Unequal Responsiveness in Constituent Services?
Evidence from Casework Request Experiments in North Carolina

Nicholas Carnes
(corresponding author)
Sanford School of Public Policy
Duke University
nicholas.carnes@duke.edu

John Holbein
Sanford School of Public Policy
Duke University
john.holbein@duke.edu

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Abstract
When legislators vote, they tend to be more responsive to the views of affluent citizens than to those of the less fortunate. Are they more responsive to the privileged when they do casework, too? This paper reports two field experiments in which a confederate sent simple requests (for help registering to vote and for a brief meeting) to every member of the North Carolina General Assembly, randomly varying whether he described himself as a blue-collar worker or a white-collar professional. In contrast to research on racial biases in casework, our lawmakers were just as likely to grant requests regardless of whether they perceived our confederate as more or less affluent. One subgroup of legislators—committee leaders—appeared to be more responsive to the privileged. Overall, however, constituent services don’t appear to be as class-biased as they are race-biased—or as biased towards the rich as other forms of legislative activity.
Politicians in the United States tend to be more responsive to affluent citizens than to middle- or working-class Americans. When individual leaders make decisions, their choices are more strongly associated with the views of higher-income citizens than with those of the less fortunate (Bartels 2008, ch. 9; Hayes 2013; Jacobs and Druckman 2011). When public policy changes, it tends to move toward outcomes that more privileged Americans favor, regardless of what less affluent citizens want (Gilens 2005; 2012; Gilens and Page 2014; Rigby and Wright 2013; see also Hill and Leighley 1992 and Schumaker and Getter 1977).¹

But what about the other work that politicians do? To date, most research on unequal responsiveness has understandably focused either on roll-call voting or on public policy itself (but see Butler 2014). These are extremely consequential features of the political process, of course, but there is still more to the job of a politician. Lawmakers decide which problems and policies to focus on, build coalitions, meet with citizens and lobbyists, and perform casework for constituents (Hall 1996). If we care about unequal responsiveness—and if we observe it when legislators cast their votes and enact public policy—it is worth asking whether the other tasks politicians perform are biased in favor of the wealthy, too.

In this paper, we focus on casework, the responses or services that politicians provide to constituents who ask for their help. Every day, citizens ask their elected representatives to assist them with things like getting expedited passports, filling out administrative paperwork, collecting government benefits, and disputing bureaucratic decisions. When politicians receive requests like these, are they more responsive to the privileged?

To find out, we conducted two constituent service field experiments in which a confederate emailed simple requests—one asking for help registering to vote, one requesting a

¹ But see Erikson and Bhatti (2011), Soroka and Wlezien (2010), and Ura and Ellis (2008).
brief in-person meeting—to all 170 members of the North Carolina state legislature. With our help, the confederate randomly varied whether he described himself as a blue-collar worker or a white-collar professional. This approach (which builds on recent work on race and constituent services) allowed us to measure how a citizen’s economic or social class background affected a legislator’s willingness to do casework on the citizen’s behalf.

In contrast to recent work on racial biases in casework and economic biases in legislative conduct, the lawmakers we analyzed were just as likely to grant our confederate’s requests regardless of whether they perceived him as more or less affluent. This was true for Republican and Democratic legislators, and for legislators who were more and less affluent themselves. Only one subgroup of lawmakers we analyzed—committee leaders—appeared to be more responsive to the privileged. Constituent casework may not be as class-biased as it is race-biased, or as biased towards the rich as other forms of legislative activity. These findings shed new light on the scope and causes of unequal responsiveness in American politics.

**Constituent Services and Representational Inequality**

Casework is an important part of what most elected officials do. Most lawmakers devote considerable time and staff resources to constituent services. Many believe that it affects their chances of winning re-election (e.g., Ellickson and Whistler 2001; Fenno 1978; Mayhew 1974). Some also see casework as a way to learn first-hand about the government policies that most directly affect their constituents, the performance of different government agencies, and the points in the bureaucratic process that might require oversight or reform (Johannes 1979; 1984). Others simply see casework as “an integral part of their representational duties” (Peterson 2014, 2; see also Freeman and Richardson 1996).
Casework can in turn have significant consequences for constituents. When citizens interact directly with government officials, it often has significant and lasting effects on their views about government (and perhaps even about themselves, e.g., Soss 1999). Citizens who are happy with the help they receive from a politician often feel good about themselves, their government, and the politician. The effect can even spread to other citizens via word of mouth, creating a “ripple effect” on the officeholder’s reputation in his or her district (Serra 1994). As a result, politicians who devote more resources to constituent services tend to do better on Election Day (e.g., Fiorina 1981; Serra and Moon 1994; but see Johannes and McAdams 1981a; 1981b).

