

Research Article

Do political donors have greater access to government officials? Evidence from a FOIA field experiment with US municipalities

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Abstract: Whether political donors have greater access to government officials is a perennial question in politics. Using a freedom of information act (FOIA) compliance field experiment with US municipalities in California, Texas, Florida, New York, and Pennsylvania, we fail to find evidence that political donors have greater access to government officials compared to engaged citizens. We contribute to the lobbying literature by testing for preferential treatment towards political donors in municipal government. Consistent with the extant FOIA literature, we do find that a formal FOIA request increases compliance rates and decreases wait time before an initial reply. This is an important contribution because, although many polities have FOIA laws, it cannot be taken for granted that FOIA laws will lead to transparency in practice. Testing the effectiveness of FOIA laws in the US is particularly important because state laws vary substantially.

Keywords: Transparency, Lobbying, Field experiment, FOIA, Campaign contributions

Supplements: [Open data](#), [Open materials](#)

Introduction

In April 2019, an Ann Arbor resident filed a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request to obtain council members' communications. The resident was concerned that council members were making key decisions outside of the public spotlight, and after a lengthy legal battle, courts ruled the request valid (Taylor, 2019). Among other revelations, the released communications showed that councilmembers conspired to withhold a raise to the City Attorney for failing to be sufficiently "loyal" and were planning to hire "a new puppy [to] train" (Slagter, 2019). Situations like these raise concerns over the transparency of government decision making and representation. When government decision making is

outside the public spotlight, the opportunity arises for inequitable access to government officials by lobbyists. Indeed, the attempt to oust the sitting City Attorney was initiated by another rival attorney.

The lobbying literature is dominated by the study of national institutions (Hall & Wayman, 1990; Esterling, 2007), but lobbying plays a role at the municipal level as well. Dahl's (1961) seminal study of political power was a case study of New Haven's City Council, not Congress or the Connecticut State Legislature. Today lobbying remains prominent in local politics, especially in larger municipalities. According to FollowTheMoney.org, campaign contributions in local elections totaled \$41,017,795 in New York City (2017) and \$24,585,277 in Los Angeles (2013). Even in smaller municipalities officials are regularly lobbied by real estate developers (Jensen, Findley, & Nielson, 2020) and others seeking to curry favor.

Given the prominence of lobbying at the local level, and previous findings that lobbyists have greater access to government officials at the federal level (Kalla & Broockman, 2016), we are interested

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in whether political donors have greater access to local government officials. We conduct a field experiment with US municipalities where we experimentally manipulate whether an engaged citizen or a political donor makes a FOIA request. Like the request made by the Ann Arbor resident, we request council members' email communications. Prior studies have conducted experiments to study the influence of lobbyists (Chin, Bond, & Geva, 2000; Kalla & Broockman, 2016; Furnas, LaPira, Hertel-Fernandez, Drutman, & Kosar, n.d.), but to our knowledge, we are among the first to field such an experiment at the municipal level. We fail to find evidence that, on average, purported political donors have greater access to government officials.

This study makes two significant contributions. First, we fail to find evidence that being a political donor provides inequitable access to government officials, at least with respect to municipal FOIA requests. Second, we show that making a formal FOIA request significantly increases access to municipal government officials. This second contribution advances a growing comparative FOIA compliance literature (Grimmelikhuijsen, John, Meijer, & Worthy, 2018; Michener, Velasco, Contreras, & Rodrigues, 2020; Peisakhin, 2012; Rodríguez & Rossel, 2018; Worthy, John, & Vannoni, 2017) and is vital in showing that FOIAs are an effective means of increasing transparency in the municipal governments of California, Texas, Florida, New York, and Pennsylvania. As Grimmelikhuijsen et al. (2018) argue, there is immense value in increasing the number of FOIA compliance studies in order to allow us to exploit cross polity variation in institutional design. FOIA compliance studies in the US are attractive because, although certain cultural aspects (e.g. the English language) are constant, there is substantial cross-state differences in institutional designs.

Theory

What role lobbying plays in politics is a perennial question (De Figueiredo & Richter, 2014). Despite overwhelming public opinion that lobbying influences politics (Jones, 2018), the empirical evidence is mixed. Early researchers theorized that lobbying should directly influence legislative voting but found mixed results (Kau & Rubin, 1984; Peltzman, 1984; Langbein, 1993). Researchers thereafter tested for lobbying's influence elsewhere in the policymaking process. Hall and Wayman (1990) argue that lobby-

ists' campaign contributions buy access to government officials by incentivizing them to be more active in committee deliberations and votes.

Rather than directly determining how a member will vote, interest groups help like-minded members participate in legislative bargaining. If this is correct, it is expected that lobbyists gain access to elected officials by providing information (Carpenter, Esterling, & Lazer, 2004; Esterling, 2007; Hansen, 1991) and research assistance (Hall & Deardorff, 2006). Legislators, regardless of whether they are deliberating in the chambers of Congress or a city hall, have an incentive to interact with lobbyists to gain resources. Over time these hypotheses have been refined into a theory of lobbying as legislative subsidy (Hall & Deardorff, 2006).

