



Are Politicians Prejudiced against the Poor?

Nicholas Carnes, Duke University

John Holbein, University of Virginia

Government in the United States is more responsive to affluent Americans than to low-income or working-class citizens. As researchers have shown, when politicians make policy decisions on a wide range of issues, the outcomes tend to line up closely with the preferences of rich constituents, and meet the preferences of the poor only by chance. The views of the poor have little relationship to what politicians do (unless the poor want the same things the rich do).

How and why does this unequal political responsiveness happen? Some observers blame the politicians themselves. Elected officeholders are often wealthy; and whatever their backgrounds, maybe they cannot relate to the poor – or just do not like them very much. The truth could also be more complicated. Politicians have to cope with enormous demands on their time and energy. When the interests of lower-income and working-class Americans slip through the cracks, it may not be because legislators dislike the poor or don't want to respond to them. Other factors may be much more important – such as the exigencies of winning and holding office and the incentives such circumstances create for legislators to spend more time and attention on the well-to-do.

Could Politicians be Prejudiced?

It is not entirely farfetched to suppose that elected officials could hold the poor in contempt. Biases, conscious or unconscious, are common in life, such as the subtle racial stereotypes that keep employers from giving equal consideration to black job applicants or the racially tinged worries that prompt real estate agents and homeowners to steer homebuyers into racially segregated neighborhoods. Researchers have documented such prejudices, and they have also found that politicians exhibit bias toward various minority groups, including African Americans, Hispanics, and Muslims. Prejudices are often not deliberate, and they are hard to remove. Maybe class biases work like racial prejudices.

However, when we talk about “prejudice” and “discrimination,” we need to be careful. Disparate treatment does not automatically mean that prejudice is at work. For example, lawmakers who need certain constituencies for reelection may spend more time catering to those groups, even if they feel no ill will toward other groups. In our research, we make careful distinctions to tease out the differences between strategic choices and prejudice.

How Legislators Respond to Constituent Requests

We devised a way to probe for class biases in state legislators' responses to simple constituent requests. We had constituents make requests, and we randomly varied how the constituents who made the requests described themselves. In some correspondence, the constituents described themselves as white-collar professionals, and in other correspondence they introduced themselves as dishwashers – blue-collar workers. As of January 1, 2013, everything else in the constituent requests was the same. <https://scholars.org>

research technique allowed us to pinpoint the effect of legislators' perceptions of the social background of constituents.

The results were clear. **We did not find evidence of class biases in legislators' responses.**

- State lawmakers responded equally to the blue-collar and the professional constituent. The number of responses, the content of responses, and the timing of the responses were the same on average for both types of constituents.
- Republicans and Democrats responded in about the same ways, as did longtime legislators compared to newcomers in office, and legislators with small versus large staffs.
- On some of the dimensions we measured, legislators actually responded slightly more favorably to the blue-collar constituents than to the professionals.

If Not Class Prejudices, What?

When the costs of meeting requests are relatively low, our research suggests that politicians show no prejudice against the poor. Things may be different, of course, in high-stakes situations or political negotiations. We can imagine, for example, that politicians might be more willing to answer the phone or make a phone call to constituents who might write big checks for the next election. But strategic considerations are at work in such a situation, not simple social prejudices.

If the kinds of prejudiced beliefs that seem to sustain racial inequalities were behind social class inequalities in political responsiveness, we would be very concerned, because engrained prejudicial tendencies are notoriously difficult to counter or eliminate. Fortunately, as our study shows, class appears different from race. The finding that legislators do not respond to individual constituents in a class-based way offers a ray of hope for those who want the U.S. to become more equal. But it is just a slender ray in an otherwise gloomy picture. Well-documented unequal responsiveness in government policymaking remains to be understood. Factors other than personal prejudices must be at work.

Our research suggests the need to analyze the environments in which politicians operate and the strategies they follow to cope with challenges they face. Do politicians end up attending more to the rich in the course of using established tactics for winning elections? Do they attend to input from the rich when they make choices about policies to pursue once they are in office? If pressures and opportunities in the strategic environments of politicians turn out to be what pushes so many of them toward unequal attentiveness to the rich, then reforms that target environmental pressures will be the key to promoting greater political equality.

Much more needs to be learned before we can conclude exactly what needs to be done – and of course reforms involving campaign finance or lobbying will be difficult to fashion and achieve. The research we report here can, however, help researchers and reformers know where to look. Personal biases against the poor do not seem to be the cause of unequal responsiveness. The answers must lie elsewhere. And that leaves room for hope. Political environments may not be easy to change, but they are easier to modify than ingrained personal prejudices.

Draws from research in John Holbein and Nicholas Carnes, "Don't Take It Personally: Affluence, Influence and Prejudice," Sanford School of Public Policy, October 2013.