

## Chapter 15

# Public Opinion and Public Policy <sup>1</sup>

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A principal function of representative democracy is to provide a mechanism through which public opinion and public policy are reliably and regularly connected. There should on the one hand be policy representation: public preferences for policy should be reflected in policy itself. There should on the other hand be public responsiveness: public preferences should be informed, and should react to public policy. Both dynamics are central to the theoretical work on representative democracy, from Rousseau's *The Social Contract* to Lippmann (1925), Schumpeter (1950), and Dahl (1971).

These concerns are of course not purely theoretical. Policy representation in particular has been a prominent theme in everyday politics, especially in recent years. As in many other advanced democracies, there has been a steady increase in disaffection with governments and leaders in Canada — particularly, an increase in the number of people who feel that government does not represent their interests (e.g., Anderson and Goodyear-Grant 2006). Following the Meech Lake Accord, Canadian support for 'elite accommodation' or 'executive federalism' largely dissipated — constitutional accommodation through back-room negotiation was met with widespread cries for transparency and public consultation (see, e.g., Watts and Brown 1990; Cairns 1991). More recently, we have seen a 'decline of deference' (Nevitte 1996) in the Canadian electorate. Smiley's (1972, 201) assertion that 'elites are somewhat unresponsive to popular attitudes and that the citizenry for whatever reasons has a considerable tolerance for this unresponsiveness' no longer rings true. And there has been a rise in Canadian governments' reconsideration of election systems, and efforts to tap into public opinion directly through Royal Commissions and Citizens' Assemblies (see, e.g., Howe et al. 2005; Seidle 2007). This is all part of an ongoing — and increasingly prominent — concern with the representation of public preferences in Canadian governance.

Less prominent in everyday politics but equally important where representative democracy is concerned is the degree to which Canadian public attitudes are actually informed. Indeed, this may be the more pressing concern, and it is this problem that we focus on below. We will review the evidence on the representation of public preferences in Canadian federal policy, to be sure. But we will spend more time on the substance of preferences, especially whether and to what extent preferences adjust alongside policy itself. That is, we will consider *thermostatic public responsiveness*, where public preferences for policy change reflect (among other factors) changes in policy.

The existing literature suggests that both public responsiveness and policy representation are evident in Canada. But there is also good reason to believe that the magnitude of each is compromised by Canada's rather complicated, overlapping federal policy structure. Federalism may make public responsiveness more difficult, and, by reducing the public's ability to monitor policy outcomes, it may also lessen the incentive to represent. The opinion-policy connection may thus be rather weak in Canada, comparatively speaking. Before we discuss this consequence of federalism, however, we review the thermostatic model of opinion-policy relationships, and the existing literature on the representation of public opinion in Canadian public policy.

### **The Thermostatic Model of Opinion and Policy<sup>2</sup>**

To begin, let us set out a more formal but relatively simple model of the relationship between public opinion and public policy, a model which we believe captures much of what we expect in a functioning representative democracy. We begin with what is perhaps the foremost element: the representation of public preferences in policy. Put succinctly, public opinion should have an effect on public policy — when the public wants more spending on health, for instance, Canadian governments should spend more on health; when the public wants less spending, governments should provide less.<sup>3</sup> That this is a critical feature of representative democracy requires little justification here.

Representation depends fundamentally on a responsive public, however — a public that monitors and reacts to what government is doing. There is little benefit policy-wise to representing inattentive and uninformed preferences — the policy consequences could be perverse. And there is also little incentive to do so — without public attention to what policymakers do the electoral incentive to represent would be altogether absent. Public responsiveness is consequently as vital to representative democracy as representation itself.

A responsive public behaves like a thermostat (Wlezien 1995). In short, a responsive public adjusts its preferences for ‘more’ or ‘less’ policy in response to what

policymakers do. When policy increases, *ceteris paribus*, the public preference for more policy decreases; conversely, when policy decreases, *ceteris paribus*, the public preference for more policy increases.

What exactly is ‘the public preference for policy’? For expository purposes, the public can be viewed as a collection of individuals distributed along a dimension of preference for policy activity, for instance, spending on health. Consider the “public preference” to be the median along this dimension — a certain ‘ideal’ level of health spending. Now, if the level of policy differs from the level the public prefers, the public favours a corresponding change in policy, basically, either more or less. If the preferred level is greater than policy itself, the public favours more spending than currently is being undertaken. If policymakers respond, and provide more (but not too much) for health, then the new policy position would more closely correspond to the preferred level of spending. If the public is indeed responsive to what policymakers do, then the public would then not favour as much more activity on health. It might still favour more, on balance, but not as substantially as in the prior period; if policymakers overshoot the public’s preferred level of spending, it would favour less.

