

Article

Unequal policy responsiveness in Spain

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Abstract

Major theories of democratic representation posit that elected officials ought to reflect the preferences of their constituents and act accordingly. But a growing body of research finds that the preferences of the most affluent influence policy outcomes more than those of the least affluent. Yet, broad studies of unequal policy responsiveness have so far only examined Northern Europe and the USA. This biased sample limits our ability both to generalize about unequal responsiveness and to build theories about its causes. We address these limitations by studying Spain, which differs from prior cases in important ways. We collected data from Spanish mass surveys fielded over the period 1976–2016 and researched which of these policies were subsequently approved. We find consistent evidence that policy responsiveness in Spain is unequal. We also find that this pattern holds regardless of the ideology of the government and the type of policy, although with some variation.

Key words: class, inequality, representation, policy preferences, Spain

JEL classification: H10, P16

1. Introduction

A basic tenet of major theories of democratic representation is that elected officials reflect the preferences of their constituents and act accordingly (e.g. Miller and Stokes, 1963; Pitkin, 1967; Dahl, 1971). But a growing body of research finds that modern democracies often fail to achieve this ideal and that political representation is unequal. In particular, studies have found that the preferences of affluent citizens tend to be better represented than those of the less affluent.

Legislators' own positions seem to reflect more closely the preferences of affluent citizens—a phenomenon representation scholars call *opinion congruence* (Giger *et al.*, 2012; Bernauer *et al.*, 2015; Rosset, 2016; Lesschaeve, 2017; Lupu and Warner, 2017, 2022a; Schakel and Hakhverdian, 2018; Rosset and Stecker, 2019). And they also seem to pursue legislative actions that better address the preferences and priorities of the affluent—a process representation scholars call *policy responsiveness* (Jacobs and Page, 2005; Bartels, 2008;

Gilens, 2012; Donnelly and Lefkofridi, 2014; Flavin, 2014; Peters and Ensink, 2015; Franko *et al.*, 2016; Lax *et al.*, 2019; Mathisen, 2019; Persson, 2020, 2021; Schakel *et al.*, 2020; Elsässer *et al.*, 2021; Schakel, 2021; Schakel and van der Pas, 2021; Traber *et al.*, 2022).

But this research is still in its infancy. Scholars of US politics debate the extent of unequal policy responsiveness there (e.g. Soroka and Wlezien, 2008; Gilens, 2009, 2015; Brunner *et al.*, 2013; Enns, 2015). And the comparative research in this area is still very sparse. While a couple of studies of inequality in congruence take a broadly comparative perspective, most studies, including all those focused on unequal responsiveness across policy areas, have examined only relatively wealthy, long-established democracies with largely stable party systems.¹ The balance of the evidence scholars have gathered suggests that policy responsiveness may indeed be unequal in modern democracies, but the case is far from settled (see Elkjær and Iversen, 2020).

Our biased sample of country cases especially limits what we can learn. We might wonder whether the finding of unequal policy responsiveness extends to newer democracies with more volatile party systems, even within Western Europe. Perhaps affluent elites have been able to capture the policymaking process over time in established democracies with stable institutions, but the same may not be true at the outset of democracy. Given the debates in this literature about appropriate measures and analytic strategies, it would also be useful to have more data and more analyses of different kinds to triangulate findings of inequality. Finally, having such a limited sample of countries makes it difficult to build theories about what might explain unequal responsiveness.

One common hypothesis is that biased turnout may be part of the explanation (e.g. Griffin and Newman, 2005; Peters and Ensink, 2015; Guntermann *et al.*, 2020). If elected representatives seek reelection, they may discount the preferences of citizens who are less likely to vote (Dassonneville *et al.*, 2021)—and in Northern Europe and the USA, those citizens are less affluent (Leighley and Nagler, 2014; Gallego, 2015). Some studies try to assess this argument by comparing the preferences of self-reported voters and nonvoters, but survey self-reports of past voting are notoriously unreliable. The ideal way to test this hypothesis would be to add more countries to our knowledge base, including those where turnout is not unequal.

In this article, we help to address these limitations by adding a new, and crucially different, country to the sample of studies of unequal responsiveness. This is not a trivial empirical contribution given that similar studies of unequal policy responsiveness exist for only five countries and each new study requires extensive data collection and contextual knowledge. Moreover, Spain differs in many ways from the existing set of cases studied by prior scholars: it is a younger, Third-Wave democracy with a more volatile party system and different institutional arrangements (e.g. more disproportional electoral rules). This not only expands our set of cases, but also helps us establish the degree to which unequal responsiveness might be a general feature of modern democracies.

Importantly, our study also adds a case where voter turnout has not been class-biased, as it is in the USA and Northern Europe (see Table 1). If we find similar political inequalities in

1 To date, studies of unequal policy responsiveness covering a broad range of policies have examined Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and the USA. There is also an ongoing effort to pool the datasets of the four European democracies.

Table 1. Comparing country cases, 1976–2016

Country	Dispropor.	ENP	Electoral volatility	Public campaign financing	Turnout	Turnout inequality
Germany	2.58 (2.19)	3.48 (0.55)	0.84 (1.05)	Partial	80.7% (6.50)	0.036* (0.002) N = 10 836
Netherlands	0.98 (0.24)	4.79 (0.97)	2.26 (2.85)	Little	80.0% (4.46)	0.025* (0.003) N = 7, 583
Norway	3.72 (1.06)	4.03 (0.71)	0.40 (0.44)	Partial	79.4% (3.14)	0.035* (0.003) N = 9530
Spain	7.09 (1.77)	2.69 (0.38)	1.89 (1.54)	Partial	73.1% (4.14)	-0.005 (0.004) N = 4642
Sweden	1.54 (0.85)	3.94 (0.53)	0.60 (1.00)	Partial	86.0% (3.87)	0.022* (0.004) N = 4045
USA	4.66 (2.32)	1.95 (0.006)		None	43.9% (7.15)	0.061* (0.004) N = 5852

Notes: Values are averages over the period 1976–2016. Disproportionality is measured using the [Gallagher \(1991\)](#) index. ENP is the effective number of electoral parties. Electoral volatility is the [Pedersen \(1979\)](#) index for volatility caused by party entry and exit. Public campaign financing is an expert-coded measure of the degree to which public financing of campaigns is available for parties or candidates competing for national office. Turnout inequality is the estimated coefficient from regressing turnout on education (controlling for study fixed effects) in the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) surveys. Standard deviations or standard errors in parentheses.

* $p < 0.05$.

Sources: [Armington et al. \(2021\)](#), CSES and [Emanuele \(2015\)](#), V-Dem.

this case, it would suggest that a common explanation for unequal representation, namely unequal participation, is not actually a sufficient condition. Finally, we leverage variation within our case to examine how unequal responsiveness varies by policy domain and by the ideology of the government, analyses that, while exploratory, help move this literature in the direction of developing and testing explanations for unequal representation.

To study responsiveness in Spain, we collected data from mass surveys fielded over the period 1976–2016—almost the entire contemporary democratic period—that asked the Spanish public their preferences regarding policy issues and proposals that were being debated in the public sphere. We then researched which of these policies were indeed approved by the Spanish government. This allows us to examine whether legislative action on these issues was more likely to follow when certain social groups within the Spanish public supported them. And this can tell us whether unequal policy responsiveness extends to this Southern European democracy.