Even so, there are good reasons to suspect that constituent services might be biased in favor of the wealthy. For one, other activities that are just as important to legislators and constituents seem to be biased in favor of the rich. Roll-call voting affects public policy and a legislator’s chances of being re-elected (e.g., Canes-Wrone, Brady, and Cogan 2002), but lawmakers are significantly more responsive to the rich when they vote on the bills before them (e.g., Bartels 2008, ch. 9). When politicians receive requests from constituents, their responses could be as biased towards the rich as their roll-call votes are.

Moreover, there are strategic reasons why politicians might favor the privileged when doing casework. Most leaders don’t have the time and resources to answer every request they receive from a constituent—they have to make tough choices about whether and how much to help at least some of the citizens who reach out to them. In those instances, officeholders and their staffers might prioritize requests from constituents who they perceive to be more affluent, perhaps seeing them as more likely to vote or donate money in the future.

It certainly wouldn’t be unprecedented: when it comes to constituent services, politicians have recently been shown to be biased along demographic lines. In 2008, Butler and Broockman
(2011) emailed roughly 5,000 state legislators across the country posing as a constituent who wanted help registering to vote. They signed half the emails “Jake Mueller,” a name they had previously determined was almost always the name of a white person, and they signed the other half “DeShawn Jackson,” a name that was almost always that of a black person. DeShawn received significantly fewer responses. Even when legislators had strategic incentives to help the constituent—when a citizen from the same party as the legislator requested help registering to vote—lawmakers often discriminated on the basis of race. If politicians exhibit racial biases when they answer constituent service requests, they might also exhibit economic or social class biases, too.

Indeed, in a follow-up study, Butler (2014, Ch. 5) found that city mayors were more likely to answer an email from an out-of-town citizen who claimed to be a homeowner and who asked about the town’s advanced placement programs and were less likely to answer an email from an out-of-town citizen who claimed to be a renter and who asked whether the town’s high schools offered a free lunch program. Of course, mayors have unique incentives to keep the less fortunate out (e.g., Peterson 1981) that might not exist in other levels and branches of government. However, we know of no other studies on class and constituent services, and Butler’s analysis clearly illustrates that constituent services can be biased against the less fortunate in some contexts.

Then again, there are also reasons to wonder whether constituent services are always as class-biased as they are race-biased. Scholars of representation sometimes argue that more and less affluent citizens want different things from government, in particular, that the rich care more

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2 Similarly, Broockman (2013) finds that black politicians work to advance the interests of black citizens even when the citizen making the request is not one of their constituents.
about public policy and that the poor care more about direct government services (for a useful review, see Harden 2013; 2015). According to this line of reasoning, even legislators who are more responsive to the rich when they vote on bills might be equally responsive to the rich and poor when providing constituent services—or might even privilege the poor when doing casework. The representational inequality that Bartels, Gilens, and others observe in roll call voting and public policy might not be a universal feature of our legislative process; it might simply reflect legislators prioritizing what different economic groups want from government. Politicians might give policy to the rich and casework to the poor.

Of course, a third possibility is simply that politicians conduct constituent services without any discernable social class biases. Perhaps whatever factors drive politicians to be more responsive to the privileged during roll-call voting aren’t a part of the strategic calculus of handling casework. Perhaps legislators simply answer as many requests as they can. Perhaps they simply instruct their staffers to help constituents on a first-come-first-served basis.

Research on constituent service has generally been less common than research on other legislative behaviors, like introducing legislation or voting on bills. And with the exception of Butler (2014), research on unequal responsiveness has focused almost exclusively on roll call voting and public policy. What about the other work that politicians perform on the job? Is casework biased in favor of the rich, too?

**Evidence from Casework Request Experiments in North Carolina**

To find out, we conducted a series of constituent service field experiments in 2011 and 2012. Following Butler and Broockman (2011), we oversaw two studies in which a constituent sent requests (for help registering to vote and for an in-person meeting) to all 170 members of
the North Carolina state legislature, randomizing whether he portrayed himself as more or less affluent. We then studied how state lawmakers and their staffers responded to our confederate.\(^3\)

Our experiments followed Butler and Broockman (2011)’s approach. In their study, the researchers sent fictional requests for information about how to register to vote to state legislators across the country, varying the race of the alias they used (by varying the person’s name). Our approach differed from theirs in four important ways. First, we varied the respondent’s class (by varying what he said he did for a living), not his race (in our study, the constituent’s name was always the same). Second, when we emailed legislators, we did not invent an alias or pose as a constituent; we worked with a real constituent and studied how the lawmakers in his state responded to him. Third, we conducted our experiments in just one state. And, fourth, we ran two experiments, one that involved requests for information about voter registration (like Butler and Broockman) and one that involved requests for something more costly to the legislator—and that more closely resembled a request for public policy than simply a request for service—a meeting to discuss a bill being debated in the legislature.

