



Political Participation by Wealthy Americans

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Version: April 2013

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Abstract

Although we know that Americans with higher incomes tend to participate more actively in politics, little is known about the really wealthy. Data from a special survey of the top 1 percent of U.S. wealth holders and from a general population survey indicate that wealthy Americans are far more active in politics than average citizens. In most respects they are also substantially more active than the merely “affluent” people (with incomes of \$150,000 and above) found at the upper end of general population surveys. The frequency with which wealthy Americans attend meetings, pay attention to politics, and volunteer for political organizations is about twice as high as the frequency among the merely affluent. Many contribute large amounts of money to politics. One-fifth reported “bundling” others’ contributions. Many initiate contacts with public officials, especially their own and others’ Senators and Representatives. Implications for democratic policymaking are briefly discussed.

As is well known, Americans with higher incomes tend to participate more actively in politics than lower-income citizens do. They more frequently turn out to vote, engage in political discussions, attend campaign events, contribute money, contact public officials, and the like (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; Schlozman, Verba, and Brady, 2012).¹

But research to date has only examined the moderately affluent respondents reached by surveys of the general public. What about really wealthy Americans, with incomes or wealth in the top 1%? Do they – as resource-based theories would suggest – participate at still higher levels than the merely affluent? Do they often initiate contacts with high-level government officials? If so, about what? Do they mostly pursue matters of narrow economic self-interest? Or do they try to further the common good (as they see it), communicating about issues of broad public concern? Answers to these questions may have some bearing on the workings or non-workings of democratic politics.

Standard surveys of the general public cannot provide answers, because a survey of a random sample of 1000 or 1500 respondents typically reaches no more than 10 or 15 people in the top 1% of U.S. income earners. One could not infer anything directly from so few cases, and it is usually impossible even to identify which cases they are, since they are generally lumped together with somewhat lower-income respondents into a broad “top-coded” income category.²

Specially designed surveys are required. But such surveys have been rare. It is extremely difficult and expensive to identify, contact, and interview wealthy Americans, who

¹ The authors are indebted to Eric Wanner and the Russell Sage Foundation for funding the

² Thus the income “top coding” problem, which makes it difficult to identify very-high-income respondents, generally prevents combining small numbers of them from each of several surveys. But see Page and Hennessy (2011).

tend to be very busy, to cherish their privacy, and to employ professional gatekeepers to keep survey researchers and other intruders at bay. In this article we offer some data based on a small survey in the Chicago metropolitan area, the first survey to investigate the political behavior of a representative sample of the top 1% of U.S. wealth-holders. We compare the participation levels of truly wealthy Americans to those of the public in general as well as to those who can be classified as “affluent.”³

Data: The SESA Study and the Pew Internet and American Life Project

Our data come from two surveys. The first is a small (n=104), Chicago-area study, the Survey of Economically Successful Americans and the Common Good (“SESA”), conducted from February 27 to June 6, 2011, by NORC at the University of Chicago with funding from the Russell Sage Foundation. The purposes of the survey were both substantive – to learn about the political attitudes and behavior of really wealthy Americans – and methodological, to see whether vexing problems of sampling, contacting, and interviewing the wealthy could be dealt with. The methodological effort was successful (though very difficult and expensive; for details, see Page, Bartels, and Seawright 2011). The substantive findings are quite suggestive – though of course not conclusive – of what might be found nationally. These data on top wealth holders are the best available and are likely to remain so, unless and until a national study (a very major undertaking) can be conducted.

³ Although some may see the terms “affluent” and “wealthy” as synonymous, economists are beginning to make distinctions, as David Leonhardt (2010) captured in a *New York Times* column titled “Merely Affluent versus Truly Rich.” Swank (2008) writes that “The richest of Americans are defined as the wealthy. They are the top 1% ...”

