

Politically Invisible in America

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Abstract

Campaigns, parties, interest groups, pollsters and political scientists rely on voter registration lists and consumer files to identify people as targets for registration drives, persuasion and mobilization, and to be included in sampling frames for surveys. We introduce a new category of Americans: the politically invisible, people that are unreachable using these voter and marketing lists. Matching a high-quality, random sample of the U.S. population to multiple lists reveals that at least 11% of the adult citizenry is unlisted. An additional 12% are mislisted (not living at their recorded address). These groups are invisible to list-based campaigns and research, making them difficult or impossible to contact. 2 in 5 Blacks and (citizen) Hispanics are unreachable, but just 18% of Whites. The unreachable are poorer than the reachable population, have markedly lower levels of political engagement and are much less likely to report contact with candidates and campaigns. They are heavily Democratic in party identification and vote intention, favoring Obama over Romney 73-27, with just 16% identifying as Republicans. That the politically invisible are more liberal and from historically marginalized groups shows that the turn to list-based campaigning and research could worsen existing biases in the political system.

Lists in contemporary American politics. Lists of registered voters — augmented by data from consumer files — are the *sine qua non* of micro-targeting and data analytics in contemporary political campaigns. Although journalists often overstate the coverage and quality of these lists (Hersh 2015) — and the use of lists is hardly a recent development (Sigelman and Jewell 1986) — these lists are vitally important to parties, campaigns and interest groups. In political science, lists of registered voters were essential to the development of GOTV field experiments (Gerber, Green and Larimer 2008), now a staple of mobilization and persuasion campaigns (Issenberg 2012). Lists have been proposed as a superior means of conducting “likely-voter” screens in pre-election surveys (Rogers and Aida 2013) and are widely used as sampling frames in political polling (Green and Gerber 2006).

The databases maintained by partisan organizations such as Catalist, Targetsmart or the GOP Data Trust — or commercial vendors such as L2 — aggregate information from state voter files and commercial data vendors. These lists can reasonably purport to include every registered voter in the United States (since registration information is a matter of public record), plus millions of unregistered people found only by commercial data vendors. Indeed, because these voter registration lists offer good residential information for so many Americans, the U.S. Census Bureau is considering using the lists to identify vacant housing units and to enumerate some households ahead of the 2020 Census (Morris, Keller and Clark 2015).

As these commercial voter files have come to play a larger part in political science and political practice, researchers have begun to not merely use them as a tool for studying political behavior (Hersh and Nall 2015) or as a lens through which to understand campaigns (Hersh 2015), but instead as a subject of study unto themselves (Nyhan, Skovron and Titiunik 2017; McDonald 2007; Berent, Krosnick and Lupia 2016). This reflects an understanding that while they are a useful research tool, they can also provide a

view of American voters that is subject to biases. In this sense, voter files are not unlike surveys: they are a valuable tool for understanding American politics, but come at the cost of imperfections that are a part of the research tool.

But much like surveys, voter file research has become even more central to the practice of politics than they have to political science. Campaigns use voter files to choose who should be contacted for registration, mobilization and persuasion activities, and to find the best contact information for these prospective contacts (Issenberg 2012). Indeed, the use of commercial voter files, and the analytics technologies they enabled, became such a central part of Hillary Clinton’s 2016 election that journalists conjectured that the overuse of this data was a factor in Clinton’s loss, a critique unimaginable for a Presidential campaign just 12 years before (Kilgore 2016). As voter files now play an important role in campaigns, the biases inherent to the use of voter files will become manifest in political action.

These lists have made political campaigns more efficient, but at what cost? Some critics bemoan a “death by data” in political campaigning, contending that the increased importance of targeted appeals to individual voters crowds out public messaging and a more substantive political discourse (Brooks 2014). We examine a different kind of civic death: the political invisibility of Americans not reachable from lists.

This paper documents three biases inherent to voter files, registration bias, reachability and unlistedness, and explores the political implications of these differences in the context of the 2012 Presidential election. These biases motivate four categories of people: (1) registered voters (whom we term “**registered**”) listed at their correct address; (2) **unregistered** people appearing on consumer files at their correct address; (3) **mislisted** people, who appear on the files at an address other than the address at which they live and (4) **unlisted** people, who do not appear in databases of registered voters or on consumer files. Categories 1, 2 and 3 are “listed” persons, while categories 1 and 2 are reachable correctly listed persons, people that can be contacted by mail or in person, the two

mainstays of political outreach, using information from the files.

