilens and Page 2014, p. 3). In line with previous research on the topic (Bartels 2008; Gilens 2012; Jacobs and Page 2005; Rigby and Wright 2010), the authors find that the preferences of lower and middle-class Americans had little to no effect on policy outcomes, while the preferences of rich Americans were indicated to be fifteen times more influential. Further, while they find that “mass-based interest groups” do have an effect on policy, the interests of these groups are only roughly half as influential as business-based groups. Similarly, a recent field experiment from Joseph Kalla and David Broockman focuses on how individuals gain access to members of Congress. They found that when constituents identify themselves as donors, they were almost four times more likely to successfully schedule a meeting with the congressperson or a high-level staffer.

There is evidence that this responsiveness differential may stem, at least partially, from a participation gap between high and low income individuals (Butler and Broockman 2011; Verba et al. 1995; Hill and Leighley 1992; Hill et al. 1995; Campbell 2003; Martin 2003). Those citizens with lower socioeconomic levels are less likely to have the resources (like money and time) that increase civic participation, and thus, do not vote at rates as high as those with higher incomes. This is also true for individuals with lower education levels. There is a correlation between education and income such that individuals with lower educational attainment tend to make less money and have less

free time. Further, education confers skills and interests that are valuable resources for participation, and those individuals who lack these skills and who also lack money and free time are the least likely to vote. And, those who are the least likely to vote are the least likely to be appropriately represented by their government. As V.O. Key put it, “the blunt truth 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, p. 99).

The three studies in Chapter 2 clearly demonstrate this pattern—when a “constituent” with a high implied or stated education level contacted his legislator, he was far more likely to get a response than when the same contact was made by someone with less education. Response rates to the educated constituents varied from 62% to 80%, while response to the less-educated varied from 45% to 60%. Considering the low response rate to the less-educated constituent it is feasible that statistical discrimination may be at work—less educated people are less likely to turn out on Election Day, so they become a lower priority for busy legislators.

Similarly, in Chapter 3 I found that in addition to less-educated constituents not receiving fair service responsiveness, they are also not being appropriately represented in terms of policy. I examined two policy areas in which individuals with lower relative educational attainment are disproportionately likely to be affected, Medicaid spending and minimum wage, finding that an increase in the proportion of a state’s population with low education levels (adults without a high school diploma) does not predict an increase in Medicaid spending or the minimum wage. Legislators are simply not particularly responsive to the needs of citizens with low levels of education.



I had hypothesized that education would work similarly to race and gender, and that perhaps the presence of legislators with lower relative levels of education themselves (no college experience, as there are not, to my knowledge, any state legislators who did not graduate high school at this time) might serve to increase the representation of less-educated constituents. Phillips (1995) argued that shared experiences and empathy would lead individuals in leadership positions to be more sensitive to the concerns of historically disadvantaged or underrepresented groups to which they also belong. Though she was specifically studying gendered experiences and descriptive representation, she posited that the same principle could be transferred to other groups. In that education, or the lack thereof, bestows shared experiences, I expected to find similar results for education representation. I did not, however, find this in my data in either Chapter 2 or in Chapter 3. In none of the three studies Chapter 2 do legislator education levels appear to significantly predict differential responsiveness, and legislator education predicts Medicaid spending and minimum wage in the opposite direction than what I had expected.

As I had discussed in Chapter 1, there is perhaps an easy explanation for this. There are individual characteristics that incite entitativity, or group cohesiveness, (race and religion, for example), but there are other characteristics that are simply seen as individual problems. Education may, in fact, be one of these. People who drop out of school prior to high school graduation may see themselves as alone in their situation, not necessarily similar to others who did the same. Likewise, those who do not continue to post-secondary education but who succeed professionally, such as in becoming a state legislator, also may not see themselves as similar to others with the same educational

background. If this is the case, it is illogical to expect that we would see the same kind of descriptive representation effects that we see in studies of race or gender.