In effect, following the thermostatic metaphor, a departure from the favoured policy temperature, *which itself can change over time*, produces a signal to adjust policy accordingly and, once sufficiently adjusted, the signal stops. In this way, the public behaves much like a thermostat. When the ‘policy temperature’ is too low, a responsive public calls for more policy, and when the ‘policy temperature’ is too high, a responsive public calls for less. This conceptualization of public preferences has deep roots in political science, of course, including Easton’s (1965) classic depiction of a political system and Deutsch’s (1966) models of ‘control.’

These expectations can be expressed formally. The public’s preference for “more” policy—its relative preference,  $R$ —represents the difference between the public’s preferred level of policy ( $P^*$ ) and the level it actually gets ( $P$ ):

$$R_t = P_t^* - P_t \tag{1}$$

Thus, as the preferred level of policy or policy itself changes, the relative preference signal changes accordingly. The public is expected to respond currently to actual policy change when put into effect (at  $t$ ). This is straightforward, at least in theory. It is of course less straightforward in practice, as we shall see.

Note that this model is a general one, and we do not expect it to work in all policy domains, in all countries. Public responsiveness and policy representation are likely to reflect the political importance (or ‘salience’) of the different domains, if only due to possible electoral consequences. Indeed, we expect the pattern of representation

to be symmetrical to the pattern of public responsiveness: where the public notices and responds to policy in a particular domain, policymakers will notice and respond to public preferences themselves; where the public does not respond to policy, policymakers will not represent public preferences (see also Wlezien 2004). This symmetry plays an important role below, as we consider the implications of federalism for public responsiveness and, by implication, representation as well. First, however, we review the state of the literature on policy representation in Canada.

### **Policy Representation and Parliamentary Government**

The relationship between opinion and policy has received considerable academic attention in the US.<sup>4</sup> In Canada, research has been considerably more limited. There is a small, related body of work focused on issue attentiveness in Canadian public opinion and government. This research suggests that there is indeed a regular connection between the issues Canadians care about and the issues receiving attention in Parliament (e.g., Howlett 1998; Soroka 2002; Penner et al. 2006). At any given time, this work suggests, the issues most important to Canadians are likely to be prominent in the legislative arena as well. This is an important finding; as we have outlined, attentiveness is critical to the opinion-policy relationship.<sup>5</sup> It is different from the opinion-policy relationship sketched out above, however, which focuses not just on whether government is paying attention to issues, but whether they are actually enacting policy in line with public preferences.

The small body of work that directly addresses this opinion-policy relationship is thus, we believe, critical. Francois Petry and Matthew Mendelsohn have examined the relationship between public preferences for change and policy change in Canada, during different periods and across different domains (Petry 1999; Petry and Mendelsohn 2004). Their work uses a ‘policy consistency’ approach, comparing the distribution of responses from single survey questions with existing, proximate changes in policy.<sup>6</sup> It suggests, first, that consistency between preferences for change and policy change is more likely when the consensus for change in opinion is greater. That is, policy is more likely to exhibit change in a direction consistent with preferences when the distribution of preferences clearly supports that change. In short, the magnitude of public support matters; government responsiveness is proportional to the magnitude of public preferences for change. Note that although the mode of analysis is quite different, these findings are roughly consistent with the thermostatic model outlined above, where a  $x$ -unit shift in preferences is expected to have a  $y$ -unit effect on policy outcomes.

The second major finding in work by Petry and Mendelsohn is that policy consistency has varied across (a) Governments and (b) policy domains. Where Governments are concerned, the Mulroney era exhibits a greater degree of policy

consistency than either the Trudeau or Chretien eras. This finding reminds us that representation can vary over time. It can vary across policy domains as well: these authors suggest that government responsiveness is more likely in higher-profile domains. That is, as outlined above, governments are more likely to appear responsive to opinion in those domains where the public is paying attention.

Proportional government responsiveness to opinion and the effect of issue salience on representation are also evident in our own work (Soroka and Wlezien 2004), which tests directly the thermostatic model in Canada. This work draws on time series data of public preferences for spending and actual government spending, and in so doing captures the dynamic, reciprocal relationship between opinion and policy. Analyses find evidence of opinion representation in Canada — federal budgetary policy in major domestic policy domains regularly follows public preferences for policy change. That said, there is variance across domains. In particular, representation is stronger for highly salient domains such as welfare and health than for less salient domains such as environment and transportation.