Two-thirds of mislisted people are registered to vote, but at an address where they do not reside. Much of the machinery of political mobilization misses these voters entirely.

Further, because their current address is not recorded on the files, voter registration operations that target recent movers will also miss these people.

Moving from the entire citizenry to registered voters, the electorate becomes less racially diverse, richer, more likely to report being contacted by a campaign and less supportive of the Democratic Party. An electorate that encompasses just listed persons has policy preferences that are more conservative than that of the entire citizenry. In this way the reliance on lists in contemporary American politics diminishes the visibility and political power of minorities and the poor, tilting policy and election outcomes in a more conservative, more Republican direction.

Data and Methodology. The 2012 American National Election Studies (ANES) face-to-face survey was based on a random sample of households drawn from the United States Postal Service Computerized Delivery Sequence File (a list of active addresses in the United States), augmented by field enumeration of households in rural Census tracts (ANES 2014). Institutional addresses are excluded from the sample. Information from voter or consumer files was not used in forming the sample. As such, the ANES sample covers addresses and individuals that do not appear on voter files or in the databases of commercial data vendors. The sampling frame for the ANES spans adult, U.S. citizens (not residing in group quarters), a close match to the voting eligible population.¹ A randomly chosen individual is chosen as the respondent in households with more than one eligible adult citizen. In addition, the ANES in-person interview takes place at the sampled respondent's home, so that in general, the address at which the interview took place should

¹The ANES face-to-face 2012 study incorporated over-samples of African-Americans and Latinos. The data is also post-stratified to reduce non-response bias (ANES 2014).

correspond to the address associated with the respondent in the databases and lists used by campaigns.

Of 2,054 ANES respondents, 2,006 provided sufficient name information to attempt a match to three prominent commercial voter files acquired by ANES; 1,693 of these respondents were located in these lists (including both registered and unregistered people). ANES collects detailed identifying data and interviews respondents in their homes, bolstering our confidence in ANES' matches of respondents to the lists; details of the matching procedure are available from ANES ([Jackman and Spahn 2014](#); [American National Election Studies 2016](#)). Of the 333 mislisted respondents, 223 matched with a full name and birth date to a commercial voter file record with an address other than address at which they were interviewed. A further 59 respondents matched on birth year or age when full birth date information was incomplete. Finally, 51 cases were treated as mislisted matches where the commercial voter file record was missing birth date information. In 40% of these missing birth date cases, the match was made to a record with an address in the same city as the respondent's residence, leading us to believe that this mislisting was due to a real error in the file, rather than an erroneous match to another person. Finally, in 31 cases, comprising just under 10% of the total mislisted cases, a match was made to a record missing birth date and age information, with an address outside the respondent's city or town. In these cases, we use the vendor's match, though it is possible that some of these mislisted individuals should have been classified as unlisted. While some misclassifications surely occurred, any misclassifications would attenuate differences between groups, leading us to observe smaller differences between citizenship categories than truly exist in the American public. The results reported here are highly unlikely to be an artifact of errors in the matching process.

After applying weights to make the ANES data representative of the sampling frame, correctly listed persons comprise 78% of the sample, with the mislisted accounting for an

additional 12%. Accordingly, 23% of the weighted sample is unlisted or mislisted in the databases available to parties and campaigns ahead of the 2012 general election. We regard this estimate of the unreachable population to be a lower bound on the true proportion, since people that have not registered to vote at their current address are also less likely to be interested in taking a long political survey.

We are interested in testing hypotheses that illustrate how these groups differ in their socioeconomic status and political attitudes, with an eye to explaining how individuals become politically invisible and what the consequences of their non-participation or non-contact might be. Our aim is to show that the absence of the politically invisible persons from voter lists, and thus from voter contact and research strategies that rely on these lists, is both substantively and normatively consequential. To support our claims, we identified interesting and statistically significant differences between these groups, which we describe below.

Race and ethnicity. People of color are considerably less likely to be correctly registered than Whites. Table 1 shows that just 18% of Whites are unreachable, compared to roughly 40% for Blacks and Hispanics. Among Blacks and Hispanics, about 20% are unlisted (not appearing on either voter or consumer files) and another 20% are mislisted (listed at an address other than their current residence). Near-majorities of the minority population can not be targeted for contact with direct mailers or in-person canvasses.