Consistent with the legislative subsidy theory, scholars have demonstrated that campaign contributions are associated with legislators' introducing legislation written with a lobbying group's preferred language (McKay, 2018; DeMora, Collingwood, & Ninci, 2019), and this effect is most substantial in citizen legislatures where legislators are more reliant on lobbyists' resources (Jansa, Hansen, & Gray, 2018). Even if the legislative subsidy theory is correct, the question remains whether political donors have greater access to government officials. Lobbyists may provide resource subsidies to like-minded legislators, as opposed to simply buying roll call votes, but they still need access to policymakers to influence policy-making. Elected officials may prioritize requests from political donors in hopes of securing their favor. Recently the lobbying literature has turned towards the use of experiments, but the evidence is mixed as to whether political donors have an advantage. In Kalla and Broockman's (2016) field experiment congressional offices were contacted to request meetings and offices were randomly told that political donors would attend. They find that requests mentioning the attendance of donors were more likely to be accommodated. Chin, Bond, and Geva (2000) conducted a similar experiment with congressional staffers and manipulated whether the meeting request mentioned a Political Action Committee (PAC) or a constituent. Contrary to Kalla and Broockman (2016), they find that requests made on behalf of PACs do not receive preferential access. A possible explanation for these conflicting results is that lobbyists do have greater access but that an unknown factor moderates the success of their efforts.

On the basis of this literature, we conceptualize

access to government officials as a spectrum; on one end is the minimum access necessary to complete simple requests, such as FOIA requests, and on the other is the access necessary to develop a sustained dialogue about policy. We focus on the former type of access, since the latter cannot be built without the former. Our expectations are that political donors will receive greater access to government officials in the form of being more likely to receive a reply, getting a reply more quickly, being more likely to receive the requested emails (compliance), and being less likely to be asked to pay for the FOIA request relative to the non-political donor control condition. We acknowledge that we are testing a minimalist type of access, the access necessary to complete a FOIA request. Lobbyists presumably wish to gain access to politicians in the form of long-term dialogue, however this latter type of access requires lobbyists to first gain a more minimal, and fundamental, “foot in the door”. The decision to respond to an information request will be dependent on the perceived benefits the requester can offer the member. By signaling that one is a campaign donor, one is signaling the potential political value of complying with the request and developing a relationship with the requester.

To our knowledge, we are the first to embed a political donor condition in a FOIA compliance field experiment, but related studies find that campaign contributions (Kalla & Broockman, 2016), or even outright bribery (Peisakhin, 2012), can facilitate access to government service. This leads to our first hypothesis:

H1: Political donors will receive greater access to government officials.

Secondly, because the extant FOIA literature finds that legally enshrined FOIA requests are more likely to be complied with (Worthy, John, & Vannoni, 2017) we hypothesize that formal FOIA requests should be more likely to receive a reply, get a reply more quickly, be more likely to receive the requested emails (compliance), and be less likely to be asked to pay for the FOIA request relative to informal requests. This leads to our second hypothesis:

H2: Formal FOIA requests will receive preferential treatment over informal requests.

Research Design

We test whether political donors have an increased

probability of gaining access to elected officials by fielding a FOIA compliance field experiment. Completing a FOIA request requires access to government officials. We conduct our field experiment with municipalities in California, Texas, Florida, New York, and Pennsylvania. The primary limitation of observational studies of lobbying and political access is that it is challenging to eliminate issues of reverse causality and achieve causal identification. Experimental designs, however, allow researchers to isolate the effects of lobbying through randomized manipulation of treatments. Such efforts have produced promising results in the study of subnational institutions (Grose, 2014) and hold promise for the study of local and state institutions (Butler, 2019).

We conducted a FOIA compliance field experiment because it requires access to government officials to complete, and most US municipalities are mandated to comply with FOIA requests. Our outcome variables (see Table 2) measure general compliance with FOIA requests, but also serve as a broader measure of access to government officials. Since most municipalities must comply with FOIA requests, compliance is a comparable behavioral measure across different municipalities. FOIA compliance is itself inherently meaningful.

FOIAs are administrative procedures that require the government to divulge information to the public. FOIAs play a role in solving information asymmetry between the government and interest groups and allow interest groups to engage in oversight and accountability (McCubbins, Noll, & Weingast, 1987). FOIAs not only aid in oversight of bureaucracies but in citizen oversight of their political representatives as well (Arnold, 1993). FOIAs are associated with decreased corruption (Cordis & Warren, 2014) and increased political trust (Grimmelikhuisen & Meijer, 2012). They also promote peaceful democratization by lowering transition costs between factions (Berliner, 2014; Berliner & Erlich, 2015). Despite the importance of FOIAs in the political process, few contemporary FOIA studies have been conducted in US municipalities (Divorski, Gordon, & Heinz, 1973; Pressman & Wildavsky, 1973; Wood & Lewis, 2017).

FOIA compliance field experiments have become increasingly popular for studying accountability. A study of Mexican agencies tested if purportedly influential citizens received higher FOIA request response rates than ordinary citizens but found few differences (Lagunes & Pocasangre, 2019). Uruguayan studies have tested compliance by purported group

membership (e.g., industry, journalists, ordinary citizens, influential citizens) and gender (Piñeiro & Rossel, 2015; Rodríguez & Rossel, 2018) and find evidence of discrimination against females. FOIA studies conducted in the United Kingdom and the Netherlands find that informal requests were less likely to be complied with (Worthy, John, & Vannoni, 2017; Grimmelikhuijsen et al., 2018).

