

Unlisted in America

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August 22, 2015

Abstract

Campaigns, parties, interest groups, pollsters and political scientists increasingly rely on voter registration lists and consumer files to identify targets for registration, persuasion and mobilization, and as sampling frames for surveys. However, a sizable proportion of the U.S. citizen population does not appear on these lists, making them invisible to list-based campaigns and research. What political consequences follow from a list-based view of the polity? How large is the unlisted population? Are their preferences ignorable? We address this question after matching respondents to the face-to-face component of the 2012 American National Election Study (using an address-based sampling design) to voter and consumer files. At least 11% of the adult citizenry is unlisted. 1 in 5 Blacks and (citizen) Hispanics are unlisted, but just 8% of Whites. The unlisted earn less income and are less likely to have health insurance or own their own home than the listed population. The unlisted have markedly lower levels of political engagement than the listed and are much less likely to report contact with candidates and campaigns. Yet, the unlisted have coherent policy preferences that tend to the left of listed respondents. Unlisted ANES respondents reported favoring Obama over Romney 73-27 and just 14% identify as Republicans. We find that if unregistered and unlisted people voted at comparable rates to registered people with the same level of interest in politics, both the 2000 and 2004 Presidential elections would have been won by Democrats. Clearly, the exclusion of the unlisted has important practical and normative implications for political representation, measures of public opinion, election outcomes and public policy.

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Lists in contemporary American politics

Lists of registered voters — augmented by data from consumer files — are at the center of contemporary American electoral politics. Lists are the *sine qua non* of micro-targeting and the “analytics” performed by campaigns. Although journalists often overstate the coverage and quality of these lists (e.g., see [Hersh 2015](#), 11) — and the use of lists is hardly a recent development (e.g., [Sigelman and Jewell 1986](#)) — there is little doubt as to importance of these lists 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 (e.g., [Green and Gerber 2006](#)).

The databases maintained by partisan organizations such as Catalist or the GOP Data Trust — or commercial vendors such as TargetSmart or Labels and Lists — 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 by commercial data vendors but not matched to a voter record.

These lists have certainly contributed to making political campaigns more efficient, but at what cost? [Brooks \(2014\)](#) has bemoaned the “death by data” of political campaigning, contending that the increased importance of targeted appeals to individual voters crowds out public messaging and a more substantive political discourse. In this paper we consider a different kind of civic death from list-based politics: the neglect of Americans not appearing on the lists.

We define four categories of people: (1) Presidential voters (persons who are recorded as having voted in the 2012 general election); (2) registered voters that did not vote in 2012 (whom we term “registered”); (3) unregistered people appearing on consumer files; and (4) unlisted people, who do not appear in databases of registered voters or on consumer files. Categories 1 through 3 are “listed” persons. We find that as the definition of the electorate is narrowed from the entire citizenry down to only Presidential voters, the electorate becomes less racially and ethnically 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. We conclude that a reliance on lists in contemporary American politics diminishes the political power of minorities, the poor and tilts policy and election outcomes in a more conservative, more Republican direction.

Data and Methodology

We rely on data from the 2012 American National Election Studies (ANES) face-to-face survey. The sample of households for the face-to-face component of the 2012 ANES was drawn from the United States Postal Service Delivery Service File, a list of active addresses in the United States, augmented by field enumeration of households in rural Census tracts; see [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 data bases 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. 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 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 lists; 1,711 of these respondents were located in lists (including both registered and unregistered people). ANES collects detailed demographic data and residential histories, bolstering our confidence in the matches of respondents to the lists; details on the matching procedure appear in a companion paper, Jackman and Spahn (2014). After applying weights to make the ANES data representative of the sample frame,¹ listed persons comprise 89% of the sample. Accordingly, 11% of the weighted sample is "unlisted" in the databases available to parties and campaigns ahead of the 2012 general election. We regard this estimate of the unlisted population a lower bound on the true proportion, since people that have not registered to vote are also less likely to be interested in taking a long political survey.