Only a small proportion of minorities not registered at their current address can be found using consumer information. Of the 42% of Blacks not registered to vote at their current address (those in the unregistered, mislisted and unlisted categories), just 6% have a record with a correct address. For Hispanics, the comparable number is 13%. For Whites, 29% of those without a current voter registration have a consumer record with an accurate address. Consumer files have low penetration into the unregistered minority population but

cover almost a third of unregistered Whites. Thus, consumer files are a viable tool for the political incorporation of Whites who have not registered to vote, but are much less useful for other racial and ethnic groups.

	Total	White	Black	Hispanic	Other
Registered	70	75	58	53	59
Unregistered	8	7	3	6	12
Mislisted	12	10	18	20	13
Unlisted	11	8	21	21	16

Table 1: Distribution of citizen types (percentages), by race and ethnicity, ANES 2012 face-to-face respondents (weighted), $p < .01$, $n = 2,006$.

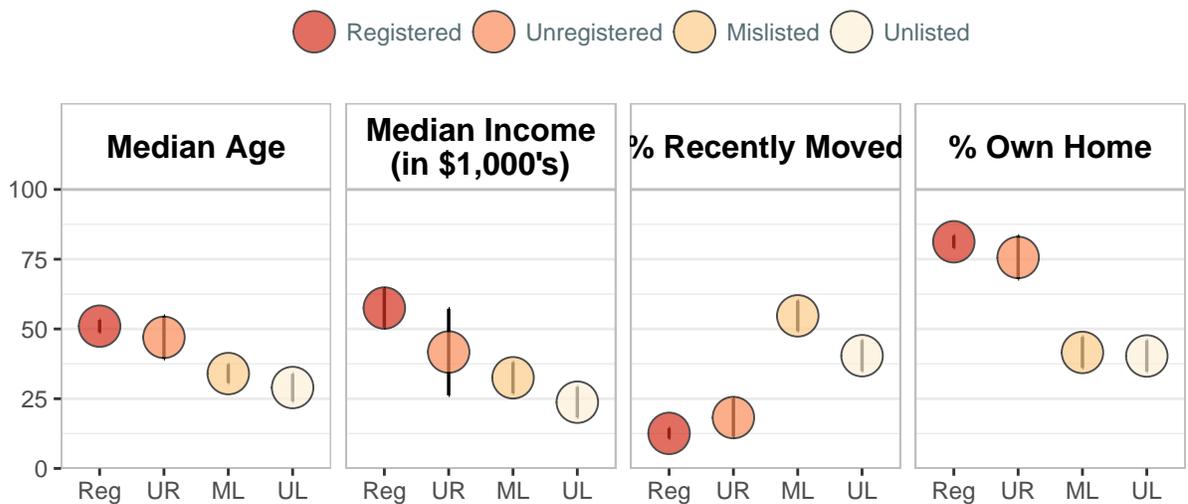


Figure 1: Percentage of citizen type with listed attribute (error bars for proportions are \pm two standard errors), ANES 2012 face-to-face respondents (weighted). Voters have consistently higher socioeconomic status than non-voters. Of the four groups, unlisted people have the lowest income and are least likely to own their home. Recently moved refers to people that have lived at their current address for less than a year. All of the between-group differences are extremely unlikely to be due to chance alone, each has a p .

Age. The median age of an unlisted person is 29 years, while the average age of accurately registered voters is 51. These age contrasts follow differences in mobility and home ownership over the life cycle. Younger people are more prone to rent and to move and so are more likely to be unlisted or mislisted, and hence politically invisible to

list-based political campaigns.

Income, Residential Tenure and Home Ownership Differences across citizen types with respect to three indicators of socioeconomic status are shown in Figure 1. In particular, the unlisted are more financially vulnerable than their listed peers. Median annual incomes among the unlisted are just \$24,000, rising to \$41,000 among the unregistered and \$57,000 among accurately registered respondents. Unlisted and mislisted people are about half as likely to report owning their homes as the correctly listed citizenry (40% versus 75%) and are more than twice as likely to report living at their current address for less than one year. High rates of residential mobility and low rates of home ownership can explain much of the absence of correct address data for the unlisted and mislisted. Their frequent movements mean that the contact information available on commercial voter files reflects their previous address, making them mislisted or absent from the files altogether. For the unlisted and mislisted, low incomes mean they generate less consumer information, further allowing a lapse in contact information to occur. Though the United States Postal Service National Change of Address database facilitates the revision of outdated contact information, not everyone registers their moves with the postal service. Indeed, the unlisted may have little or no commercially relevant information or a voter registration record in the first instance.