Identifying who is wealthy is a very difficult task. One needs a list of households believed to be wealthy, along with contact information, before one can sample potential respondents from the list. The most reliable lists – based on wealth estimates derived from income tax returns – are provided by the Internal Revenue Service to the Federal Reserve Board, in order to carry out the Survey of Consumer Finances (SCF). But these lists are not available to private researchers. In order to develop a sample for SESA, NORC statisticians used the imperfect but commercially available WealthFinder “rank A” list of roughly the top 4% of U.S. wealth-holding households (wealth estimates were based on publicly available data), supplemented by the ExecuReach list of business executives. Both lists were further refined using individual-level data on the finances of listed households (home value, income-producing assets, position in and size of business, and the like), to identify those likely to fall among the wealthiest 1%.

NORC, along with our academic team, used this sampling frame to randomly draw a representative sample of wealthy people from four communities in the Chicago metropolitan area, including the city itself, affluent Western suburbs, and the affluent North Shore. Our overall response rate – in the most demanding sense, the proportion of eligible, sampled potential respondents that actually completed interviews – was 37 percent, a remarkably high figure for this sort of very elite population. We guarded against self-selection bias, such as a tilt toward the politically active among those who took part in the survey, by carefully designing promotional materials to emphasize that we wanted to learn how and why they achieved economic success, what lessons they might offer to others, and what charitable and philanthropic activities they

have engaged in.⁴ In this paper we present data on the 83 households interviewed using our refined, most representative sampling scheme.⁵

The distribution of wealth among our respondents is given in Table 1. Most respondents fall in or near the top 1% of U.S. wealth-holders, and a fair number are in the top 0.5%. The average (mean) wealth is about \$14 million, with a median of \$7.5 million.⁶ The people in our sample are not ultra-rich; that is, their net worth falls far below the more than \$1 billion necessary to make the Forbes 400 list of the very wealthiest Americans in 2011. But to our knowledge ours is the wealthiest representative sample whose political behavior has yet been studied.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

⁴ In promotional materials and the survey itself, questions about respondents' economic successes and their philanthropic activities were emphasized and were placed before any discussion of politics. For example, the first two question batteries asked how important each of a list of factors was – for themselves and for others – in achieving economic success (e.g., hard work, luck, sacrifice, planning, etc.).

⁵ A total of 104 respondents were interviewed for SESA. Many of the first 21, however, who were selected from the WealthFinder “rank A” list by an early, unrefined sampling scheme, fell below our target of the top 1% of wealth holders. They are useful for comparative and correlational purposes but would distort the representativeness of results if they were included in the computation of marginal frequencies.

⁶ Despite our best efforts, twelve respondents refused to give even a rough range for their household wealth. They are excluded from Table 1.

In order to compare the political participation and civic engagement of the wealthy to that of the general public, especially the affluent among the general public, we present data from a second survey – the Pew Internet and American Life Project (Smith, Schlozman, Verba and Brady 2009). This is a followup to the 1990 Citizen Participation Study (Verba, Schlozman, Brady, and Nie 1990); it includes many of the same questions plus new questions about political uses of the Internet.⁷ The Pew survey was conducted by telephone between August 12 and August 31, 2008, based on a sample of landline telephones. It included 2,251 adult respondents aged 18 and over, of whom 1,655 were Internet users. The final response rate was 22%.

Findings: Voting, campaigning, and contributing by the wealthy

According to our data, wealthy Americans tend to be very active in politics: far more so than the average citizen, and considerably more so than the merely affluent people found at the upper end of general-population surveys. As Table 2 shows, nearly all our wealthy respondents said they voted in the 2008 presidential election. A very large majority (84%) said they pay attention to politics “most of the time,” and two fifths said they talk politics every day. (Several commented, “all the time!”) Their attendance at a campaign speech or meeting (41%), and the

⁷ These same data are used in Schlozman, Verba, and Brady (2012), where income and education are combined to divide respondents into SES quintiles. We reanalyzed the Pew data and divided the higher-income respondents into those with incomes of \$75,000 to \$149,000, and the quite affluent with incomes of \$150,000 and above (roughly the top 7 or 8 % of the U.S. population in 2008 when the survey was conducted; \$150,000 and above was the top income category from which respondents could choose).

frequency with which they have contributed money to a political party or candidate or other political cause in the last three or four years (60%), are high as well.

