

CHAPTER 43

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THE  
RELATIONSHIP  
BETWEEN PUBLIC  
OPINION AND  
POLICY

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Does public opinion matter? Many of the preceding chapters presuppose that it does—that belief systems, political values, socialization, and the many determinants of voting behavior are of fundamental importance to the study of politics. Political beliefs and voting behavior are certainly important enough on their own to warrant study. But their significance to political scientists is most often rooted in the sense that—perhaps through changing preferences or through shifts in voting behavior—public opinion can affect policy outcomes. The link between public opinion and public policy is thus fundamental to the study of political behavior. In the words of Erikson, Wright, and McIver (1993, 1), “Ultimately, virtually all public opinion research bears on the question of popular control.”

The significance of an opinion-policy link is by no means exclusive to work on public opinion. The vast body of research on electoral representation—on the link

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between the distribution of votes and seats—is at its heart interested in the extent to which public preferences will be reflected in policy (e.g. Lijphart 1994; Taagepera and Shugart 1989; Cox 1997). This connection is explicit in Powell’s (2000) recent work, which shifts the focus of electoral institutional analysis away from votes and seats. A critical test of electoral institutions, Powell suggests, is the link between citizen preferences and government policy positions. While not examining public opinion and policies directly, this work highlights the centrality of the opinion-policy link in the study of representative democracy.

The current chapter reviews the empirical literature testing a general model in which policy is considered to be a function of public preferences. The mechanics by which preferences are converted to policy are considered along with extensions of the basic model—extensions through which the magnitude of opinion representation varies systematically across issues and political institutions. For much of the chapter, then, and in contrast with preceding chapters, public opinion is an *independent* variable—an important driver of public policy change. In a concluding section, we reconsider opinion as a dependent variable, specifically, its responsiveness to policy change. The ongoing existence of both policy representation *and* public responsiveness is critical to the functioning of representative democracy.

## 1 OPINION REPRESENTATION IN THEORY AND PRACTISE

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A fundamental principle of democratic government is that policy will be a function of opinion (see e.g. Dahl 1971; Weale 1999; Pitkin 1967). We can express this expectation formally, as follows:

$$P = f\{O\}, \tag{1}$$

where  $P$  designates policy and  $O$  opinion.<sup>1</sup> To be absolutely clear, we expect a positive relationship between opinion and policy—when the public wants a lot of policy, they should get a lot of policy. Whether and the extent to which this is true is a critical indicator of representative governance, and versions of this simple function have generated no small amount of attention from political scientists.

### 1.1 Dyadic Representation

Early empirical work on the opinion-policy link was sparked in large part by Miller and Stokes’s (1963) “Constituency influence in Congress.” These authors brought together

<sup>1</sup> This is not meant to be a complete model of policy of course, as we know that many other things also matter (Kingdon 1973; Jacobs and Shapiro 2000). The equation is used solely to characterize the relationship between opinion and policy.

data on public preferences by constituency, and both surveys and roll call voting behavior of US congressmen on social welfare, foreign affairs, and civil rights. Correlations between constituency preferences and congressmen's behavior suggested that the latter was guided in part by constituency opinion. The finding was striking at the time, empirically demonstrating a mode of representation quite different from the party-centered work that had preceded it.

This seminal study—alongside other critical early works such as Mayhew's (1974) *Congress: The Electoral Connection*, Clausen's (1973) *How Congressmen Decide*, and Kingdon's (1973) *Congressmen's Voting Decisions*—spawned a vast literature seeking to establish links between the voting behavior of representatives and some combination of constituency opinion, constituency aggregate demographics, and representatives' own demographic traits and party affiliations.<sup>2</sup> The research is largely restricted to the US, where roll call votes are readily available (and party discipline is weak), though there are important and informative exceptions (e.g. Barnes 1977; Converse and Pierce 1986; Matthews and Valen 1999).<sup>3</sup>

Referred to as studies of *dyadic* representation (Weissberg 1978), the literature on roll call voting asserts that representation is to be found in the relationship between individual constituencies and individual representatives. A good amount of work bears out significant connections in the US House of Representatives and Senate (Erikson and Wright 1997, 2000; Wright and Berkman 1986; Wright 1989*a*, 1989*b*). That representation in this work is at the constituency level—focusing on the behavior of legislators—is important, as we shall see below.