Residential mobility. Voter registration is tied to an individual living at a certain *address*, rather than to individuals themselves. Residential mobility severs a citizen's connection to the voter registration system. An affirmative act by the citizen is required to re-register each time they move (Schmidhauser 1963; Squire, Wolfinger and Glass 1987). The National Voter Registration Act of 1993 ("Motor Voter") lowered the costs of re-registration, but our data confirm a pattern long noted in the literature: moving results in many citizens falling off voter rolls (Highton and Wolfinger 1998) and commercial

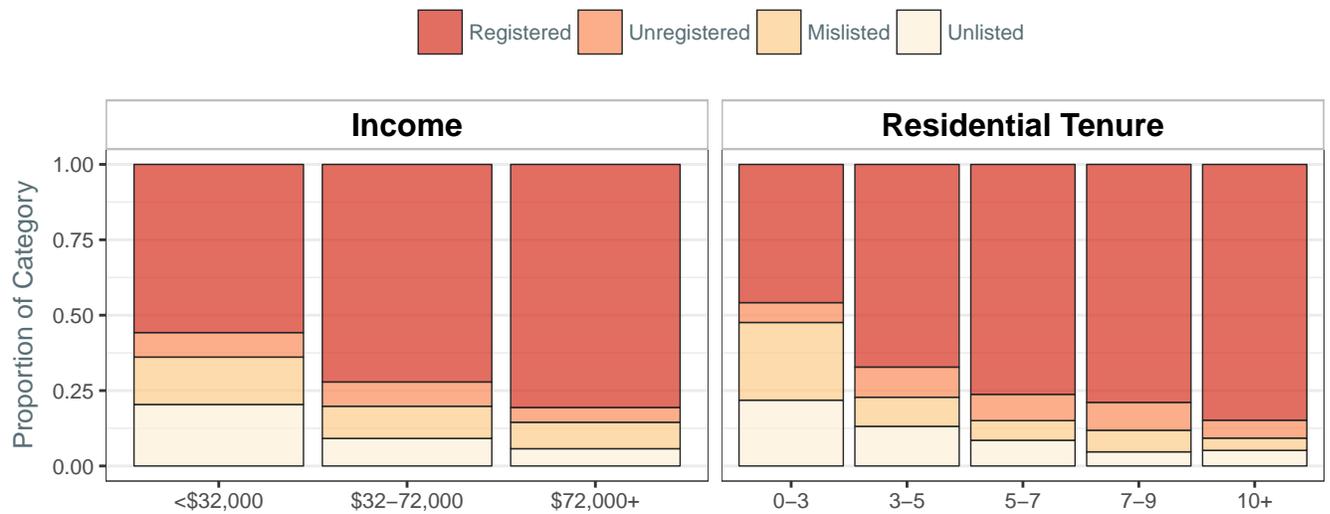


Figure 2: Distribution of citizen types, by income tercile (annual household income) and residential tenure (years at current residence), $p < .01$.

databases as well.

Residential mobility is concentrated among the poor and urban dwelling. In turn, this helps explain why non-Whites are less likely to be listed than minorities. Figure 2 demonstrates that duration of residential tenure is associated with political visibility. Majorities of Blacks (59%) and Hispanics (52%) report residing at their current address for less than five years; among Whites the corresponding figure is 36%. 48% of Whites but just 1 in 3 Blacks and Hispanics report residing at their current address for 10 years or more.

Income powerfully shapes the relationship between residential mobility and being listed. Figure 2 shows that people with higher incomes are more likely to be politically visible, consistent with a resource model of political participation, in which civic knowledge, time and money are three key resources for political participation (Brady, Verba and Schlozman 1995). Our analysis points to a fourth element, closely associated with wealth: being *listed*. Since unregistered records are sourced from commercial voter files, the probability of being listed increases with wealth. Figure 2 demonstrates that the poorest respondents are

dramatically more likely to be unlisted and dramatically less likely to be registered.

Residential mobility elevates the risk of becoming (or remaining) unreachable, even for the wealthy.

Campaign contact. Being reachable — and especially being registered — greatly facilitates contact with campaigns. As Figure 3 illustrates, registered voters with accurate contact information were dramatically more likely to report being contacted by a campaign in 2012. Unregistered and the politically invisible reported less than half the rate of contact as registered respondents. Only 33% of registered mislisted that voted in 2008 report being contacted in 2012, less than the 46% contact rate for correctly listed registered respondents overall, or the 52% contact rate among correctly listed registered respondents that voted in 2008. The 20 point gap between mislisted respondents and registered voters confirms the importance of accurate address information for contact with campaigns. When address information is inaccurate, the campaign’s outreach will often fail to reach its intended target.