We find that it does. Regardless of the measures we use and the analytical approach we take, we consistently find that the preference of the most affluent influence policy outcomes substantially more than those of the least affluent. As in Northern Europe and the USA, policy responsiveness in post-Third Wave Spain appears to be unequal. Digging deeper into our data, we find that this pattern of inequality holds regardless of the ideology of the government and the type of policy, although it is most pronounced among cultural issues.

2. Unequal responsiveness in comparative perspective

Political equality is fundamental to theories of democratic representation (Dahl, 2006). So too is the notion that a democratic government ought to be responsive to the preferences of its citizens (Dahl, 1971, 1998; Urbinati and Warren, 2008), or at least that elected representatives, ‘must not be found persistently at odds with the wishes of the represented without good reason’ (Pitkin, 1967, p. 210). Even if these ideals are never truly achieved, the degree and nature of political inequality, Gilens (2012, p. 1) argues, ‘tell us much about the quality of the society’s democracy’ (see also Sabl, 2015).

For several decades, empirical scholars have been evaluating this dimension of democratic quality by studying the degree to which citizens’ preferences appear to exert influence over the outcomes of the policymaking process in modern democracies (e.g. Miller and Stokes, 1963; Achen, 1978; Esaiasson and Holmberg, 1996; Hobolt and Klemmensen, 2008; Canes-Wrone, 2015). To be sure, the link between preferences and policy is not the only important measure of democratic quality or even of the connection between citizens’ desires and the work of their elected representatives. Still, it is an important component of democratic representation that merits empirical investigation.

Recent work in this tradition, however, has documented political inequalities specifically associated with citizens’ economic position. Research by Gilens (2005, 2012) first showed that policy outcomes in the USA tend to be far more responsive to the preferences of affluent Americans than they are to the preferences of lower-income citizens. While there are persistent debates about how to measure responsiveness and the appropriate analytic approach (Bhatti and Erikson, 2001; Soroka and Wlezien, 2008; Brunner *et al.*, 2013; Enns, 2015; Branham *et al.*, 2017; but see Gilens, 2009, 2015; Bartels, 2021), other studies have found similar inequalities in policy responsiveness in the USA (e.g. Bartels, 2008; Hayes, 2013; Flavin, 2014; Becher *et al.*, 2018).

Why are elected officials more responsive to the preferences of the affluent in the USA? Researchers typically posit three potential explanations. First is the outsize role of money in American politics. Since affluent citizens disproportionately direct lobbying and campaign finance, representatives may be responding to those who hold the purse strings (e.g. Bartels, 2008; Gilens, 2012; Flavin, 2014). A second explanation is that reelection-motivated representatives are simply discounting the preferences of less-affluent citizens since they are less likely to turn out to vote (Griffin and Newman, 2005; Guntermann *et al.*, 2020). A final explanation posits that high income inequality in the USA makes it all the more likely that the affluent will work to exert more influence over the policymaking process (Flavin, 2012).

Adjudicating among these explanations (and other plausible ones; see Lupu and Warner, 2022b) within the single US case is difficult. Authors sometimes rely on variation across states within the USA and other times offer only suggestive evidence. Based on these assessments, there is broad agreement among scholars in this area that campaign financing plays a

critical role in unequal policy responsiveness in the USA. But we need to go beyond the USA to better understand this phenomenon.

Taking a comparative perspective offers two analytical advantages. First, before we can build theories to explain the causes of unequal responsiveness, we need to understand the extent to which it exists across modern democracies. To that end, a number of recent studies have found similar patterns of inequality across several European democracies (Donnelly and Lefkofridi, 2014; Peters and Ensink, 2015; Bartels, 2017; Elkjær, 2020; Schakel *et al.*, 2020). Unlike Gilens (2012), who includes a wide range of policies, these studies focus exclusively on government spending, often just social welfare spending. Only four studies to date have applied the methodology and broad scope of Gilens's analysis—in Germany (Elsässer *et al.*, 2021), the Netherlands (Schakel, 2021; Schakel and van der Pas, 2021), Norway (Mathisen, 2019) and Sweden (Persson, 2020, 2021). They too find evidence for unequal policy responsiveness.

A second advantage of going beyond the US case is that cross-national comparison can help us adjudicate among competing explanations for unequal responsiveness. Whereas scholars of the USA emphasize the role of money in politics as a central explanation, the extent to which we uncover similarly unequal policy responsiveness in contemporary Europe raises important doubts (Elsässer *et al.*, 2021; Schakel, 2021). After all, most European election campaigns are funded through party memberships and public financing. Additional cases can help us evaluate other potential explanations.

What we know about unequal policy responsiveness therefore remains limited. The studies that look at the wide range of public policies (beyond just spending) are limited to the wealthy, established democracies of Northern Europe. In one sense, these are unlikely contexts in which to find unequal responsiveness, precisely because, unlike the USA, they are relatively egalitarian and electoral campaigns do not rely heavily on private funding. In another respect, though, they share characteristics that may make them likely cases: affluent elites may have entrenched their preferences in older democracies with established institutions and party systems, making them less likely to respond to the preferences of the less-affluent. Even more importantly, these cases offer no variation on one feature that is regularly offered as a potential explanation for unequal responsiveness, namely that the affluent are substantially more likely to participate in politics than the less-affluent. Without studying cases that differ along some of these dimensions, we cannot know the degree to which unequal responsiveness is a general feature of modern democracies and we cannot hope to explain it.

We turn to the case of Spain to address these limitations. Our study represents the first broad analysis of unequal policy responsiveness in Southern Europe, where democracies are younger and party systems less stable (although the Dutch party system is also relatively fluid). As Table 1 also shows, Spain has a far more disproportional electoral system than the other cases, adding another dimension of significant variation. Importantly, political participation, which is class-biased in Northern Europe and the USA, is not so in Spain (Boix and Riba, 2000; Gallego, 2015), offering an opportunity to gain analytical leverage on the question of whether unequal participation might explain unequal responsiveness.

Our aim here is descriptive and not causal.² We want to know the extent to which patterns of unequal representation uncovered in one set of countries (Northern Europe and the

2 On the importance of description for political science, see Gerring (2012).

USA) hold in a different political and socioeconomic context. Doing so is important if we want to build causal theories about why political responsiveness is unequal. And it helps us adjudicate among competing hypotheses: the fact that policy responsiveness is also unequal in a country where political participation is more equal suggests that biased turnout may not be a sufficient condition for unequal responsiveness. In short, descriptive analysis in a new political context is a critical scientific step towards building—and eventually adjudicating among—theories to explain the important phenomenon of unequal policy responsiveness.