*Treatment: Occupational Information*

Before starting the study, we recruited a confederate named Joey who was interested in learning more about voter registration laws in our state (North Carolina) and whose job—the manager of a restaurant—entailed both washing dishes (a task usually performed by blue-collar

\(^3\) Like prior studies (e.g., Butler and Broockman 2011), we treat responses from legislators and from their staff as equivalent. To most constituents, it doesn’t matter whether casework requests are handled by a lawmaker, her staff, or a staffer posing as a lawmaker—what matters most is whether constituents receive a satisfactory response.
workers) and managing human resources (a definitively white-collar job). We then helped our confederate email North Carolina state legislators and—with his permission—randomly varied how he described his occupation in the text of the correspondence (which we present in its entirety below). Whereas other research on class and constituent services (e.g., Butler 2014, Ch. 5) has signified class with hints about renting vs. owning a home and free lunch programs vs. advanced placement classes, our experiment was more direct about the sender’s class: Joey began his emails by introducing himself and mentioning his occupation (as people often do when they introduce themselves) in the first sentence of the emails. In some, he identified himself as “a dishwasher.” In others, he identified himself as “an HR professional.”

By varying how Joey presented his occupation, we believe we varied the class or income group that legislators and staffers associated with our confederate. Our occupational manipulation was about as visually prominent as Butler and Broockman’s manipulation (it took up four words in the first sentence of the message; theirs took up two words in the signature). And in general, occupational information provide strong signals of a person’s position in a society’s economic or social class structure—as Donald Matthews (1954, 23) put it, what we do

\[4\] In his words, “Some days I’m a dishwasher, some days I’m an HR professional.”

\[5\] To protect his confidentiality, the confederate never mentioned his last name or hometown in these emails.

\[6\] Unfortunately, we could not carry out a formal post-study manipulation check: if we had asked whether the legislator recalled Joey’s occupation, legislators could have simply looked at the email Joey sent. As we explain below, however, several of the differences we uncovered in response rates led us to believe that the recipients of Joey’s emails did in fact pick up on his occupation.
for a living is “[p]robably the most important single criterion for social ranking in the United States.” Our confederate couldn’t simply say, “I’m wealthy,” or, “I’m in the top third of the income distribution” without it seeming hopelessly artificial; we couldn’t directly replicate the income measures that Bartels, Gilens, and others have used. However, occupations convey exactly that kind of information (e.g., Hout 2008; Katz 1972, 63). When we hear “I’m a dishwasher,” most people know that it means something different than “I’m an HR professional”—lower pay, lower social status, and so on.7 When legislators saw “dishwasher” vs. “HR manager,” we believe they perceived differences in the affluence of the sender.

Design: Recruiting an Actual Confederate

Studying responses to an actual citizen allowed us to avoid some of the ethical concerns that have been raised about constituent request experiments and audit studies more generally (e.g., Pager 2007). In most previous constituent service studies, the scholars who have carried them out have used aliases—they have posed as fictional constituents when emailing lawmakers. Most social scientists would probably agree that this kind of deception is well within the realm of ethical human subjects research: there is no real harm to the lawmakers, and if they were aware of the deception, they would almost certainly behave differently. However, there are practical reasons to be cautious about emailing lawmakers to request services on behalf of fictitious constituents (McClendon 2012), and in general, when deception can be avoided, it should be. By simply recruiting a real citizen and helping him submit real requests that accurately represented his constituency status—he indicated that he was from North Carolina, but not necessarily from

7 According to the BLS, a dishwasher’s average salary in 2010 was $18,930, putting the occupation around the 20th percentile of the income distribution, whereas an HR manager’s average salary was $52,690 per year, placing them around the 60th percentile.
each legislator’s district—we did not have to invent an alias or mislead legislators. There are many ways to run field experiments involving lawmakers without pretending to be constituents (e.g., Butler, Karpowitz, and Pope 2012; Butler and Nickerson 2011; Putnam 1994, 73). This approach—connecting a real constituent with a real informational need to his elected representatives—is one of them.

