Imagine yourself as a mayor. In office you have gained a lot of knowledge about how your community works. But you also have the personal knowledge you brought to office from having lived in your community for a long time and having seen how things work. This personal knowledge helps you perform your duties more efficiently because you have a good understanding of how your city programs run. Consider the local school system. As a longtime community resident, you have likely raised your children in the community and know about some of the programs the local schools offer.

Suppose you receive an e-mail from a Mr. Dan Johnson, who is relocating to your area for work. The Johnson family is comparing different communities to decide where it wants to live, and the father is asking about access to a public library and the programs at the high school. Mr. Johnson could look up this information himself on the school’s website, but making people happy is good politics. Can you easily answer his question? Will you take the time to research and answer it? Does your decision to answer depend on which school program Mr. Johnson asks about? Are you more likely to answer if he asks about advanced placement programs rather than free lunch programs?

**The Importance of Information**

Public officials have limited time and energy and so must carefully choose which issues they will work on. They cannot answer every request for help or tackle every possible
issue, even those that seem important to their constituents. They must selectively choose where to focus their energy.

Public officials might decide which issues to focus on based on the information they bring to office. The more information they have the less time and energy it will take to work on that issue. And the less time it takes to work on an issue the more likely it is that they will give the issue attention (Hall and Deardorff 2006). By focusing on issues for which they have an informational advantage, politicians are able to maximize their probability of reelection with the fewest resources possible.

Public officials’ personal experiences are an important source of the information they bring to office. Individuals from similar demographic groups are likely to have similar experiences because they probably face similar challenges or operate in the same social circles that people who share those challenges do. As a result of this personal experience, officials will give more thought to issues that are important to constituents from their own demographic groups. Black officials have probably given more thought to discrimination in housing. Religiously devout officials may have given more thought to the steps involved in sending children to parochial schools. The knowledge that officials gain from these personal experiences incentivizes them to work on the issues important to constituents who are descriptively like them because it is easier for them to work on these issues.

If legislators’ personal background is an important source of policy-relevant information, then groups that are numerically well represented in office will enjoy better representation because the issues they care about will receive more attention. In other words, one source of inequality in representation may be that policymakers as a whole
have less expertise on issues important to groups that are numerically underrepresented and so they work less on those issues. This chapter explores this possibility by testing whether public officials are more likely to take proactive action on issues that are important to constituents who share their descriptive characteristics.

City Mayors, Socioeconomic Status, and Information

Information is an important factor that should affect the decisions of mayors in the example with which this chapter began. Information is important because these mayors are busy. If they need to gather information about their local schools in order to address a query, it means spending less time on their numerous other responsibilities—those related to their elected positions, their families, and often their private-sector jobs. If they already have information about the schools, they do not need to divert as much time from other duties; that is, the more information these mayors have about an issue the less costly it is for them to work on it.

Shang Ha and I implemented the thought experiment with which this chapter began in the spring of 2009. For the experiment, we identified the publicly available e-mail addresses of about a thousand mayors (or the equivalent) who served in small and medium-sized cities and towns.22 In early June 2009,23 each mayor in the sample received

22 We limited the sample to cities and towns that the U.S. Census considers to be part of a metropolitan area with a population between 1,000 and 150,000 people. For each of these cities, we used the city website to identify its chief executive officer. The mayor or the equivalent (e.g., the village president) was the chief executive officer in over 95 percent of the cities. In a few cities the chief elected official was a city council member or selectman. For each city we e-mailed only one official.

23 The main reason we sent the e-mails in June is that it fit the narrative described in the message. The e-mail suggests that Mr. Johnson has school-age children and would be looking for housing in the area immediately. This fits because the Johnson family would be waiting for the school year to end before moving and because June is part of the primary housing market season for homebuyers with children.
the e-mail from the alias Dan Johnson. Each e-mail explained that Mr. Johnson’s company was relocating him to the area and the Johnson family was deciding where it wanted to live. Further, each mayor was asked two questions (whether there was a local library and about programs at the high school). The e-mail explained that Mr. Johnson would like a quick response because the family needed to move out of its current housing soon.

(Box 5.1 about here)

Half the mayors in the sample were randomly assigned to receive an e-mail in which Mr. Johnson asked whether the “high school offers a free lunch program” and also indicated that the Johnson family currently rented an apartment. I refer to this as the low-SES treatment. The other half of the mayors received an e-mail that asked whether the “high school offers advanced placement programs” and indicated that the Johnson family currently owned a home. I refer to this as the high-SES treatment.

**Where Do Mayors Get Information?**

A key difference between the low-SES and high-SES treatments is that they ask about different programs. The immediate goal is to test whether there is evidence that the information mayors brought to office affects their ability to answer the two questions.

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24 Even though all the e-mails were sent from the same alias, we were not worried that this would lead to detection of the experiment because it is unlikely that mayors from neighboring jurisdictions talk to each other about the e-mails they receive. Even if they do discuss their e-mails, the message itself suggests that Mr. Johnson will be contacting officials in a number of cities to find the one that best meets his family’s needs.

25 To ensure that we had balance with the size and wealth of the town, we block randomized on the median household income and population of the town.
about the local high school. The larger goal is to discover whether relevant preexisting differences in information affect elected officials’ behavior in office.