3. Data from Spain

To study policy responsiveness, we first need information about the policy preferences of the public. Since its refounding in 1976, just after Spain's transition to democracy, the respected Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas (CIS; Sociological Research Center) has been fielding regular, high-quality public opinion surveys and making them available to the public. Over the period 1976–2016, the CIS fielded over 1200 national and regional surveys, asking Spaniards their opinions on a wide range of issues. From this extensive catalogue, we identified 122 nationally representative surveys that included questions about specific policy preferences.³ These surveys asked a total of 214 individual items regarding respondents' support for political issues and policies that were being debated in the public arena in Spain at the time.⁴

For each of these selected questions, we established whether the policy proposal was approved or not by the Spanish government within 4 years after the survey.⁵ We did this by researching legislative documents—particularly the Official State Gazette (*Boletín Oficial del Estado*) that publishes judicial, royal and national decrees—as well as academic sources and national newspaper coverage of each issue in the years following the survey. We then created a dummy variable for each policy that identified whether or not it was adopted by the Spanish government, our key dependent variable. Finally, we classified these policies

- 3 The surveys use area probability samples designed to be representative of the adult population of Spanish nationals. Interviews are conducted face to face and the samples typically include a minimum of 2000 observations. Our dataset ends in 2016 because we code our dependent variable (the policy outcome) over the subsequent 4 years.
- 4 [Online Appendix A](#) lists all of the items, in Spanish and English, and the years in which they were asked. For each policy that was approved within 4 years of the survey (and many that were not), we include the source of information about the legislation. Some of the questions are fairly indirect, but we think, in context, would have been interpreted as relating to specific policy proposals (these are indicated with an asterisk in the [Online Appendix](#)). Dropping these items from the dataset does not affect our main results (see [Online Appendix Table A7](#)). Following [Gilens \(2012\)](#), we discarded all policy questions that were asked after a policy was already approved in order to avoid the potential for reverse causation.
- 5 We do not address here whether a policy was adopted at the regional level since the surveys we analyse are representative at the national level. We also limit our analysis to policies within the jurisdiction of the national government. We do this in order to make our study as comparable as possible to those conducted in other countries. However, given the important administrative role of regions and autonomous communities in Spain, and the availability of regional surveys in the CIS catalogue, a similar region-level analysis may be a fruitful avenue for future research. The 4-year window for evaluating policy change is somewhat arbitrary, but follows similar studies in other countries.

into four domains⁶: (1) those related to economic and social policy, like taxation and government spending; (2) those related to political processes, like constitutional reform and regional autonomy; (3) those related to national security and foreign affairs, like European integration and political violence; and (4) cultural issues, like divorce, gay marriage and immigration.

For each survey item, we coded whether an individual agreed or disagreed with the policy proposal. When the response options included a median/neutral option (e.g. ‘neither agree nor disagree’), we coded those respondents as favouring the status quo with regard to that policy or issue. This helps us avoid potential status-quo biases (Soroka and Wlezien, 2008; Bowman, 2020), which we discuss further below. We then aggregated these individual preferences by social group to identify the rate of support for each proposal by group.

To do this, we also need to identify individual respondents’ socioeconomic status. In public opinion studies in the USA, this is typically done using self-reported household income (see also Schakel, 2021). In the European context, researchers more often rely on education or occupation (e.g. Persson, 2020, 2021; Elsässer *et al.*, 2021) and indeed many surveys omit questions about household income altogether. In Spain, in particular, where the informal economy is substantial, self-reported household income is often a less reliable measure. Indeed, the CIS only began regularly asking respondents their household income in 2008, meaning that we only have that variable for 58 of the 214 issue items in our dataset.⁷ Our analysis therefore relies on education and occupation as measures of socioeconomic status. This has the additional advantage that unlike income position, educational and especially occupational experiences are critical sources of political socialization (Kitschelt and Rehm, 2014).⁸

The Spanish educational system changed substantially during the period of our data, with seven different educational reforms (some of them related to the European Union

- 6 These policy domains correspond to those used by Gilens (2012), with two differences. First, we collapse his separate economic and social welfare policy domains since these are so closely related in policy debates in the European context. Second, we add a political process domain dealing with constitutional reform and regional issues, an area of policy debate that has been very salient in Spain because of its young democratic institutions and strong subnational identities.
- 7 Even where the surveys did ask household income, we can only disaggregate respondents into quintiles, rather than the deciles used in prior studies. When we nevertheless run our models using income, the patterns are substantively similar, though our estimates are naturally less precise (see [Online Appendix Table A6](#)).
- 8 One advantage of studying income groups, however, is that they can be divided into equal-sized groups (as in deciles). This is appealing because politicians may rationally be more responsive to larger groups than to smaller ones. While our socioeconomic groups are of different sizes, we do not see consistent evidence for this bias. In fact, our results sometimes show the least responsiveness to the largest socioeconomic group (unskilled workers). Moreover, we think it is important to demonstrate inequality in responsiveness, even if its cause is legislators behaving rationally. Note also that the sizes of our socioeconomic groups are relatively stable over time (see [Online Appendix Figures A1 and A2](#)), although the secondary and tertiary education groups grow somewhat over time. There are two sets of exceptions to this stability: (1) with regard to occupation, the very first couple of surveys in our dataset classified an unusually high number of respondents as unskilled workers and (2) with regard to education, the CIS classified many more respondents as having primary education until a coding change was implemented in 1993. Our results are substantively consistent if we focus just on the data starting after this change (see [Online Appendix Table A7](#)).

standardizing higher education) and the CIS also coded educational attainment differently over time. We standardize the survey categories into a classification scheme based on the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED, 2011). We then create three educational groups: those with no formal or only primary education, those with at least some secondary education and those with tertiary or higher education.

The CIS similarly modified its approach to classifying occupations over time, adopting the Spanish National Statistical Institute's classification schemes CNO-79, CNO-94 and CNO-11. We use the Institute's crosswalk documents to standardize the classification into occupational categories based on the widely used scheme developed by Oesch (2006) and applied to the Spanish case in Oesch and Rodríguez Menés (2011). We then aggregate these into four occupational groups: unskilled workers, skilled workers, lower-grade service class and higher-grade service class and small business owners.⁹

Our analysis relates the preferences of each socioeconomic group with the actual policy outcome, to see if some socioeconomic groups consistently have more influence over policy-making than others. We take a number of different approaches to analysing policy responsiveness, following the best approaches used in related studies and paying special attention to the methodological debates among researchers in this area. As Gilens (2012, p. 47) notes, 'There is no single right way to assess something as complex as government responsiveness to public preferences; alternative approaches offer different sets of trade-offs and limitations.' To the extent that we find similar evidence of inequality using some of these different approaches, we can be more confident that our results are not artifacts of particular measurement strategies or model specifications.¹⁰

4. Policy preferences in Spain

What do our data reveal about policy preferences during Spain's contemporary democratic era? For one, they show that socioeconomic groups do not differ wildly in their policy preferences. Figure 1 plots the level of support for each policy proposal among the highest and lowest socioeconomic groups: primary versus tertiary education and unskilled workers versus higher-grade service professionals and owners. Regardless of whether we look at education or occupation, the figure shows that the preferences of the highest and lowest groups are highly correlated, mirroring similar associations in other contexts (Soroka and Wlezién, 2008; Branham *et al.*, 2017; Elsässer *et al.*, 2021; Schakel, 2021).¹¹ Of course, these correlations may also reflect the possibility that measurement error is correlated across groups within a survey or item.