Sample: The North Carolina General Assembly

In order to recruit a trustworthy confederate with the right occupational background, we had to limit our attention to the state we lived in, North Carolina. In general, studying decisions at the state level can be useful, especially for research on political and economic inequality (see, for instance, Flavin 2012; Kelley and Witko 2012; Rigby and Wright 2013). Moreover, North Carolina wasn’t just practically advantageous; it also had several substantive advantages for this type of research. The North Carolina General Assembly is similar to the legislatures of many other states: it meets for most of the year, its elections are competitive, and standard measures of legislative professionalism consistently place North Carolina near the national median (Squire 2007). Unlike many states, moreover, legislators in North Carolina do not pool resources like office spaces, phone lines, and staff, which helps avoid “cross-contamination” in field experiments. Each legislator has her own space and her own staff, and legislators and their staffs seldom discuss routine constituent services; as such, there was little chance that public officials ever see one another’s email requests and discovering our research design. Finally, in North Carolina’s “citizen legislature,” many lawmakers answer their own emails. Like other scholars, we treat responses from lawmakers and staffers as equivalent in most of our analyses; that is, we assume that staff members routinely make consequential decisions—they often “stand in” for
legislators. However, in states where staffers handle all of the constituent services, we might wonder whether a study of biases in constituent services was really comparable to research on how lawmakers are more responsive to the wealthy. In North Carolina’s citizen legislature, we need not wonder: we received some emails signed by staffers, but we also received many responses that were almost certainly written by lawmakers themselves.

Two Experiments: Voter Registration and In-person Meetings

In our first experiment, we worked with our confederate to email all 170 members of the North Carolina General Assembly in October 2011 to ask for information about registering to vote. The subject of each email was “a question on registering to vote.” The body of the email was modeled after Butler and Broockman’s emails:

Dear [Representative/Senator] [legislator’s name],

My name is Joey, and I am [a dishwasher / an HR professional]. I’m trying to figure out how to register to vote for the upcoming election. I heard that the voter registration deadline is soon.

Who should I call in order to register? Also, is there anything special I need to do when I register so that I can vote in future elections?

Thanks,

Joey

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8 Many go on to become lawmakers themselves; from 1999 to 2008, about one in three members of Congress had been legislative or legal staffers (Carnes 2013).

9 Before the study, we checked with former General Assembly staffers, who confirmed that lawmakers receive dozens of requests like these each day and that different legislators almost certainly wouldn’t would notice they were receiving the same emails. Legislators and staffers rarely discuss simple constituent requests—they receive dozens every day—and their responses to our emails never indicated that they knew we had also emailed their colleagues.
We randomized the bolded text: 85 legislators received an email from Joey the dishwasher, and 85 received an email from Joey the HR professional. Though the treatment was subtle, we have no doubt that legislators noticed it: it appeared in the first sentence of the email, and it took up about as many words as other manipulations scholars have used, like names. After two weeks, we recorded whether and how each legislator responded and then forwarded their messages to our confederate (which still left him plenty of time to register before the deadline).

Six months later, we ran a second field experiment. (This span of time was long enough that there was little chance that legislators or staffers would remember the first email and, indeed, none who responded to the email in the second experiment mentioned any previous correspondence. We also used a different email address, in case some legislators maintained databases or email archives.) Using the same randomization as the first experiment, we emailed state legislators to ask for something slightly more costly: time to meet.

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10 We assigned legislators to treatment groups using block randomization by party and chamber. Our randomization also yielded nearly perfect balance on other observable characteristics, like the legislator’s race and gender and whether the legislator served on the state elections committee.

11 In that time, there were no legislative elections, and only 4 legislators changed seats: three resigned and one passed away.

12 Even if a few had, moreover, their doing so would not have biased our results. If some legislators and staffers can recall previous constituent correspondence, that is simply a part of the governing environment we are trying to study.
Shortly before our second experiment, North Carolina’s governor vetoed a bill that would have required voters to bring government-issued IDs to the polls. On the day our experiment began, the legislature scheduled time to debate whether to override the governor’s veto. With our help, our confederate emailed every state legislator to ask to meet or speak on the phone about the bill. The subject line read, “meeting to discuss voter registration.” The body read,

Dear [Representative/Senator] [legislator’s name],

My name is Joey, and I am [a dishwasher / an HR professional]. I’ve been following the recent debates about voter registration and House Bill 351, and I wanted to share my opinion with you.