There are reasons to think that personal information might not matter. Elected officials might actively engage in learning about issues that are relevant to constituents who are not like them—but do they? In this case, there is a testable null hypothesis. If there are no differences among elected officials in terms of the information they have about an issue, there should be no differences in how costly it is for them to answer a question about the issue; that is, the information costs should be homogeneous. This implies that elected officials should all be equally responsive to the questions about the different school programs. If, however, personal information does matter, then the elected officials who have more information on the topic because of their own background should be more responsive.

In our experiment, where might the mayors’ information about school programs come from? The responses we received from the mayors in the experiment suggested at least two major sources.

First, several mayors indicated that they had information about the school system because they worked in the schools. For example:

My wife and I both work at [redacted] High School (25 years) and we do offer Advanced Placement Classes.

I should let you know that I am not only the mayor, but also was the chair of the task force that led the library project through the process, and am a
teacher at [name of high school redacted], so I have insights into both of the questions you asked.

An even larger number of public officials cited their experiences with their own children as the source of their information about the local high school. Numerous mayors who were asked whether the local high school offered advanced placement courses referred to the experiences of their children. Here is a small sample of those responses.

Hi Dan

[City name redacted] has a library and … does offer some AP courses but I have only the specific knowledge of my daughter taking them.

[M]y daughter just graduated from [redacted] High School. She enjoyed a number of their AP courses and we found that the school was fantastic.

My son will be a senior there [at the local high school] and … has taken Honors and AP classes.

Regarding your second question, yes the [redacted] School District does offer AP classes, both of my sons have taken advantage of these classes.

Public officials with such personal information do not have to invest time in research and can directly answer the questions. They are also more confident in their
answers. This can be seen in one of the responses we received from a mayor without this type of firsthand experience.

I do believe the local high schools have AP (my son is only 5 right now, so I am sorry I do not know better first hand).

At least some of the mayors clearly used their personal experiences to answer questions. How does this information explain why mayors respond to one question more often than the other?

In our experiment, the information that comes from on-the-job experience is not likely to make a difference for our questions. Mayors who work as teachers are likely to be equally informed about the questions posed in both the low-SES and high-SES treatments. Their job experience should not make them more likely to respond to one question than the other.

In contrast, the information that mayors gained from the experiences of their own children and their friends’ children is likely to influence their relative ability to answer the questions. We expected the mayors in high-SES communities to be less likely to know about free lunch programs. Their children are simply less likely to have participated in such programs. And because our social circles are typically filled with individuals who share our socioeconomic background, the children of these mayors’ friends would also be less likely to have used this resource (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001). Mayors with low-SES backgrounds, by contrast, should be more likely to personally know high school students who have used the resources of this type of
program. Our expectation was that a similar pattern might also explain individuals’ knowledge about advanced placement programs at the high school. Mayors with high-SES backgrounds might be more likely to personally know high school students—possibly their own children—who took advanced placement courses.

If information matters, then increases in the median household income of the city should lead to an increase in the relative number of mayors who answer the question regarding the advanced placement program compared to the number of mayors who answer the question regarding the free lunch program. Before testing this prediction, it is worth considering a number of questions that naturally arise about this experiment.

Why Education? Why City Mayors?

We decided to focus on education because most individuals have personal experience on which to draw. Most mayors have either raised their own children or have friends who raised children in the local school system.

Education is also one of the largest expenditures in most city budgets. About a third of all local government spending in the United States goes to elementary and secondary education (Census of Governments 2007). Because education is a local issue, studying mayors makes sense when exploring this topic.

Another reason to study city mayors is that they have responsibility for the entire city, whereas state legislators develop expertise in their committees’ jurisdictions.\(^{26}\)

\(^{26}\)In the constituency service field experiment I ran on state legislators for this chapter (see below), one legislator explained that he or she was unable to answer a question about taxes because “my work in the legislature mostly focused on education issues and I have not served on a tax committee.” This is anecdotal
Specialization is not a problem in and of itself. But if legislators are more likely to serve on committees that concern policy issues most relevant to their constituents (Fenno 1973; Weingast and Marshall 1988; Adler and Lapinski 1997) and those constituents happen to elect descriptive representatives, then the relationship between descriptive representation and legislators’ information could be spurious. The correlation could simply reflect the fact that legislators choose committees that help them develop expertise on a topic their constituents care about.

There are potential downsides to looking at mayors instead of legislators. As David Mayhew writes, “[E]lected legislators are basically position takers. Elected executives are basically managers” (2008: 203). Because mayors have more managerial responsibility than state legislators do, they may be better prepared to deal with questions from constituents. As a result, we may underestimate the degree to which information affects representation.

*What about Possible Discrimination against Low-Income Constituents?*

One obstacle to drawing conclusions from this study is that results might be driven by other information that the mayors inferred from the text of the e-mail. Mayors might respond differently to questions about the two different school programs because the question itself reveals something about the writer, and they might use that information to infer the writer’s SES. Mayors who are asked whether the school offers a free lunch program are more likely to assume that Dan Johnson is of a lower SES than mayors who
are asked about the existence of an advanced placement program. The e-mail reinforces this by signaling something about the Johnson family’s current housing arrangement.