Policy representation in Canada is also limited in several ways. First, the magnitude of representation in Canada is somewhat more limited than in the US. In short, to the extent that directly comparable models are available (see Wlezien 2004; Soroka and Wlezien 2005), the effect of a given shift in preferences on policy appears smaller in Canada. Second, representation in Canada appears more ‘global’ than domain-specific. In the traditional characterization of representation, politicians respond to public opinion within particular areas (see, e.g., Monroe 1979; Page and Shapiro 1992). Representation may in some cases be more collective, however. Governments may respond to a component of preferences that is common across domains. Rather than having specific preferences for each policy domain, that is, citizens may have preferences ‘over the general contours of government activity’ (Stimson et al 1995; see also Stimson 1991), and it may be that governments may respond to these more ‘global’ preferences. Of course, preferences (and representation) need not be entirely global or domain-specific, but rather some combination thereof. Past work shows this to be true. It also suggests that representation in Canada — to the extent that it exists — is largely to this global component. The implication is that, even where Canadian politicians do attend to public preferences, they do so mostly in a general way. Preferences for more or less spending, generally speaking, may be represented across several domains, but the component of preferences that is specific to health, or education, may not.

Why is policy representation in Canada comparatively limited in magnitude and largely ‘global’ in focus?<sup>7</sup> Political institutions likely play a role here. The US presidential system may be more conducive to policy representation than the Canadian

parliamentary system, for instance. Scholars have long noted the dominance of cabinets over parliaments (see, e.g., the classic statements by Bagehot 1867 and Jennings 1959; also see Laver and Shepsle 1996; Cox 1987; Tsebelis 2002). These scholars portray a world in which cabinet governments exercise substantial discretion, where the cabinet is the proposer—it puts legislation to the Commons—and the legislature ultimately has only a limited check on what the government does. Indeed, where the legislature and executive are fused, the need for a government to hold the confidence of the legislature can result in relatively strong party cohesiveness, or ‘party discipline’ (Diermeier and Feddersen 1998; Huber 1996). Strom (2003) concludes that parliamentary government deals much better with ‘adverse selection’ than it does ‘moral hazard.’ Once established, the cabinet is difficult to control on a recurring basis. This is certainly evident in Canada. Through control over MPs’ career opportunities, party discipline is extraordinarily high in Canada (Docherty 1997; Carty et al 2000). And the system is regarded as increasingly centralized, with little space for meaningful participation by the legislature, at least on an ongoing basis (Franks 1987; Savoie 1999).

This almost certainly has implications for government responsiveness. When there are differences between what the cabinet and parliament want, the latter cannot effectively impose its own contrary will. That is, the legislature cannot consistently undertake ‘error correction,’ adjusting the government’s position where it may be going too far or not far enough given public preferences. This is of particular relevance given the independence of individual ministers, and prime ministers, in the policymaking process (Laver and Shepsle 1996). Some may be more conservative than others, some more liberal. All can make mistakes. The process of amendment and veto is thus crucial. In parliamentary systems, however, this can be somewhat compromised, at least by comparison with Madisonian presidential systems. In the latter the executive cannot effectively act without the legislature, at least with respect to statute. The legislature is the proposer—it puts statute to the executive—and while the executive can veto legislation the legislature can override. Most changes in policy require agreement between the executive and legislature, or else a supermajority in the latter. This is likely to reduce disjunctures between public opinion and policy change.<sup>8</sup>

The lack of a horizontal separation of powers may consequently make the Canadian parliamentary system less reliably responsive to public opinion over time. This concern is evident in work on Canada, certainly. Consider J.R. Mallory’s observation that ‘the mass of citizenry is perhaps as far away from the real decisions of government as they were two hundred years ago, and the cabinet system provides strong institutional barriers to the development of more democratic ways of doing things’ (1974, 208). Even so, we expect representation in the Canadian system – Canadian governments may be held accountable for their actions more easily than

governments in a presidential system, as responsibility is far clearer come election time. In between elections, however, there is little to make Canadian cabinets accountable except for the prospect of a future electoral competition.<sup>9</sup> Though important, the electoral incentive is imperfect.

## Public Responsiveness and Federalism

The magnitude and nature of public responsiveness should matter to policy representation as well. As discussed above, representation is to some degree (and perhaps to a considerable degree) dependent on public responsiveness. A monitoring public is the critical incentive to represent, after all. It is for this reason that issue salience — in work by Petry and Mendelsohn (2004), as well as by Soroka and Wlezien (2004) — matters to representation. Looking across domains, representation in policy is more likely where the public notices policy change.

How informed are Canadian policy preferences? And what information do they reflect? The literature suggests a glass-half-full, glass-half-empty story. On the one hand, there is evidence of rationality on the part of the Canadian public. In a comparatively early but very detailed study of Canadian public opinion on policy, Johnston (1986) reveals a structure to Canadian attitudes on, for instance, the distribution of powers, levels of taxation, and a wide range of policy priorities. In a study modeled after Page and Shapiro's (1992) work in the US, Bélanger and Petry (2005) also find considerable stability in Canadian public opinion over time; and when opinion change is apparent, they suggest that change is typically gradual and in response to other real-world and political trends.