### **5.3: Implications: Education and Representation**

Those who vote and those who represent are more educated than those who do not, but is that really such a bad thing? What is so appalling about well-educated people having a disproportionate amount of political influence? Some might even argue that it is encouraging that our representatives and leaders have had such a solid academic grounding and that is so dominant in the formulation of policy (Zakaria 2003). Further, the fact that those who are politically involved do not match the rest of the country in important demographic characteristics does not necessarily mean that substantive representation of the needs and interests of the whole country is not occurring. Elected officials and political activists may not share the same characteristics as the rest of the constituents, but that does not necessarily mean that they do not “act in the interest of the represented, in a manner responsive to them” (Pitkin 1967, p. 209).

Of course, an education disparity is not necessarily a problem, especially in light of my finding that state legislators with lower levels of education themselves (no education past high school) do not better represent the interests of less-educated constituents. However, representing a large group of people (over 317,000,000 at present) is hard. Representation becomes even more difficult when there is a discernable gap in policy preferences between active and inactive citizens, that is, when “those in public life are more likely to be aware of and to pay attention to the needs or preferences of those who are active” (Verba et al. 1995, p.163). This raises the question of whether more

highly educated citizens differ from lesser-educated citizens in terms of their policy preferences and interests. In Chapter 3, I argued that minimum wage policy and healthcare spending disproportionately affect individuals with less education—policy areas that disproportionately affect the interests of those with less education. Similarly, a 1972 study by Cobb and Elder found that study participants in the Netherlands answered questions about the most important problems facing society similarly in terms of the top five most important problems, but outside of the top five, there were large differences based on educational attainment. For example, the well-educated are concerned with ethics, the environment, and education, while those with lower levels of education are less likely to see these things as serious problems.

In Chapter 4, I found that the legislators who I interviewed seemed primarily concerned with the will of the majority in their districts—exactly the expectation stemming from the Verba et al. quote above. Broadly, this finding, along with the findings in Chapters 2 and 3, raises the issue of de Toqueville’s “tyranny of the majority”—when the majority of the population subordinates the minority. This is then magnified, when the minority is a discrete group with particular needs and interests. By pushing aside those with less education, the state legislators are systematically disenfranchising a group of people who are most likely, because of correlations with poverty, unemployment, and the like, to need government services.

Of course, it is reasonable to expect that government officials will—or even should—legislate based on the wishes of the majority. This is not necessarily a bad thing, and is likely even a good thing most of the time. The problem lies in the conflict between majority rule and minority interests. Concern about the potential tyranny of the majority

dates back to the founding of America and was felt by Federalists and Anti-Federalists alike. Majority rule is clearly necessary for the function of a participatory democracy, but what of the minority? There are safeguards in place to protect some minority rights, namely the enumerated rights in the Constitution, as well as the protection afforded by the justice system, however when it comes to interests, rather than rights, the minority tends to be in a more precarious position. It falls to the voters to elect officials who will, while legislating for the majority much of the time, also make an attempt to legislate for the needs and interests of minority groups. Unfortunately, when many minority groups, including those with lower education levels, do not turn out to vote in high numbers it is difficult to accomplish this effectively.

#### **5.4: Recommendations: Education and the Civic Mission of Schools**

In response to the (real or perceived) decline in political participation over the years, much attention has been paid to the role of civic education in schools. Citing statistics about participation in civic and political institutions, as well as those regarding the notion that young people are less likely to vote, have lower levels of political interest, or participate less frequently in political discussions than older Americans, organizations and commentators have argued for a renewed focus on the civic mission of schools. The list of related organizations that have cropped up in the past 40 years is substantial: the Center for Civic Education, the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning

and Engagement, the Center for Civic Literacy, the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools, and Sandra Day O'Connor's iCivics are some of the more prominent examples, but this list is certainly not exhaustive. A civics test has even been developed as part of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) evaluations.