Because the treatments signal different things about the sender’s likely SES, the mayors’ responses could be affected by their attitudes toward low- and high-SES individuals. The next chapter presents evidence that state legislators exhibit a personal, in-group bias in favor of constituents of their own race/ethnicity. It is possible that mayors exhibit the same type of discrimination by SES. Previous studies have suggested that federal officials, who tend to be of higher SES themselves, favor high-SES individuals in the speeches they make (Druckman and Jacobs 2011), the votes they take (Bartels 2008; cf. Erikson and Bhatti 2011), and the policies they favor (Gilens 2005; Rigby and Wright 2011; cf. Wlezien and Soroka 2011). Wealthy individuals are more likely to know about issues, have clear preferences, participate in politics, and donate money to candidates (APSA Task Force 2004). Because in order to win candidates need money and voters who show up on Election Day, elections should only exacerbate any bias toward high-SES individuals. Further, mayors have a powerful structural incentive to have wealthy rather than poor families move into their communities because it deepens the tax base and leads to fewer expenses (Gramlich and Laren 1984; Peterson and Rom 1989, 1990). These concerns would have been particularly salient in 2009 and 2010, when this study was conducted, because many localities were dealing with budget shortfalls at the time.

If mayors exhibit a personal, in-group bias for people closer to their own socioeconomic group, we would expect that increases in the median household income of the city will lead to an increase in the relative number of mayors who answer the question
regarding the advanced placement program compared to the number of mayors who answer the question regarding the free lunch program. This is the same result we would expect if mayors use information from their own experiences to answer the question. In sum, the treatment is possibly confounding two ways in which citizens’ SES might influence how mayors respond: mayors’ in-group bias in favor of citizens closer to their own SES, and mayors having knowledge about issues that are important to citizens from a similar socioeconomic background.

**Separating the Effect of Information from the Effect of In-Group Bias**

We could not adjudicate between the information and in-group bias stories by manipulating the question because the question itself signals something about the sender’s SES. However, we took two steps to increase our confidence that any result we found would be driven by differences in the information mayors have, and not mayors’ in-group, personal bias.

First, we asked the library question in the same way across treatments (see box 5.1). If in-group bias explains the differences in the way people respond to the schools question, we should see differences in overall responsiveness and how well mayors answer the question about the community library. However, if the bias exists because mayors have less knowledge about low-SES issues, we should only see differences in how responsive they were to the question about the local high school.

Second, we ran a follow-up experiment in the spring of 2010 in which we held the question constant and used other information to signal the SES of the individual sending
the e-mail (see box 5.2). The 2010 study serves as a placebo test. If information explains
the results of the 2009 (see box 5.1) study, we should find that low- and high-SES
individuals are treated the same in the 2010 study.

In the follow-up study we also tried to correct for other concerns about the 2009
study. We worried that the socioeconomic signals in the 2009 study were not strong
enough. Because the e-mail indicated that the father’s employer was relocating the
Johnson family, the city official may have assumed that this individual was in the middle
class. Dan Johnson also indicated what the family’s housing situation was, not what he
expected it to become. Also, because the e-mail indicated that Johnson had children, city
officials may have chosen not to engage in discrimination simply because children were
involved.

Our second experiment followed a protocol similar to that used in the first
experiment. We used the same sample of cities and again e-mailed the city’s chief
executive, typically the mayor. The text of the e-mail appears in box 5.2. All e-mails
were sent using the alias Andy Hansen and asked whether the city had a car tax or any
other fees. All the elected officials were asked the same question because we wanted to
test whether individuals’ SES affected the way legislators treated them without
confounding any effects that might result from asking different types of questions. We
asked about a car tax because most individuals, regardless of their income, own cars.
Also, the question is general enough to be plausibly important to nearly everyone and
addresses an issue that is often dealt with at the municipal level.

(Box 5.2 about here)
In the second experiment we signaled the sender’s SES by randomizing information about his job and desired housing situation in the text of the e-mail. The city officials assigned to the low-SES treatment received an e-mail indicating that the sender was a janitor who would be renting an apartment. The high-SES individual indicated that he was a manager looking to buy a home. These e-mails were sent in the first week of April 2010.

The Results for the Two SES Studies on Mayors

In both the 2009 and 2010 experiments, I present three outcomes: responded measures whether the official provided a response at all, timely response measures whether the official responded within two weeks, and answered question measures whether the official provided a response that answered the question. Because the e-mails sent in the 2009 study asked two questions (see box 5.1), I present the results for the outcome answered question for both of these questions separately.

Table 5.1 shows the average differences between the low- and high-SES treatments in both experiments. Each cell gives the percentage of city officials in the treatment condition that provided a response meeting the criteria for the dependent variable. I also list the percentage point difference between the responses to the low- and high-SES treatments, with the associated standard error given in parentheses.

(Table 5.1 about here)

The results show that the vast majority of mayors responded. In the June 2009 study, 77.1 percent of mayors who received the low-SES e-mail responded, and 75.5
percent of the mayors who received the high-SES e-mail responded. The 1.6 percentage point difference is not statistically significant. Similar results hold for the 2010 study. Mayors responded to both the low- and high-SES e-mails just over 60 percent of the time.

In both experiments, the mayors respond to the low- and high-SES individuals at equal rates. Mayors are also equally likely to provide timely responses to both low- and high-SES individuals. Finally, mayors are equally likely to answer the questions that are held constant across the e-mails: the library question in the 2009 study and the tax question in the 2010 study. When holding the question constant, the city officials were equally responsive to both the low- and the high-SES individuals.

Does this mean that mayors do not exhibit a socioeconomic-based personal bias? Not necessarily. It may be that mayors from poorer cities are more responsive to low-SES individuals and mayors from wealthier cities are more responsive to high-SES individuals but on average there are no differences.