9 Oesch uses five class categories, splitting up the higher grade service class and small business owners. We combine these two because they represent small proportions of the Spanish population and, as a result, our samples.

10 We follow prior studies in this literature by not including any additional control variables in our regression models. However, Online Appendix Table A8 reproduces our main results including a series of economic and political controls that may be thought to confound the relationship between public preferences and policy outcomes. These are GDP per capita, the unemployment and inflation rates, the degree of legislative fragmentation and government ideology. Information about the sources and definitions of these variables is also available in the Online Appendix. Adding these variables to our models does not change our substantive results.

11 The correlations are 0.81 for the education groups and 0.94 for the occupation groups.

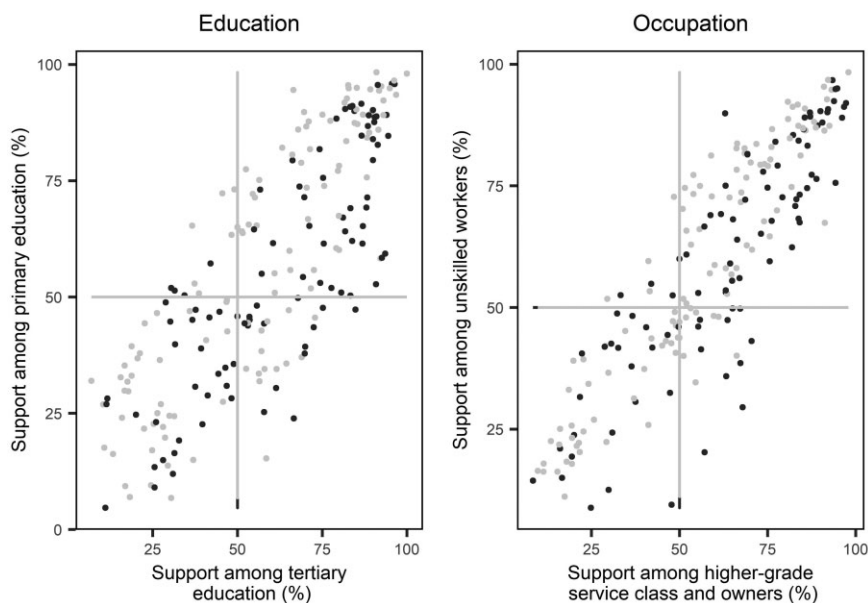


Figure 1 Comparing group preferences. Dots represent individual policy proposals, showing the proportion of support among the highest and lowest education and occupational groups. Black dots identify proposals that were approved within 4 years of the survey item, gray dots those that were not approved.

Figure 1 also reveals something about the overall relationship between public opinion and policy. The black dots represent proposals that were approved within 4 years after the survey question, the gray dots those that were not. There appears to be a cluster of black dots at the top right of the plot, meaning that many policies that are broadly popular get adopted. At the same time, many very popular policies do not seem to get adopted. And, moreover, the many black dots in the lower left quadrant show that quite a number of broadly *unpopular* policies also get adopted. Overall, 49% of the policies in our dataset were adopted.¹²

Nevertheless, Figure 1 also highlights that while the preferences of Spaniards in different socioeconomic groups are correlated, they are far from identical. Indeed, there are many instances of substantial policy disagreement between more and less affluent Spaniards. The average absolute difference between levels of support among the most and least affluent is 13.0 percentage points for the education groups and 6.1 percentage points for the occupation groups.

12 This rate is higher than that reported in similar studies in the USA and the Netherlands (Gilens, 2012; Schakel, 2021). The distinction here may be related to Spain's transition to democracy, which required political reforms but also offered the possibility for other changes to the political status quo of the dictatorship. Indeed, the approval rate was substantially higher (62%) during the early democratic period in the 1970s and 1980s.

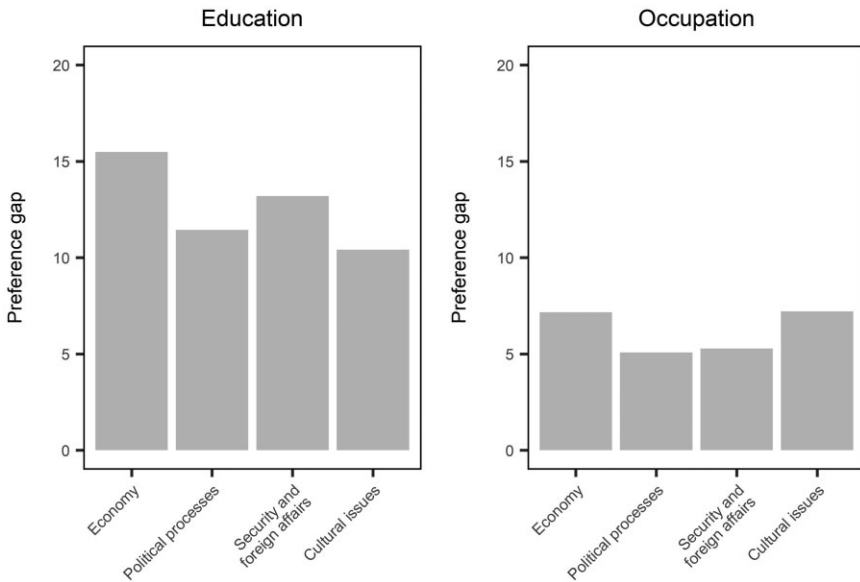


Figure 2 Policy disagreement by domain. Bars show the average absolute difference in support between the highest and lowest education and occupation groups within each policy domain.

Figure 2 breaks this policy disagreement down by domain, showing the absolute difference in preferences between the highest and lowest socioeconomic groups. We find that these groups' preferences differ the most when it comes to economic issues, which is not surprising. Among occupation groups, cultural issues also generate relatively higher levels of disagreement. Notably, there is more disagreement among education groups than there is among occupation groups.

What do these disagreements actually look like in the dataset? Consider some of the policies with the highest levels of disagreement between the most and least affluent groups. In 1978, the CIS asked Spaniards whether they supported recognizing the rights of conscientious objectors, individuals who refused the military service that was still obligatory at the time and had been during the Franco regime. The regime's military origins and the persistent association of the Spanish military with the dictatorship meant that many Spaniards objected and the issue became politically salient during the transition years (Ordás, 2016). Among the highest education group, 91% supported recognizing conscientious objectors, but only 53% of the lowest education group agreed—a remarkable difference of just over 38 percentage points. The recognition would have to wait until 1984 (i.e. outside our 4-year window), when an alternative to military service was created for conscientious objectors.

A similarly remarkable disagreement, also dating to 1978, has to do with one of several efforts by Spain's first democratic government to roll back the Franco regime's conservative social policies and consolidate democracy (Fishman, 1990; Bermeo, 1994). Asked whether they supported decriminalizing adultery and legalizing contraceptives, 85% of Spaniards in the highest education group expressed support, but only 47% of the lowest education group did so. Despite the disagreement, the policy was adopted later that same year (see Blofield, 2006).

