ABSTRACT

THE POLITICAL REPRESENTATION
OF THE POOR

by
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How do electoral rules affect the poor? Under what conditions are legislators likely to be more or less responsive to the poor? What are the distributional consequences of electoral incentives to be more or less responsive to the poor?

This research departs from current explanations of cross-national differences in social policy by recognizing that antipoverty measures are especially well-suited for manipulation by re-election-motivated legislators: Antipoverty measures are highly targeted policies that are readily perceived by the beneficiaries and can be directly attributed to incumbent legislators. In combination with the geographic distribution of income groups, electoral rules determine the electoral power of low-income citizens, and structure legislators’ incentives to be responsive to this constituency. The generosity of antipoverty measures will reflect the share of legislators that rely on low-income citizens’ electoral support. The theoretical intuition for this research is developed in a series of formal-analytic examples (presented in Chapter 2) that
demonstrate the important modifying effect of electoral geography on the more general relationship between electoral rules and social policy.

Support for this election-motivated account of antipoverty policy is presented two forms: First, I take full advantage of Italy’s electoral reform and the dramatic change in Germany’s electoral geography following re-unification to demonstrate that important improvements in the electoral power of the poor are quickly followed by increases in the effectiveness and generosity of antipoverty measures; Chapter 4 reports the results of this analysis. Second, in a broadly comparative analysis, Chapter 5 establishes the general – positive – relationship between the electoral power of a low-income voting bloc (i.e., the number of seats elected by low-income citizens, if they all turn out to vote, and all vote for the same party), and levels of targeted poverty relief. Both of these analysis use a new measure of poverty responsiveness, developed in Chapter 3, as their dependent variable. The poverty relief ratio, $R$, assesses the effectiveness of antipoverty transfers from the perspective of low-income citizens – an attribute that is important for the evaluation of an election-motivated account of antipoverty policy.

That cross-national and over-time differences in levels of poverty relief reflects variation in legislators’ electoral incentives to be responsive to low-income citizens is both surprising and a cause for concern: The electoral institutions of contemporary democratic societies may undermine opportunities for these societies to fulfill their obligations to democratic equality.