(Figure 5.1 about here)

Figure 5.1 shows that the level of socioeconomic bias did not vary with the median household income of the mayor’s city for the outcomes responded and timely response. For each panel in the figure I used locally weighted regression (lowess) to estimate the predicted probabilities, with the dashed (solid) line representing the lowess line for the low-SES (high-SES) treatment group. The histograms show the distribution of mayors included in the study by the median household income of their cities. The top half of figure 5.1 presents the results for the 2009 study showing that low-SES individuals are treated slightly worse in cities with median household incomes above ninety thousand dollars. However, this difference is not statistically significant. Further,
in the 2010 results—in the bottom half of the figure—this pattern reverses itself. The mayors from the wealthiest cities were, if anything, more responsive to e-mails from low-SES individuals. Again, however, this difference is not statistically significant. Taken together, these results (combined with those in table 5.1) show no evidence of an in-group, personal bias among city mayors.

The results for whether the mayors answered the questions raised in the e-mails, however, suggest that socioeconomic descriptive representation affects how easy it is to answer constituents’ questions. The results in table 5.1 show that in the 2010 study, where the question about taxes was held constant across the socioeconomic treatments, the mayors were equally likely to answer the question in both socioeconomic treatments. The same is true for the library question in the 2009 study. In contrast, mayors who received the low-SES question about the availability of a free lunch program were nearly ten percentage points less likely—a statistically significant difference—to answer that question than mayors who were asked about the availability of advanced placement courses. This difference is consistent with the possibility that mayors have more knowledge about high-SES issues due to personal experience.

Alternatively, mayors may have been more responsive to the high-SES question because it was simply an easier question to answer. Of course, this possibility is interrelated with the mayor’s knowledge drawn from firsthand experience. The high-SES school question may have been easier to answer because mayors, who are more likely to be high-SES individuals themselves, are more likely to have had firsthand experience with advanced placement courses than with free lunch programs. This is exactly how
information may explain the benefits that come to constituents through descriptive representation.

If descriptive representation explains why the high-SES question is answered more frequently, then we should observe a heterogeneous treatment effect with respect to the wealth of the city for how well the low- and high-SES school questions are answered. The library question in the 2009 study and the tax question in the 2010 study provide placebo tests for this argument; there should be no interactive effect between the wealth of the city and whether these questions are answered.

(Figure 5.2 about here)

Figure 5.2 shows how the outcome question answered varied with the median household income of the city the mayor represented for each of the three questions. For each panel in the figure I use locally weighted regression (lowess) to estimate the predicted probabilities, with the dashed (solid) line representing the lowess line for the low-SES (high-SES) treatment group. The histograms show the distribution of mayors included in the study by the median household income of their cities. Panels (b) and (c) of figure 5.2 show our placebo tests using the question for the 2010 tax question and 2009 library question, respectively. In both cases the wealth of the city did not moderate the difference in how likely the mayors were to answer the low-SES versus high-SES questions.

The results in panel (a) in figure 5.2, however, show that mayors from wealthier cities had a much harder time answering the question about free lunch. In cities where the median household income exceeded fifty thousand dollars, there is a sharp divergence in how well the two questions were answered. The wealthier the city the more likely the
mayor was to answer the question about advanced placement courses and the less likely
the mayor was to answer the question about free lunch programs (a difference that is
statistically significant). By contrast, the mayors of cities where the median income was
roughly fifty thousand dollars or less were equally likely to answer both the low-SES
question about school lunch and the high-SES question about advanced placement
classes. Mayors personal information affects the issues they can work on: mayors in
wealthier situations appear to know more about advanced placement programs and much
less about programs designed for low-income citizens.

Recall that we do not see this divergence on the library or car tax questions, which
suggests that differences in how mayors respond to advanced placement and free lunch
questions are not driven by their attitudes toward low- and high-SES individuals.
Together these results provide strong evidence that information matters. Mayors do not
seem to exhibit a direct personal bias against low-income individuals, but they do better
represent higher-SES individuals because of their own knowledge and experience.

**Gender, Information, and Representation: A Study of State Legislators**

I conducted another experiment to evaluate the possibility that an informational
advantage would lead female state legislators to be relatively more responsive—and male
legislators relatively less responsive—to questions dealing with women’s issues than to
questions dealing with other issues. I conducted this experiment because I wanted to see
whether the results from the constituency service field experiments on mayors could be
applied to other public officials and other questions.
Why Run a Constituency Service Field Experiment?

Previous studies found evidence consistent with the possibility that substantively female legislators better represent female constituents due to information. Researchers have found that women participate more in floor debates on women’s issues (Tamerius 1995; Swers 2000) and committees with more women are more likely to produce legislation that incorporates women’s interests (Berkman and O’Connor 1993; Dodson 1998; Norton 1999; Swers 2002). Given these findings, what is the advantage of running a constituency service field experiment?

The previous observational studies have not controlled for legislators’ opportunities to deal with women’s issues. Female legislators may advocate women’s interests because they have more knowledge or information about these issues. They may also have more opportunities to become involved. Committee assignments structure the opportunities that legislators have to focus on issues (Fenno 1973), and female legislators in both the United States (Diamond 1977; Thomas and Welch 1991; Thomas 1994; Darcy 1996) and elsewhere (Considine and Deutchman 1994; Heath, Schwindt-Bayer, and Taylor-Robinson 2005) are more likely to serve on committees that deal with issues traditionally considered women’s issues.