(Table 2 about here)

How different are these levels of participation from those of the general public? Comparing the wealthy SESA respondents to members of the general public interviewed in the Pew Internet and American Life Survey (column 2), the differences are dramatic. By several measures, wealthy Americans participate politically at two or three times the rate of members of the general public. For example, whereas 60% of wealthy Americans contributed money politically, only 18% of the public at large contributed. And while 84% of wealthy Americans said they attend to politics most of the time, only 26% of the general public did.⁸ By every measure we examined – including attending political meetings, belonging to political organizations, and volunteering for political organizations – much higher proportions of wealthy Americans than of ordinary citizens are politically engaged.

The last five columns in Table 2 break down the participation levels of the general public by income, using five categories that run from under \$30,000 to over \$150,000. The \$150,000+ top-coded category (the top 5% of income-earners in the Pew sample, representing the top 7 or 8% in the population as a whole) is quite high by the usual standards of general-population surveys. Yet by contrast our wealthy respondents reported a median income of \$500,000 and a mean of \$1,040,000. Just as found by Scholzman, Verba, and Brady (2012), political participation increases with income for almost every type of political activity, from voting to volunteering for political organizations. What we add to this picture is the finding that even

⁸ As indicated in Table 2, all the data for the general public come from the Pew survey except “voted in 2008” and “attend to politics most of the time” which we took from the ANES.

higher percentages of truly wealthy Americans participate politically than do those who are just affluent. (Compare the first and last columns of Table 2.) In several cases – attending meetings, paying attention to politics, and volunteering for political organizations – the wealthy are about *twice* as active as the merely affluent. According to only one measure – belonging to a political organization – do affluent Americans reach the same level of political activity as our wealthy respondents.

Especially notable is the role of the wealthy in giving political money. On average, our wealthy respondents each reported giving a very substantial \$4,633 to political campaigns and organizations in the past twelve months. Remarkably, one fifth (20%) of them reported soliciting or “bundling” contributions from other people to a party or candidate or political cause. As we know from media reports, since the Supreme Court’s *Citizens United* decision a handful of extremely wealthy individuals have each invested many millions of dollars in political campaigns.⁹ Money giving – which is easiest for people with a lot of money – may be the area of political activity in which wealthy Americans have the biggest comparative advantage over their fellow citizens.

High-level political contacts. We asked our SESA interviewees whether or not they had initiated a contact with each of six types of federal government officials or their staffs in the past six months. As can be seen in Table 3, about half said they had contacted at least one type

⁹ Data collected by Richard L. Hasen (2012) show that total outside spending on electoral campaigns exploded after the *Citizens United* decision. In 2010, outside spending totaled \$15.9 million, compared with \$1.8 million in the previous (2006) midterm cycle. At the time of Hansen’s research early in 2012, campaign spending was \$88 million in comparison to \$37.5 million at the same point in 2008.

of official. This contrasts with fewer than 30 percent of the general public.¹⁰ As with other political activities, Americans with low incomes (under \$30,000) are the least likely to initiate political contacts (only 21% did so), and the percentage rises as income rises. Note that in this case, however, the affluent (with incomes over \$150,000) were just about as active as the wealthy.

Presumably what counts a lot about contacts with officials is the result: whether or not one receives a response and is satisfied. Sixty five percent of wealthy Americans reported being satisfied with their contacts. Pew asked members of the general public who made contacts whether they received a response and, if so, whether they were satisfied with it. Although relatively small percentages of Americans made contacts, a high proportion (70%) of those who made contacts received a response, and most (69%) of those receiving a response were satisfied. As can be seen in Table 3, these high rates of receiving responses and being satisfied with those responses hold across all income groups. Of course the wealthy may have been asking for a lot more – perhaps a \$1 million tax break, rather than a position paper for their child’s school project. We don’t know.

[Insert Table 3 about here]

¹⁰ The Pew questions asked respondents whether they had contacted a national, state or local government official. This makes comparison with the SESA question on contacting only federal government officials inexact. We can be almost certain that not *all* of the 30% of the general public that answered the Pew questions affirmatively contacted federal officials. So the 30% figure probably over-estimates federal contacts for the public, under-stating the true contrast between them and the wealthy.

