

Who Gets Constituent Service?

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Abstract

Constituency service is an important component of Congressional representation where Members of Congress help their constituents navigate federal bureaucracies. We leverage a massive new comprehensive database of constituent service requests from Members of Congress to examine which types of constituents receive help from Members of Congress and how electing a Republican or Democrat affects who gets served. We find that the amount of help that legislators provide veterans and seniors aligns with the number of veterans and seniors in their district. However, the share of low-income constituents does not predict the amount of help that legislators provide to constituents seeking help during hardship. Using a difference-in-differences design, we show that Republicans provide less constituency service than Democrats overall. We fail to detect partisan differences in the amount of service to businesses, veterans, or seniors, but we find that Republicans provide much less service to low-income individuals. We offer potential explanations for this disparity, including demand from constituents and elected officials' willingness to supply it. Our results show that elections have consequences for the provision of service to constituents.

Advocating on behalf of constituents in their dealings with government agencies is one way that Members of Congress serve their constituents. Little is known, however, about biases in the provision of constituent service. Despite the nonpartisan nature of constituent service, legislators may prioritize helping constituents they infer to be potential supporters or deem them more deserving of their help. While underserved groups like immigrants, constituents with disabilities, and low-income constituents may require more help navigating the federal bureaucracy, they may be less likely to reach out to their legislators. They may also be less likely to receive help if they ask for it. Asking for help with a particular service or program, such as Medicare, Medicaid, Social Security, veterans' benefits, and immigration, may provide cues to Members of Congress about a constituent's characteristics that affect their perceived deservingness of help. Additionally, legislators may prioritize assisting particular types of constituents who are part of their electoral base, causing factors such as race, income, disability status, age, or veteran status to influence the likelihood that constituents receive help.

Using a new dataset of congressional correspondence with all federal agencies covering the years 2007 through 2019 and obtained through over 400 Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests, we assess the relationship between districts' characteristics and the types of constituency service representatives provide. We might

suspect that some stigmatized groups will fail to ask for help for the federal government or that representatives might be unwilling to provide it. Other valorized groups such as veterans might feel that their status empowers them to ask for help and create incentives for elected officials to provide service to those groups.

We provide some evidence for this pattern in the provision of constituency service and that the party of the elected official can affect the types of service that is provided. First, we show that representatives from districts with a large proportion of veterans provide more constituency services for veterans. Similarly, legislators who represent districts with a large share of senior citizens provide more constituency service for senior citizens. In contrast, there is essentially no relationship between the level of poverty in a district and the provision of constituency service targeted at low-income individuals. This finding is robust, depending on how we measure the provision of service to individuals and how we operationalize the income of a district.

To better understand how the stigma or valor around an individual’s status can affect the amount of service received, we examine how the provision of service changes after a partisan shift in the district. The Democratic party tends to more strongly endorse a role for the federal government in mitigating poverty, while Republicans (on average) find federal assistance more objectionable. Likewise, the Republican party tends to more strongly endorse policies that are pro-business, while Democrats tend to articulate more pro-worker policies. In contrast, both Republicans and Democrats valorize veterans’ service to the United States and endorse federal assistance for seniors (often in the form of social security and medicare). As a result of these differing party affinities, we might expect that Republicans provide similar amounts of service to veterans and seniors, but less overall constituency service for low-income individuals.

Using a difference-in-differences design, we find some evidence consistent with this pattern. In our preferred specification, we find that electing Republican causes a 14.8 percent decrease in the amount of constituency service targeted at low-income individuals. We do not, however, find that Republicans are substantially more likely to provide service to businesses: we estimate a small 3 percent increase in business-focused constituency service, and we fail to reject a null of no difference. Similarly, we fail to reject the null of no difference between Republicans and Democrats in the provision of service focused on veterans, military members, or seniors. Our results do indicate, however, that Republicans provide less overall constituency service—a finding that we cannot attribute to differences in tenure in the institution.

We are able to make these new insights into the types of services that are provided because of a painstaking data collection process and subsequent meticulous hand-coding of letters. We identify the types of constituents that are served by hand-coding over a hundred thousand records of legislator contacts and use keywords contained in correspondence logs to estimate constituents’ demographic characteristics. This comprehensive data set enables us to make inferences at the legislator level, while important prior work was focused on the agency-legislator level. This enables us to better understand the overall consequences of particular legislators and if reductions in one type of service are compensated for with other kinds of service.

Our results highlight why the consequences of elections extend far beyond the roll

call votes legislators cast. Elected officials are able to reshape their office to target their services at distinct constituencies. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the availability of services depends on the partisanship of the elected official. In the conclusion, we return to this issue and argue that our results provide another suggestive reason that descriptive representation may be important. In particular, we argue that it may be the case that legislators who are familiar with the service needs of a particular group may be more likely to create an office infrastructure that facilitates serving that group.

1 What is Constituent Service?

Constituent service is an essential function of congressional offices and a key component of representation. In communicating with government agencies on behalf of their constituents, members of Congress provide support for their constituents who are experiencing issues with the bureaucracy. The process begins when a constituent contacts a member of Congress to ask for help with a problem involving the bureaucracy. These problems often involve matters such as veterans' benefits, workers' compensation benefits, or Social Security payments. The legislator's office will then contact the appropriate agency to intervene on the constituent's behalf. The intervention may involve asking for information, a specific resolution of an issue, or an expedited decision from the agency.

As an ostensibly nonpartisan activity, constituent service has been conceptualized as a function of the legislative office that can help members of Congress get re-elected by generating support from constituents who may not have supported them otherwise (Ashworth and Mesquita, 2006; Cain, Ferejohn and Fiorina, 1987; Fiorina, 1977; Herrera and Yawn, 1999; Serra and Moon, 1994; Yiannakis, 1981). Dropp and Peskowitz (2012) find that greater electoral security decreases the likelihood that legislators will respond to requests from constituents, suggesting that constituent service is only used as an electoral strategy under limited conditions. However, some evidence of constituents' behavior raises doubts about the importance of constituent service. Johannes and McAdams (1981) find that, even in an era of low partisan attachments among constituents, the ideological positions of congressional incumbents have a greater influence on voters' choices than does the provision of constituent service.

Given the nonpartisan nature of constituent service, legislators may focus on constituents who would otherwise be less likely to support them. Alternatively, given existing evidence suggesting that non-supportive constituents may not be responsive to constituent service, legislators may want to instead focus their limited attention and resources on important or non-controversial subconstituencies. In doing so, legislators may provide representation to a subconstituency against the interests of a majority (Bishin, 2009). Several factors may introduce inequities into the provision of constituent service, including legislators' biases and district-level constituency characteristics, including the need for assistance and willingness of a population to reach out for help.