Do you have any time in the next couple of weeks to meet or speak on the phone briefly?

Thanks,
Joey

This request went beyond Butler and Broockman’s pure constituent service request and asked for the chance to weigh in on public policy, a slightly more time-consuming request that was more closely related to public policy. Again, we recorded whether and how each legislator responded for two weeks, forwarding responses to our confederate along the way. If politicians give policy to the rich and casework to the poor, as some scholars maintain, we reasoned that legislators might be less biased towards the rich (or even biased towards the poor) in our voter registration information experiment—and more biased towards the rich in this in-person meeting

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13 The Governor signed a similar bill into law in July 2013, after our experiments had concluded.

14 If the legislator agreed to meet or speak on the phone, we helped our confederate set up a meeting. If the confederate’s schedule conflicted with times the legislator was available, we helped the confederate send a reply email thanking the legislator and explaining the confederate’s position on the voter identification bill.
experiment. If, on the other hand, politicians are simply biased towards the privileged in every stage of the legislative process, those biases should have been evident in both studies. And if class doesn’t matter for constituent services the way it does for other legislative activities like roll-call voting, we should have found null effects across the board.

**Unequal Responsiveness in Constituent Services?**

Overall, public officials in North Carolina responded to our confederate’s emails at about the rates we expected. Figure 1 plots the total response rates for our first experiment (labeled “request for information”) and our second experiment (labeled “request for a meeting”). Setting aside how the confederate described his class, the first experiment’s overall response rate was 65%, only slightly higher than (and not statistically distinct from) the response rate in Butler and Broockman’s (2011) nation-wide constituent request study (57%). This put to rest any concerns we had that legislators might find Joey’s requests abnormal, hokey, or otherwise suspicious.\(^\text{15}\) And, as we expected, our second experiment’s response rate was significantly lower—just 41% of lawmakers replied when our confederate asked to speak with them. To a state legislator, scheduling a meeting is a costlier activity than helping someone register to vote.

[Figure 1 about here]

\(^{15}\) Although Butler and Broockman’s study was covered by several major media outlets—including *Science, The New York Times, The Washington Post,* and *The Wall Street Journal*—the method they used does not seem to be common knowledge among lawmakers or their staffs: no legislator gave any indication that she suspected that we were studying her replies, and our response rate was comparable to Butler and Broockman’s.
In either case, does the social class of the person making the request affect how legislators and staffers respond? Figure 2 begins to answer this question by plotting the response rate when the confederate described himself as an HR professional (“white-collar writer”) and when he described himself as a dishwasher (“blue-collar writer”).

In both experiments, state legislators were equally likely to respond to our confederate’s emails regardless of how he described his class. In the first study, 64% of lawmakers responded to a request for voter registration information from a white-collar professional, and 63% responded to a request from a working-class citizen (a difference equivalent to about 1 more response overall for the white-collar condition). In the second study, the response rates were 40% for a white-collar professional requesting a meeting and 42% for a blue-collar worker. Our findings seemed squarely in line with the idea that class simply doesn’t matter in constituent services; legislators weren’t more favorable to the affluent across the board, and they seemed less favorable to the affluent in our experiment that blended constituent service and policy.

Needless to say, the differences in Figure 2 were not statistically significant. Had we found actual gaps in response rates in either experiment, we might have worried that our sample size of 170 was too small and lacked the statistical power to detect true effects. With such a substantively tiny difference, however, there was little reason to be concerned about power; even if our sample had been huge and our standard errors had been tiny, the differences we found were substantively insignificant (and nowhere near the magnitude of the differences Butler and Broockman and others have documented). Simply put, this appears to be a true null effect.

To check that imbalances in confounding variables weren’t driving these results, we also estimated logistic regression models that controlled for several additional factors. When we
randomized our sample, the resulting treatment groups were generally well-balanced on a wide range of observable variables. Still, as a simple robustness check, we estimated the models reported in Table 1, which controlled for the legislator’s previous occupation, party, and chamber; whether the legislator was on the state elections committee; the legislator’s race and gender; how long the legislator had been in office; whether the legislator was a party or committee leader; and the number of staffers the legislator employed.

[Table 1 about here]

Nothing in either regression changed our basic finding. The response rates for lawmakers in the blue-collar treatment and the white-collar treatment were nearly identical, and the modest differences between them were nowhere near statistically significant (the odds ratios were statistically indistinguishable from 1). Only one control variable in each model predicted significant differences in response rates, about what we would expect by chance alone. With or without controls, lawmakers appeared equally likely to respond to a request from a constituent regardless of the constituent’s class.