There are numerous ways in which one might expect voters or registered people to differ from the unregistered or unlisted. We identified 310 questions on the ANES that we thought might illustrate such differences, spanning demographic characteristics and attributes to self-reports of political attitudes and behaviors. We examine differences on each variable across the four groups, typically via one-way ANOVA, applying the weights accompanying the ANES data. Each ANOVA produces a F -statistic and p -value testing the null hypothesis of no difference in means across the four groups. It is well known that when testing a large number of null hypotheses that naive use of a given significance level will lead to too many rejections, leading to "false discoveries." We guard against this with the Benjamini-Hochberg (1995) procedure, adjusting the critical p -value to the .035 level, so as to hold the expected proportion of false discoveries in our analysis to 5%. This revised threshold of statistical significance allows us reject 219 of the 310 null hypotheses we tested. In this paper we highlight some of the more interesting and important differences.

Demographic differences across the groups

Race and ethnicity. People of color are considerably more likely to be unlisted than Whites. Table 1 shows that just 8% of Whites are unlisted, while 1 in 5 Blacks and 1 in 5 Hispanics are unlisted, and hence invisible to parties, candidates and interest groups relying on lists. Just 8% of Blacks are listed but unregistered: i.e., appearing on consumer files while not being registered to vote. Among Hispanics the corresponding rate is 13%, reflecting differences in age composition and political mobilization in these two groups: 90% of listed Blacks are registered to vote, but only 84% of listed Hispanics have a voter registration record. 92% of Whites are listed, and of these Whites 90% are registered to vote, the same registration rate of listed Blacks. Differences in White and Black registration rates (83% versus 73%) are largely a function of the much higher unlisted rate among Blacks.

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

	All	White	Black	Hispanic	Other
2012 Voter	65	71	58	47	53
Registered	13	12	15	20	15
Unregistered	10	10	8	13	17
Unlisted	11	8	19	20	15
Total		71	12	11	6

Table 1: Distribution of citizen types (percentages), by race and ethnicity, ANES 2012 face-to-face respondents (weighted). $\chi^2 = 86.3, p < .01, n = 2,006$.

Note too the differences in turnout. 71% of Whites voted in 2012, equal to 85% of registered Whites and 77% of listed Whites. 58% of Blacks voted in 2012, equal to 80% of registered Blacks and 72% of listed Blacks. That is, after we condition on being listed, an apparent 13 percentage point White-Black turnout gap falls to 5 points. Turnout among listed Hispanics is 59%, still substantially lagging the corresponding rates among Whites and Blacks. While 1 in 5 Hispanics are unlisted, an equivalent proportion of Hispanics were registered but did not turn out in 2012, seeing Hispanics record the lowest turnout rate among the four race and ethnicity groups in the analysis.

Age. The median age of an unlisted person is 30 years, while the median age of 2012 voters is 50. Registered non-voters and unregistered persons are indistinguishable from one another with respect to age (median ages of 36 and 39, respectively).