2 Biases in the Provision of Constituent Service

2.1 Supply side biases: legislators' competing incentives to win new votes and support their base

Scholarship has largely conceptualized constituent service as a way for legislators to earn the support of those who may not support them on the basis of issue positions or policy work (Cain, Ferejohn and Fiorina, 1987; Fiorina, 1977; Herrera and Yawn, 1999). However, legislators also have incentives to support core constituencies, especially in an era of strong partisanship and polarization. If legislators receive a large volume of requests, providing service to all constituents may be difficult, leading them to focus on those who are most likely to support them (Habel and Birch, 2019; Mendez and Grose, 2018).

Existing research shows biases for and against certain populations in other forms of representation. Members of Congress favor the interests of high-income constituents over those of low-income constituents in policymaking (Ellis, 2012, 2013; Hayes, 2013), and legislators take the opinions of low-income constituents who contact them less seriously (Butler, 2014). In general, legislators dismiss the opinions of constituents who disagree with them (Butler and Dynes, 2016).

Research on constituent service finds that legislators are more likely to advocate on behalf of constituents with whom they share descriptive characteristics (Lowande, Ritchie and Lauterbach, 2019).

Some evidence suggests that legislators make strategic electoral considerations when responding to requests from constituents. Thomsen and Sanders (2019) find that women legislators, particularly those in conservative districts, are more likely to be responsive to constituent requests, partly as a way to keep electoral pace with their male counterparts. Similarly, Butler, Karpowitz and Pope (2012) find that legislators, particularly state legislators with greater margins of victory, are more responsive to service requests than to policy requests as a way to gain leeway that allows them to pursue their policy goals. Other research, however, suggests that legislators may respond selectively to constituents out of electoral concerns. Geras and Crespín (2019) find evidence of a staff hierarchy in responses to constituents in the office of Representative James R. Jones (D-OK) between 1973 and 1977. Senior staffers in the office handled correspondence from constituents with titles that indicated a significant role in business or the community, while junior staffers handled requests from women and families and other requests dealing with legislation. More powerful constituents, in short, received more attention from the office.

Audit studies examining the propensity of legislators to respond to requests from different types of constituents have also found evidence of this type of strategic responsiveness. Gell-Redman et al. (2018) find that minority constituents are less likely to receive responses from legislators, particularly Republican legislators, which they attribute to Republicans' partisan interests, as minority constituents are less likely to support the Republican Party. Additional contemporary evidence, although outside the realm of individualized constituent service, exists to support this claim that legislators pay more attention to supporters: Kalla and Broockman (2016) find that members of Congress were more willing to meet with organizations when they

were informed that the organization donated money to their campaigns.

Aside from strategic electoral considerations, legislators may simply discriminate on the basis of factors such as race and class when providing constituent service. Existing evidence from audit studies shows that legislators discriminate when responding to constituent requests. In a meta-analysis of these audit studies, Costa (2017) shows that political elites are less likely to respond to requests from minority constituents, particularly Latinos. Furthermore, three studies in this analysis (Einstein and Glick, 2017; Janusz and Lajevardi, 2016; Mendez and Grose, 2014) find no relationship between legislators' responsiveness to minority constituents and the share of the minority population in legislators' districts, suggesting that legislators may discriminate against constituents even when doing so goes against their electoral interests.

Research shows that white legislators respond less frequently to requests from Black constituents, regardless of partisanship, while minority legislators are more likely to respond to requests from Black constituents (Butler and Broockman, 2011). White, Nathan and Faller (2015) find that local election officials are less likely to respond to requests from Latino constituents, and Mendez and Grose (2018) show that legislators are less responsive to Spanish-language requests from Latino constituents than to Spanish-language requests from white constituents, implying that discrimination against Latinos in the provision of constituent service is unrelated to legislators' electoral incentives or resources. Furthermore, Habel and Birch (2019) show that ethnicity and class can interact to affect legislator responsiveness; legislators were least responsive to requests from working-class Muslim constituents. Carnes and Holbein (2019), however, find no evidence of class-based biases alone, suggesting that legislators are not simply less responsive to constituents who may be less likely to vote.

Audit studies that provide evidence of discrimination, however, have mostly been conducted at the state legislative level. Evidence of the likelihood that members of Congress may engage in similar kinds of discrimination is mixed. Landgrave and Weller (2019) show that legislative offices in more professionalized state legislatures are less likely to discriminate, suggesting that such discrimination may be unlikely to occur at the congressional level. Thomsen and Sanders (2019), on the other hand, find that state legislators representing more populous districts are less responsive to requests from constituents, suggesting that receiving a large volume of requests for service may necessitate a focus by the legislator on particular groups of constituents who are most in need or deserving of assistance. Members of Congress may therefore be more likely to focus their attention on supporters or potential supporters when providing assistance through constituent service.

Given that legislators use correspondence from constituents to discern constituent opinion (Abernathy, 2018), legislators may similarly use constituents' requests for assistance to make judgments about who deserves help.

2.2 Demand side biases: district demographics

The provision of constituent service may be biased by district-level factors such as constituent demographics. The number of requests that legislators make to the

Department of Veterans Affairs, for instance, likely depends upon how many veterans reside in their district, just as the number of requests that legislators make regarding programs such as Social Security that benefit older constituents may depend on how many older constituents reside in their districts. Similarly, legislators representing lower-income districts may write more letters on behalf of constituents expressing economic needs.

Research shows that legislators actively take constituency characteristics into account when engaging in other forms of representational activity. Adler and Lapinski (1997) show that legislators representing districts with high demand for certain types of services sit on committees with jurisdiction over those services, with members of the Agriculture Committee representing districts with higher populations of farmers and members of the Foreign Affairs Committee representing districts with higher foreign-born populations. Adler (2000) finds a similar pattern among members of Appropriations subcommittees: members of the Agriculture subcommittee represent farming districts, for example, and members of the Treasury, Postal Service, and General Government subcommittee represent districts with higher numbers of federal employees.

The flow of federal dollars also depends on the district's demographics. Districts with more Democratic voters receive more federal money for programs that were introduced in the 1970s and programs that vary widely in use from district to district but not for programs such as Social Security, Medicare, and veterans' benefits (Levitt and Snyder Jr, 1995). Within congressional districts, areas with higher voter turnout receive more federal money (Martin, 2003). However, Martin also finds that poorer counties and counties with higher unemployment rates receive more federal money, suggesting that legislators do not necessarily prioritize their own electoral constituencies in such a way that denies service to their broader district constituency, particularly those who need it most.

2.3 Demand side: individualized need

Because the provision of constituent service depends largely on the need for assistance that exists among constituents, demand-side factors, such as constituents' willingness to contact legislators for help, may also affect the rates at which legislators engage in contact with the bureaucracy on behalf of constituents. Research on the demand for service among constituents has produced inconsistent results about the role that constituents' socioeconomic status plays in constituent-legislator contact.