Maybe, though, how lawmakers responded depended on the class of the person making the request. This did not appear to be the case, either. The top panel of Figure 3 plots a simple quantitative measure of the quality of responses: the number of characters in the legislators’ reply emails.\textsuperscript{16} The bottom panel plots a qualitative measure, the percentage of responses that we deemed “helpful,” that is, that provided detailed instructions about where Joey could go to

\textsuperscript{16} If legislators did not respond, this measure took on a value of 0. If legislators sent more than one reply email, we simply summed the character counts for all of them.
register to vote (in the first experiment) or that offered to schedule a meeting with Joey (in the second experiment).\footnote{This outcome conditions on whether a legislator responded. Given equal responsiveness across our conditions, we would still expect our conclusions to be unbiased by this truncation.}

Neither measure produced any evidence of discrimination for or against the working class. In the first study, legislators’ responses to Joey the dishwasher had an average of 184 more characters than their responses to Joey the HR professional, a difference roughly equal to the number of characters in this sentence. When our confederate described himself as a blue-collar worker, he was five percentage points ($p < 0.39$) more likely to receive a detailed response to his question about voter registration\footnote{We also tried an alternative measure that counted the number of the following in each email: an indication that the email was from the legislator herself and not an assistant, a thank you, an offer to provide follow-up help, and/or encouragement to register. Results based on this measure (available on request) were essentially the same as those in the bottom panel of Figure 3.} and seven percentage points ($p < 0.33$) more likely to be invited to meet with the legislator. Neither difference was statistically significant, and together the results weren’t in line with either the expectation that legislators would be biased against the less fortunate or the expectation that legislators would be more biased against the less fortunate in policy than in service. Once again, class simply seemed not to matter all that much.

As an additional robustness check, we attempted to determine whether legislators or their staffers answered each email. Perhaps legislators—but not staffers—are biased by class (or vice versa). In Figure 5, we reproduced our main findings from Figure 2, this time ignoring responses signed by staffers. (We see a similar result when we focus only on responses sent on Saturdays,
when staffers are not working but legislators still have access to their official emails.) There is no difference. Public officials—both legislators and their staffers—seem not to be biased when they respond to constituents’ service requests.

[Figure 4 about here]

Even lawmakers who were more affluent themselves did not exhibit biases. Figure 4 plots response rates in both experiments (in the same fashion as Figure 2), this time limiting the sample to lawmakers who last worked in white-collar, private-sector jobs like business or management before getting involved in politics (as opposed to white-collar, not-for-profit jobs like teacher or social worker or blue-collar jobs like construction worker or dishwasher). The results were nearly identical: lawmakers who had worked as business owners, managers, and HR professionals were just as likely to respond to requests from Joey the HR professional as they were requests from Joey the dishwasher. Unfortunately, there were not enough lawmakers from the working class to see whether they would have treated Joey the HR professional as kindly as white-collar lawmakers treated Joey the dishwasher.¹⁹ (Nor were there enough members overall to carry out a more fine-grained analysis of lawmakers’ occupational backgrounds, e.g., Witko and Friedman 2008. And, unfortunately, data on the incomes and net worths of General Assembly members were not available, either.) There was little reason to expect we would find anything different, however: none of our main analyses uncovered any evidence of unequal responsiveness in constituent services.

[Figure 5 about here]

¹⁹ Like most political institutions in the United States (Carnes 2013, ch. 1), people from the working class are almost never members the North Carolina General Assembly.
Where Social Class Biases Existed

A few of our robustness checks did, however. One follow-up analysis found non-significant differences by party, and one found significant differences by leadership status.

Figure 6 plots response rates in both experiments, this time dividing legislators by their party affiliation. The Republican party has historically drawn more of its electoral support from affluent Americans, and the Democratic party has historically been the party of the less privileged. If lawmakers respond strategically to requests like our confederate’s—if they are more likely to help people who are more likely to be their supporters—then we might expect Republicans lawmakers to be more responsive to Joey the HR professional and Democratic lawmakers to be more responsive to Joey the blue-collar worker.