Similar patterns appear more recently and with occupation groups. In 1997, for instance, the CIS asked respondents whether Spain should adopt the new European single currency or retain its own national currency, a part of ongoing debates in Spanish politics at the time about European integration (Díez Medrano, 2010). Among higher grade service professionals and owners, the euro was preferred by 56%, but only 41% of unskilled workers preferred it. Indeed, our dataset shows that many aspects of European integration over the years were more popular among more affluent Spaniards than they were among the less-affluent. As in many of those other cases, the higher socioeconomic group won out, with the Spanish government adopting the euro at the beginning of 1999.

A final example dates to 1989, when the recurring issue of regional autonomy was especially salient and the CIS asked Spaniards whether they would support the right to self-determination of the residents of Catalunya and the Basque Country (see Gillespie and Gray, 2015). Only 39% of higher-grade service professionals and owners supported allowing these communities to consider independence, whereas 53% of unskilled workers approved of it. In the end, the Spanish government did not approve such a measure; indeed, its repeated resistance to separatist demands in these regions contributed to ongoing tensions and, at times, violence.

These are only some of the issues on which the least and most affluent Spaniards disagreed, but they represent the range of issues (and some of the recurring topics) that our dataset includes. These examples also highlight that, at first glance, the most affluent do seem to get their way when the public disagrees strongly in their preferences. However, this is not always the case—or at least not within the time-frame we establish—as the case of conscientious objection shows. We turn, then, to more systematic analysis of whether policy responsiveness in Spain is generally unequal.

5. Analysing policy responsiveness

Are policy outcomes in Spain generally more responsive to the preferences of the most affluent, as they are in the USA and Northern Europe? Answering this question requires confronting several methodological challenges (see Bartels, 2021). Prior studies of unequal responsiveness (as well as overall policy responsiveness) typically analyse this question by regressing the policy outcome (i.e. whether or not a policy proposal was adopted) on the proportion of a group that supports it. Higher correlation coefficients are then interpreted as more responsiveness.

The problems with these kinds of analyses are two-fold. High correlation coefficients can tell us that a group's preferences covary with adoption even if it has little actual influence over the outcome (Achen, 1977). Regression models like these *can* tell us whether some groups appear to have more influence over policymaking than others if we include in the same model the preferences of different groups, as Gilens (2012) does (see also Gilens and Page, 2014). The problem with this approach, though, is that the preferences of different groups are correlated, often highly so (Soroka and Wlezien, 2008; Enns, 2015). As long as we do not have perfectly correlated preferences, multicollinearity will not bias regression estimates, but it will make our estimates less precise.¹³

13 Gilens (2012) partially corrects for the correlated measurement errors in the preferences of different groups by relying on instances in which similar policy questions were put to different survey samples in the same year. Our more limited dataset unfortunately does not allow us to make a similar correction.

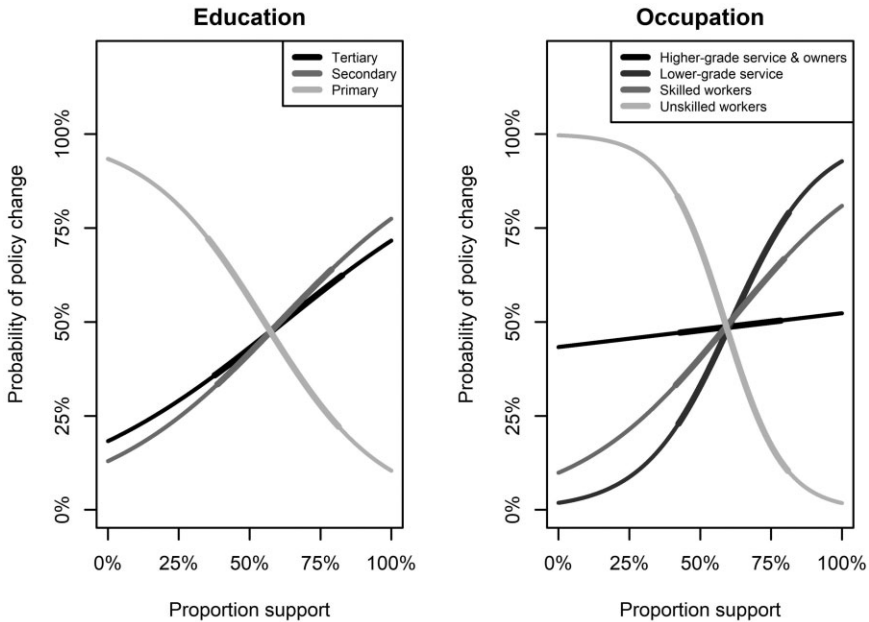


Figure 3 Group preferences and policy change. The figures show the predicted probability of policy change based on different education and occupation group preferences. The thicker portions of the lines represent the interquartile range of the variable in the data. These estimates are based on regression models reported in [Online Appendix Tables A1 and A2](#).

[Online Appendix Tables A1 and A2](#) report the results of these kinds of regression analyses with our data for Spain. [Figure 3](#) plots the predicted effects of each group's level of policy support on the probability it gets adopted.¹⁴ The figure also shows the interquartile range of each variable to distinguish the extreme predictions that are mostly statistical extrapolations from the data.

As expected, most of the correlation coefficients on group preferences are imprecisely estimated,¹⁵ but the estimates are nevertheless instructive. Beginning with education groups, [Figure 3](#) shows that as Spaniards with tertiary education increase their support for a policy proposal, it becomes substantially more likely to be adopted. Indeed, proposals with high

14 [Online Appendix Figure A3](#) also includes confidence intervals for each prediction line, but we exclude these here for the sake of clarity and because the high degree of multicollinearity inflates our standard errors.

15 Analysts often calculate the variance inflation factor (VIF) as a diagnostic measure of multicollinearity, with a rule of thumb that values greater than 4 imply high multicollinearity. In our fully specified model of education groups (model 4 in [Online Appendix Table A1](#)), the VIFs are 10.7, 35.1 and 14.5 for the tertiary, secondary and primary education groups, respectively. In our fully specified model of occupation groups (model 5 in [Online Appendix Table A2](#)), the VIFs are 29.7, 25.0, 50.0 and 45.0 for the higher-grade service class and owners, lower-grade service class, skilled workers and unskilled workers, respectively.

levels of support among this group have a high probability of becoming law. In contrast, the preferences of Spaniards with only primary education appears to be negatively related to policy change, something Gilens (2012) also finds in the USA. The more a proposal is preferred by this least-affluent group, the less likely it is to be adopted.

Similar patterns emerge among occupation groups. Here again, Figure 3 shows that as higher-grade service professionals and owners increase their support for a policy, it becomes more likely to be adopted—although the slope of the line for this affluent group is flatter than it is for the top education group. The relationships between preferences and outcomes for lower grade service professionals and for skilled workers are similarly positive and steeper. But as with education, the bottom occupation group—unskilled workers—has no such influence on policymaking. Regardless of whether we measure socioeconomic status using education or occupation, our data clearly show unequal policy responsiveness in Spain.