While socioeconomic status is positively related to constituents' likelihood of engaging in other kinds of political activity (Verba and Nie, 1972), the relationship between socioeconomic status and particularized contacting is less straightforward. Verba and Nie (1972) find no relationship between socioeconomic status and particularized contacting, in contrast to the positive relationship that they find between socioeconomic status and other forms of political activity. Jones et al. (1977) go further and propose a parabolic model of this relationship, with constituents in the middle range of socioeconomic status being more likely to contact their legislators for assistance because they have both some need for assistance rooted in their eco-

conomic status and enough political awareness to initiate contact with their legislators. They find some evidence to support this model in a test of particularized contact in Detroit, but Sharp (1982) is unable to provide supporting evidence for this model when examining all types of contact in addition to particularized contact.

Protected and underrepresented groups of constituents, such as veterans, seniors, immigrants, and constituents with disabilities, may also contact their legislators at different rates, given the varying rates at which these groups have been found to participate in other political activities. Veteran status increases the likelihood of voting among constituents (Leal and Teigen, 2018), and veterans may also feel entitled to representation because of their service to their country (Parker, 2009). Further, their experience in the military may have taught them how to navigate the federal government and whom to ask for help. Low-income senior citizens are more likely to engage in political activity related to Social Security because of their dependence on the program (Campbell, 2002), particularly when the program is threatened (Campbell, 2003).

Although immigrants often face barriers to political participation (DeSipio, 2011), Barreto and Muñoz (2003) find that Mexican immigrants to the United States are active participants in non-electoral activities such as attending campaign rallies and donating money to campaigns. In general, constituents who use universal government programs are more likely to vote, but constituents who use means-tested government programs are less likely to vote (Mettler and Stonecash, 2008). Constituents who use means-tested government programs are also underrepresented among constituents who contact public officials (Verba, Schlozman and Brady, 1995). Finally, constituents are less likely to contact public officials who do not share their race (Broockman, 2014). As such, the ability of legislators to provide constituent service to constituents of other races may be limited by the constituents' reluctance to contact these legislators in the first place.

Given the existing evidence that constituents contact their legislators at different rates and legislators discriminate against constituents when responding to communications, we investigate the extent to which members of Congress adequately represent different types of constituents in their letter-writing activity. We expect that, if legislators are not engaging in discrimination when addressing constituents' requests, legislators who represent greater numbers of veterans, seniors, and economically disadvantaged constituents will engage in more letter-writing on behalf of these constituents.

In the next section, we describe our data collection and coding processes. The following section presents and discusses the results. The final section concludes with a discussion of the implications of our findings.

3 Data: Legislators' Correspondence with Federal Agencies

We examine legislator advocacy on behalf of constituents using instances of correspondence tracked in congressional correspondence logs, obtained from nearly all federal agencies and sub-agencies through 421 Freedom of Information Act (FOIA)

requests. The correspondence logs track congressional communications with federal agencies, including letters, emails, and phone calls, and cover 2007 through 2020.

Table 1: Contacts From Members of Congress to Federal Agencies

Department	Components FOIAed	Records received	Coded	N
Department of Agriculture	29	29	11	9641
Department of Commerce	19	18	10	8510
Department of Defense	49	10	7	8005
Department of Education	1	1	1	3973
Department of Energy	8	2	1	6119
Department of Health and Human Services	15	8	5	29195
Department of Homeland Security	14	12	12	35183
Department of Housing and Urban Development	2	1	1	31852
Department of Justice	23	3	2	2379
Department of Labor	22	11	7	51836
Department of State	1	0	0	0
Department of the Interior	11	7	6	5731
Department of the Treasury	7	5	5	12785
Department of Transportation	10	6	6	20497
Department of Veterans Affairs	6	3	2	76295
Independent Agencies	77	39	26	81817
Total	294	155	102	383818

3.1 Data Collection

Response Rates to Our FOIA Requests As of August 2020, all departments except for the State Department have provided records to us, though the majority of records from the Departments of Defense and Energy are still being processed, and the majority of Department of Justice components have not yet released records to us (see Table 1). Some components provided records that duplicated records from the Secretary’s office, for example, in the Department of Agriculture, where several such component records were dropped. As for independent agencies, we are waiting on records from the SEC, FLRA, CFPB, CIA, and Appalachian Regional Commission. The remaining 28 independent agencies have provided records, though some are still in the process of reviewing and releasing additional records. Of these, 18 have been sufficiently cleaned, coded, and linked with other data sources for inclusion in this analysis. A large amount of data yet to be received will allow out-of-sample tests of the present analysis. In all, we have filed 421 FOIA requests, yielding 383,818 observations.

About half of the responsive agencies are left-censored between 2007 and 2013. Left censoring arises from either document retention cycles (offices that are diligent about discarding documents), or document loss and changing systems (offices that are bad at keeping documents). Either of these may correlate with changes in an agency’s salience, for example, due to changes in party control. The most contacted and controversial agencies tend to keep higher quality records. This might introduce a bias toward older records being about policy, but we do not see evidence of such bias in our data.

Variation in Responses to Identical FOIA Request Responses to our requests varied significantly. Most agencies offered logs of congressional correspondence, which record a date, sender, and summary of each contact. Logs generally include any written requests, as well as many phone and email records. For example, between May 2015 and December 2017, the Department of Justice Office of Administrative Law Judges received 132 emails, 109 telephone calls, and only 54 letters. Between 2007 and 2017, the Postal Regulatory Commission received 100 emails, 30 faxes, 173 letters, 118 calls. In this paper, we use “contacts” and “letters” interchangeably to refer to all modes of correspondence.

Small agencies or regional offices had staff search their email history or provided hand-written records that we had transcribed.

Department Secretary offices generally queried a correspondence tracking database designed to track all correspondence, but our FOIA requests to sub-departmental components almost always recovered additional records of communication that was not in central databases. As one central office FOIA officer put it, “Legislative Affairs is supposed to be the front door for the department, but if somebody knows somebody, well...” (personal communication, Feb. 21, 2018). Because of such idiosyncratic relationships, capturing patterns of correspondence that “go around” a Department Secretary’s office is key to avoiding erroneous inferences about legislator behavior. For example, when chairs of the Homeland Security committee wrote about immigration enforcement issues, they almost always contacted the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) office of the Executive Secretary, but, at the same time, the Immigration Customs Enforcement (ICE) component of DHS directly received thousands of contacts from a different set of legislators.