We conducted our field experiment using municipalities in the five most populated US states. We limited our study to municipalities where councilmember’s email addresses were publicly available (total n= 1,392): California (n= 378), Texas (n= 370), Florida (n= 172), New York (n= 50), and Pennsylvania (n= 422). We do not claim that this is a nationally representative sample, but these five states account for a little under forty percent of the US population and are adequate for our purposes (Nicholson-Crotty & Meier, 2002). It is noteworthy that the majority of US municipal offices are officially non-partisan⁴, so although we can exploit interpolity variation to test for potential moderators such as FOIA law strictness or municipal demographics (see appendices), we cannot test for moderation by officials’ party ID. Furthermore, we could have included all US municipalities but decided against it because of the high burden to subjects. As we discuss in our ethics section, field experiments that rely on deception should attempt to minimize the burden on subjects (Cooper, 2014).

With this concern for ethics in mind, we conducted a power analysis based on studies that resemble our own. Kalla and Broockman (2016) find a 5.4 percentage point difference between constituents and political donors seeking access to members of Congress. To replicate their findings at the local level,

we need a minimum of 260 subjects per treatment group.⁵ Grimmelikhuijsen, John, Meijer, & Worthy (2018) estimate that FOIA compliance field experiments require 159 subjects per group to replicate the 11.1 percentage point difference initially found in Worthy et al. (2017).

In Table 1, we summarize the relevant state FOIA laws. All five FOIA laws require municipalities to divulge information upon request, but they vary in the amount of time given for an initial reply and who is eligible to make a FOIA request.

Measuring Access to Government Officials

Elected officials can be influenced in several ways, whether by requesting information or sustained dialogue on policy issues, but all these ways require officials to open communication channels with lobbyists at some level. This study tests whether being a political donor helps to open communication channels with officials by granting them access to otherwise private information. If campaign contributors are more likely to receive information, then we can conclude that contributions allow preferential access to politicians.

To measure access to government officials, we submitted FOIA requests to municipalities in California, Texas, Florida, New York, and Pennsylvania. FOIA requests were submitted to the publicly available email addresses of municipal council members. One FOIA request was submitted per municipality. We limited our treatment to one email per municipality to minimize potential intra-council network effects (Coppock, 2014; Phadke & Desmarais, 2019) and ethical concerns about minimizing the requested

Table 1
State FOIA Laws

State	Law	Initial Reply in	Covers	Population (2017)
CA	California Public Records Act	10 Days	Any person	39,535,653
TX	Texas Public Information Act	10 Days	Any person	28,304,596
FL	Florida Sunshine Law	Not specified	Residents only	20,984,400
NY	New York Freedom of Information Law	5 Days	Any person	19,849,399
PA	Pennsylvania Right to Know Law	5 Days	Any US Citizen	12,702,887
Total				121,376,935

Figure 1 Email Composition

“Dear [Representative’s Name],
My name is [Constituent’s Name]. I hope you have been having a good day.
I wish to request a copy of every email you have received in the past week. [-Blank-/-FOIA Request-].
As a frequent [voter/political donor], I feel it is also part of my civic duty to ensure local government is transparent.
Best, [Constituent Name]”

workload. We requested a copy of all emails received in the past week by the recipient municipal councilmember. We sent FOIA requests in early May 2019 and collected responses for 30 days afterward. Because the municipality is legally liable for complying with FOIA requests, it is the unit of analysis for this study.

Although we used council members’ email addresses, it was unclear a priori who would read and respond as these email addresses are often accessed by staffers. We coded self-identified respondents among observed replies: 27.78 percent identified as a councilmember, 5.49 percent identified as an attorney or paralegal representing the municipality, and 61.39 percent identified as staffers. The remainder did not self-identify. This ex-post analysis suggests that constituents interact primarily through staffers, which is consistent with prior research on constituency service in state and local politics (Bowen & Greene, 2014; Landgrave & Weller, 2020). FOIA compliance is still a valid measure of access to government officials because legislative bodies, including municipal councils, are enterprises which rely heavily on staffer support (Salisbury & Shepsle, 1981; Shepsle, 1992).

The email composition used for requests is shown in Figure 1. The central experimental manipulation is whether the requestor identified themselves as a frequent voter or political donor. We selected a “frequent voter” as the baseline condition as we believe that a political donor, in addition to signaling someone who provides campaign contributions, signals someone who is civically engaged.

Second, we experimentally assign whether the FOIA request is informal (-Blank-) or formal (“*This is a request under the -FOIA STATE LAW-. You have X days to reply. I have BCC’ed my lawyer.*”). Last, we randomized whether the requestor was purportedly white or Hispanic as identified by the constituents’ name.⁶ Assignment to treatment was done using simple randomization.

Consistent with previous measures of access to government information (Worthy et al., 2017), we use four different measures: (a) whether the email requests receive any reply at all within 30 days, (b) how long it takes for an initial reply to be received, (c) if the request is complied with within 30 days, and (d) if payment is requested for compliance with the request. These outcomes are coded as four different variables, see Table 2.