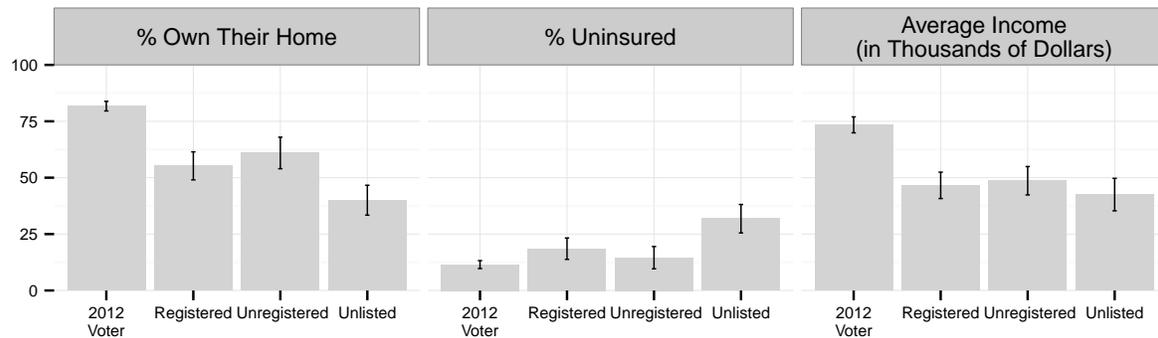


Figure 1: Percentage of citizen type with listed attribute (error bars are \pm two standard errors), ANES 2012 face-to-face respondents (weighted). Voters have consistently higher socioeconomic status than non-voters. Of the four groups, unlisted people have the lowest levels of home ownership, health insurance and income. All of the between-group differences are extremely unlikely to be due to chance alone: the largest p -value from the three ANOVAs is .0015.

Indicators of status and wealth: home ownership, health insurance and income. We summarize differences across our citizen types with respect to three indicators of socioeconomic status in Figure 1. Non-voters, and unlisted people in particular, are also more financially vulnerable than their voting or listed peers. Unlisted people are about half as likely to report owning their homes as the rest of the citizenry (40% versus 75%) and are about 2.5 times more likely to report not having health insurance (32% versus 13%). Median annual incomes among the unlisted are just \$21,000, rising to \$32,500 among the unregistered and registered groups and \$42,500 among 2012 voters.

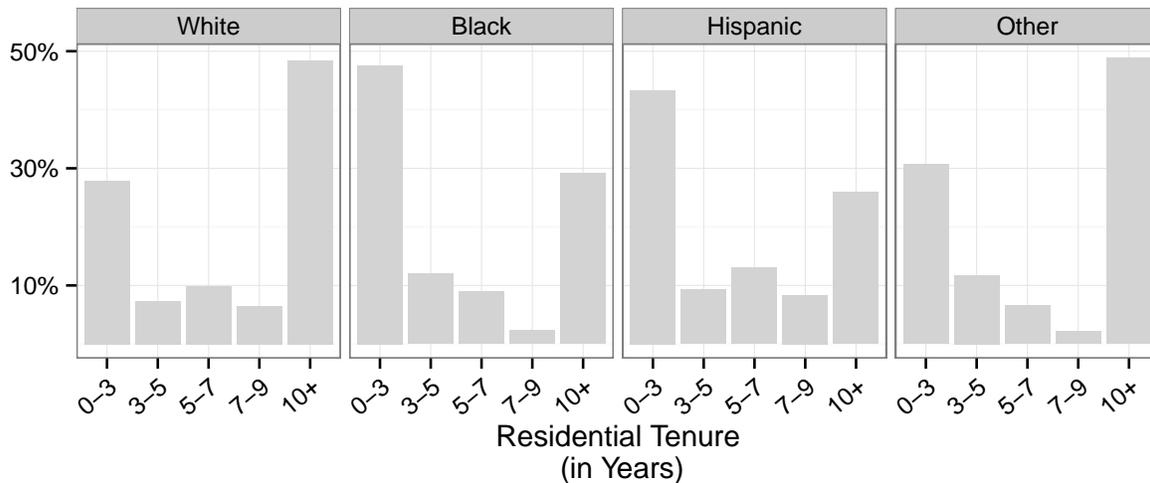


Figure 2: Duration of residential tenure by race and ethnicity, ANES 2012 face-to-face respondents (weighted). For the two-way ANOVA, $\chi^2 = 85.5, p < .01$.

Residential mobility. Voter registration is tied to an individual’s *address*, rather than the individual themselves. Accordingly, residential mobility severs a citizen’s connection to the voter registration system, requiring an affirmative act by the citizen to re-register each time they move. [Schmidhauser \(1963\)](#) noted the tension between residential mobility and voter registration over fifty years ago; [Squire, Wolfinger and Glass \(1987\)](#) also documented the deleterious effects of residential mobility on turnout. The National Voter Registration Act of 1993 (so-called “Motor Voter”) aimed to lowering the costs of re-registration, but our data confirm a pattern long noted in the literature: moving results in many citizens falling off the voter rolls (e.g., [Highton and Wolfinger 1998](#)), and commercial databases as well.