3.2 Coding Process

Using the subjects contained in the correspondence logs, we identified each instance of communication between a member of Congress and a federal agency as belonging to one of five types: personal service, commercial transactional service, government and nonprofit service, commercial policy service, and policy work. Personal service refers to individual, non-commercial constituent service, or service provided to individual private citizens. This type of service may include help with government matters such as federal benefits, passports, immigration processes, or workers’ compensation. Commercial transactional service involves providing constituent service to businesses regarding matters such as grants, loans, contracts, fines, or debt settlements. Letters on behalf of local governments and nonprofits involve advocating

for similar types of matters on behalf of local or state governments and nonprofit organizations. Commercial policy service involves policy work, such as appropriations, comments on rules, or legislation that is targeted toward a particular industry, such as milk prices, pollution criteria, or crop insurance rates. Policy work involves matters such as lawmaking, oversight, or rulemaking that is not in the service of any single individual, business, organization, or industry. For the purposes of this paper, we are most interested in instances of personal service, as it is through this type of service that members of Congress advocate on behalf of individual constituents.

Coders read the subjects in the logs and classified each instance of correspondence as belonging to one of these five categories. Coders also indicated the level of certainty with which they believed that each letter belonged to each type. Where certainty was low, coders then indicated an alternative classification for the letter. The first several agencies for which we received data have been double-coded.

Coders identified constituent types by reading the subjects within the logs that described the correspondence and noting keywords in the logs that uniquely described types of constituents. For example, within the Department of Labor agencies that do not specifically deal with veterans, coders confirmed that the word "veteran" indicated a letter written on behalf of a veteran. Any entries in the logs whose subjects contained the word "veteran" would then be automatically coded as a letter written on behalf of a veteran. The vast majority of constituent type coding was auto-applied using appropriate keywords, but a small number of letters were coded by hand because the richness of the log's subjects made the task of identifying unique keywords complex. Importantly, these categories are not mutually exclusive: for example, communication on behalf of a constituent who is both a veteran and disabled would be identified as belonging to both of these categories.

Several features of our data make our study a difficult test of our hypothesis that members of Congress advocate on behalf of constituents at rates that reflect the constituents' populations within congressional districts. First, at the agency level, members of Congress are limited in the potential scope of their advocacy because the nature of constituent service at the congressional level reflects the purview of federal agencies. Programs like unemployment, welfare, and food stamps are administered at the state level, so members of Congress necessarily cannot advocate on behalf of constituents who use these programs in their correspondence with federal agencies. A large part of our opportunity to analyze legislators' advocacy on behalf of economically disadvantaged constituents, then, comes from constituents' volunteering this information themselves. Conversely, programs assisting constituents such as veterans and seniors are administered at the federal level, meaning that these constituents may be over-represented in our data.

Second, actions that take place at the legislator level, namely the decisions and skills of legislators' constituent service staff, may also affect the amount and type of correspondence present in our data. Effectively advocating on behalf of constituents in their dealings with federal agencies is a complex task for congressional staff. For a request from a constituent to reach a federal agency, congressional staff must be able to correctly discern the constituent's problem and get in touch with the appropriate agency. This process is straightforward for agencies such as the VA, CMS, and Social Security that administer clearly-defined programs, but the proper course of

action may be less obvious for other types of requests and may require considerable knowledge of the federal agency structure by congressional staffers. As a result, they may not appear in our data.

Third, constituent types may be under-counted as a result of individual decisions that occur at the constituent level. In many cases, we have only been able to identify a letter as written by a particular type of constituent because the constituent mentioned something about their identity in their correspondence with their member of Congress. This information about their identities, such as veteran or disability status, age, or financial situation, was then relayed to the agency by the member of Congress and included in the agency’s congressional correspondence logs. Therefore, we may not be able to see advocacy on behalf of constituents who, for whatever reason, did not share this information with their legislator when they contacted them for assistance.

On the other hand, measuring constituency service provision by contacts between congressional offices and federal agencies comes with decided advantages. One strength of this form of measurement of constituent service is that it captures “high” effort level cases of constituency service when the constituent’s need requires the congressional office to take some active step with regard to a federal agency while downplaying “trivial” cases that the congressional office can handle internally with some sort of semi-automated reply.

3.3 Agencies that Receive Letters on Behalf of Veterans, Seniors, and Low Income Constituents

Figure 1 shows the numbers of letters on behalf of each of five main types of constituents—veterans (top panel), veterans and military families (2nd from the top panel), low-income constituents (middle panel), seniors (2nd from the bottom), and constituents experiencing hardship (bottom panel)—as they occur within several different agencies. In the top panel of Figure 1, we see that letters on behalf of veterans are overwhelmingly concentrated within the Department for Veterans’ Affairs, with some also appearing within the Veterans’ Employment and Training Service within the Department of Labor. Letters on behalf of military families, many of whom wrote to their members of Congress seeking assistance locating military records for their families, also appear within the National Archives and Records Administration. Within the VA and DOL-VETS, all letters written on behalf of individual constituents are necessarily also written on behalf of veterans, and slightly fewer than half of the letters sent to NARA are written on behalf of military families and veterans.

Similarly, the middle panel of Figure 1 shows that letters on behalf of low-income constituents, namely those who receive Medicaid, and seniors are concentrated within the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services within the Department of Health and Human Services. However, the second from the bottom panel of Figure 2 shows that fewer than half of all letters that members of Congress write to CMS are written on behalf of seniors, and a very small proportion of letters are sent to CMS on behalf of Medicaid recipients.