The constituency service field experiment ensures that the differences in legislators’ opportunities are not driving the results because I randomized the subject of each letter. This research design also avoids the problems that can arise from using surveys, such as social desirability bias.
Omitted variable bias is also a concern because men and women, on average, represent different districts (Palmer and Simon 2006). These differences might affect legislators’ information and thus lead to differences in the way they respond to e-mail requests. I mitigate this concern by using the logic of a regression discontinuity design to construct the sample (see Lee 2008; Butler and Butler 2006; Imbens and Lemieux 2008). In this study I compare men and women legislators who won competitive elections against a candidate of the opposite gender. The reason for comparing a close election is that these outcomes are often determined by idiosyncratic factors. Thus the results can be treated as if the outcome were randomly determined. It also means that factors not associated with the gender of the legislator, such as constituent preferences, should be, on average, quite similar for the two groups of legislators.

I used information from the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University to identify all the legislators serving in the spring of 2010 who competed against a candidate of the other gender in the most recent general election (CAWP 2011). For these races I measured the percentage of the two-candidate vote share the female candidate received,\(^{27}\) collecting a sample that included 197 legislators who won their previous elections with 52.5 percent or less of the vote.

I conducted a constituency service field experiment on the legislators I identified by sending each of them a short e-mail that began with a formal salutation (“Dear

\(^{27}\) In this case, the female candidate’s two-candidate vote share is that for the top vote-getting female divided by the total received by her and the top vote-getting male.
[representative’s title and last name]”), asked a simple constituency service question, and finished with a formal ending signed with the randomly chosen alias. In total I created twenty aliases with corresponding e-mail accounts.²⁸ For each e-mail I randomized the question that was asked. As with the aliases, there were a total of twenty questions. Table 5.2 contains a list of the questions.

(Table 5.2 about here)

Why Use These Twenty Questions in the Experiment?

I used a total of twenty questions and twenty aliases because I limited the number of legislators in the sample from each legislative chamber to twenty and I did not want the same question or alias being used in contacting two people from the same chamber. Because I block randomized on each state and legislative chamber, I only used each alias once per chamber, and no legislators in the same chamber were asked the same question.

Of the twenty different questions used in the experiment, ten were intended to deal with topics considered women’s issues and ten dealt with other topics. In writing the questions, I tried to follow the convention in the literature of classifying health, welfare, and education as women’s issues (Saint-Germain 1989; Swers 1998, 2002). The other questions in the experiment focused on issues related to voting, employment, and taxes.

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²⁸ I randomized the alias used when contacting each legislator. I chose to use only white-sounding names because whites represent the largest group of voters. I chose a total of ten male and ten female aliases. These names were generated using lists of common first and last names among self-identified whites (Fryer and Levitt 2004; Word, Coleman, Nunziata, and Kominski n.d.). The male aliases used in this study were Andrew Kelly; Dennis Powell, Eric Gray, Gregory Wood, Jerry Jenkins, Joshua Ross, Patrick Butler, Ray Price, Stephen Watson, and Walter Patterson. The female aliases were Amy Bennett, Angela James, Anna Barnes, Brenda Sanders, Cynthia Peterson, Kathleen Long, Melissa Brooks, Pam Hughes, Rebecca Coleman, and Virginia Perry.
In writing the questions dealing with women’s issues and other topics, I tried to make them comparable along other dimensions. Because the welfare questions all signaled that the person asking the question had a low SES, I tried to create questions that dealt with employment and also signaled that the individual had a low SES. Questions 12, 14, and 16 (see table 5.2) were meant to deal primarily with employment, but they could also be classified as welfare issues. As a result, it is not clear whether these questions should be classified as dealing with women’s issues or not. For this reason, I present the results when excluding these questions from the analysis. The results are substantively similar when these questions are used in the analysis.

What about In-Group, Personal Bias?

In the case of the education study described above, it was difficult to separate the content of the question from any potential socioeconomic bias. The question itself sends a signal about the writer’s potential SES.

By contrast, we can easily signal the putative gender of the writer separately from the question asked. The experimentally manipulated name signals the constituent’s gender. Consequently, it is easy to test the information mechanism separately from considerations about the gender of the constituent asking the question.

Results for the Gender Experiment

29 It is worth noting that I randomized which question was used in each e-mail; that is, the questions were randomized within the issue treatment.
Table 5.3 presents the results for how the issue affected legislators’ responsiveness to constituents’ questions. The difference between the way women’s issues and other issues are treated is given in percentage point terms at the bottom of each section, with the standard errors given in parentheses. These values are calculated so that positive values indicate a differential treatment in favor of women’s issues and negative values a differential treatment in favor of other issues. I present the results without the three questions that did not fit neatly into either category (i.e., questions 12, 14, and 16 in table 5.2), though the results are substantively similar when these questions are included. Finally, I show the results broken down by gender in order to test whether men are less responsive to the women’s issues (as opposed to other issues).

(Table 5.3 about here)

The results in table 5.3 show that female legislators were equally responsive to questions on both issues. For the questions dealing with women’s issues the women’s response rate was 61 percent, and for questions on other topics the response rate was just under 66 percent. Surprisingly this result actually goes in the unexpected direction: women in the study were less responsive to the women’s issues questions (although the difference is statistically insignificant). This does not mean that women necessarily prioritize these other issues. It may be that the specific questions dealing with women’s issues were simply harder to answer in an absolute sense. Consistent with this possibility, we see that the male legislators were also less responsive to the questions dealing with women’s issues.