Of course, stability in opinion may not be a good thing. As Bélanger and Petry note, opinion change might be critical to functioning democracy, and stability may reflect complacency (2005, 209). For instance, our own work finds limited public responsiveness to policy change (Soroka and Wlezien 2004). The public responds thermostatically to policy change in welfare and health, but other domains exhibit less consistent responsiveness. Responsiveness appears to be largely ‘global’ in focus as well — to the extent that public responsiveness to policy is evident, it tends to be focused on the trend in spending common across different social domains, rather than changes in spending that are unique to each domain.

That the structure of public responsiveness across domains is symmetric with policy representation is of course exactly as we would expect. Representation is conditioned by responsiveness — the magnitude and focus of public responsiveness will in most cases be directly connected to the magnitude and focus of policy representation. And this should be true not just across domains, but across countries. The political

institutions that facilitate responsiveness may by implication enhance representation. Institutions that inhibit responsiveness may similarly depress representation.

Perhaps most critically in the Canadian case, there is a growing body of literature suggesting that federalism inhibits public responsiveness. Public responsiveness requires that the people acquire accurate information about what policymakers are doing. This depends on the supply of information, and on the clarity of that information. More precisely, it depends on the extent to which responsibility for policies is clear, and this is in part a function of how government itself is organized. Federalism increases the number of different governments making policy and thus makes less clear what ‘government’ is doing (see, e.g., Downs 1999). Put differently, the government policy signal ( $P$ ) may be confused—or, rather, there may be different signals from multiple sources—at least in policy domains for which different governments have responsibility. This may well dampen public responsiveness.

Consider a unitary system, where there is but one government making policy in all areas. In such a system, there is no mistaking the source of policy change. The signal is clear. We thus would expect a comparatively high level of public responsiveness. (Of course, this doesn’t mean that the public doesn’t ignore or mistake the policy signals in the many low salience policy domains.) Now, consider a federal system. Here we have multiple governments, and there are consequently multiple sources of policymaking and policy information. There may still be considerable variance amongst federal systems, admittedly, indeed across policy domains within a single system. Regardless, and fundamentally, these federal arrangements will lead to greater or lesser degrees of clarity of responsibility (Powell and Whitten 1993; see also Anderson 2006).

This concern has been voiced in the Canadian literature. In his classic account of the self-sustaining behaviour of Canadian provincial governments, for instance, Alan Cairns (1977, 707) argues that ‘The institutionalization of government, the construction of a sphere of political and bureaucratic existence differentiated from other spheres of collective life, automatically reduces the relative importance of nongovernment groups, interests and individuals in policy-making.’ Cairns suggests, in sum, that the increasingly complex maze of inter-governmental relationships makes it increasingly difficult for the public to hold governments accountable. Donald Smiley (1979) highlights the same deficiency, in what is perhaps the best-titled critique of Canadian executive federalism thus far: ‘An Outsider’s Observations of Intergovernmental Relations Among Consenting Adults.’ Simeon and Cameron (2002) argue that federalism poses a real problem for government responsiveness, transparency and accountability; Cutler (2004) presents a particularly valuable discussion of the problems that federalism poses for the Canadian citizen.

The degree to which there is a clear ‘policy signal’ to which the public can respond will depend in large part on the particular federal institutional and fiscal structure, of course. One principal difference is the extent to which governments have ‘exclusive’ versus ‘concurrent’ legislative powers (Watts 1999). Under ‘exclusive legislative powers,’ different governments have different responsibilities and there are no interactions between layers. Much like the unitary system, there is no mistaking the source of policy in each policy area; it is just that the source differs. We thus might expect a comparatively high level of responsiveness on the part of the public in politically important domains, regardless of which level of government is in charge. This does presume that the availability of information about the behavior of governments is fairly equal across levels of government, however, and this may not be true for at least two reasons: (1) the behavior of the national government may receive more attention than lower-level governments; (2) the flow of information about lower-level governments may vary meaningfully geographically, e.g., across counties, states, and municipalities. Information on policymaking in a federal system may thus be more available in some domains than others, depending on which government is responsible, and responsiveness may vary accordingly.