Table 2
Outcome Variables

Outcome Variable	Variable Type
Any Reply	Binary variable. =1 if a reply ¹ was received.
Days for Initial Reply ²	Continuous variable.
Compliance ²	Binary variable. =1 if FOIA request complied.
Payment Requested ²	Binary variable. =1 if payment requested.

¹ Autoreplies and other invalid replies excluded from analysis.

² Adjusted for post-treatment bias (Coppock, 2018).

A potential methodological concern is post-treatment bias (Coppock, 2018). We observe the first measure, whether any reply is received or not, but among non-replies, we do not observe when it would have been received, if it would have complied with the request, or if payment would have been requested. As who replies is not random, analyzing the data with observed replies only biases the results. To address this concern, we code unobserved replies as being received in 30 days, not complying with the informational request, and not asking for payment. This is a common solution to address potential post-treatment bias (Kalla, Rosenbluth, & Teele, 2018; Loewen & MacKenzie, 2018).

Ethics

This study received IRB approval, but it is essential to discuss the ethics of our experiment given its use of deception. There is growing concern about field experiment ethics because of their use of deception, cost on unknowing subjects, and potential harm to the democratic process (Landgrave, 2020; Whitfield, 2019).

The field experiment presented here could not ask subjects for their consent to participate without compromising the research design. Prior studies

(Alem, Eggert, Kocher, & Ruhinduka, 2018; Findley, Nielson, & Sharman, 2013; Findley, Nielson, & Desposato, 2016) have established the importance of deception when conducting a compliance study on political elites. Findley, Nielson, and Desposato (2016) compare the results of a non-deceptive experiment with an earlier deceptive experiment they conducted to study unethical corporate behavior (Findley, Nielson, & Sharman, 2013) and find evidence of unethical behavior in the deceptive field experiment, but not its non-deceptive counterpart.

Some may be concerned about our use of FOIA requests, which could take considerable resources to comply with. Prior studies have partnered with interest groups or politicians that intended to submit FOIA requests to minimize the net burden on subjects (Cuillier, 2010; Wood & Lewis, 2017). We did not partner with a 3rd party, but we had intended to make FOIA requests for a different project and therefore coupled both projects together. In other words, we did not increase the net amount of work for subjects.

Results

In Table 3, we estimate a linear probability model (LPM) of the three binary measures (Wooldridge,

Table 3
Compliance by Experimental Treatments

Predictor Variables	Outcome Variables			
	Any Reply (1)	Days for Initial Reply (2)	Compliance (3)	Payment Requested (4)
FOIA Request	0.092*** (0.026)	-2.138*** (0.703)	0.053** (0.021)	0.013 (0.013)
Political Donor	-0.012 (0.026)	0.583 (0.703)	-0.013 (0.021)	-0.003 (0.013)
Hispanic Constituent	-0.011 (0.026)	0.369 (0.703)	0.005 (0.021)	0.008 (0.013)
Constant	0.399*** (0.026)	19.370*** (0.687)	0.163*** (0.020)	0.058*** (0.013)
Observations	1,392	1,392	1,392	1,392
R-squared	0.009	0.007	0.005	0.001

Notes: Columns 1, 3 and 4 are estimated using a linear probability model. Column 2 is estimated using OLS. Standard errors are in listed in parentheses. Significance codes are as follows: *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

2001) and use OLS for the continuous variable (Days for Initial Reply). In Appendix A, we show results using a probit and negative binomial, respectively. Results are robust to alternative estimators.

We fail to find evidence that, on average, being a political donor gives preferential treatment when attempting to access government information. Although not statistically significant using ordinary levels of significance, we find that political donors are less likely to receive a reply (-1.16 pp, p-value= 0.661), wait longer to receive a reply (0.58 additional days, p-value= 0.599), and are less likely to have their request complied with (-1.26 pp, p-value= 0.796). These results fail to support Hypothesis 1 that political donors should receive preferential treatment over voters. It is emphasized that these results do not mean that lobbyists do not influence local politics per se, only that we fail to find an average treatment effect. It is nonetheless possible that being a political donor is moderated by municipal wealth or another factor (see Appendix C).

We find that a formal FOIA request, compared to an informal informational request, is more likely to receive a reply (9.18 pp, p-value= 0.001), to wait fewer days for an initial reply (2.13 fewer days, p-value= 0.002), and more likely to have the request complied with (5.32 pp, p-value= 0.011). This supports Hypothesis 2, that formal FOIA requests will receive preferential treatment over informal requests. This suggests that elected officials do practice discriminatory responses, albeit the relevant factor is whether one is knowledgeable about and has the resources to file a FOIA request.