Residential mobility is concentrated among the poor and urban dwellers. In turn, this helps explain why non-Whites are less likely to be listed than minorities. The ANES makes this clear. Figure 2 demonstrates, duration of residential tenure is clearly associated with race: Blacks and Hispanics report greater residential mobility than Whites. 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 3 shows that people with higher incomes are more likely to be listed and to vote, consistent with a resource model of political participation. [Brady, Verba and Schlozman \(1995\)](#) cite time, money and civic knowledge as three key resources for political participation. 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 3 demonstrates that the poorest respondents are dramatically more likely to be unlisted and dramatically less likely to vote, especially for those with short duration of residential tenure. Residential mobility elevates the risk of becoming (or remaining) unlisted, even for the wealthy. But residential mobility is more common among the poor and the wealthy have much higher baseline rates of being listed, such that

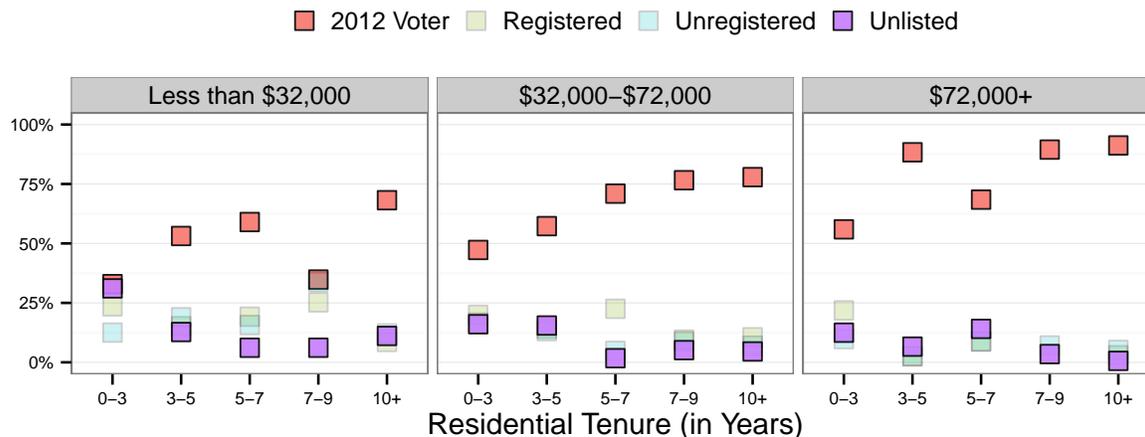


Figure 3: Distribution of citizen types, by income tercile and residential tenure. ANES 2012 face-to-face respondents (weighted). Two-way ANOVA: $F_{9,1770} = 23.1, p < .01$.

just 12% of wealthy, recent movers (in the previous 3 years) are unlisted, while the corresponding percentage is 31% in the poorest tercile.

Political characteristics of the Unlisted

Contact with campaigns. Why is being listed in itself an important resource? Being listed — and especially being listed *as a voter* — greatly facilitates contact with campaigns. As Figure 4 illustrates, those that voted in the 2008 general election are dramatically more likely to report being contacted by a campaign in 2012. The effect of being listed on campaign contact dwarfs the effect of income, explaining over twice as much variance in contact than income alone. This should be cause for hope: once poorer people make it onto lists (and especially when they start voting) they can be contacted for continued mobilization efforts (Nickerson 2015). This observation suggests that voter registration efforts may have important secondary effects, exposing the newly listed to contact opportunities from a variety of political organizations.