## 1.2 Collective Representation

Another body of work examines relationships between aggregated public preferences and system-level policy outcomes. This research is based on a view of representation ontologically different from that which guides work on dyadic representation. Here, representation is viewed as a systemic property, located not in the behavior of individuals but in the overall functioning of the entire representative policy-making system. The difference is partly a function of outcome variables: for the roll call voting literature, the outcome is clearly congressmen's votes; for the literature on collective representation, the outcome is policy. And policy is of course not the outcome of a single legislator, but the entire policy-making system. Concordance between individual legislators' actions and constituency preferences is thus a helpful but not sufficient condition for policy representation; most individual representatives could in fact vote against the majority opinion in their district. So long as the various district preferences were reflected in the votes of other districts' representatives, policy outcomes could still be representative of the (national) majority preference (e.g. Hurley 1982). What is critical

<sup>2</sup> For other prominent work on roll call voting, see e.g. Fiorina 1974; Stone 1979; Erikson 1978, 1990; Achen 1978; Kuklinski 1977, 1978; McCrone and Kulinski 1979; Shapiro et al. 1990; Bartels 1991.

<sup>3</sup> See also related cross-national work on party manifestos, e.g. Budge, Robertson, and Hearl 1987; Klingemann, Hoffebert, and Budge 1994.

in this view aren't the individual votes that contribute to the policy outcome, but the outcome itself—and of course the extent to which that outcome is in agreement with aggregated public preferences.

The notion of representation as a function of system-level policy outcomes underlies a vast literature on the “opinion-policy nexus.” The literature is wide and varied; we offer a brief review here, distinguishing between three different approaches: (1) consistency, (2) covariation, and (3) congruence.<sup>4</sup> These approaches are differentiated to a large extent by data availability, though as we shall see each has its advantages.

### 1.2.1 *Policy consistency: preferences for change*

We draw the “policy consistency” designation from Monroe (1979, 1998), whose work on the US provides an archetypal example of this line of analysis. This research asks, *To what extent is policy change consistent with a proximate public preference for policy change?* The approach involves identifying a single survey question asking about policy change, and examining the relationship between the proportion of respondents favoring that change and the existence of proximate changes in policy. “Consistency,” then, refers to the match between public preferences for change and actual policy change. Across 556 cases from 1981 to 1993, for instance, Monroe finds a consistency score of 55 percent.

Consistency scores can be estimated for separate policy domains or different time periods. Indeed, this is where consistency scores are most interesting—they can indicate those domains in which opinion representation is particularly good (or bad). What consistency scores cannot do is establish a clear causal connection between public opinion and policy change. As Monroe (1998, 12) himself notes, the best this kind of analysis can do is to establish the coincidence of a public preference for change and actual policy change. A demonstration that preferences *lead* policy requires an analysis of data over time—data that can show, at least, that the public preference for change precedes the policy change.

The principal advantages of the consistency approach relate to the fact that it requires relatively little data—indeed, each case requires just one survey result, and the capacity to assess whether there was a proximate change in policy in that domain. As a consequence, the approach can easily include a wide range of policy issues. Where overall policy responsiveness is concerned, the inclusion of as many policy domains as possible is critical. Polling questions deal with issues of some level of public salience, so estimated overall responsiveness will be based on a rather restricted set of policy domains. Moreover, because policy responsiveness is likely greatest for salient issues—as we shall discuss further below—an estimate of overall policy responsiveness will almost necessarily be biased upwards, relying as it does on only those salient issues about which pollsters ask questions (see Burstein 2003). The consistency approach, by requiring just a single question, can encompass a broader spectrum of policy issues than do the more data-intensive covariation or congruence approaches described below.