Letters on behalf of constituents experiencing hardships are overwhelmingly con-

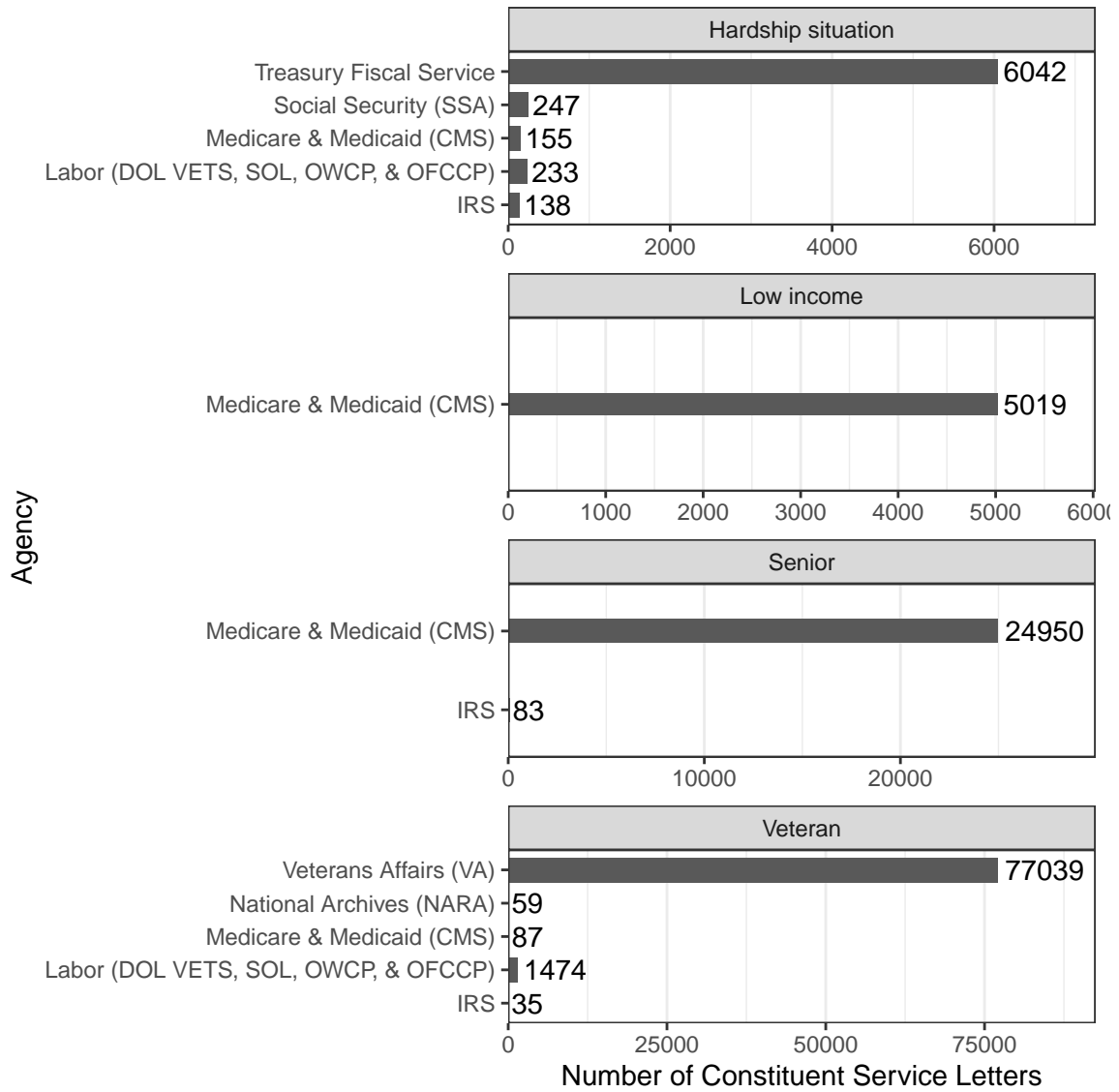


Figure 1: Number of Legislator Letters per Type of Constituent

centrated in the Bureau of the Fiscal Service within the Department of the Treasury. As the bottom panel of 1 shows, these letters also appear in smaller numbers in the Social Security Administration, the Internal Revenue Service, CMS, and the Department of Labor. 2 shows that, with the exception of the Bureau of the Fiscal Service, in which nearly half of the letters are written on behalf of constituents experiencing hardships, these letters are rare for most agencies.

Thus far, we've considered how specific types of constituents directed letters to different agencies. But we can also consider this from the agency perspective. Figure 2 below shows the share of legislator contacts an agency received by the type of constituent for a selected number of agencies. The top panel examines the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) and shows the contacts the agency received from each of our five types of constituents (veteran, military family or veteran, senior, low-income, and hardship) relative to the overall number of contacts received. For the IRS, we see that the vast majority of letters received from legislators are not in reference to any of our five-types of constituents. A small number are letters on behalf of constituents experiencing hardship. Many of these were requests for tax refunds that constituents needed in order to meet their basic living needs.

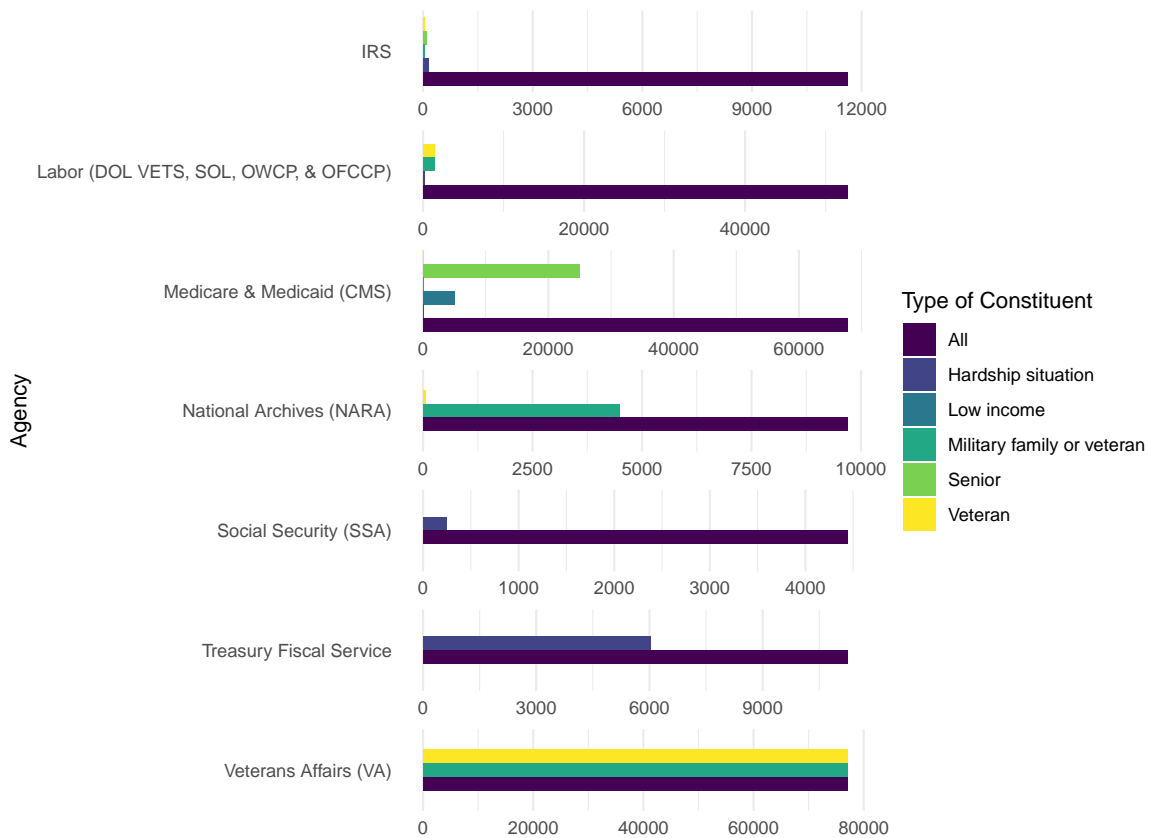


Figure 2: Share of Legislator Contacts an Agency Received by Type of Constituent

The second panel shows the share of letters received regarding each type of constituent for five subagencies of the Department of Labor (Veterans' Employment Training Service, Office of the Solicitor, Office of Workers' Compensation, and the Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs). Here we see they receive a small

number from veterans and military families, but the vast majority are from other constituents. Letters on behalf of veterans were mostly addressed to the VETS subagency.