Our wealthy SESA respondents were particularly likely to initiate contacts with members of Congress. Forty percent reported that they had contacted their own senator, and 37% contacted their own representative; remarkably, 28% contacted a representative or senator from another district or state (see Table 4). In total, nearly half of our respondents – 47% of them – made at least one contact with a congressional office. Contacts with executive department officials (12%), White House officials (11%), and officials at a regulatory agency (21%), though less frequent, were also substantial. Overall, a bit more than half of our respondents (53%) made at least one political contact; 41% made two or more.

[Insert Table 4 about here]

Most of our respondents supplied the title or position of the federal government official with whom they had their most important recent contact. Several offered the officials' names, occasionally indicating that they were on a first-name basis with “Rahm” Emmanuel (then President Obama’s Chief of Staff) or “David” Axelrod (his chief political counsel.) The frequency of such close ties to the Chicago-linked Obama administration may be unique to our Chicago-area respondents, but we see no particular reason why their high frequency of contacts with congressional representatives should be atypical of wealthy Americans elsewhere in the country. For that matter, we suspect that very wealthy people anywhere in the country can probably get the attention of high-level executive branch officials, too, when they wish to do so. Only a representative national study could tell us for sure.

Purpose of contacts: narrow self interest? When we asked an open-ended question about the main purpose of a respondent’s most important recent contact, most reported a specific topic. Many gave a fair amount of detail about what they discussed. As best we could, we coded these responses as reflecting either narrow economic self interest or broad collective concerns.

Of course some responses were too vague to code: “[to] try to influence legislation...”; “trying to get him to pass or veto some pending legislation”; “to make recommendations on policy issues.” And some involved ambiguous mixtures of personal and societal concerns (“A relative works for a non-profit that trains foreign police officers to investigate alleged war crimes, e.g. in Africa....I found the correct person to contact to obtain money for this group”; “I met with both [the] congressman and the senator...on why government must not cut the worker training budget, as a representative of the Alliance of Manufacturing...[this] is an important investment that will return the benefits many times over.”)

But many contacts could be coded as fairly clearly concerning a matter of economic self interest (“to try to get the Treasury to honor their commitment to extend TARP funds to a particular bank in Chicago”; “to better understand the new regulations of the Dodd-Frank Act and how it will affect my business [banking/ finance]”; “Fish and Wildlife. Business; permitting on development land”; “on behalf of clients, seeking regulatory approvals”; “I own stock in several banks. I was concerned about legislation he was drafting that I think could be harmful for the banks.”) Many other contacts involved matters of broad public policy (“concern about... deficit spending too much”; “we don’t like...defunding public broadcasting, ending funding to NOAA, decrease funding to the IRS....It’s crazy to end Head Start and they want to give away oil rights....”; “[as an advisory committee member] I provided my input to the issues associated with migrant worker health”; “My congresswoman is also a friend so we met over dinner and discussed...health care issues”; “to support government fiscal responsibility.”)

According to our coding there were many contacts of both types, but somewhat more of them concerned collective matters (56% of those coded one way or the other) than concerned narrow economic self interests (44%). See Table 5, which also summarizes a few examples of

topics or purposes of contacts. Contacts about health care policy were particularly frequent, constituting 20% of all issue-specific contacts.

(Insert Table 5 about here)

Can we believe these responses? For the most part, subject to certain caveats, we think we can. Most of the reported topics and arguments seem too detailed and too plausible to have been made up on the spot for our interviewers. Spur-of-the-moment inventions would take effort to concoct and could be harmful to the self-esteem of people who like to think of themselves as honest. On the other hand, we suspect that the frequency of self-interested discussions with officials may have been somewhat understated. This could happen, for example, because some respondents chose to focus on a genuinely public-regarding contact as the “most important” one (ignoring an equally important but more selfish contact), or because some of the 4% who acknowledged the fact of a contact but refused to state its purpose – and/or some of those whose responses were too vague to judge – were actually pursuing a narrow self interest but felt uncomfortable telling us about it.