<sup>4</sup> These terms have been used in past reviews of this literature. It is typical to distinguish between consistency and congruence, for instance (Monroe 1998). We add the intermediary “covariation” category here, based in part on Weissberg’s (1976) early methodological review. For other reviews, see Manza and Cook 2002; Kuklinski and Segura 1995.

Relatively light data requirements also mean that the consistency approach has been quite easily exported outside the US to countries where comparatively less opinion data are available (e.g. Brooks 1985, 1987, 1990; Petry 1999; Petry and Mendelsohn 2004; Brett Schneider 1996). These studies compare preferences for policy change at a single point with actual policy change within a subsequent period—usually the next twelve months—and in so doing add much to our understanding of the opinion-policy link across countries. The ongoing interaction between opinion and policy is however more adequately captured by the covariation and congruence approaches, as we shall see.

### 1.2.2 *Policy covariation I: policy and opinion, before and after*

Policy covariation studies involve a slightly more data-intensive approach to the link between opinion and policy. While consistency studies measure preference for policy change at a single point in time, covariation studies rely on cases in which the same policy question was asked at two different points in time. Changes in the distribution of responses over that period are compared with proximate policy change. Measures of policy also tend to be more comprehensive in this approach. Policy is typically examined both before and after the period of opinion change, so it is clearer when opinion precedes policy, or vice versa. The central question, then, is: *To what extent do changes in policy follow related changes in public preferences for policy?*

Studies of policy covariation go further than consistency studies in examining both opinion and policy over time, and are thus better equipped to examine the causal order of opinion and policy change. The best-known and most comprehensive study of policy covariation is Page and Shapiro's (1983) study of over 300 federal US policy issues from the mid-1930s to the late 1970s. These authors compare measures of covariation across domains and institutions, similar to Monroe, but with the additional advantage of being able to ascertain whether policy change followed or preceded opinion change. Indeed, a critical insight offered by this approach is that policy change often *precedes* measured opinion change—Page and Shapiro (1983) find that policy may have affected opinion in almost half their cases.

The covariation approach has been used outside the US as well (e.g. Bélanger and Pétry 2005; Isernia, Juhasz, and Rattinger 2002). The approach has much to recommend it: it is not so data intensive as to be difficult outside the US, but at the same time it gathers enough information to get a general sense for the direction of causality between opinion and policy. Still, as with consistency, the limited period over which preferences and policies are measured makes it difficult to ascertain which came first. Preferences can change at a particular point in time because of previous policy changes, for instance. This ongoing interaction over time is missed by the covariation approach, but captured in the congruence approach below.

### 1.2.2 *Policy covariation II: policy and opinion across space*

An additional policy covariation model examines the relationship between policy and opinion across space—typically, across US states. Like the Page and Shapiro method, this approach is based on variation in both opinion and policy. Here, however, the

variation is not across two points in time, but across contexts. The central question, then, is *To what extent do levels of policy vary across states alongside public preferences for policy?* Erikson, Wright, and McIver's (1993) *Statehouse Democracy* stands out as the best-known example of this kind of research. These authors examine the relationship between estimated state ideology scores and a measure of state policy liberalism; results show quite a strong relationship between the two.

The analysis of opinion and policy relationships across space has been used elsewhere, particularly in work on US state abortion policy (e.g. Goggin and Wlezien 1993; Norrander and Wilcox 1999). The methodological approach is a powerful one, though its use outside the US has been limited, presumably due to a lack of sufficient data at the subnational level. Much the same has been true cross-nationally. There was some early work focusing on the convergence between mass and elite views on issues (especially Dalton 1985; also see Thomassen and Schmitt 1997), but only very recently have scholars begun to directly assess the relationships between opinion and policy across countries (e.g. Brooks and Manza 2006).