Moving on to agencies that have larger shares of our constituent types of interest, we see that the third panel from the top shows letters written to Medicare and Medicaid (CMS). Consistent with the mission of those agencies, we see over a third of the letters referencing seniors, and a much smaller proportion referencing low-income constituents.

Turning to the middle panel, we see that the National Archives (NARA) receives nearly half their letters from military families and a small number from veterans themselves. These are largely requests for copies of military records made by either family members of those who served in the military or by veterans who need copies of their own records to make a service-related claim.

Below the National Archives (NARA), we have the Social Security Administration (SSA). Here we have what may seem a somewhat counter-intuitive result. Here we see no letters referencing seniors and a small chunk referencing hardship situations. While this may seem surprising at first glance, closer inspection revealed the vast majority of letters were from people with queries about their social security numbers or replacement social security cards. Additionally, our SSA dataset contains just under 4500 observations, far below what we would expect given the widespread use of the Social Security program. It is possible that much of legislators' advocacy on behalf of Social Security recipients is actually done by contacting regional or local offices, whose logs are not included in our data.

In the next panel, we see the Treasury Fiscal Service, where we see that nearly half the letters reference a constituent in a hardship situation. The vast majority of these constituents owe some sort of debt to a federal agency, meaning that their hardship may be temporary rather than long-term.

Finally, we consider all letters to the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to involve veterans. These requests involve matters such as veterans' benefits, health care, and medical issues, pensions, and confirmations of veteran status. Like Social Security, regional offices are a significant part of the VA's infrastructure and likely receive additional correspondence from members of Congress, but these letters are not captured in our data.

4 Research Design

We examine differences in the provision of constituent service both across and within congressional districts. First, we assess whether certain types of districts are over-represented in legislators' correspondence with federal agencies. Second, we assess whether legislators write more letters on behalf of types of constituents which comprise a greater share of their district's population. Finally, we examine how partisan changes in a district's representation affect the letters written on behalf of veterans, seniors, and low-income constituents in the district.

5 Results

5.1 Which Constituents Receive More Assistance?

To begin answering this question, we can examine the average number of letters a legislator wrote in a congress on behalf of a different constituency. Figure 3 shows the legislators sorted from fewest letters to most letters on the x-axis, and the y-axis shows how many letters they wrote on behalf of that group. The upper left panels show the letters on behalf of veterans, the upper right letters on behalf of seniors, the lower right on behalf of low-income constituents, and the lower-left on behalf of constituents experiencing hardship. These plots reveal substantial variation across legislators in how much representation they are providing to these different sub-groups, while the differing scales of the y-axis across plots indicates the vastly different level of representational activity occurring for these different subgroups, with veterans receiving substantially more attention than seniors who in turn receive much more attention than either low-income constituents or constituents experiencing hardship. The question that remains is what explains this variation in sub-constituency representation across legislators, and in particular, does it vary with the size of the subconstituency population in the district?

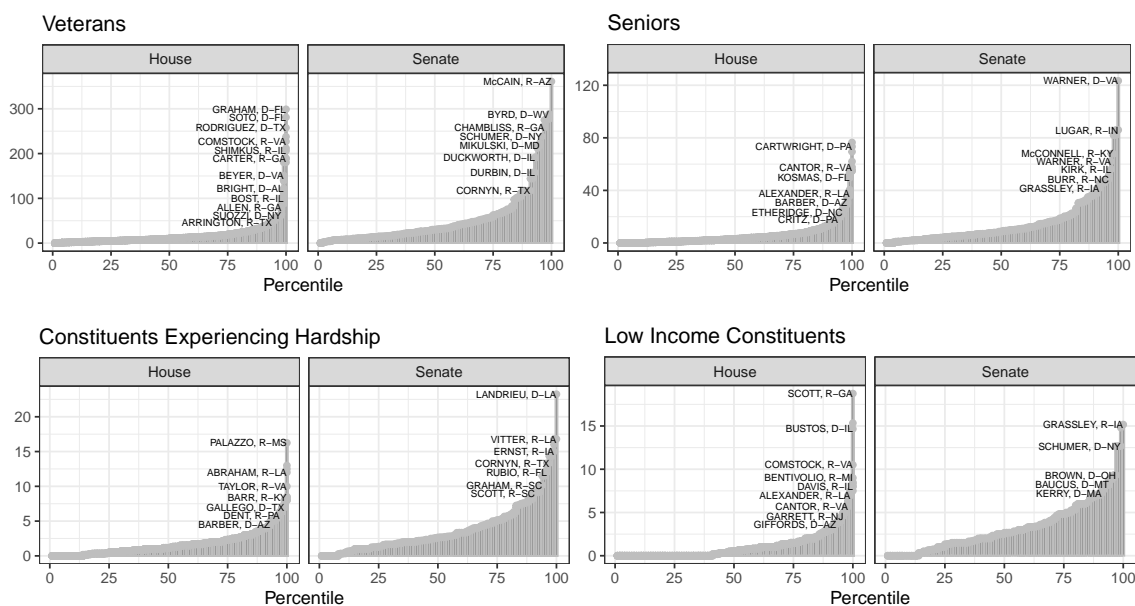


Figure 3: Average Legislator Requests per Congress by Constituent Type

Table 2 displays the bivariate relationships between letters written on behalf of veterans, seniors, and the poor and each group’s population as a percentage of the overall district population. As both the bivariate regression results and the bivariate plots with a locally weighted regression line in Figure 4 show, there is a strong positive relationship between the proportion of veterans in a legislator’s district and the number of letters that they write on behalf of veterans.¹ A similarly

¹The figures show a locally weighted smoothed regression line with the bivariate relationship between the subconstituency’s population in the district and the letters written on behalf of that

strong relationship exists for older constituents, with legislators who represent older populations writing more letters on behalf of seniors.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Percent Veteran	7.084 (1.022)	6.936 (1.055)			
Percent 65+			2.095 (0.580)		
Median Income				-0.00000106 (0.00000113)	
Percent Poor					0.145 (0.232)
Dependent Variable	Mil	Vet	Senior	Poor	Poor
Observations	6574	6574	6574	4312	4312

Robust standard errors in parentheses, clustered at District Level.
All dependent variables are log-transformed.

Table 2: Representatives from districts with more senior citizens and veterans perform more senior citizen and veteran constituency service, but we find no increase for representatives from districts with lower household income or a higher percentage of poor and constituency service for the poor.