The situation is even more stark for the unlisted. Both unregistered and unlisted respondents are not registered to vote, but nearly 20% of unregistered respondents report contact from a campaign or political organization in 2012, while only 10% of unlisted respondents only report contact. Unregistered-but-listed respondents report twice as much attention from campaigns as the unlisted. Since direct contact between candidates and citizens is an important avenue through which politicians learn about citizen preferences and make policy decisions (Fenno 1978), the extra attentiveness of politicians to the listed over the unlisted reinforces economic and social inequality. Though the unlisted and mislisted might still be stimulated by broadcast advertisements, these ads don’t funnel information back to the campaign like an in-person canvass.

By expending less political resources on the unlisted, politicians and politically engaged

volunteers rarely come into contact with this group, potentially leading to policy issues of particular importance to the unlisted receiving less attention. The 11% of the population that is unlisted are mostly people of color, have low median incomes and have high rates of residential mobility, all traits that distinguish them from the more white, richer and residentially stable registered population. The median income among those reporting contact from a campaign is \$62,500, while the median income among those not reporting contact is just \$37,500, a gap partly explained by the differences in listed status between low and high earners.

The effect of being listed dwarfs the effect of income, explaining over three times as much variance in contact rates than income alone. Once poorer people become listed (and especially when they start voting) they can be contacted for continued mobilization efforts (Nickerson 2015). This suggests that voter registration efforts may have important secondary effects, exposing the newly listed to contact opportunities from a variety of political organizations using lists to identify targets for mobilization efforts.

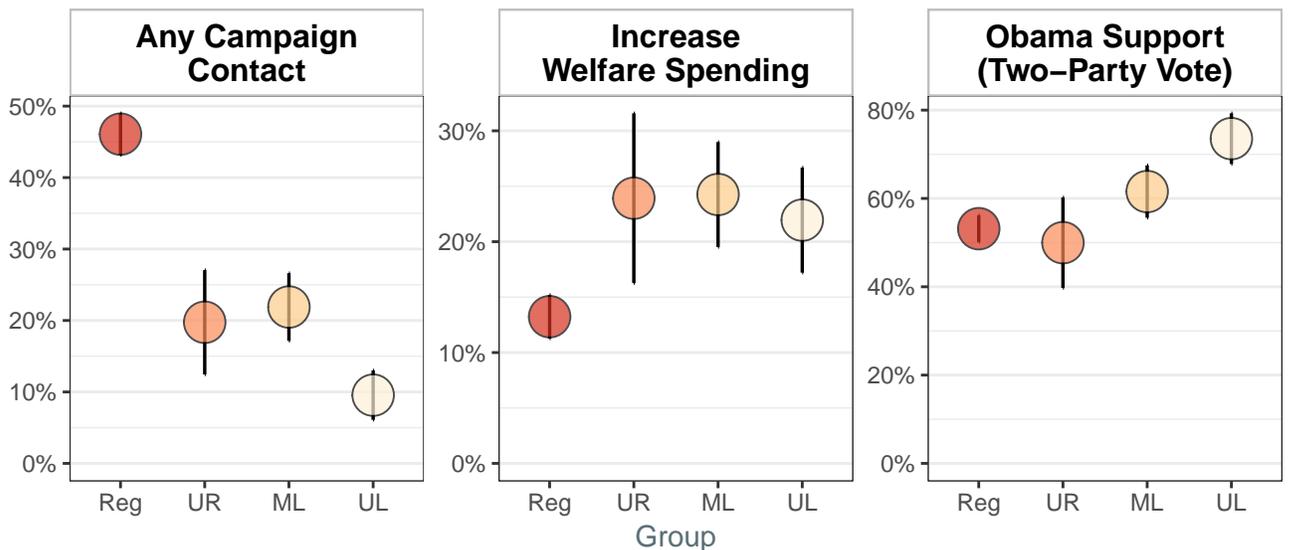


Figure 3: Percentage of each citizen type reporting contact by campaigns and parties, expressing support for more federal welfare spending and expressing support for President Obama in an interview after the 2012 Presidential election. ANES 2012 face-to-face respondents (weighted). $p < .01$.