Significantly, table 5.3 shows that male legislators showed a much stronger disinclination than female legislators to respond to questions about women’s issues.
While the men responded to only 48 percent of the questions dealing with women’s issues, they responded to about 76 percent of the other questions. This large thirty percentage point difference is statistically significant. Male legislators were also nearly thirty percentage points less likely to send responses that arrived in a timely manner or to answer the question if it dealt with a women’s issue.³⁰

Although we must be careful in interpreting the findings, it is clear that, at least in relative terms, women prioritize women’s issues more than men do. We can only make claims about legislators’ relative prioritization because our questions dealing with women’s issues may simply have been harder questions that suppressed the level of responsiveness for everyone. It may be that men put less effort into women’s issues and women put equal effort into all issues, or it may be that men put equal effort into all issues and women prioritize women’s issues. Either way, the results clearly show that female legislators are relatively more responsive to women’s issues compared to other issues than are their male counterparts.

What the State Legislators Wrote

Combined with the results from the two mayoral studies, the findings are evidence that descriptive representation matters, at least in part, because of the knowledge that representatives bring to office. The text of the responses that public officials sent is consistent with this view. Many officials referred to information they had gathered as a

³⁰Although they are not shown here, the results also hold when controlling for the legislator’s partisanship. That roughly two-thirds of the female legislators in the sample are Democrats does not drive the observed findings.
result of firsthand experience in either their professional or personal lives. For example, compare the responses from state legislators who were asked about whether the putative constituents needed to do anything about taxes on the homes they had just sold (see question 18 in table 5.2).

I’m not a tax attorney, but I recall when I sold my home, that as long as I purchased another home within two years, I didn’t have to pay capital gains on the equity. I also know, that if you did a short sale you can claim the loss of equity.

I would advise you to call the IRS question hot-line and ask the question or contact an tax attorney and ask the question.

Our office has recd your email and recommend you contact a tax advisor. We are not aware of the particulars of your personal finances nor do we feel knowledgeable enough to render tax advise.

Thank you for your e-mail. Unfortunately I am not a CPA and I do not want give the wrong tax advice. I appreciate your request and would suggest contacting a CPA or going to the IRS website at www.IRS.gov They have a FAQ section which includes information on selling your home. I believe the site also has a phone number to call for tax advice. I hope this information is helpful and I am sorry I could not give you any direct tax advice.
I really can't answer that. I have never sold a home. I would suggest you go to a tax preparer and ask the question.

All the legislators prudently advised the constituent to get help from the IRS or a professional consultant. However, the first legislator also drew on his own experience to provide information on the question. As the following snippets from other e-mails show, similar responses to other questions came from numerous legislators.

[In response to a question about voting absentee:] I have never voted by absentee ballot, but I believe that I would contact the Supervisor of the checklist …

[On the issue of seeking a tax filing extension:] I am not an accountant. But, I have applied for and received extension from IRS

[About breast-feeding at work:] I do not know of any laws that deny women from breastfeeding during a break but there are laws against breast feeding in public. As a former Human resource Manager, I have never came across this issue but there must be something in the company policy on breastfeeding.
This issue comes up from time to time and I learned a whole lot more about it when my wife and I had our first child …

[Tax reporting for renting out a house:] I am not a tax expert, but I did rent out a portion of my house a number of years ago. The most important thing is to …

[About the do-not-call list (from Chapter 3):] All of my phone numbers are on the do not call list and I repeatedly get calls from surveys and solicitors. Apparently, Congress has a loop hole that once the caller elect to have their number identified, they can continue to call your number even if it is registered with the do not call list. Sometimes I don't know why Congress pass laws in the name of making things better, there always seem to be loop holes for every law they pass. What I do to avoid these calls is …

Public officials are not blank slates when they come to office. They use knowledge from their own experiences—both professional and personal—to aid constituents seeking help.

**Discussion**

Some constituents are at a disadvantage because their representatives do not have the information that incentivizes them to work on issues they care about. Legislators’
proactive behavior is important because their proactive actions shape political outcomes and affect representation (Hall 1996; Burden 2007). Before a bill can be voted on, the issue it deals with must be researched, the bill must be drafted, politicians must debate the issue, and so on. If some issues are never discussed and considered, the groups that care about those issues will be underrepresented. On a more individual level, the constituents who need help in these areas will also be at a disadvantage because their elected officials will lack the incentive to help them—doing so requires too much effort!

In contrast, when politicians have firsthand experience with an issue, they work more on that issue because it is less costly for them to do so. Shang Ha and I showed that city mayors, who tend to come from wealthier backgrounds, are more likely to answer a high-SES than a low-SES question. Further, a mayor’s likelihood of responding was moderated by the wealth of the city: the wealthier the city the more likely the mayor was to answer our high-SES question and the less likely to answer our low-SES question.

I conducted a second experiment looking at responsiveness by gender and found that female legislators, relative to their male colleagues, put relatively more effort into women’s issues. This is consistent with previous research suggesting that women legislators put relatively more effort into issues that are considered women’s issues than their male counterparts do (Dodson and Carroll 1991; Dolan and Ford 1995; Gertzog 1995; Foerstel and Foerstel 1996).