It is worth mentioning that our mean compliance rate of 18.53 percent is high for a FOIA compliance study conducted in an Anglophone nation. Worthy, John, and Vannoni (2017) conducted a FOIA compliance study in the United Kingdom with a compliance rate of 7.81 percent. Our results are comparable to a FOIA compliance study conducted in the Netherlands (Grimmelikhuijsen et al., 2018) but lower than those studies conducted in Latin America (Rodríguez & Rossel, 2018; Michener et al., 2020)

Conclusion

This field experiment is one of the first field experiments of its kind conducted with US municipalities and it provides two major contributions. Our first major contribution is that we fail to find evidence

that political donors have greater access to government officials, as measured by whether FOIA requests were complied with. Although failure to find evidence is not the same as “no effect”, reporting null results is important for research transparency. Notably our null results hold across different model specifications. Our second major contribution is that, consistent with prior FOIA studies, we find that a formal FOIA request substantially increases compliance rates. Our FOIA compliance field experiment tested the effectiveness of FOIA laws in California, Texas, Florida, New York, and Pennsylvania municipalities. Fielding a FOIA compliance field experiment in these five states is a major contribution to a growing comparative FOIA literature because these five states substantially vary in institutional design and other factors which allow for comparative analysis of FOIA compliance (see appendices for examples).

In this manuscript we have focused primarily on testing for differences in FOIA compliance by alias’ attributes (political donor status, filing a formal FOIA request). We have two suggestions for future FOIA compliance studies, in addition to those offered by Grimmelikhuijsen et al. (2018). Now that several FOIA compliance studies have been conducted, researchers should re-analyze existing studies and exploit the cross-national variation in institutional design to explore moderators. Second, future studies should seek to conduct FOIA compliance studies in federal polities to allow for cross-national subnational analysis. The US is an attractive case because each of its constituent states have different FOIA laws and institutional structures but other countries, like Mexico (Berliner & Erlich, 2015), also hold promise.

Notes

1. Authors listed alphabetically. We thank Nicholas Weller, Daniel Biggers, and participants of the 2019 UC Davis PRIEC meeting for their feedback on this manuscript. All remaining errors are our own. Nicholas R. Jenkins is a political science doctoral student at the University of California, Riverside.
2. Michelangelo Landgrave is a political science doctoral candidate at the University of California, Riverside (Email: mland014@ucr.edu, Twitter: @MichellLandgrave). Corresponding author.
3. Gabriel Elias is a political science doctoral student.

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4. We had research assistants attempt to code council members' partisan identification, but were unable to do so for most council members. Attempts to code council members' race and ethnicity also proved difficult.
 5. Power analysis based on 0.80 power and an alpha of 0.05. We had 712 subjects in our control condition and 680 in our political donor condition.
 6. We were also interested to test for potential ethnic discrimination, but for conciseness our focus in this manuscript is whether political donors have greater access in FOIA compliance. See Appendix B for analysis of the ethnic manipulation.

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Appendix

Appendix A

Appendix A Table 1
FOIA Compliance by Experimental Treatments;
Probit and Negative Generalized Linear Regressions

Predictor Variables	Outcome Variables and Model Type			
	Any Reply Probit	Days for Initial Reply Neg. Binomial	Compliance Probit	Payment Requested Probit
FOIA Request	0.234*** (0.068)	-0.114** (0.055)	0.200** (0.078)	0.104 (0.103)
Political Donor	-0.030 (0.068)	0.032 (0.055)	-0.048 (0.078)	-0.023 (0.103)
Hispanic Constituent	-0.028 (0.068)	0.022 (0.055)	0.019 (0.078)	0.068 (0.103)
lnalpha		0.010 (0.040)		
Constant	-0.257*** (0.066)	2.961*** (0.054)	-0.983*** (0.077)	-1.570*** (0.104)
Observations	1,392	1,392	1,392	1,392

Standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

In Appendix A, Table 2, we test whether the strictness of a state’s FOIA law influences FOIA compliance by municipalities. Strictness is measured by the number of days (CA & TX: 5 days, NY & PA: 10 days) that a state FOIA law gives municipalities to provide an initial reply. The reference category is those states (Florida) where the state law is ambiguous about how long municipalities have to reply. Surprisingly, we find that municipalities in states with stricter FOIA laws are less likely to comply with FOIA requests. Differences are statistically significant between states that give municipalities five vs. ten days respectively.

Appendix A Table 2
FOIA Compliance by Strictness of State FOIA Laws

Predictor Variables	Outcome Variables			
	Any Reply (1)	Days for Initial Reply (2)	Compliance (3)	Payment Requested (4)
5 Days to Reply	-0.382*** (0.043)	10.295*** (1.132)	-0.341*** (0.033)	-0.181*** (0.022)

10 Days to Reply	-0.167*** (0.041)	4.733*** (1.075)	-0.165*** (0.032)	-0.128*** (0.021)
Constant	0.651*** (0.037)	12.773*** (0.969)	0.390*** (0.028)	0.198*** (0.019)
Observations	1,392	1,392	1,392	1,392
R-squared	0.067	0.067	0.082	0.047

Notes: All models are estimated using a linear probability model. Standard errors are listed in parentheses. Significance codes are as follows: *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$

Appendix B

Ethnic Discrimination

In Appendix B, we test for potential ethnic discrimination as we assigned constituents ethnically distinct names. Eight different male names were selected; four white and four Hispanic. Signaling constituents' purported ethnicity using names is a common practice (Butler & Homola, 2017). We follow the advice of prior audits by pre-checking these names to ensure that they are perceived as white and Hispanic respectively (Gaddis, 2017a; 2017b). In line with the existing literature presented, we have the following hypotheses.

Appendix B H1: Purportedly white constituents will receive preferential treatment over purportedly Hispanic constituents.