Moreover, even when our respondents communicated their views on broad rather than narrow policy matters, we cannot be sure that they were always correct about what would benefit their fellow citizens, or that their views were untainted by individual- or group-related economic self interest. Indeed, the specific policy preferences expressed by SESA respondents often differed markedly from those of average citizens, sometime in ways that could be self-interested (Page, Bartels and Seawright 2013).

In any case, some might interpret our glass as “half empty” (the 44% of contacts that admittedly involved matters of narrow self interest) rather than “half full” (the 56% that claimed a collective focus.) Still, our evidence suggests that when wealthy Americans contact high-level

public officials, they may often address the common good as they see it, not solely their own parochial concerns.

Discussion

Our survey was small and confined to a single geographical area. Unless and until someone can do a national study we cannot be sure about the behavior of all wealthy Americans around the country. On the other hand, the Chicago metropolitan area – in the heartland of the Midwest – may not have been a bad place to start. In political terms the Chicago-area wealthy may fall somewhere in between wealthy people in such diverse places as New York City, Dallas, and Silicon Valley.

To the extent that our survey is representative of the nation as a whole, it is clear that wealthy Americans – the top 1% or so of wealth holders – are exceptionally active in politics. They vote, talk politics, campaign, and (especially) give money to political causes at much higher rates than average citizens do. They are significantly more active than the merely affluent, as well. Particularly notable are the findings that our respondents averaged a substantial \$4,600 in annual political contributions; that 20% of our respondents reported “bundling” others’ political contributions; and that 40% reported initiating a contact with their own U.S. senators. Many also contacted their own representatives, others’ senators or representatives, executive branch officials, and/or members of the White House staff.

In her book *How Policies Make Citizens: Senior Citizens and the American Welfare State*, Andrea Campbell (2005, p.2) refers to the elderly as “the Über-citizens of the American polity, voting and making campaign contributions at rates higher than any other age group.” Our

findings point to the fact that it may be the wealthy who are the real Über-citizens of the American polity. Their participation levels far exceed any others that scholars have found.

What implications does this have for democratic policy making? Others have found evidence indicating that moderately “affluent” Americans in the top third or top fifth of the income distribution have much more influence than other citizens over the roll call votes of their senators (Bartels 2008) and over changes in national policy (Gilens 2005, 2012). If a high level of political participation by the affluent is one important mechanism by which they exert such influence, then the truly wealthy – with their still more vigorous participation – may exert particularly high levels of political influence. This would presumably violate the norm of political equality (central to “populistic” democratic theories), which calls for every citizen to have an equal voice (see Dahl 1989).

Soroka and Wlezien (2008) point out that unequal influence by the affluent would not make much difference if the affluent generally shared the same policy preferences as the citizenry as a whole. But Gilens (2009, 2012) presents compelling evidence that on many important issues the affluent in fact tend to disagree with other Americans. SESA data (not presented here) indicate that the truly wealthy – the top 1% -- differ even more sharply. They express much more enthusiasm for cutting domestic programs in order to balance the budget. They prefer lower, less progressive taxes; less economic regulation; and fewer federal government programs related to jobs, incomes, health care, and retirement pensions than others do (Page, Bartels, and Seawright 2013). If the intensive political participation revealed by the SESA data enables wealthy Americans to have their voices heard by policymakers more clearly than the voice of the general public – and perhaps sometimes get their way over opposition by popular majorities – this would seem to be troubling for democracy.

A full assessment of the normative implications of our findings, however, would depend upon precisely what sort of democratic theory one embraces (relatively populist or pluralistic). It might also depend on learning more about the nature of wealthy Americans' higher levels of political participation. To what extent do wealthy Americans in fact pursue narrow economic self-interest, and to what extent do they pursue the common good as they see it? Is their vision of the common good informed by superior knowledge, so that they should be seen as enlightened leaders – pushing for policies that would serve their fellow citizens better than those citizens themselves realize? Or do the unusual standpoints and experiences of the wealthy produce biases in their world-views (perhaps hyper-awareness of tax burdens, for example, but little understanding of the benefits of social welfare policies) that lead them to act against the best interests of their fellow citizens? In this article we have barely been able to touch upon such issues, which we consider important matters for future inquiry.