Because politicians appear to work more on issues with which they have personal experience (see Bratton and Haynie 1999; Swers 2002; review in Swers and Rouse 2011), groups that are numerically underrepresented will also be disadvantaged in terms of their representation. With fewer women, minorities, and low-income representatives in office,
issues of importance to these groups will receive less attention because fewer legislators will proactively research these issues, propose bills on these topics, provide good information during deliberations on these issues, help constituents who need help with them, and so on. The lack of individuals with personal expertise to proactively advocate for the issues that low-income and minority voters care about contributes to (or at least compounds) the underrepresentation of these groups.

**How Many Representatives Are Needed?**

Increasing the numerical representation of some groups means decreasing the representation of other groups. How, then, can we decide whether the benefits of increasing the representation of one group outweighs the costs to other groups? Rosabeth Moss Kanter (1977), and subsequent researchers, argued that a critical mass is needed to activate the benefits of descriptive representation (Kanter suggested 15 percent as a critical threshold). Contradictory findings since then have raised questions about the usefulness of the notion of a critical mass (Bratton 2005; Grey 2006; Beckwith 2007; see also review in Swers and Rouse 2011).

My experiments do not provide any new insights into questions about critical thresholds. Still, by the proportionality standard, women, minorities, and low-SES individuals are underrepresented. The results in this chapter suggest that decreasing the bias in numerical representation for these groups will likely improve their substantive representation because legislators will collectively put more effort into issues important to them.
Information as a Collective Benefit

The informational benefits that come with the increased representation of politically disadvantaged groups can be a collective benefit. In several cases, the politicians I studied relied on each other to serve their constituents. For example, when we asked the mayor’s office in one city whether the local high school offered advanced placement courses, the office redirected the e-mail to a city council member who had personal experience with AP courses at the high school. As the city council member wrote:

I’m a member of City Council with a student who just graduated High School last week, so I’ve been asked to answer your question. While I’m not a school district employee, and cannot officially answer your question, my quick response to your advance placement question would be to say yes. [There follows a full paragraph on the joint college–high school program available at the school.]

State legislators also relied on the expertise of other members. One forwarded an e-mail to another representative with this preface: “This is from another member of the House that is an attorney that specializes in this area.” Another wrote that he had forwarded the question “to another representative who is more versed in insurance.”

The results show that the information that legislators bring to office because of their personal experience benefits not only their constituents but also the constituents in
other districts because legislators rely on each other for information. As the informational advantage is also likely to affect how legislators develop policy, it also explains one of the benefits of descriptive representation for racial minorities—or any minority group, for that matter. Legislators who represent a small minority are unlikely to either affect the agenda or prove pivotal on a large number of votes (Grose 2011); however, even a small number of minority legislators can provide benefits to all constituents like them because they focus more on issues important to those constituents.

**No Personal Bias Related to Socioeconomic Status**

Although we found evidence of an informational advantage among city mayors, there is no evidence that mayors exhibit a direct bias against individuals based on their SES. The lack of such discrimination is surprising for several reasons. First, several previous studies have suggested that public officials exhibit a bias toward the wealthy (Bartels 2008; Gilens 2005, 2009, 2012; cf. Wlezien and Soroka 2011). Second, wealthy individuals are more likely to have the financial and political resources that candidates need to win reelection (APSA Task Force 2004). Third, researchers have argued that governments compete with each other to provide the fewest social services so as to discourage low-income individuals from moving into their jurisdictions (Gramlich and Laren 1984; Peterson and Rom 1989, 1990). In other words, if government officials have a personal bias against low-SES individuals, it should have been easiest to observe among city officials. Yet we find no evidence of a direct bias against low-income citizens.
When taken with the results in chapter 4, we see that the bias against low-income citizens occurs at the input stage, not the output stage. Public officials discount the opinions of low-SES individuals, but they do not exhibit a direct bias against them at the output stage. In the next chapter I present experiments that test whether there is evidence of a direct bias by gender and/or race/ethnicity.
Box 5.1. E-mail Sent to Mayors in 2009

From: Dan Johnson
To: [official’s e-mail address]
Subject: A Question about [official’s city]

Dear [official’s position] [official’s last name],

My name is Dan Johnson and my company is relocating me and my family to [official’s state] and we are trying to decide where to live. I had two quick questions about [official’s city] that I thought you might know the answer to: First, does [official’s city] have its own public library? Second, do you know if the high school offers [advanced placement programs / a free lunch program]?

If you could reply soon, it would be really helpful as [we close on our house / our rental contract ends] at the end of the month and we are trying to make a decision soon.

Thank you very much.

Dan

Notes: Items in bold were manipulated across e-mails. Items in italics were assigned randomly based on the treatment group. The low-SES treatment e-mail included the “a free lunch program” and “our rental contract ends” language while the high-SES treatment e-mail included the “advanced placement programs” and “we close on our house” language.
Box 5.2. E-mail Sent to Mayors in 2010

From: Andy Hansen
To: [official’s e-mail address]
Subject: A Question about [official’s city]

Dear [official’s position] [official’s last name],

I recently accepted a [janitorial / managerial] position at a company in your area and am considering trying to [rent an apartment / buy a home] in your town. As we compare different locations, I am trying to learn about whether you have a car tax or any other fees in [official’s city].