Given the problem of multicollinearity in these kinds of models, some scholars have suggested alternative ways of analysing policy responsiveness. One approach is comparing policy change rates under different distributions of preferences among particular groups (Branham *et al.*, 2017). These kinds of rates can themselves be problematic since the threshold one uses to define popularity can be arbitrary and may affect the substantive results (Bowman, 2020). The estimates in Table 2 follow the thresholds used by Gilens (2012) to examine some of these policy change rates. We examine the rate at which policies are adopted when policies are especially popular among top and bottom socioeconomic groups, defining popular policies as those with support above 75%.

The results again show consistent evidence of unequal responsiveness. Policies that are popular among the top socioeconomic group—whether those with tertiary education or higher-grade service professionals and owners—have nearly a 57% chance of being approved. On the other hand, when policies are especially popular among the bottom group—whether those with only primary education or unskilled workers—they are substantially less likely to become law, at roughly a 41% change rate.

One issue with these kinds of analyses is that if preferences are highly correlated, it may be hard to observe which group has more influence over policymaking. Gilens (2005) proposes focusing instead on policies about which socioeconomic groups disagree (see also Gilens, 2012, 2015). Table 2 reports policy change rates for policies that were both popular

Table 2 Policy change rates

Preference distribution	Policy change rate
Popular among Tertiary ($N = 74$)	56.8
Popular among Primary ($N = 64$)	40.6
More popular among Tertiary ($N = 28$)	78.6
More popular among Primary ($N = 28$)	25.0
Popular among higher-grade service class and owners ($N = 60$)	53.3
Popular among unskilled workers ($N = 66$)	45.5
More popular among higher-grade service class and owners ($N = 12$)	66.7
More popular among unskilled workers ($N = 20$)	30.0

among either the top or bottom education and occupation group and on which the two groups disagreed by at least 5 percentage points.¹⁶

The evidence for unequal responsiveness is even starker among this subset of policy proposals. A policy that is popular among Spaniards with tertiary education but substantially less popular among those with only primary education has close to a 79% chance of being approved. Compare that with only 25% when a policy is popular among those with only primary education and the highly educated disagree. Similarly, a policy that is popular among higher-grade service professionals and owners but less popular among unskilled workers has a 67% chance of passing, but when a policy is popular among unskilled workers and less so among higher grade service professionals and owners, its likelihood of passing is only 30%. A policy's popularity among more affluent Spaniards appears to be more important in the policymaking process.

One limitation of looking at policy change rates is that policymaking often has a status-quo bias. If a particular social group tends to support the status quo, then they would appear to have disproportionate influence on policy outcomes simply by virtue of the coincidence between their preferences and the status quo (Bowman, 2020). Alternatively, if each group sometimes supports the status quo, then status-quo bias may lead us to understate the actual differences in groups' influence over policy outcomes. This may be less of a concern in a newer democracy like Spain, where the status-quo bias of the policymaking process may be less pronounced, especially in the earlier period of democratic transition and consolidation. Indeed, the fact that the rate of policy approval in our dataset is substantially higher than what similar studies observe in the USA and Northern Europe may be indicative of this.

Still, we take one final analytical approach that overcomes this limitation. Following Gilens (2005), we study the effect of the gap in preferences between groups rather than just their individual influence. The idea here is to see whether there is inequality in responsiveness by examining whether policymaking is more likely to be influenced by the affluent when preferences diverge. This approach also avoids the issue of multicollinearity, allowing us to estimate relationships more precisely.

To do this, we measure the preference gap for each policy proposal as the difference between the proportion of the most affluent who support it and the proportion of the least affluent who support it. When the preference gap is positive, the policy is favoured more by the well-to-do than by the least affluent. When the gap is negative, the least affluent are more supportive. [Online Appendix Table A3](#) reports the results of our regression analyses and [Figure 4](#) presents the predicted effects.¹⁷

These results again show that affluent Spaniards have substantially more influence over policymaking. When the more-affluent and the less-affluent diverge in their preferences, the former are more likely to get what they want. When the reverse is true—when the less-

16 This threshold is arbitrary, but our limited number of observations makes it difficult to go any higher in this analysis. In our analysis of all preference gaps below, we also examine disagreements of 10 percentage points. Both thresholds also follow similar analyses in prior studies.

17 [Online Appendix Table A3](#) reports the results for the full sample of policies and also for subsets of the sample in which the top and bottom socioeconomic groups diverged by at least 5 or 10 percentage points. The relationship between preference gaps and policy change is remarkably stable across these subsets of the data.

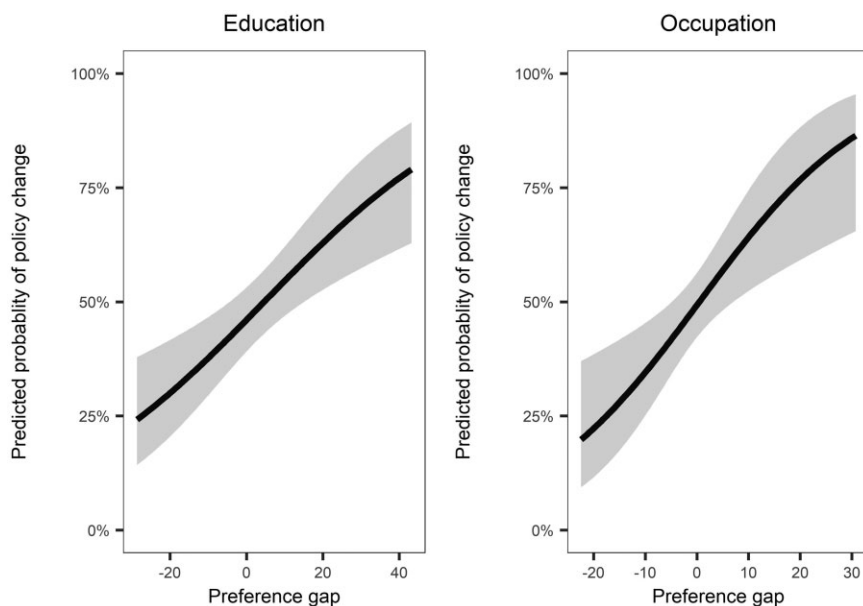


Figure 4 Preference gaps and policy change. The figures show the probability of policy change predicted by preference gaps between the top and bottom education and occupation groups. Predictions are based on regression models 1 and 4 reported in [Online Appendix Table A3](#).

affluent support a proposal more than the most affluent—it has a much lower chance of success.

Regardless of how we identify socioeconomic groups in Spain and the approach we apply to analyse our data, we consistently see that the most affluent citizens have more influence over policy outcomes than the less well-off. The phenomenon of unequal policy responsiveness, it seems, is not limited to the USA and Northern Europe, but extends also to a newer, Southern European democracy.

6. Types of policies and governments

Once we establish a pattern of inequality in policy responsiveness, the logical next question is why responsiveness is unequal. We cannot hope to definitively answer this question within the confines of a single paper—indeed, we would likely need cross-national data to do so convincingly—but what we can do is delve deeper into our dataset for potential avenues for theory-building.