We hypothesize that purportedly white constituents will receive preferential treatment over purportedly Hispanic constituents, as correspondence audit studies find consistent evidence of discrimination against Hispanic constituents making government requests in the US (Butler, 2014; Costa, 2017). Most US political audit studies have been conducted using state legislators (Gell-Redman, Visalvanich, Crabtree, & Fariss, 2018; Mendez & Grose, 2018) or bureaucrats (Einstein & Glick, 2017). To our knowledge, we are the first to test if Hispanics are discriminated against when interacting with municipalities, but related studies have found evidence of discrimination against blacks interacting with municipalities (Butler & Crabtree, 2017).

Appendix B H2: If ethnic discrimination is present, if H3 is true, then political donations and filing a formal FOIA request should respectively mitigate discrimination.

We hypothesize that if ethnic discrimination is present and if H3 is true, then political donations and filling a formal FOIA request should respectively mitigate discrimination. Peisakhin (2012) found that monetary payments to government officials mitigated SES differences in FOIA compliance rates. In the present field experiment, we do not offer direct monetary payment, but we argue that the underlying mechanism (a financial contribution) is like our treatment of signaling being a political donor. We, therefore, believe that ethnic discrimination, if it is present, should be mitigated in either the political donation or formal FOIA request conditions.

The FOIA request may, however, fail to mitigate discrimination. A recent field experiment conducted with the City of New York finds that government warnings against discrimination by landlords failed to mitigate housing discrimination (Fang, Guess, & Humphreys, 2019). An audit study conducted to test the effectiveness of municipality IDs to mitigate market discrimination against Hispanics likewise found null effects (Ditlmann & Lagunes, 2014).

We turn next to evaluating Appendix B Hypotheses 1 and 2. We did not find evidence of ethnic discrimination in the main manuscript's results. It is nonetheless possible that ethnic discrimination occurs, but that it occurs in a more nuanced matter or is conditional. It is entirely possible that ethnic discrimination is present in the control condition (informal informational request, voter) but mitigated by a formal FOIA request, signaling

being a political donor, or a combination of both. We provide results of two-sided t-tests comparing purportedly white and Hispanic constituents in Appendix B Table 1 and Table 2.

Appendix B Table 1

Reply Rate by Constituent Race and Condition

	Control	Political Donor	FOIA Request	FOIA Request & Political Donor
White Constituent	39.68% (n= 189)	36.84% (n= 171)	53.76% (n= 173)	45.06% (n= 162)
Hispanic Constituent	38.38% (n= 185)	40.00% (n= 175)	43.64% (n= 165)	48.84% (n= 172)
Ethnic Differential	-1.30 pp (p-value = 0.80)	3.16 pp (p-value = 0.55)	-10.12 pp (p-value = 0.06)	3.78 pp (p-value = 0.49)

P-values from two-tailed t-tests.

Days for Initial Reply by Constituent Race and Condition

	Control	Political Donor	FOIA Request	FOIA Request & Political Donor
White Constituent	19.39 (n= 189)	20.31 (n= 171)	16.20 (n= 173)	18.52 (n= 162)
Hispanic Constituent	19.79 (n= 185)	19.90 (n= 175)	18.61 (n= 165)	17.59 (n= 172)
Ethnic Differential	0.40 (p-value = 0.77)	-0.41 (p-value = 0.77)	2.42 (p-value = 0.09)	-0.94 (p-value = 0.51)

P-values from two-tailed t-tests.

When looking at ethnic discrimination if it occurs, we should expect it to be highest in the control condition, but we see no statistically significant difference between white and Hispanic constituents in either reply rate (p-value= 0.80) or number of days before an initial reply (p-value= 0.77). We only find evidence of differential treatment in the formal FOIA request condition. When constituents submit a formal FOIA request, Hispanic constituents are less likely to receive a reply (-10.12 pp, p-value= 0.06) and wait longer (2.42 days, p-value= 0.09) than white constituents.

Appendix B Table 2

Compliance Rate by Constituent Race and Condition

	Control	Political Donor	FOIA Request	FOIA Request & Political Donor
White Constituent	17.46% (n= 189)	15.20% (n= 171)	20.81% (n= 173)	19.75% (n= 162)
Hispanic Constituent	16.22% (n= 185)	14.86% (n= 175)	22.42% (n= 165)	22.09% (n= 172)
Ethnic Differential	-1.24 pp	-0.35 pp	1.62 pp	2.34 pp

(p-value = 0.75)	(p-value = 0.92)	(p-value = 0.72)	(p-value = 0.60)
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P-values from two-tailed t-tests.

Request for Payment by Constituent Race and Condition

	Control	Political Donor	FOIA Request	FOIA Request & Political Donor
White Constituent	4.76% (n= 189)	4.68% (n= 171)	8.67% (n= 173)	7.41% (n= 162)
Hispanic Constituent	7.03% (n= 185)	8.00% (n= 175)	7.27% (n= 165)	6.40% (n= 172)
Ethnic Differential	2.27 pp (p-value = 0.35)	3.32 pp (p-value = 0.21)	-1.40 pp (p-value = 0.64)	-1.01 pp (p-value = 0.72)

P-values from two-tailed t-tests.