Thanks,

Andy Hansen

Notes: Items in bold were manipulated across e-mails. Items in italics were assigned randomly based on the treatment group. The low-SES treatment e-mail included the “janitorial” and “rent an apartment” language while the high-SES treatment e-mail included the “managerial” and “buy a home” language.
Table 5.1. Socioeconomic Bias among Mayors in 2009 and 2010

(A) June 2009 Experiment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Responded</th>
<th>Timely Response</th>
<th>Library</th>
<th>School</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low-SES Treatment</td>
<td>77.1%</td>
<td>74.5%</td>
<td>74.8%</td>
<td>52.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High-SES Treatment</td>
<td>75.5%</td>
<td>72.1%</td>
<td>74.2%</td>
<td>62.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difference</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>-9.6**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Std. Error)</td>
<td>(2.6)</td>
<td>(2.7)</td>
<td>(2.7)</td>
<td>(3.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obs.</td>
<td>1,060</td>
<td>1,060</td>
<td>1,060</td>
<td>1,060</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(B) April 2010 Experiment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Responded</th>
<th>Timely Response</th>
<th>Answered Question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low-SES Treatment</td>
<td>61.1%</td>
<td>57.6%</td>
<td>59.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High-SES Treatment</td>
<td>62.6%</td>
<td>59.8%</td>
<td>59.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difference</td>
<td>-1.5</td>
<td>-2.2</td>
<td>-0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Std. Error)</td>
<td>(2.9)</td>
<td>(3.0)</td>
<td>(3.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
<td>1,092</td>
<td>1,092</td>
<td>1,092</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: **Sig at the 0.01 level (one-tailed); *Sig at the 0.05 level (one-tailed). Standard errors of the estimated differences are given in parentheses. The sample for both studies is the chief elected executive (typically the mayor) in cities and towns located in metropolitan areas with populations between 1,000 and 150,000 people. Each elected official received a short e-mail (see box 5.1 for the June 2009 experiment and box 5.2 for the April 2010 experiment) in which we randomized whether the e-mail signaled that the putative constituent was low-SES or high-SES.
Table 5.2. Questions Used in the Gender Study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Women’s Issue</th>
<th>Low SES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Is there any way to find out how the well different schools perform on required state tests? I want to check the performance of schools across districts.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. I recently moved within the state and am wondering about what I need to do in order to transfer my voter registration to my new residence.</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. My child will start school next year and I’m trying to learn what immunizations they need. Do you know that information or where I might find it?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. I realize that the election is still a ways off, but I’m still wondering about whether there is a deadline to register to vote?</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. I have a child who will be starting school soon and I’m wondering what I need to do to enroll them.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. What steps do I need to take if I want to vote absentee in the next election?</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. We are expecting a baby several months away and I was trying to figure out maternity leave. What are the state laws regarding the length of maternity leave?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. We just moved into the area and I am trying to figure out how to find my polling place. Is there a site that lists the location of polling places?</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. I was wondering whether the state has any programs to help with childcare after my kids are out of school.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Does the state list anywhere the jobs in state government? I’m interested in finding out what is available.</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. We are expecting our first child soon and one of my friends told me I should apply for WIC. Do you know how I do that?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Do you know whether people who are working are also eligible for food stamps?</td>
<td>Maybe</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. What are the requirements to get health coverage from the state for children under 16? I want to see whether my friend’s family qualifies.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Can someone receive both social security income and unemployment? I am trying to help a friend out.</td>
<td>Maybe</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Do you know whether the state-provided health insurance covers pregnancy expenses even if our family enrolled after the pregnancy?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. It looks like I may soon lose my job as a janitor and I’m wondering how I apply for unemployment.</td>
<td>Maybe</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. We recently had a child and are going to be breastfeeding. What are the laws about getting breaks for breastfeeding at work? Do women get breaks to do so?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. I just sold my home and am wondering how I report the sale of</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qno</td>
<td>Question</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>A friend was telling me that in some states health insurance companies are required to cover fertility treatments. Is that true here?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>I’m worried that I won’t be able to finish my taxes before the deadline. Do you know whether I can apply for an extension (and how I should do that)?</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 5.3. Responsiveness by Request Type (Women’s Issue vs. Other Issue)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Female Legislators</th>
<th></th>
<th>Male Legislators</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Respond</td>
<td>Timely</td>
<td>Answered</td>
<td>Respond</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women’s Issue</td>
<td>61.1%</td>
<td>57.4%</td>
<td>42.6%</td>
<td>47.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Issue</td>
<td>65.7%</td>
<td>57.1%</td>
<td>54.3%</td>
<td>75.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difference</td>
<td>-4.6</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>-11.7</td>
<td>-28.0**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Std. Error)</td>
<td>(10.6)</td>
<td>(10.9)</td>
<td>(10.9)</td>
<td>(11.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: **Sig at the 0.01 level (one-tailed), *Sig at the 0.05 level (one-tailed). The percentages in the table are the percentage of the legislators whose responses met the requirements for the measured outcome. All the legislators in the sample faced a candidate of the opposite gender in their most recent general election and won with 52.5 percent or less of the two-candidate vote total.
Figure 5.1. Mayors’ Treatment of E-mails by SES of Sender

Notes: The histogram shows the distribution of the median household income across the cities in the sample. The lines, which give the likelihood that the city official answered the question he or she was asked, are estimated using lowess regressions. The dashed (solid) line gives the lowess line for the low-SES (high-SES) treatment.
Figure 5.2. Responsiveness by SES Treatment and Wealth of the City

Notes: The histogram shows the distribution of the median household income across the cities in the sample. The lines, which give the likelihood that the city official answered the question he or she was asked, are estimated using lowess regressions. The dashed (solid) line gives the lowess line for the low-SES (high-SES) treatment.