



When Do Members of the U.S. Congress Respond to Less Privileged Constituents?

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Many recent studies have documented that elected representatives in the United States respond mostly to the wealthy and often ignore the poor. Our new research strikes a different note, however, by revealing that in recent high-profile struggles over the Affordable Care Act, the preferences of people with low incomes may matter to their Congressional representatives just as much as those of the wealthy – but only when those poorer constituents become politically active on a high-profile national issue.

Citizen Activism, Policy Choices, and the Affordable Care Act

The recent, repeated failures of Republicans in Congress to repeal Obamacare have been attributed to many of the usual suspects – ranging from Congressional dissidents in the Freedom Caucus to personal choices by President Donald Trump or Arizona Senator John McCain. In new research, we add an important character to this lineup: politically active citizens. Media coverage during legislative battles has highlighted images of angry constituent protests at district town hall meetings – and Democrats aiming to preserve the health law have portrayed its survival so far as a victory for such grassroots democratic efforts. But even though these protests made for good media stories and social network videos, it is not clear whether they actually influenced Congressional votes.

Our study examines whether citizen activism influences the policy choices of members of Congress. We examine several different issues and various types of political activity, asking whether those who participate in political activities in addition to voting have policy preferences more aligned with the preferences of their elected leaders (a situation known as "preference congruence") than people who "only" vote. Our research provides evidence that the policy preferences of citizen activists were reflected in Congressional roll call votes related to the Affordable Care Act, which suggests that activists were better represented than non-activists.

To examine congruence, we used 2012 survey responses about people's preferred policies and the related votes that their members of Congress later cast on four issues – the repeal of the Affordable Care Act, the Keystone XL Pipeline, the repeal of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" and the Korean Free Trade Agreement. For three of these issues (all except the last), representational theories of the "electoral connection" led us to expect that citizens of the same party as their representative who report voting and additional political activism would have greater similarity in policy preferences with their elected leaders than citizens identifying with the other party or citizens who did not vote. But our expectations fit the evidence only for one case, the Affordable Care Act.

Active Citizens and Their Representatives Votes

Did stronger congruence – stronger representation of constituents – happen in this case because voters were unusually active in making their view known? To find out, we examined whether people donated money and engaged in other political activities beyond voting. When such extra activism was found, were representatives also more likely to act in ways their constituents wanted? This is what we found for the Affordable Care Act, with greater congruence between representatives and constituents who were activists and donors (and weaker congruence with the preferences of constituents who were not so active). Importantly, we found that additional political activities – including attending a political meeting, engaging in campaign activity or displaying signs – strengthened the congruence voters enjoyed between their views about the Affordable Care Act and the votes taken by their representatives.

We also probed to see whether citizen political activism can overcome the well-established over-representation of the preferences of the wealthy compared to the poor that has been documented in U.S. politics today. Tellingly, for those who are political activists we found no difference in policy congruence between the highest and lowest income groups.

When low-income people were active, their preferences on the Affordable Care Act were represented in Congress at similar levels to the preferences of wealthy activists. But politically disengaged low-income citizens had the lowest levels of representation. This evidence suggests that democratic activism can make a difference in representational equality in the United States, although perhaps only on highly-partisan, very publicly salient issues such as the Affordable Care Act. We did not find the same relationships for other important policy issues. We also found that activists have greater preference congruence with representatives in their party, than with elected leaders from the other party.

Looking Forward

We are curious to see if additional votes follow the same patterns we earlier found for the Affordable Care Act. More broadly, we wonder about the lingering effects of the activism spawned by the 2016 election and struggles in 2017 over the Affordable Care Act. Will future high-profile issue battles, such as over tax reform, follow a similar path?

Our study suggests that if ordinary citizens, including low-income people, actively engage with their elected officials, Congressional members may end up voting in closer correspondence to the views of their poorer constituents than they would if such citizens stay on the sideline – or if they hear from them only on election day. Loud and clear citizen engagement makes a difference, we find, even for low-income people who are often ignored.

Read more in Jan E. Leighley and Jennifer Oser, “Representation in an Era of Political and Economic Inequality: How and When Citizen Engagement Matters.” *Perspectives on Politics*. (2017).