In most domains, the Canadian system is one of ‘concurrent legislative powers,’ where different governments share responsibilities.<sup>10</sup> (Canadian federalism is discussed in Chapter Five so we review only the most relevant details here.) In most major domestic policy domains in Canada, there is some combination of (a) direct involvement by multiple levels of government, and (b) direct involvement by one level of government, funded through fiscal transfers from another. In the former arrangement, there are different sources of policy change and implementation, which can create fairly obvious complications for the public, especially if policy change over time is not parallel across levels of government.<sup>11</sup> The latter is scarcely any better — decisions made by one level of government are constrained, at least in a general way, by the budgetary policy of another. Both forms of concurrent powers, then, blur the ‘policy signal’ citizens receive.<sup>12</sup>

What are the likely implications for public responsiveness? It may not be that the public is less informed about the sum of policy across levels of government, though this is a possibility. (It also may not be that the public is less sophisticated than in unitary systems, where little sophistication is required of citizens.) There is very good reason to think that the public will be less informed about the behavior of specific levels, however, as this would require keeping what is happening at each level perfectly straight. That is, where there are overlapping jurisdictions, we expect a dampening of public responsiveness of preferences for policy *at any particular level of government*. For instance, we might expect that individuals’ preferences for more policy at the

national level are less responsive to changes in national policy, independent of state/provincial/ local policy. We would expect the same at these lower levels of government as well.

Consider the following, more concrete, Canadian example: Over the 1988-2005 period, for instance, roughly 61% of all welfare spending was direct spending by the federal government, and the remaining 39% was spent by a combination of provincial and municipal governments. Some of that 39% was also federal funds, however, transferred to provinces through block transfers (including Established Programs Financing, the Canada Health and Social Transfer, the Canada Social Transfer). How can we reasonably expect a citizen to distinguish between policy changes that are the consequence of one government or another? Welfare policies may have grown significantly in one province,, but does this mean we want the national government to do less? Or do we think that provincial government should do less? Or both? Indeed, the truth might be that we ‘should’ think that the national government needs to do less and the provincial government more. Making such an assessment is likely rather difficult – citizens simply cannot tell which government is principally responsible for a given shift in spending.

In short, public responsiveness is much more difficult in domains in which governments have concurrent jurisdiction, or where policies are funded through transfers between governments. And the combination of concurrent jurisdictions and fiscal transfers — as in many major domestic domains in Canada — likely makes public responsiveness especially hard. In this situation, it will very often not be clear to the public which government is responsible for what policy.<sup>13</sup>

This has implications for opinion representation itself. As we already have discussed, there is good reason to think that we will have clear policy responsiveness only where we observe clear public responsiveness to policy. Note that some have argued that federalism actually increases net representation of broad policy preferences, as multiple levels of government provide greater opportunity (e.g., Trudeau 1968; Downs 1999). This possibility is perfectly consistent with our conjecture regarding representation at particular levels of government: It may be that the representation of opinion at each level of government is lower even as representation across all levels of government is higher. Given lower public responsiveness, however, the pressure for representation at each level of government may be reduced.<sup>14</sup>

### **Policy and Opinion in Canada: An Expository Analysis**

What can existing data tell us about the relationship between policy and public preferences in Canada? As an expository analysis, we look here at public opinion and

government spending on welfare, or ‘social assistance’, for the period from 1988 to 2006. Spending data are from Statistics Canada, and include social assistance spending by (1) the federal government, (2) provincial, territorial and local governments (referred to below as ‘provincial’), and (3) consolidated federal, provincial, territorial and local governments (referred to below as simply ‘consolidated’).<sup>15</sup> Our measure of public preferences for welfare policy is based on the following question: ‘Keeping in mind that increasing services could increase taxes, do you think the federal government is spending too much, just the right amount, or should be spending more on each of the following ... [i.e., welfare]?’<sup>16</sup> Following previous research, we create a percentage difference measure by subtracting the percentage of people who think we are spending ‘too much’ from the percentage of people who think we are spending ‘too little’ in each domain. The resulting measure of ‘net support’ thus captures the degree to which the public wants more or less spending over time—it captures both direction and magnitude. Note also that this measure of public preferences is based on a survey question which identifies the ‘federal government.’ That the question is specific about a level of government is important for our current purposes — it allows us to explore the degree to which preferences for federal spending actually respond to federal spending.