In Appendix B, Table 2, as we look for differential treatment in ultimate compliance rate with the informational request and whether payment is requested. We fail to find any evidence of statistically significant ethnic differences in compliance rates. Notably, both purportedly white and Hispanic constituents have near-identical compliance rates (p-value= 0.72) in the formal FOIA request condition. Although Hispanics are discriminated against in the formal FOIA request condition in Appendix B Table 1 in terms of reply rate and time for an initial reply, compliance is indistinguishable. Overall the results fail to support Appendix B Hypothesis 1 and by extension Hypothesis 2.

Appendix C

Access and Municipality Wealth

The prominence of lobbying activity at the city-level leads to the possibility that political donors have greater access to city governments. Essentially, access to closed-door information can be thought of as adding another cost to the price of producing policy favorable to interest groups. Officials must balance the costs of producing policies that will satisfy political donors and constituents since each plays an essential role in re-election efforts. As a result, lobbying is expected to be more likely, and more effective, on issues that the public is uninterested in (Denzau & Munger, 1986). FOIA requests present a way to bring these closed-door discussions to public light, increasing the cost of producing captured policies, leading to transparent policy-making. Therefore, we hypothesize that lobbyists should be more effective in gaining access to government officials in wealthier cities. It is in wealthier cities where the value of controlling city government decision making is highest and therefore where officials must curry the support of lobbyists to attain and retain their posts. Therefore, we develop the following hypothesis:

Appendix C H1: Political donors will receive greater access to government officials in wealthier municipalities.

Appendix C Table 1 presents the results for this hypothesis. As previously noted, we use median household income as our measure of municipal wealth. Across model specifications, we find consistent evidence that wealthier municipalities, as measured by median household income, are more likely to reply to FOIA requests (p-value= 0.001).

Unlike our experimental treatments, municipal median household income is not randomly assigned and is liable to suffer from omitted variable bias, so two relevant covariates are included in Appendix C Table 1 column 3: total municipal population and the non-Hispanic white percent of the municipal population. The

total number of observations drops in Appendix C Table 1 due to covariate data availability. Both median household income and total population are measured in 10,000 units for ease of interpretation. Neither in Appendix C Table 1 column 2 (p-value= 0.211) or Appendix C Table 1 column 3 (p-value= 0.205) is the interaction term between the political donor treatment and median household income statistically significant. As noted by Brambor, Clark, and Golder (2005), it is difficult to properly interpret interaction terms because the default standard errors are only valid for the lowest value of median household income. To properly interpret interaction terms, they suggest graphing the results, as we did in Appendix C Figure 1.

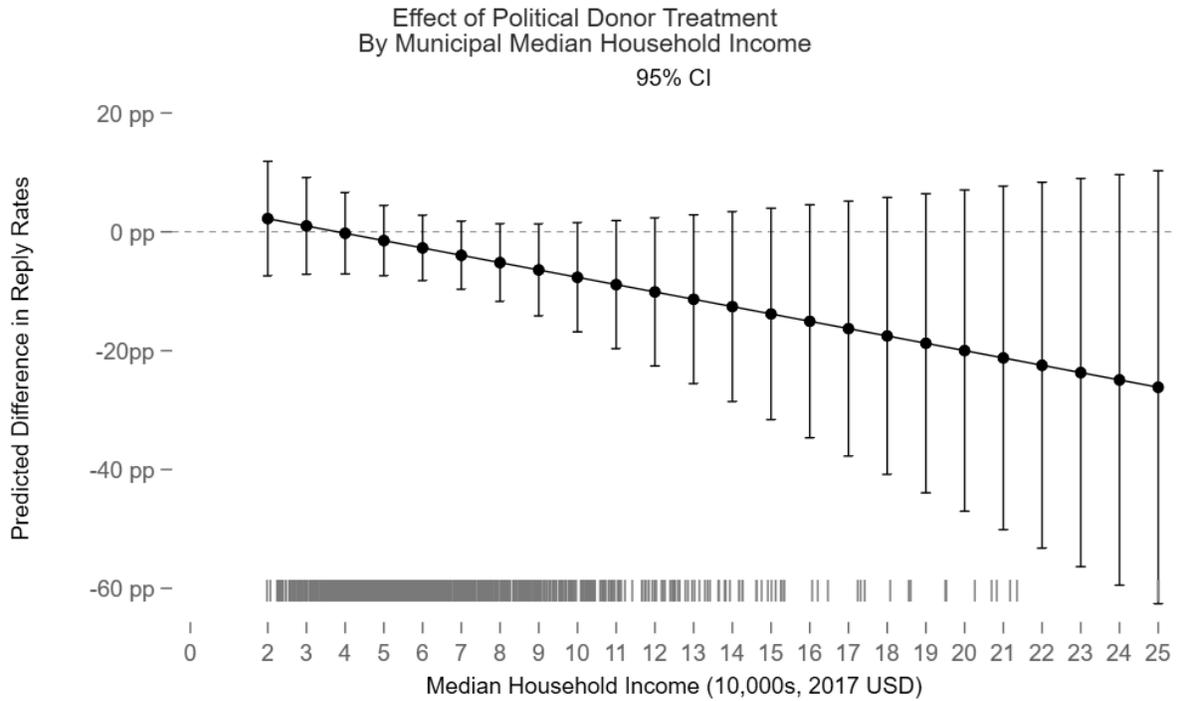
Appendix C Table 1
Effect of Political Donor Treatment by Municipal Median Household Income