### 1.2.3 *Policy congruence: dynamic representation*

The central questions in the study of the opinion-policy nexus are, *To what extent is policy development congruent with changes in public preferences for policy?*, and *To what extent do public preferences for policy react to policy change?* These questions are best addressed using an analysis of time-series data on both public preferences and policy—we refer to this here as the congruence approach. To really tease out the dynamic relationship between opinion and policy, we need dynamic data.

Early work on dynamic representation preceded the development of the time-series econometrics which has come to characterize the field. In *The Attentive Public*, Devine's (1970) analysis includes plots of (survey-based) mean policy support measures for different publics, alongside appropriations in those domains. Similarly, Weissberg (1976) plots opinion measures alongside spending measures for eleven different US policy domains, and Burstein (1979) tracks opinion and antidiscrimination policy. In each case, over-time analysis consists mainly of visual interpretations of graphs. Nevertheless, these authors' broader longitudinal outlook makes their work the clear precursor to more recent research on dynamic representation.

The term "dynamic representation" is drawn from Stimson, MacKuen, and Erikson's (1995) article of the same title, a critical and representative example of what congruence analyses have come to look like. The article posits a model in which policy is a function of public preferences, either directly through politicians' reactions to shifts in opinion, or indirectly through elections that result in shifts in the partisan composition of the legislature. The authors then examine relationships between a survey-based measure of "opinion liberalism" and policy-voting measures for the president, House, Senate, and Supreme Court. There is strong evidence that policy-makers respond to changes in public opinion.

While Stimson and colleagues were developing a dynamic model of the link between public opinion and multiple US political institutions, Wlezien (1995, 1996)

was developing a “thermostatic” model of the (dynamic) reciprocal links between preferences and government spending—that is, a model which examined both opinion representation over time and public responsiveness to policy change. Dynamic models such as these are likely best equipped for investigating the causal relationships between opinion and policy. Work along these lines includes analyses of defense spending by Hartley and Russet (1992) and Eichenberg and Stoll (2003), recent work by Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson (2002) and by Soroka and Wlezien (Soroka 2003; Wlezien 2004; Soroka and Wlezien 2004, 2005) as well as Johnson, Brace, and Arceneaux’s (2005) research on environmental policy.

The drawback to dynamic models is they require a good deal of data, and to date this is available across many policy domains in a very limited number of countries: the US, Canada, and the UK. Work on dynamic representation has thus been restricted to polling-rich Anglo-American democracies, and mainly to salient policy domains. What the approach lacks in generalizability, however, it makes up for in the detail with which it can analyze opinion-policy relationships. This, we hope, will become clear in the sections that follow.

## 2 THE MECHANICS OF REPRESENTATION

Representation can occur in two familiar ways. The first way is indirect, through elections, where the public selects like-minded politicians who then deliver what it wants in policy. This is the traditional pathway to representation and is deeply rooted in the literature on responsible parties (Adams 2001). In effect, the public chooses among alternative policy visions and then the winning parties put their programs into place after the election. The second way to representation is direct, where sitting politicians literally respond to what the public wants. This pathway reflects an active political class, one that endeavors to stay closely attuned to the ebb and flow of public opinion and adjust policy accordingly. The two ways to representation actually are related. That is, the first way implies the second, at least assuming incumbent politicians are interested in remaining in office or else motivated to represent our preferences for other reasons. This is how we think of representative democracy, how we think it should work, i.e. we expect responsiveness. Responsiveness is dynamic—responsive politicians follow preferences as they change. Policy change is the result.

