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## Breaking ground—Politics

### Money counts — even more than expected

The idea that wealthy Americans have political influence is hardly news, but according to new research from Professor Martin Gilens, the magnitude by which public policy favors people with high incomes is more overwhelming than previously known. The preferences of Americans in the 90th percentile of income affect policy twice as much as the preferences of people with average incomes, and three times as much as those in the 10th percentile — and these figures may be understated, since high- and low-income citizens agree on many policy issues.

Gilens, who joined the politics department last fall, found significant disagreement among the rich and poor on issues such as income taxes, free trade, Social Security reform, and affirmative action. On these kinds of “high-disagreement” issues, the probability of policy change increases dramatically as the percentage of high-income Americans favoring such change increases. But the probability of enacting change shows virtually no relationship to the preferences expressed by poor and middle-income Americans.

Wealthier Americans are more likely to participate in the political process, through active membership in political groups, personal expressions of opinion like letter writing, and voting, which explains some of the income bias. The U.S. also lacks the powerful labor unions and labor-affiliated political parties that empower lower-income citizens in some European nations. “We go to considerable lengths to try to limit the disproportionate influence of people with greater resources, through things like campaign finance laws,” Gilens says, “but it’s unclear how effective those efforts are.”


Previous research in the field has looked at government responsiveness to the public as a whole, but studying responsiveness to specific population subgroups is relatively new. Professor Larry Bartels, director of Princeton’s Center for the Study of Democratic Politics, used public-opinion data to assess biases in congressional representation in a 2002 study.



Martin Gilens, associate professor of politics, has long studied citizens’ public-policy preferences. (Photo by Frank Wojciechowski)

Gilens is using survey data collected from 1980 to 1998. Respondents were asked to express support, opposition, or a neutral position for hundreds of potential policy changes; Gilens allowed a four-year window after the time of each survey to determine whether Congress enacted each policy. His initial findings come from data collected from 1991 to 1998, and his next step is to go back further in time to compare the bias from different time periods. Future work may also include a look at biases based on gender, age, race, and party affiliation.

Gilens's other research interests include changes in the media coverage of presidential elections since the dawn of the television age. In one recent paper, he writes that both news viewership and the amount of substantive, issue-based information in news coverage has declined in the last 50 years. Yet Americans are just as well informed about and able to identify the policy stances of candidates as they were in previous decades, thanks in large part to paid political advertising.

But there is a price. "While the increase in the amount of resources that are going to paid advertising is a benefit, from the point of view that it does have an education effect for the public," Gilens says, "that money has to be raised from somebody, and the candidates become beholden to the campaign donors." 

By B.T.