As Figure 6 illustrates, we found some evidence of this kind of difference, although the gaps were not statistically significant. Republican lawmakers were 10 percentage points ($p < 0.26$) more likely to respond to a request for information about voter registration if it came from a white-collar professional than if it came from a blue-collar worker. Democratic legislators were 12 percentage points more likely to respond to an informational request from a blue-collar worker ($p < 0.29$) and 7 percentage points more likely to respond to a request for a meeting ($p < 0.54$). These differences helped assure us that our experimental manipulation worked—if legislators hadn’t picked up on the social class cues in our confederate’s emails, we probably wouldn’t see differences like these. Moreover, these findings were broadly consistent with research suggesting that political inequality increases when Republicans are in charge (e.g., Bartels 2008, ch. 2; Kelly 2009; Kelly and Witko 2012). However, they did not provide much support for the idea that lawmakers are generally biased against the less fortunate when they
perform constituent services (the way they are when the vote; Bartels and others find that Republicans and Democrats are both biased against the less fortunate) or the idea that lawmakers strategically prioritize the rich when crafting policy and the poor when providing services.

The only auxiliary analysis in which we found statistically significant social class biases was on in which we analyzed responses to our second experiment among the legislators who tend to have the tightest schedules, the 30 party and committee leaders in our sample. These lawmakers are responsible for much of the coalition leadership, vote tallying, negotiations, and cat herding in the General Assembly. Since legislative leaders have more demanding schedules, we reasoned that they might be more likely to prioritize requests from rich constituents. And indeed they were, but only when our confederate requested an in-person meeting.

[Figure 7 about here]

Figure 7 plots response rates in our second experiment, this time dividing our sample into rank-and-file state legislators and those serving in party or committee leadership positions. Rank-and-file lawmakers tend to be about equally likely to respond to a request for a meeting regardless of the class of the person making the request. In contrast, response rates among legislators in leadership positions differed widely depending on the class of the person sending the email. More than 60% of legislative leaders responded to requests from Joey the HR professional. Less than half as many responded to requests from Joey the dishwasher. Legislative leaders were 36 percentage points ($p < 0.06$) more likely to respond to a meeting request from a white-collar professional than one from a blue-collar worker.

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This prediction is in line with a long literature in social psychology has predicted that in situations where people are especially stressed or depleted, they may be more likely to reveal discriminatory patterns (e.g., Govorun and Payne 2006).
These findings were generally in line with the notion that legislators are more biased towards the rich when crafting policy than when providing basic casework services. However, a cautious interpreting of this analysis is probably best. The legislators in our sample who had the greatest demands on their time (and who may have had more political ambition) tended to exhibit the patterns expected by the theory that legislators give policy to the rich and service to the poor. This could mean that in general more ambitious politicians are biased in this way and that less ambitious politicians simply provide constituent services on a first-come first-served basis. However, that interpretation would truly be a post-hoc theory; we did not set out with this hypothesis in mind, and the finding could also simply be a “repeated testing problem,” a statistical accident resulting from our attempt to aggressively check the robustness of our main findings by re-analyzing our data numerous times. The bulk of the evidence in this analysis suggests that legislators are not biased by class when they perform constituent services. However, the one exception—legislative leaders—suggests that we may need future work on the possible mediating role of factors like leadership, time constraints, and political ambition.

**Class and Constituent Services**

Overall, state legislators do not seem to prioritize more affluent constituents when they perform casework. Whereas constituent services tend to be biased by race, and other legislative activities tend to be biased by class, lawmakers seem to be equally responsive to constituent service requests from rich and poor alike.

In general, this finding (coupled with the finding that public policy and roll call voting tend to be more responsive to the rich) is in line with theories of representation that argue that the poor tend to care more about direct government services, the rich tend to care more about public
policy, and political leaders simply give both groups what they want. However, within our research design, we included one experiment in which a constituent requested an in-person meeting to discuss public policy—a constituent service that essentially blended policy and casework. Overall, we did not find the difference that the representation theories in question would anticipate: if anything, legislators were slightly more biased in favor of the less affluent when doling out in-person meetings about policy than when helping with voter registration.

The weight of the evidence presented here was more in line with the idea that lawmakers simply aren’t biased towards the rich when they do casework, that is, that the strategic factors that lead politicians to be more responsive to the rich when creating public policy simply don’t influence the work they do when they perform casework. For a politician, the logic of casework may simply be different from the logic of roll call voting or creating public policy. For instance, constituent service might simply be handled on a first-come first-served basis.

Whatever the reason, this study provides clear evidence that constituent services are not biased by class the way other legislative activities are. There are limits to the unequal responsiveness that Bartels, Gilens, and others have documented. Constituent services don’t appear to be as class-biased as they are race-biased—or as biased towards the rich as other forms of legislative activity.