Table 1. Distribution of Wealth among SESA Respondents

Wealth	Percentage (%)	N
<\$4,999,999	27%	19
\$5,000,000 – 9,999,999	37%	26
\$10,000,000 – 19,999,999	14%	10
\$20,000,000 – 39,999,999	14%	10
\$40,000,000 +	8%	6
Mean wealth = \$14,006,338; median = \$7,500,000	100%	71
Based on the n=83 refined sample only. Omits cases that refused to give a number or range for their wealth.		

Table 2. Percentages of Wealthy Americans and the General Public Engaged in Political Activities

Political Activity	Percentage (%) Participating						
	Wealthy (SESA)	Total Public (Pew & ANES)	Public by Income				
			<\$30,000	\$30,000- \$49,999	\$50,000- \$74,999	\$75,000- \$149,000	\$150,000 +
Voted in 2008	99%	78	73	73	84	83	84
Talk politics every day	42	19	14	19	19	26	32
Attended political meetings, rallies, speeches, or dinners ^a	42	12	8	10	15	14	22
Contributed money	60	18	10	14	19	27	44
Helped solicit or bundle contributions	20						
Attend to politics “most of the time”	84	26	21	24	26	31	38
Belong to political organization	23	15	10	12	20	24	26
Volunteer for political organization	29	8	6	6	9	10	15
N ^b	83	2,251	509	337	296	488	127

^a Survey of general public asked only about attending a political rally or speech.

^b Number of respondents provided for the general public from the Pew survey. All general public questions come from the Pew survey except “Voted in 2008” and “Attend to politics most of the time” which are taken from the ANES.

Table 3. Percentages of Wealthy Americans and of the General Public who Contacted Officials and Percentages Satisfied with Contacts

Political Activity	Percentage (%)						
	Wealthy (SESA)	Total Public (Pew)	Public by Income				
			<\$30,000	\$30,000- \$49,999	\$50,000- \$74,999	\$75,000- \$149,000	\$150,000+
Contacted an official ^a	55%	30	21	25	31	39	49
Satisfied with contact	65						
Received a response from contact ^b		70	62	72	73	71	79
Satisfied with contact, if received a response ^c		69	66	70	68	75	69

^a The general public survey asked separately about online (email) and offline (letter, phone call, etc.) contacts; results are combined here. Pew, national, state, or local officials; SESA, federal only.

^b Question only asked of those who contacted a public official. An interviewee who made contacts both online and offline was coded as receiving a response if received from at least one of his/her contacts.

^c Question only asked of respondents who contacted a public official and received a response. An interviewee receiving a response from both online and offline contacts was coded as satisfied if satisfied with at least one of his/her responses.

Table 4. Percentages of Wealthy Americans who Contacted Specific Officials

Type of Political Contact	Percentage (%)
Contacted own congressional representative	37%
Contacted own senator	40%
Contacted representative or senator from another district or state	28%
Contacted a White House official	11%
Contacted an executive department official	12%
Contacted a regulatory department official	21%

Note: 53% made one or more of the above contacts; 41% made two or more.

Table 5. Purposes of Wealthy Americans' High-Level Political Contacts*

Purpose of Contact	Percentage (%) (including cases not categorized)	Percentage (%) (omitting cases not categorized)
<p>Collective Concerns</p> <p>Examples: <i>health care policy; save the Everglades; support fiscal responsibility; cut military spending; oppose abortion funding limits; less government; cancer prevention and cures.</i></p>	35%	56%
<p>Narrowly Self-Interested Concerns</p> <p>Examples: <i>Dodd-Frank effects on R's bank stocks; development project in R's House district; disclosure issues; get FDA approval for a product; private equity tax change.</i></p>	28%	44%
<p>Could not categorize</p>	37%	--

*The respondents in this table are limited to those who both made a contact and discussed its purpose (N=43).

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