[Figure 1 about here]

Figure 1 shows the resulting spending and preferences series. Note first that there are differences between the federal and provincial spending series — there are years in which the two move together, certainly, but other years in which they are moving in different directions. And even in years when the series are moving together, they do not necessarily move up or down the same amount (even taking into account the relative size of the federal and provincial budgets). The correlation between the two series is 0.59; for annual changes in spending (the policy *change* central to the thermostatic model) it is 0.68. This implies that spending at the two levels is more dissimilar than similar. Canadians clearly experience varying degrees of welfare commitment. And these data conceal the additional variance that results from the various provincial policies. The average bivariate correlation between the 10 provincial data series (not pictured here) is 0.42. So if federal welfare spending preferences are co-determined by federal and provincial policies, then national public preference will be the product of different and sometimes quite disparate provincial policy trends.<sup>17</sup>

Figure 1 hints at a thermostatic response in public opinion — when spending increases, net preferences for spending decrease, and vice versa. This is confirmed in regression models (shown in the Appendix). *Ceteris paribus*, Canadian preferences for welfare spending respond thermostatically (negatively) to federal welfare spending. But, paradoxically, Canadian preferences for federal welfare spending also respond to provincial spending series. This is true not just when federal and provincial data are

considered separately — even when both are included in the same model, there is responsiveness to spending at both levels of government.<sup>18</sup> (This is somewhat apparent in Figure 1 in the post-2000 period, when preferences continue to rise alongside declining provincial spending, even as federal welfare spending increases.) Given that part of what provinces spend on welfare comes from the federal government, we might expect federal spending preferences to be at least partly conditioned by provincial spending. But for ostensibly ‘federal’ welfare preferences to be affected by provincial spending nevertheless highlights a potential weakness of the Canadian system. It suggests that the Canadian public is not readily able to distinguish between what one or the other level of government is doing.

There are other explanations for the patterns we observe, ones that do not assume that the public fails to differentiate between the source of spending. First, respondents may simply not think much about the word ‘federal’ in survey questions, and their responses consequently lump together preferences for both federal and provincial spending. Second, and more substantively, we should not forget that a good deal of provincial spending in the social domains comes from the federal government. Citizens may quite reasonably adjust preferences for federal spending in reaction to provincial spending, because the latter actually is driven in large part by the former. Third, given that multiple governments are making policy in a single domain, citizens might base their preferences for one government’s policy at least in part on what the other governments are doing as well. Again this is entirely reasonable: if a desire for more spending at the federal level can be appeased through increased spending at the provincial level, for instance, then preferences for federal policy should shift in response to provincial policy change.

These are interesting possibilities, and ones that may help us understand the micro-level story behind our aggregate-level results. They may not matter where the relationship between responsiveness and federalism is concerned, however. Regardless of whether citizens readily distinguish between levels of government or simply choose not to, responsiveness in the Canadian federal context is not clearly directed at the policymaking behaviour of any single level of government. As we have seen elsewhere, and discussed earlier, this responsiveness also is weaker than what we see in the US and, especially, the United Kingdom.

This diminished (or opaque) public responsiveness dampens the incentive for Canadian governments to represent preferences in policy. It also lessens the value of doing so, even for those policymakers who are motivated to represent for other than electoral reasons, because preferences are less meaningful. This is not to say that there is no value in representing expressed public opinion in Canada, just that the value of public opinion to legislators at the federal or provincial levels will be reduced: it just is

not clear to which government those preferences are responding, or even to which government those preferences are directed.

### **Conclusions: Responsiveness and Representation in Canada**

What is the nature of the opinion-policy relationship in Canada? The story is, in a nutshell, as follows. There is evidence of policy representation in Canada — public policy does regularly follow public preferences, across a number of policy domains. Policy representation is likely limited more by a parliamentary rather than presidential system. In the latter, Congress can act to correct errors made by the executive, whereas in the Canadian parliamentary system the Commons holds very little power, and Cabinet has considerable freedom. Policy representation is likely also limited by public responsiveness. This responsiveness is the critical incentive for representation, but it requires a clear ‘policy signal’; in order to react to policy change, the public needs to be able to identify that policy change. The likelihood that citizens can identify policy change is lessened considerably by federalism. Where there are multiple governments making policy in the same domains, spending funds that are often transferred from one level of government to another, the capacity to monitor or respond to government activities is likely reduced.

This problem is not unique to Canada, but this is a country for which the dampening effect of institutions on the opinion-policy link may be especially great. (Recall that the particularly complicated system of concurrent legislative powers in many Canadian policy domains likely makes the ‘policy signal’ especially confusing.) This is not to say that Canada is not a functioning democracy, of course. It surely is. But the efficiency with which preferences are converted to policy, and policy change is then reflected in preferences, is diminished when compared to countries where policymaking authority is more concentrated.

Grappling with the effects of federalism remains a critical task for future work on the opinion-policy link in Canada. The existing literature has paid relatively little attention to the potentially confusing effects of federalism outlined above. And we have not even begun to consider whether policy varies across provinces in ways that are systematically linked to regional differences in public preferences. We thus know little about the implications federalism has for the relationship between public opinion and policy — a relationship that is one of the most critical indicators of the success and strength of any representative democratic system.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The authors are grateful to Fred Cutler, Patrick Fournier John Courtney and David Smith for comments on a previous draft.