One way to do this is to examine whether particular kinds of policies are driving unequal responsiveness. A number of studies of unequal representation have found that whereas affluent citizens wield outsize influence over economic policymaking, that inequality declines, or even reverses, when it comes to cultural issues (Gilens, 2012; Bartels, 2017; Lupu and Warner, 2022a; but see Elsässer *et al.*, 2021). Figure 5 takes our results on preference gaps among education groups and divides up our sample by policy domain. That is, we again

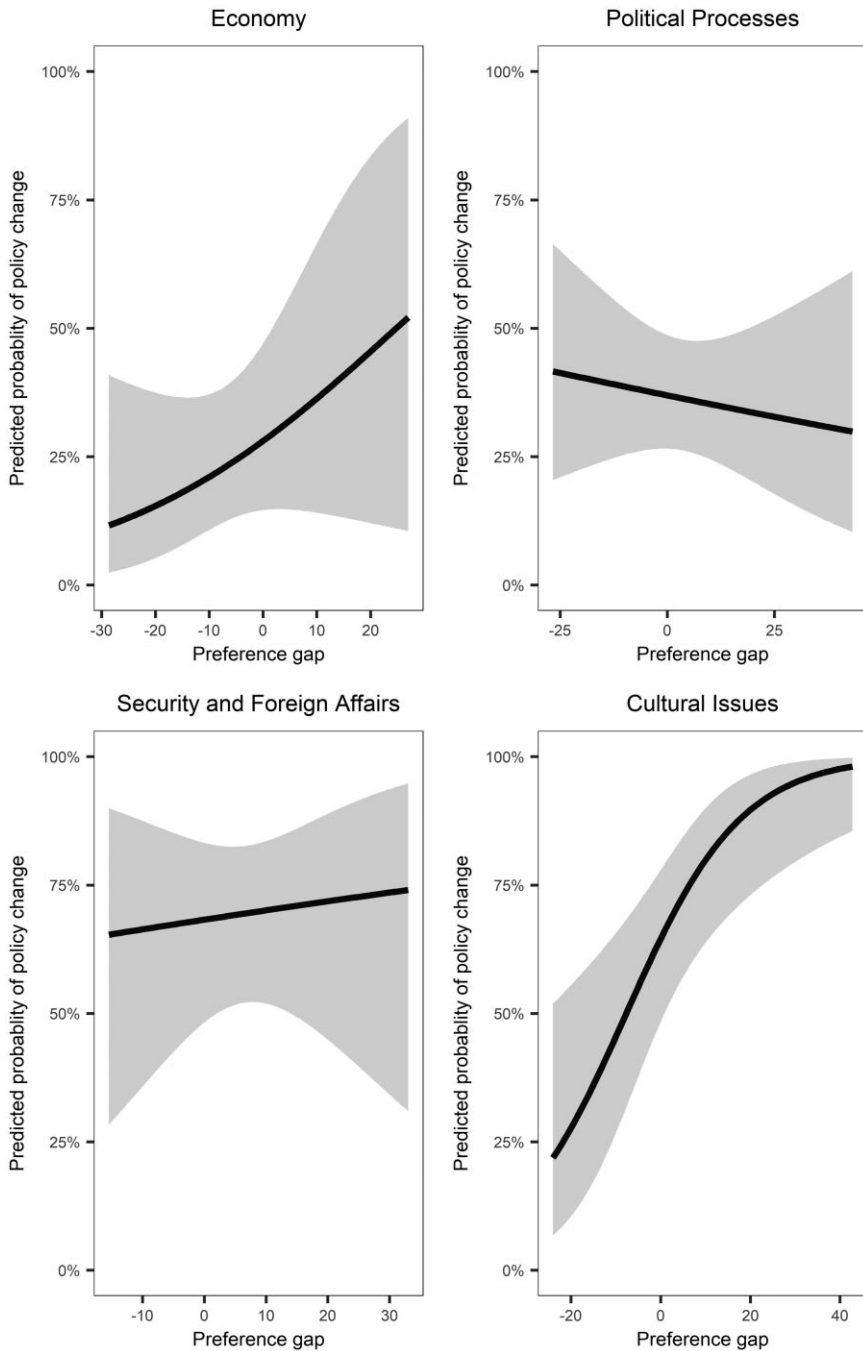


Figure 5 Preference gaps and policy change, by policy domain. The figures show the probability of policy change predicted by preference gaps between the top and bottom education groups, by policy domain. Predictions are based on regression models reported in [Online Appendix Table A4](#).

regress policy outcomes on education preference gaps, but we do so for each policy domain separately (see [Online Appendix Table A4](#)).¹⁸ Since this means that we leverage smaller numbers of observations, the confidence intervals expand and most of the relationships no longer reach conventional thresholds for statistical significance. But the patterns in the figure are still instructive, if suggestive.

These results diverge considerably from some prior studies. Unequal policy responsiveness in Spain seems to be partly driven by economic issues and perhaps also somewhat by issues related to security and foreign affairs. But the inequality is far more notable on cultural issues. In Spain, then, the affluent have a great deal of influence over policymaking on cultural issues. Only when it comes to issues of political processes—regional autonomy, direct democracy and the like—do we see some mild indication of where less-affluent citizens might be more influential. But even this indication is weak at best.

Observers of Spanish politics may not be surprised by these inequalities around cultural issues: less-affluent Spaniards tend to hold more conservative social views whereas policies on cultural issues from divorce to gender parity to gay marriage have moved in a consistently progressive direction over the last four decades ([Engeli et al., 2013](#)). Our data offer systematic evidence of these trends and highlight the political inequalities these policy changes have implied.

Another potential explanation we can explore with our data is the possibility that government ideology might play an important role in whose preferences get represented. Leftist parties are thought to have less-affluent core constituencies ([Huber and Stephens, 2001](#); [Korpi and Palme, 2003](#)), so if leftist governments are more responsive to their core constituents we may expect less unequal responsiveness when the left is in power ([Rhodes and Schaffner, 2017](#)). On the other hand, less-affluent voters have been abandoning mainstream leftist parties in Europe in recent decades ([Rennwald and Pontusson, 2021](#)), Spain's Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE) being no exception ([Share, 1988](#); [Montero, 1998](#)). In that case, there may be little reason to expect differences in unequal responsiveness by government ideology.

Our four decades of data for Spain allow us to examine this possibility because it includes periods of centrist, leftist and rightist governments. In particular, we compare responsiveness during periods of leftist government (1982–1996, 2004–2011) to those in which centrist or rightist coalitions controlled the executive (1976–1982, 1996–2004 and 2011–2018). We do this by revisiting our analysis of preference gaps from [Figure 4](#), but this time interacting preference gaps with government ideology. [Figure 6](#) presents the resulting marginal effect of preference gaps under left and non-left governments.

We find no significant differences between left and right governments with regard to policy responsiveness. If anything, rightist governments in Spain appear to be slightly less unequal in their responsiveness, something that may be related to their more conservative positions on the cultural issues that seem so important to overall unequal responsiveness. But this difference is not statistically significant and substantively small. Of course, this does not mean that we can rule out government ideology as an explanation for unequal policy responsiveness and incorporating variation across countries on this score would offer more analytical leverage than we have within a single case.

18 [Online Appendix Table A9](#) reports estimates from similar regression models using the preference gap between top and bottom occupation groups, with similar substantive results.