The idea behind this movement is that civic education will help America's youth "acquire and learn to use skills, knowledge, and attitudes that will prepare them to be competent and responsible citizens throughout their lives" (NCSL 2014). This idea is not without scholarly support. There is research that suggests that youth who receive civic education during their K-12 school years are more likely to vote than their peers who did not receive similar schooling (CIRCLE and NCSL). Niemi and Junn (1998) found that civic education courses lead to "increased civic knowledge to a substantial degree above and beyond individual motivation and family-socialization influences" (Niemi and Junn 1998, p. 148). Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996) also find that an increase in civic knowledge can have a large impact on engagement and participation.

In that knowledge is one of the Verba-esque resources that affect political participation, civic education is certainly a logical way to increase participation in politics. There are a couple of problems with this strategy, however. First, students may not be absorbing as much information on civics and government as one might hope. To wit, only about one-quarter of students in fourth, eighth, and twelfth grades score at or above "proficient" on the NAEP assessment (CIRCLE). Since No Child Left Behind was passed in 1996, the amount of time that schools have available to schedule courses that are not primarily focused on reading and math has decreased. Teachers are simply unable to dedicate the time necessary to ensure that students are receiving enough civic

instruction to make a difference.

The second problem, and the one most relevant to this dissertation, is a matter of putting the proverbial cart before the horse. In Chapter 2 I demonstrated that state legislators are considerably more responsive to communication received that had been written at a relatively high level—that is to say, with no spelling or grammatical mistakes. Being able to write well, however, is not as common as it should be. According to the National Commission on Writing (2013), the following NAEP writing samples may be considered typical of current writing by high school students. Students were asked to explain “Appleby”, a local haunted house. Below are three representative pieces submitted about the Appleby House. Each is a complete, unedited response to the exercise. The Appleby exercise provided students with basic information about the house and asked them to write an explanatory article about it.

**Rating: Unsatisfactory (48% of respondents)**

The house with no windows. This is a house with dead-end hallways, 36 rooms and stairs leading to the cieling [sic]. Doorways go nowhere and all this to confuse ghosts.

**Rating: Adequate (50% of respondents)**

Man builds strange house to scare ghosts. He says that he did it to confuse the ghosts. But why may we ask would he want to spend 10 years building a house. For instance there are stairs that go nowhere and hallways that go nowhere. This house has 36 rooms. If you ask me I think it is kind of strange.

**Rating: Elaborated (2% of respondents)**

Years of rumors and unsubstantiated reports have created, in a quite urban neighborhood, a house of horrors. The dwelling is one Appleby House, a modest dwelling of 36 rooms built over an 8 year period. On interviewing neighbors, who dubbed the owner “strange” one finds that 10 carpenters have been employed to build such oddities as stairways to ceilings, windows on blank walls, and doorways going nowhere. According to these reports, these bizarre customizings are intended to confuse ghosts. Maybe the owner will report one day that he has caught one in a dead end hallway! Until then, however, the mystery of the building of Appleby House remains just that—a mystery.

If writing skills make such a big difference in the responsiveness that comes from elected officials, perhaps it would behoove us—including the organizations dedicated to civic education, and the government entities that fund these organizations—to focus more on the basics, writing and communicating a message, rather than leaping forward to specific knowledge.

**5.5: Conclusion**

This dissertation builds on previous studies of political representation in the American states by assessing inequalities in the democratic process. These findings, when combined with the literature on inequality, educational attainment, and representation help us to better understand why political influence is unequal in the

American states. Democracy rests on the fundamental ideal of the equal consideration of the needs and preferences of each citizen. Political participation is the mechanism by which those needs and preferences are communicated to political decision makers and by which pressure is brought to bear on them to respond. Thus, equality in political participation - embodied in the most obvious principle of equal consideration of citizen preferences, one-person, one-vote - would seem to be a necessary condition for democracy. Unequal participation suggests that elected officials respond to a biased representation of the public. If educational advancement increases political participation, then we have not only identified a source of participatory inequalities, but also a potential corrective. After all, as Marx (1847) astutely noted, "The interest which any individual has in society is in inverse proportion to the interest which society has in him".



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