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 three non-voting groups in our analysis are more liberal than those of general election voters. For example, the left panel of Figure 5 displays variation in preferences for more or less federal welfare spending. Just 12% of 2012 voters think that spending should increase, compared to 22-27% for non-voters. 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.

Interestingly, the unlisted are not especially dissatisfied with “the way democracy works in Amer-

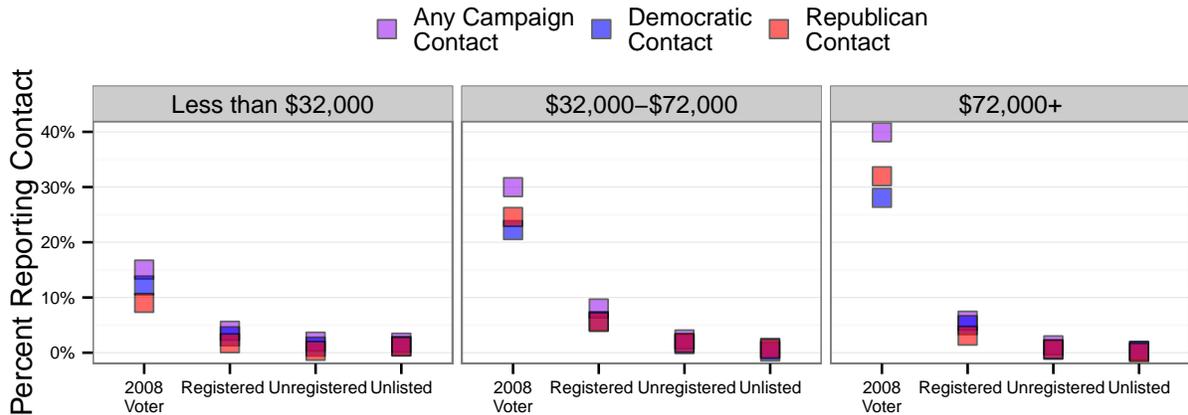


Figure 4: Percentage of each citizen type by income tercile reporting contact by campaigns and parties. Note that we use 2008 voters here, rather than 2012 voters, to reflect the information that political parties and campaigns would have about their targets during the 2012 campaign. ANES 2012 face-to-face respondents (weighted). Two-Way ANOVA: $F_{9,1781} = 18.9, p < .01$.

ica” (middle panel Figure 5). Instead, it is unregistered people that are markedly less satisfied, reporting that they are satisfied about 10% less often than any of the other groups. This suggests that for at least some of these listed but unregistered people, not being registered to vote might be a choice, stemming from their relatively lower levels of satisfaction with the American political system.

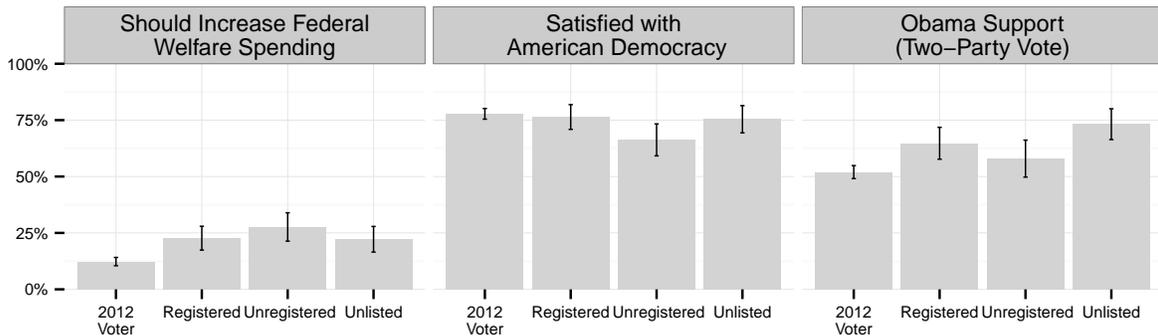


Figure 5: Percentage of being in each category by income tercile and residential tenure.