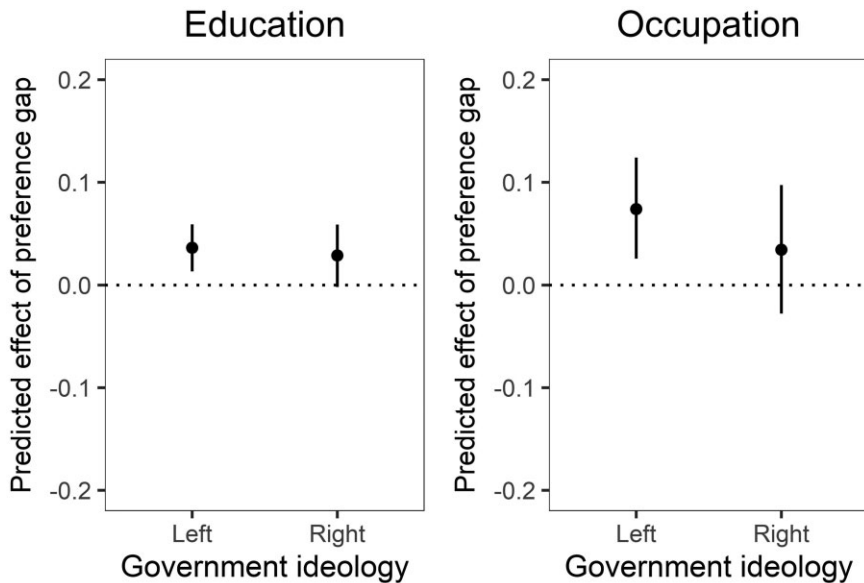


Figure 6 Preference gaps and policy change, by government ideology. The figures show the probability of policy change predicted by preference gaps between the top and bottom education and occupation groups, by government ideology. Predictions are based on regression models reported in [Online Appendix Table A5](#).

7. Understanding unequal responsiveness

More and more studies find that representation in modern democracies is more unequal than we previously thought. Which aspects of democratic representation they analyse and the analytical approach they take vary across studies, but it is now difficult to ignore the mounting evidence of political inequality. Building upon studies in the USA and Northern Europe, we focus in this article specifically on policy responsiveness, whether the preferences of particular social groups have more influence over democratic policymaking than others. Responsiveness is by no means the only way to assess democratic representation; indeed, it is sometimes even problematic as an empirical standard (Sabl, 2015). But it certainly is one element of representation and evidence of unequal policy responsiveness should give us pause about the quality of democratic representation.

Our evidence suggests that policy responsiveness in Spain during the four decades of the contemporary democratic era has indeed been unequal. We pieced together a dataset that includes every available survey item on a policy proposal from the extensive catalogue of the CIS. And regardless of the metric and analytical strategy we use to evaluate this dataset, we consistently find that the preferences of the most affluent have more influence over policymaking than do the preferences of the least affluent. The pattern seems to hold regardless of the ideology of the government and the type of policy we look at, although the inequality is most pronounced among cultural issues.

This finding is notable from the perspective of our understanding of Spanish politics. Spain's transition to democracy was elite-driven, followed by a post-transition period of consensual

politics (Gunther *et al.*, 1986; Sánchez-Cuenca, 2014). As a result, some scholars view modern Spanish democracy as fundamentally exclusionary and elitist (Fishman, 2019), particularly given the subsequent convergence of the two main political parties on economic policy (Perez and Matsaganis, 2018; Buendía, 2020). Others point to relatively frequent episodes of mass mobilization since the transition, describing these episodes as successfully changing the direction of public policy in a more responsive direction (e.g. Jiménez, 2007; Fishman, 2012; Romanos, 2017). Our findings are consistent with the former perspective, suggesting that Spanish democracy's responsiveness to the less-affluent has not been the norm.

Beyond Spain, our findings have important implications for the broader study of policy responsiveness. To date, studies like ours have focused on a small number of Northern European countries and the USA. The fact that we find similar patterns of unequal responsiveness in Spain both adds a case to our empirical body of knowledge and helps us theorize about possible explanations for these patterns. Scholars have posited that one possible explanation has to do with economic biases in turnout: if affluent citizens turn out to vote at higher rates than the less-affluent, then reelection-motivated representatives may give their preferences greater weight. The fact that we find similar patterns of unequal responsiveness in Spain undermines this potential explanation. Unlike the contexts in which prior studies have been conducted, turnout is not class-biased in Spain over the period we study. If there is a general explanation for why policy responsiveness is unequal across established democracies, unequal participation does not seem to be it.

There are, of course, other possible explanations for unequal representation that deserve further attention (see Lupu and Warner, 2022b). One potentially promising explanation has to do with the role of interest groups in the policymaking process. If powerful interest groups are more aligned with the preferences of the affluent and wield substantial influence over policymaking, this may explain the patterns we see in Spain and elsewhere. Indeed, this is a possibility Gilens and Page (2014) examine in the USA, but which we do not have the data to replicate in the Spanish context. That said, there are good reasons to think that interest groups do matter for policymaking in Spain, where civil society played a crucial role in the democratic transition and its consolidation (Encarnación, 2001; Hamann, 2012).

Another possible explanation for unequal responsiveness is that it might be linked to inequalities in descriptive representation. Studies have shown that politicians themselves overwhelmingly come from more affluent socioeconomic backgrounds and that this biases their behaviour (Carnes, 2013; Carnes and Lupu, 2015). And Spain is no exception to this pattern (Curto-Grau and Gallego, 2021). Unequal descriptive representation has yet to be tied directly to unequal responsiveness—and we too do not have sufficient data on the backgrounds and behaviours of Spanish legislators over the 40-year period of our dataset to test it. But this very plausible explanation for unequal responsiveness deserves scholarly attention.

Our findings also differ somewhat from studies in other established democracies. On the one hand, our findings show that policy responsiveness in Spain is unequally distributed, consistent with recent findings in other countries. On the other hand, we do not find evidence that policymaking responds exclusively to the preferences of the most affluent, as in some other countries. In our analysis, there is no statistically significant difference between responsiveness to citizens with secondary and tertiary education (even though the former group is far larger in absolute terms). Our occupation analysis finds more responsiveness to the lower grade service class and skilled workers than to the higher grade service class and business owners, but the latter group still has more influence than unskilled workers. In

sum, policymaking in Spain may be more responsive to the preference of middle-class groups than in some other countries, but it is disproportionately unresponsive to the least affluent.

Our focus here has been on examining inequalities among socioeconomic groups, but the same analytic approaches we take could be replicated to study unequal representation as it applies to other social groups. In the Spanish context, these might be genders, age cohorts, or regional groups. Indeed, the CIS catalogue includes many regional surveys that could be used to analyse responsiveness within regions, an influential level of government in contemporary Spanish politics. Our analysis is by no means the last word on unequal representation in Spain; it ought to spur future researchers to both theorize and examine descriptively the variety of links, both equal and unequal, between public opinion and policy in Spain and beyond.

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Supplementary material

[Supplementary material](#) is available at *SOCECO Journal* online.

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