Importantly, our findings differed from those reported in the only other study of class and constituent services that we are aware of, Butler’s (2014, Ch. 5) analysis of whether city mayors were more likely to answer an email from an out-of-tow homeowner asking about the town’s advanced placement programs or an email from an out-of-town renter who asked whether the high schools offered a free lunch program. As Butler notes, the jobs of mayor and legislator are different. Moreover, the jobs of state and city officials are different, too: mayors have incentives
to discourage lower-income people from moving to their cities that don’t really exist at the state level (e.g., Peterson 1981). That may help to explain why Butler’s emails from out-of-towners thinking of moving to a city elicited social class differences that weren’t evident in our study: in the specific case of out-of-town residents asking city officials for information about moving there, there may be strong incentives to favor the wealthy that are not universal to the political process. In the absence of those powerful incentives, we find that constituent service requests are essentially unbiased by class.

Of course, it is important to reiterate the limitations of our own study. We only analyzed politicians in one level and branch of government. We only focused on state. We only requested two types of constituent services. And constituent services are but one of the many things legislators do besides voting on bills. Future work should study other politicians, other locations, other services, and other legislative activities. Legislative casework in North Carolina doesn’t appear to be biased in favor of the rich, but unequal responsiveness is too normatively important to stop there.
Bibliography


Figure 1: Overall Response Rates

Notes: Each experiment’s sample size was $n=170$. 
Figure 2: Legislators’ Response Rates, by the Citizen’s Class

*Notes:* Each experiment’s sample size was *n*=170. Within each experiment, each treatment condition’s sample size was *n*=85.
Table 1: Odds Ratios from Logit Models Relating Whether Legislators Responded, the Treatment Variable, and Additional Controls

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Request for Information</th>
<th>Request for a Meeting</th>
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<tr>
<td>Blue-collar constituent treatment</td>
<td>0.878</td>
<td>1.116</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.293)</td>
<td>(0.365)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Private-sector professional legislator</td>
<td>0.901</td>
<td>0.726</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.320)</td>
<td>(0.254)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Republican legislator</td>
<td>0.695</td>
<td>0.630</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.295)</td>
<td>(0.251)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lower chamber legislator</td>
<td>1.258</td>
<td>1.384</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.479)</td>
<td>(0.522)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Elections committee legislator</td>
<td>0.755</td>
<td>0.604</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.365)</td>
<td>(0.297)</td>
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<tr>
<td>White legislator</td>
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<td>2.141</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(1.717)</td>
<td>(1.133)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Male legislator</td>
<td>0.974</td>
<td>0.815</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.412)</td>
<td>(.337)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Legislator’s prior terms (#)</td>
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<td>0.902*</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.416)</td>
<td>(0.045)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Committee leader</td>
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<td>0.804</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>(0.375)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Staff size (#)</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>(0.184)</td>
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<td>Intercept</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.536)</td>
<td>(0.464)</td>
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<tr>
<td>(n)</td>
<td>170</td>
<td>170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pseudo (R^2)</td>
<td>0.029</td>
<td>0.044</td>
</tr>
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</table>

*Notes*: Cells report odds ratios (with standard errors in parentheses) from logit models relating whether each legislator responded to the variables listed above. Except for “Prior Terms” and “Staff Size,” all variables are indicators. \(+ p < 0.1, \ast p < 0.05, \ast\ast p < 0.01\), two-tailed.
Figure 3: The Quality of Legislators’ Responses, by the Citizen’s Class

Notes: Bars report the percentage of lawmakers who provided detailed, specific instructions about how to register to vote (in the first experiment) or who offered to meet with the confederate to discuss voter identification laws (in the second experiment). Each experiment’s sample size was N=170. Within each experiment, each treatment condition’s sample size was n=85.
Figure 4: Legislators’ Response Rates (Excluding Staffers)

Notes: Each experiment’s sample size was $n=170$. Within each experiment, each treatment condition’s sample size was $n=85$. 
Figure 5: Response Rates among Legislators from Private-sector Professions

Notes: Each experiment’s sample size was $n=170$. Within each experiment, each treatment condition’s sample size was $n=85$. 
Figure 6: Response Rates, by the Legislator’s Party

Notes: Each experiment’s sample size was $n=170$. Within each experiment, each treatment condition’s sample size was $n=85$. 
Figure 7: Response Rates for Meeting Requests, by the Legislator’s Leadership Status

Notes: The experiment’s sample size was $n=170$, with $n=30$ legislative leaders and $n=140$ rank-and-file members.