Obama Vote and Partisanship. The large disparities in socio-economic status across the four citizen groups lead to considerable variation in partisanship and vote choice. The right-hand panel of Figure 5 displays Obama’s share of the two-party vote across the four citizen types (ANES respondents reporting not being registered or not voting in 2012 were asked which candidate they preferred). 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. The other, non-voting citizen types favor Obama by larger margins, 65-35 among registered non-voters, 58-42 among the listed-but-

unregistered, and an overwhelming 73-27 Obama-Romney split among the 11% of the ANES sample that are unlisted. We see a similar but less lop-sided result with respect to party identification: 2012 voters split 34% Democrat to 28% Republican, with 31% “Independent”; the unlisted split 39-14-37.

The political implications of being listed, of contact and turnout are unambiguous. If more of the unlisted and unregistered people voted, elections would more strongly favor the Democratic party. To explore this further, we investigate four different versions of the 2012 election: (1) the actual election (only respondents known to have voted in the 2012 election are considered); (2) the unregistered and unlisted turn out at the same rate as registered people who expressed the same level of interest in politics;² (3) the unregistered and unlisted people turn out at the same rate as registered co-ethnics;³ and (4) everyone votes.

The different turnout scenarios show dramatically different election results. If unregistered and unlisted people turn out at the same rates as co-ethnics or as respondents with comparable levels of political interest, Obama would have won about an additional 2% of the two-party vote. If instead we contemplate a more extreme scenario in which everyone voted, then Obama would have gained an additional 4% over the actual election outcome. This would have been enough to swing the 2000 and 2004 Presidential elections for the Democratic presidential candidates in those years.

Conclusion

The absence of the unregistered and the unlisted from electoral politics has important consequences for American democracy. The politically marginalized are marginalized in other domains. 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). The fact that at least 11% of the citizenry is unlisted indicates a market failure of sorts: unregistered and unlisted people report especially low levels of contact from the parties and campaigns. Parties and interest groups — the dominant forces of political mobilization — are either unaware of this large, unlisted segment 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 unlisted or unregistered. In a free society, citizens are not compelled to register to vote or turn out, and neither the state or political organizations obliged to mobilize those who choose not to participate in elections. Being unlisted or unregistered is a choice, or so the argument goes. Perhaps.

To be sure, the exclusion of any particular person is unlikely to prove pivotal, and probably has

²For scenario 2, we computed the average turnout rate among registered respondents, segmenting the respondents according to their expressed level of interest in politics. Respondents were asked “How often do you pay attention to what’s going on in government and politics?” There were 5 possible responses ranging from “always” (90% turnout rate) to never (38%). We then simulated 100 possible electorates, assuming that all of the 2012 voters voted, adding unregistered and unlisted respondents with a turnout probability given by their response to the political interest item.

³We use the simulation procedure described in the previous footnote, this time matching turnout rates by race and ethnicity.

infinitesimal effects on their own personal welfare. But our research confirms that the burdens of the voter registration system — as low as they might be — are felt disproportionately by the poor. In turn, low SES leads to vastly lower levels of contact with candidates, parties and interest groups. Given these facts, we should not be surprised that the interests of this segment of the citizenry is under-represented in policy-making. 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).

It is these policy implications of our contemporary, *listed* American democracy that are the most disturbing. When the preferences of voters and the citizenry diverge, the premise that democracy leads to popular political outcomes is undermined. In this case, as in so many arenas of American life, economically and socially marginalized people are also politically marginalized. Economic disadvantage and its concomitant — high rates of residential mobility — see minorities, young people and the financially vulnerable — people whom we find to be more liberal than voting Americans — less likely to cast a ballot and far less visible to list-driven campaigns.

Are lists good for American democracy? While they surely make campaigns more efficient, they do so at the expense of unlisted Americans, and of proponents for more liberal policy-making generally. The listed electorate is whiter, older, wealthier and more conservative than the citizenry. It seems clear that the well-off and the already-powerful are the beneficiaries of this new political institution.

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