This strong positive relationship between the subconstituency population and letters written on behalf of the subconstituency does not hold, however, for letter-writing on behalf of low-income constituents. Using both the median income of the district and the percentage of constituents in the district living below the poverty line, we show that legislators representing districts with greater numbers of these constituents do not, in fact, write more letters on their behalf. Indeed, one of the most striking features of all four bivariate plots is the flat horizontal line in the poverty figure (lower-right hand corner)—demonstrating no variation in letters written on behalf of low-income constituents despite substantial differences in the low-income population across districts.

subconstituency. The bottom of each figure shows a rug plot identifying the distribution of district characteristics in the data.

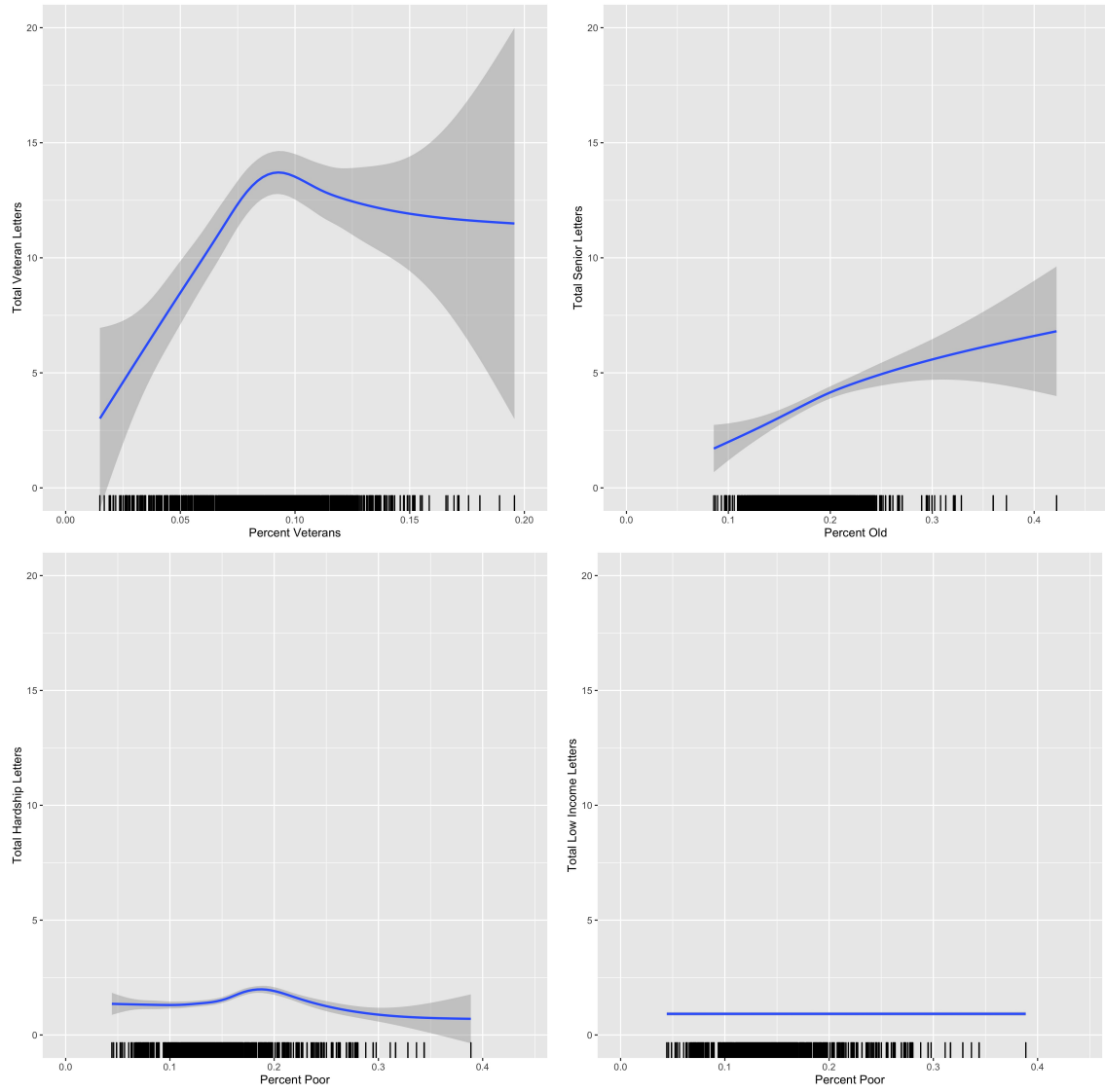


Figure 4: How Different Subconstituencies are Represented by Population Share

5.2 Which Districts Receive More Assistance?

While legislators allocate more work across topic areas depending on who they represent, we don't see evidence that this translates into overall bias in the types of districts that have more letters to the bureaucracy written on their behalf. We can see this by examining the characteristics of the average district whose representative makes contact with the bureaucracy. To calculate this number, we compute a weighted average, weighted by the number of letters a member of Congress sends to an agency. For example, the median letter comes from a House district with an average household income of \$48,387, while the median house district income in our data is \$48,670. Similarly, the median letter comes from a district with 14.6% of residents classified as "poor", while the median House district in our data has 14.8% poor. We see similar patterns for the proportion of residents over 65 (median letter from a district with 18.9% poor, the median district has 18.5% poor) and veterans (median letter from a district with 8.7% veterans, while the median district has 8.5% veterans.) So while there is substantial variation across legislators in how much constituency service they provide (recall Figure 3), that variation isn't explained by the district demographics examined here.

To more formally analyze differences in the number of letters, we regressed the total number of letters produced in each year in a district on the characteristics of that district for the House (Table 3 Columns 1-2) and Senate (Table 3 Columns 3-4). We find few systematic differences in the number of letters that are produced across districts of different types. We find some evidence that House districts with higher average median income have legislators who produce more contacts with federal agencies, but we also find that as the percent poor in the district increases, those districts make more contact with federal agencies. We do find that states with more people have senators who produce more contact with federal agencies, but if we adjust for the number of people in the state, we find that there are fewer contacts made *per person* on behalf of residents of larger states.

Table 3: We find few systematic biases in the total number of letters produced

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Percent Veteran	333.5 (82.47)	5.928 (1.107)	650.6 (864.3)	6.394 (5.015)
Percent 65+	70.25 (43.20)	1.246 (0.796)	1281.7 (459.2)	5.511 (3.378)
Percent Poor	134.5 (54.63)	2.287 (0.752)	283.8 (627.2)	-1.062 (4.678)
Median Income	0.00102 (0.000330)	0.0000166 (0.00000346)	0.00276 (0.00308)	0.00000224 (0.0000221)
Population, Millions			9.581 (3.278)	0.0639 (0.0181)
Dependent Variable	Total	Log(Total + 1)	Total	Log(Total + 1)
Chamber	House	House	Senate	Senate
Year Fixed Effects	✓	✓	✓	✓
Observations	3464	3464	824	824

Robust standard errors in parentheses, clustered at District Level.