Political Attitudes. If registration and mobilization activities truly do affect the composition of the electorate, how would the political views of the electorate change if everyone was listed, registered and turned out to vote? In general, the policy positions of the unregistered, mislisted and unregistered respondents in our analysis are more liberal than those of registered voters. For example, the middle panel of Figure 3 displays variation in preferences toward federal welfare spending. Just 13% of registereds think that spending should increase, compared to 22-25% for the unregistered and unreachable. The differences across citizen types on policy matters can be so stark that on a related issue, federal spending for childcare, the median position of the electorate moves from supporting the status quo level to supporting an increase when we shift focus from voters to the entire citizenry.

Obama Vote Choice and Partisanship. Large disparities in socio-economic status across the four citizen groups lead to considerable variation in partisanship and vote choice. The bottom panel of Figure 3 displays Obama's share of the two-party vote choice item across the four citizen types. The weighted ANES data closely reproduce the national 2012 two-party result, with respondents known to have turned out in 2012 favoring Obama over Romney 52-48. Correctly listed registereds supported Obama over Romney 53 to 47, while unregistered were split 50-50 between the two candidates.

The unreachables, on the other hand, broke strongly for Obama. 62% of mislisteds and 74% of unlisteds indicated support for Obama, margins that mirror the exceptionally strong support Democratic candidates earn from non-whites.

Table 2 shows that the unreachable population is more likely to identify with the Democratic party than their listed peers. This affiliation fits with their higher rates of support for Obama and for the welfare state, but begs a question: why do they remain unreachable when the Democrats would benefit so much from getting them registered and

	Dem	Ind	Rep
Registered	36	36	28
Unregistered	25	58	17
Mislisted	40	37	23
Unlisted	43	42	16

Table 2: Percent identifying with each of the two parties, or identifying as independent, by category. $p < .01$.

voting? The answer probably lies with the institution of voter registration itself. The voter registration system in America began as a tool to limit voting to landed men, and ironically, it still serves these ends today (Cunningham 1991). The institution of voter registration is simply not designed to accommodate itinerant citizens. Even if the unreachable were to be registered — and the Democratic Party would appear to have a clear incentive to do so — the small commercial footprint of the unreachable and frequent moves would see them become politically invisible once again.

Political representation in the list-based era. The mislisted and the unlisted are marginalized in other domains of American life. They are poorer, more financially vulnerable, younger and more likely to be non-White than voters. They also report more liberal policy preferences and political attitudes and express less satisfaction with America’s political system.

Political parties and interest groups are often seen as brokers in American politics, connecting citizens and candidates, voters with vote seekers (Aldrich 1995). That at least 11% of the citizenry is unlisted indicates a market failure of sorts. Mislisted and unlisted people report much less contact with political parties and electoral campaigns. Parties and interest groups — the dominant agents of political mobilization — are either unaware of the large, unlisted and mislisted segments of the citizenry, or have made the calculation that mobilizing them is simply not worth the effort.

Some might see no great normative issue in large proportions of the citizenry being

mislisted or unlisted. In a free society, citizens are not compelled to register to vote or to turn out. Being unlisted or unregistered is a choice.

Disenfranchising any particular person is unlikely to be electorally pivotal and probably has infinitesimal direct effects on that person's welfare. But the burdens of the voter registration system — as low as they might be — are felt disproportionately by the poor. Low SES is associated with vastly lower levels of contact with candidates, parties and interest groups. Low levels of contact between parties and candidates and the poor, coupled with their disproportionately low turnout, may explain why public policy tends to favor the rich ([Bartels 2009](#); [Gilens 2012](#)).

The inequality in political visibility we document here has parallels with inequality in other domains of American life. Economic and social disadvantage predict diminished political visibility, participation and representation. Economic disadvantage and its concomitant — high rates of residential mobility — see minorities, young people and the financially vulnerable — people more liberal than most voting Americans — less likely to cast a ballot and far less visible to list-driven campaigns.

Moreover, absent a positive, affirmative act by a citizen to become registered to vote, the way a citizen moves from being unlisted to listed is via their behavior not in the realm of politics, but in the economy, through activities such as credit card usage, having active bank accounts, or owning a home. In no small measure, political visibility is premised on one's visibility as a consumer. Inequality in economic consumption is reflected in the unequal political visibility reported here. As a formal, legal matter, political representation is a constitutional guarantee available to all citizens; as a practical matter, economic and social inequality generates inequality in political visibility.

Are lists good for American democracy? While lists surely make campaigns more efficient, they do so at the expense of unlisted and mislisted Americans. The listed electorate is

whiter, older, wealthier and more conservative than the citizenry. The well-off and already-powerful are the beneficiaries of this new political institution.

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