Predictor Variables	Outcome Variable: Any Reply		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Political Donor	-0.029 (0.028)	0.046 (0.066)	0.047 (0.066)
Median Household Income (10,000s, 2017 USD)	0.026*** (0.005)	0.033*** (0.008)	0.035*** (0.008)
Political Donor * Median Household Income		-0.012 (0.010)	-0.012 (0.010)
Total Municipal Population (10,000s)			-0.000 (0.001)
Percent Non-Hispanic White			-0.002*** (0.001)
Constant	0.287*** (0.035)	0.242*** (0.050)	0.375*** (0.059)
Observations	1,211	1,211	1,211
R-squared	0.024	0.026	0.040

Notes: All models are estimated using a linear probability model. Standard errors in are listed in parentheses. Significance codes are as follows: *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Appendix C Figure 1 plots the moderated effect of the political donor treatment by municipal median household income. Appendix C Figure 1 is the equivalent of Appendix C Table 1, column 3 graphically displayed. For convenience, we plot a rug plot showing the distribution of municipalities by median household income. The median municipality has a median household income of 61,577 USD, with a standard deviation of 29,346 USD. We fail to find evidence of statistically significant moderation, but we find suggestive evidence of a negative moderation. At the extreme range of our values, we find evidence that political donor treatment decreases the reply rate to FOIA requests. We find little support for this hypothesis. Another unknown moderator may influence the success of political donors in accessing government officials, but it is unlikely to be municipal wealth.

Appendix C Figure 1



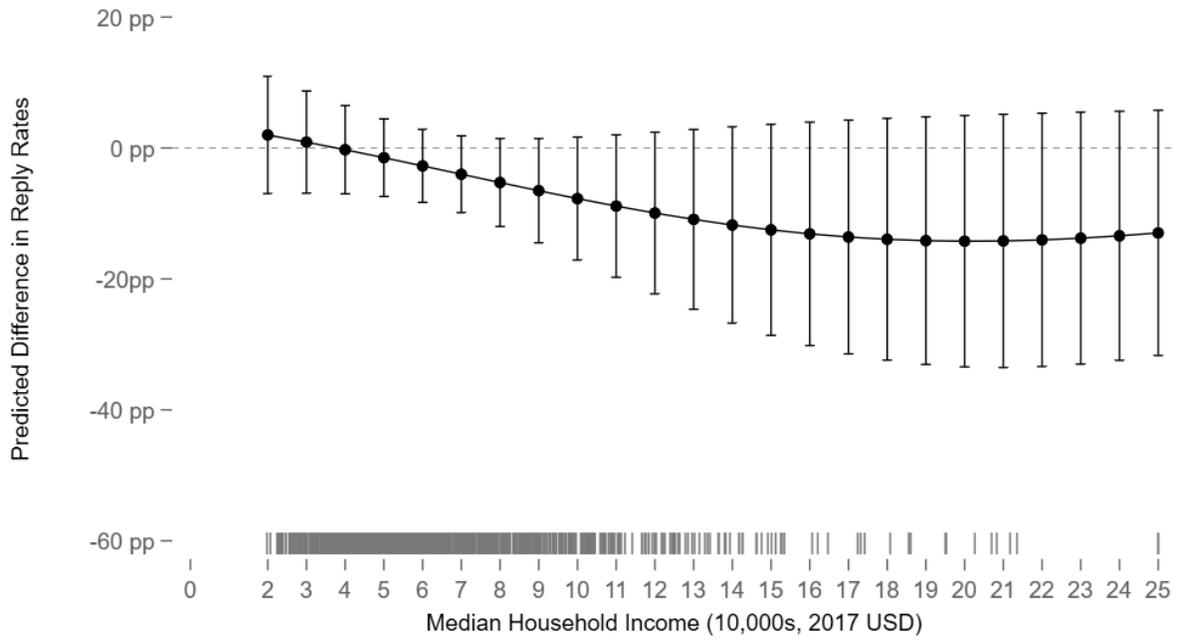
Appendix C Table 2
Moderation by Municipal Median Household Income; Probit

Predictor Variables	Outcome Variable: Any Reply		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Political Donor	-0.074 (0.073)	0.117 (0.174)	0.120 (0.175)
Median Household Income (10,000s, 2017 USD)	0.067*** (0.013)	0.085*** (0.020)	0.090*** (0.020)
Political Donor * Median Household Income		-0.031 (0.026)	-0.032 (0.026)
Total Municipal Population (10,000s)			-0.001 (0.001)
Percent Non-Hispanic White			-0.006*** (0.001)
Constant	-0.547*** (0.093)	-0.660*** (0.132)	-0.319** (0.154)
Observations	1,211	1,211	1,211

Notes: All models are estimated using Probit. Standard errors are listed in parentheses. Significance codes are as follows:
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Appendix C Figure 2

Marginal Effect of Political Donor Treatment
By Municipal Median Household Income



Note: Negative values indicate fewer responses to Donors than Non-Donors.
Probit results. Controlling for municipal demographics.