5.3 Partisan Differences in Constituency Service

Finally, we assess how the parties differ in how they represent different valorized and stigmatized constituencies. Table 4 below shows the effect of being represented by a Republican Member of Congress. The odd-numbered models control for year fixed effects and leverage across-district variation while the even-numbered models control for both year and district fixed effects and leverage partisan turnover in who holds the seat and keep the district (and its associated population and characteristics) constant. While both forms of variation are informative, we believe the even-numbered models with district fixed effects that hold demand-side factors such as district characteristics constant speak more directly to what happens when a Democratic representative is replaced by a Republican representative. We find that Republicans who represent the same districts as Democrats provide less overall constituency service (model 2).

Table 4: Partisan Differences in Constituency Service Provision: Overall, Poor, and Business

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Republican	-0.0180 (0.0542)	-0.138 (0.0795)	-0.0595 (0.0216)	-0.148 (0.0401)	0.137 (0.0419)	0.0278 (0.0632)
Dependent Variable	Total	Total	Poor	Poor	Business	Business
Observations	6598	6598	6598	6598	6598	6598
Year Fixed Effects	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
District Fixed Effects		✓		✓		✓

Robust standard errors in parentheses, clustered at District Level.
All dependent variables are log-transformed.

Moving from the overall partisan differences in constituency service to the valorized and stigmatized sub-constituencies, we see in models 3 and 4 of Table 4 that electing a Republican to a district causes a decrease in constituency service for the poor. In contrast to the overall partisan differences and the partisan difference in the provision of constituency service for the poor, we fail to reject a null of no partisan effect for the amount of business-focused constituency service.

Table 5 below shows the partisan differences in constituency service provision for military families, veterans, and seniors. Interestingly, despite Republicans providing less overall constituency service and less constituency service to poor constituents, we find that Republicans and Democrats provide similar amounts of constituency service to Veterans, Senior Citizens, and Military Members.

6 Conclusion

Building on previous research that has examined the likelihood of legislators' discriminating against constituents in the provision of constituent service, we leverage a massive new dataset of congressional correspondence with federal agencies to contribute to this literature using observational data. We document differences in the provision of constituent service to three sub-constituencies—veterans, seniors, and

Table 5: Partisan Differences in Constituency Service Provision: Military Families, Veterans and Seniors

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Republican	0.135 (0.0650)	0.0176 (0.105)	0.119 (0.0650)	0.00376 (0.103)	0.0978 (0.0461)	-0.0445 (0.0826)
Dependent Variable	Mil	Mil	Vet	Vet	Senior	Senior
Observations	6598	6598	6598	6598	6598	6598
Year Fixed Effects	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
District Fixed Effects		✓		✓		✓

Robust standard errors in parentheses, clustered at District Level.

All dependent variables are log-transformed.

low-income constituents—and show that certain constituencies receive more representation through constituent service than others. Veterans and seniors receive constituent service in proportions that match their populations within congressional districts, with legislators who represent more of these constituents writing more letters on their behalf. For low-income constituents, however, this is not the case.

We also document partisan differences in the provision of constituent service to these three groups. Republicans elected to previously Democratic-held districts write fewer letters on behalf of their poor constituents than did their Democratic counterparts. A partisan shift from Democratic to Republican does not, however, reduce the number of letters written on behalf of veterans or seniors. Together, these results suggest that, in the provision of constituent service, veterans and seniors are valorized by representatives of both parties, while poor constituents are stigmatized, particularly by Republican legislators.

Three potential explanations for these differences exist. The first, as we have mentioned throughout, is structural. Programs such as welfare and unemployment that serve low-income constituents or those experiencing hardship are administered by the states, giving members of Congress fewer opportunities to help constituents who use these programs. While some of these constituents may not come into contact with members of Congress at all, instead of seeking help from their state representatives, it is also possible that constituency service staff may affect the number of letters that members of Congress write to federal agencies on behalf of low-income constituents. Specifically, staff may either lack the expertise required to advocate for these constituents, or they may possess enough expertise and skill to handle such requests within their offices, such that no communication with a federal agency is necessary at all. Regardless, our results speak to the ways in which programs at the federal level are designed to help valorized constituents like veterans and seniors.

Second, legislators may discriminate against low-income constituents, either for strategic electoral reasons or simply because of personal biases. With limited resources to engage in this kind of advocacy, legislators may choose to focus on providing service to large or popular constituencies whom they can count on to turn out on Election Day or support their campaigns in other ways. Veterans and seniors are two subconstituencies who are likely to engage in electoral politics, given their strong

organizations and histories of responding to proposed policy changes that threaten their benefits (Campbell, 2002, 2003). Interestingly, veterans' and seniors' advocacy on behalf of their respective benefits may have transformed them into particularly attractive constituencies and guaranteed that they will receive constituent service if they ask for it.

Third, our coding of constituents experiencing hardships is likely imperfect. Because few of the most widely-used programs for the economically disadvantaged are handled at the federal level, our identification of low-income constituents relies in large part on information contained in the logs' subjects. Given both the sparseness of some of these subjects and the fact that our coding sometimes relies on constituents', legislative offices', and agencies' describing the hardship in enough detail for it to appear in our data, it is likely that we are missing at least some contacts on behalf of the poor. However, the fact that legislators may not explicitly communicate the economic needs of their constituents when advocating on their behalf is significant in and of itself, as this also implies that legislators may not view these needs as important.

Several additional questions about biases in the provision of constituent service remain unanswered, namely whether the poor are a uniquely stigmatized and underrepresented subconstituency and whether the relationship between legislator partisanship and constituent service carries over into advocacy on behalf of other groups of constituents. Recently, we received data from U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) that will allow us to analyze legislators' service on behalf of immigrants and explore this question in full in a subsequent paper. We also possess existing data that allows us to identify constituents' racial and ethnic identities and disability status, which will further enable us to examine the representation of the poor alongside other underrepresented or protected groups.

Our findings have several implications for representation and legislator behavior. Clearly, inequalities exist in the provision of constituent service, with disadvantaged groups like the poor receiving less attention from their legislators. Coupled with our finding of partisan differences in constituent service on behalf of these groups, our results suggest that the representation that constituents receive through constituent service—what is designed to be a leveling, nonpartisan form of representation—may depend upon where they live and the party of the legislator who represents them. Such inequities raise normative concerns about legislators' incentives and goals, constituents' willingness to reach out for help, and how these two factors work together to create a system of constituent service that works for all constituents.

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