<sup>2</sup> Note that the description of the thermostatic model here draws considerably on Wlezien 1995, 1996.

<sup>3</sup> We can express policy representation more formally, as follows,  $P = f\{O\}$ , where  $P$  designates policy and  $O$  opinion, and where we expect the relationship between the two to be positive; that is, if opinion favours more policy, governments should provide more policy, and if opinion favours less policy, governments should provide less.

<sup>4</sup> The literature is vast, but see, e.g., Achen 1978; Bartels 1991; Erikson et al 1993; Erikson et al 2002; Manza and Cook 2002; Page and Shapiro 1983; Stimson et al 1995. For reviews of the literature see Burstein 2003; Wlezien and Soroka 2007.

<sup>5</sup> Also see Baumgartner and Jones 2002 on the role of attentiveness in policymaking.

<sup>6</sup> See Monroe 1978 and 1998 for the archetypal example of the policy consistency approach, and Wlezien and Soroka 2007 for a discussion of the different approaches.

<sup>7</sup> Note that we observe similar patterns in the UK, another parliamentary system – see Soroka and Wlezien 2005.

<sup>8</sup> This may be most likely when control of the different branches is divided, not unified.

<sup>9</sup> We might distinguish between ‘indirect’ representation, through elections, and ‘direct’ representation, where sitting politicians actively represent current public interests. And it may be that even though presidential systems enhance ‘direct’ representation, other systems may produce better ‘indirect’ representation — essentially, a stronger relationship between votes and seats. Consider a parliamentary system with a proportional electoral system, for instance. Even so, given its plurality electoral system there is no reason to believe that ‘indirect’ representation is particularly strong in Canada either.

<sup>10</sup> This is not so much a direct consequence of the Constitution Act (1867) as it is an indirect one. That is, few concurrent powers are specified in the constitution. Provincial governments are allocated many of what in the last century have become the major spending domains, but relatively limited powers of taxation. The federal

government's "spending power" has consequently meant that many otherwise provincial domains are effectively concurrent.

<sup>11</sup> Additionally, in both cases citizens must navigate the credit-stealing and/or blame avoidance that tends to exist in domains where multiple governments exert policymaking power. See, especially, Harrison 1996.

<sup>12</sup> Indeed, federalism only matters to public responsiveness if policymaking is not parallel across governments. If government policies move together over time, then responsiveness to one level of government is indistinguishable from responsiveness to another level of government.

<sup>13</sup> Note that Cutler and Mendelsohn (2004) find that Canadians have relatively realistic views of the relative responsibility of federal and provincial governments in various domains. But assessing responsibility is of course different from reacting to actual policy, and what we are concerned with here is Canadians' capacity to respond to policymaking by federal and provincial governments.

<sup>14</sup> Note also that federalism can make representation more difficult, not just because there can be multiple governments acting in a single domain, but because public responsiveness may be confused. Under such circumstances the supply-side advantages of federalism cannot be realized. Multiple governments may seek to represent preferences, but in representing expressed (and confused) preferences, policymakers could do more to misrepresent real preferences than represent them.

<sup>15</sup> Note that consolidated spending can be less than the simple sum of federal and provincial spending. This is because a federal-provincial transfer marked clearly for social assistance is counted as federal social assistance spending in series 1, and then as provincial social assistance spending in series 2. These funds are not double-counted in the consolidated measure, however.

<sup>16</sup> These data are drawn from Environics' Focus Canada omnibus surveys. Focus Canada is a national omnibus poll conducted quarterly since the late 1970s. Questions on spending are usually in the 3<sup>rd</sup> quarter of the current fiscal year. For subsequent analysis, we will in the few missing years using linear interpolation.

<sup>17</sup> Note also that provincial governments could be spending the same amount of money differently. This is a version of cross-provincial difference that is not captured here — and another reason why public responsiveness to policy may be difficult.

<sup>18</sup> And this responsiveness is roughly equal in both significance and magnitude.

## Appendix

The model of public responsiveness to welfare spending used here is drawn from Soroka and Wlezien (2004), though it is estimated here using a longer time period. The model, briefly, regresses current net preferences for welfare spending on (a) spending, (b) a counter variable, to capture the gradual upward trend in social spending preferences over the past few decades, and (c) lagged preferences, to account for autocorrelation in the series. Results are shown below, for models including federal spending, provincial spending, and then both. The standardized coefficients for spending are included to facilitate comparison between measures with quite different variances. Even so, we need not (and should not) make too much here of the magnitude of coefficients — significance alone will suffice.

