

**Degrees of Democracy: Politics, Public Opinion, and Policy** by Stuart N. Soroka and Christopher Wlezien. New York, Cambridge University Press, 2010. 256 pp. Cloth, \$80.00; paper, \$25.99.

This book is an important contribution to the study of how publics and national policymakers interact. The title is a play on the authors' "thermostatic" model, in which the government is not only expected to provide what the public wants ("representation"), but further—and in the authors' view, just as importantly—the public then must adjust their preferences as policy changes ("responsiveness"). Stuart Soroka and Christopher Wlezien examine this dynamic with public opinion and governmental spending data covering roughly a 20-year period for the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada, the only countries for which comparable data are available for testing their model. Their analysis encompasses primary issue domains of defense, welfare, education, and health, as well as some minor areas like transport or space that are not available for all three countries. They skillfully match government spending data by functional categories to the public preferences domains, sequentially looking at responsiveness to changes in government spending patterns and then at how spending changes as a function of preferences.

A key concept is their idea of "democratic efficiency," which is a combination of representation and responsiveness or the rates at which preference-policy systems reach equilibrium following externally induced changes in public preferences. Much of their analysis is guided by three hypotheses. On the institutional side, they expect that public responsiveness is greater in unitary systems (the UK) than in federal systems (the United States and Canada); this is because citizens should have a clearer policy signal in the former. They find strong support for this in some policy domains, especially defense. Their second hypothesis is that government representation of preferences is better in presidential systems where separate elections of the executive and legislative branches increase the chances for "error correction." They find general support here as well, although there are notable policy relationships that do not fit the expected patterns.

Some of the apparent inconsistency in the results is resolved by their third hypothesis, that public responsiveness to policy changes is a function of the salience of the policy domain. Here they find that national publics vary in which policies they say are important, and that responsiveness increases with the salience of the policy domains.

Their overall message is highly positive: democracy works. In making their case, Soroka and Wlezien take on a normatively very different message that has emerged from recent works by Martin Gilens and by Larry Bartels. Both of these authors argue that government policy is responsive primarily to the preferences of upper income groups; the poor are ignored. *Degrees of Democracy* argues that by and large, different groups' preferences change in tandem

over time, so that when government responds, it responds to all. They tell us there is a lot more equality than inequality in the representative relationship in their three countries.

The authors' research design deals only with national publics and national spending patterns—and this admittedly encompasses a huge amount of data. But it does limit them in making hard and fast conclusions about democratic responsiveness in federal systems. That is, there are important preference-policy relationships in these systems at a level the authors simply do not address. This only reminds us that much remains to be done.

This is a rich, innovative, and thought-provoking study. The authors offer many tantalizing findings, but the long-term contribution of *Degrees* is likely to be in re-framing the comparative study of representation. And, given the fundamental importance of representation for democratic governance, that is a very substantial contribution.

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**Untying the Knot: Marriage, the State, and the Case for Their Divorce**  
by Tamara Metz. Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 2010.  
214 pp. \$27.95.

Is it illiberal for the state to bestow marriage licenses and provide official recognition and support to marriages? Rather than join those liberal theorists who argue that the state should open up civil marriage to same-sex couples, Tamara Metz, in *Untying the Knot: Marriage, the State, and the Case for their Divorce*, argues that they, like their liberal forebears, John Locke and John Stuart Mill, fail adequately to answer a basic question: why is marriage the state's proper business at all? Marriage matters, she argues, both because it is a source of material benefits and obligations and because it is a "comprehensive social institution" rich in social meaning. This meaning side is at the heart of the problem with a liberal state's engagement with marriage. This engagement is an "establishment" analogous to the constitutionally forbidden state establishment of religion. What makes the *civil* status of marriage special, she contends, has "little to do with legal definition or concrete benefits and much to do with the extralegal social institution that shares its name"—the meanings that marriage has for individuals who marry, their families, and the communities who witness their public declaration of commitment (p. 95). Those meanings often stem from religious conceptions of marriage. She draws on G.W.F. Hegel's analysis of marriage to reveal that it is the "ethical authority" of a community that helps marriage perform its constitutive role (pp. 101-104). For the state to be this conferring authority, however, is deeply problematic because it offends liberal principles of liberty, equality, and stability.