[Table 15.1 about here]

Note, then, that there is evidence of (statistically significant) public responsiveness to both federal and provincial spending, in columns 1 and 2 respectively. Even in column 3, where both spending series are included together, we see significant responsiveness to both federal and provincial spending. The implication is that the Canadian welfare preferences, captured through a question asking about the ‘federal’ government, respond to changes in provincial spending above and beyond what the federal government is doing.

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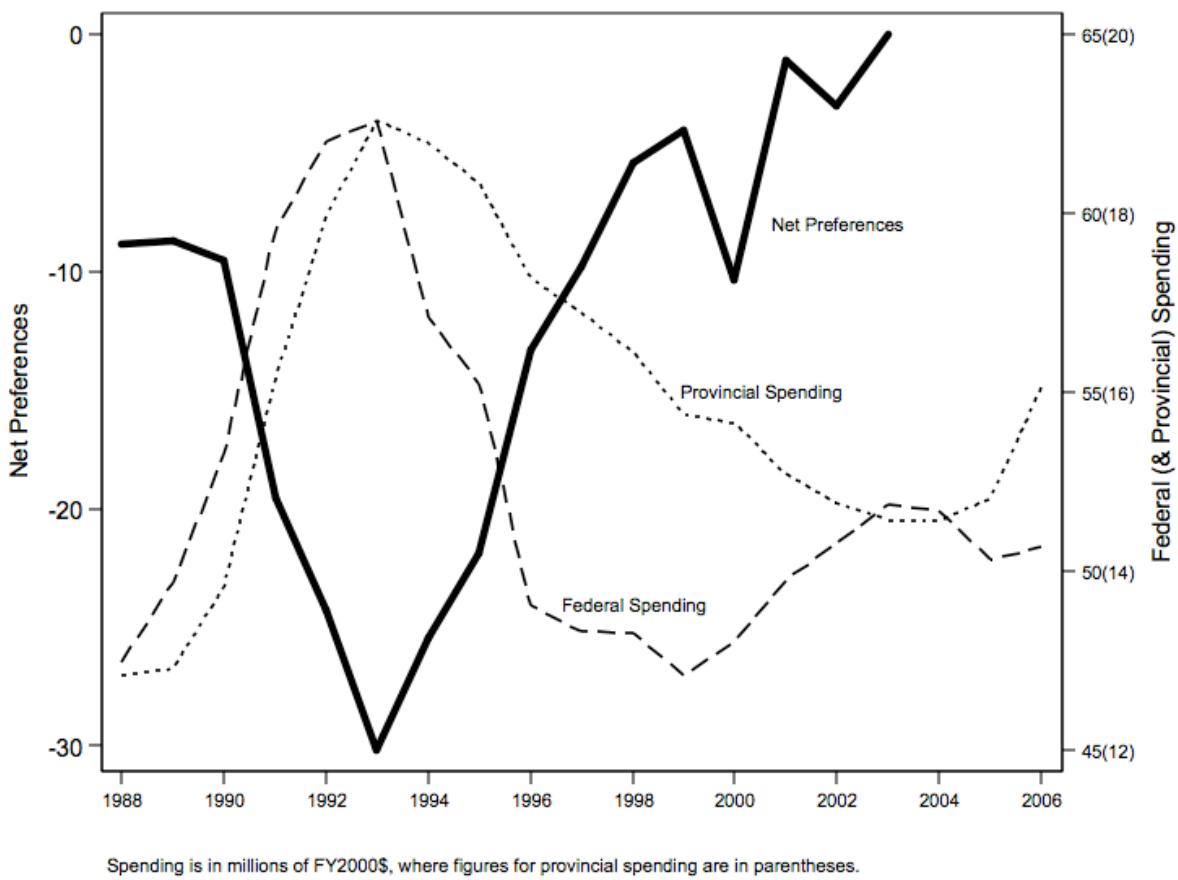
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**Figure 15.1.** ‘Net Preferences’ and Government Spending on Welfare



**Table 15.1:** Assessing Public Responsiveness to  
Federal and Provincial Welfare Spending

	Dependent Variable: Net Preferences <sub>t</sub>		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Federal Spending <sub>t</sub>	-.891*		-.523*
	[-.500]		[-.293]
	(.205)		(.189)
Provincial Spending <sub>t</sub>		-3.176*	-2.116*
		[-.866]	[-.577]
		(.649)	(.647)
Net Preferences <sub>t-1</sub>	.520*	-.095	.046
	(.125)	(.205)	(.172)
Counter	.302	1.252*	.892*
	(.206)	(.246)	(.237)
Constant	-2.263	-9.388*	-6.691*
	(1.763)	(2.007)	(1.884)
N	16	16	16
R-squared	.892	.908	.945

Cells contain OLS regression coefficients, with standard errors in parentheses, and with standardized coefficients in square brackets. \*  
 $p < .05$ .