We can formally express these expectations by revising our equation 1 for policy ( $P$ ) as follows:

$$P = g\{O, I\}, \quad (2)$$

where  $O$  still is opinion and  $I$  is introduced to represent partisan control of government. Here policy is conceived to be directly responsive to opinion and indirectly responsive, through changes in partisan composition owing to elections. Of course,

the indirect linkage presupposes a connection between public opinion and party control of government, that is:

$$I = h\{O\}. \quad (3)$$

These models apply across both space and time. We can characterize the relationships between opinion and governments and policy across countries or, say, provinces or states within a country. There is relatively little work across countries, as good comparative data are hard to come by, though scholarly explorations are underway. There is more work on the US states, as we have seen, and Erikson, Wright, and McIver's (1993) classic examination reveals both connections: general policy differences across states reflect the partisan composition of government and opinion, and the partisan composition reflects opinion.

We also can characterize relationships over time, as preferences change, following the study of dynamic representation. This sort of analysis allows us to explicitly assess policy "responsiveness." Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson (2002) do just this, focusing on the number of major pieces of legislation in the US. They show that policy change nicely follows opinion over time independently of party control. Wlezien (1996, 2004) shows the same focusing on budgetary policy. This does not mean that politicians actually respond to changing public preferences, for it may be that they and the public both respond to something else, e.g. the perceived "need" for spending. All we can say for sure is that the research captures policy responsiveness in a statistical sense—whether and the extent to which public preferences directly influence policy change, other things being equal.

Of course, policy responsiveness is an institutional outcome. In parliamentary systems, this is straightforward—the government can change policy fairly directly, assuming that it does not face a realistic threat of a vote of (no) confidence. In presidential systems, agreement across institutions usually is required, as in the US. Presidential responsiveness to public preferences is conceptually quite simple: The president represents a national constituency and is expected to follow national preferences. Congressional responsiveness is more complex, even putting aside bicameralism, as members of the legislature represent districts. Although preferences differ across constituencies (see e.g. Erikson and Wright 1980, 1997, 2000; Erikson, Wright, and McIver 1993), there is reason to suppose that preferences in different constituencies move together over time (see e.g. Bartels 1991), just as movement of opinion across states (Erikson, Wright, and McIver 1993) and various demographic subcategories of the American public (Page and Shapiro 1992) is *largely* parallel. To the extent that they are responsive to public preferences, then, both the president and Congress should move in tandem, and predictable policy change is the logical consequence, even in the presence of divided government. Here we have a good amount of evidence, as we have seen.

How exactly do politicians know what public preferences are? Elections likely provide a good deal of information, but direct representation between elections requires something further. Politicians may learn about preferences through interactions with constituents; they may just have a good intuition for public preferences (Fenno

1978). Polls likely also play a critical role. Particularly given developments in polling technology, policy makers have in principle relatively easy access to public opinion on policy matters (Geer 1996). And while we know that policy makers' use and interpretation of polls can vary (e.g. Kingdon 1995; Herbst 1998), there is considerable evidence of the importance of polls, both public and private, in policy making (e.g. Beal and Hinkley 1984; Jacobs 1993; Jacobs and Shapiro 1995, 1995–6; Heith 1998). This work is critical. It shows one means by which politicians learn about public preferences. Of course, politicians have other, more direct sources of information as well.

### 3 ISSUES AND REPRESENTATION

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Representation does not occur in all policy domains in all countries. The characteristics of domains appear to matter, for instance. Representation is likely to reflect the political importance (or “salience”) of issue domains, if only due to the possible electoral consequences. Let us briefly trace the logic.

#### 3.1 Issue Salience

In its simplest sense, a salient issue is politically important to the public. People care about the issue and have meaningful opinions that structure party support and candidate evaluation (see e.g. Miller et al. 1976; van der Eijk and Franklin 1996). Candidates are likely to take positions on the issue and it is likely to form the subject of political debate (Graber 1989). People are more likely to pay attention to politicians' behavior on an important issue, as reflected in news media reporting or as communicated in other ways (Ferejohn and Kuklinski 1990). Politicians, meanwhile, are likely to pay attention to public opinion on the issue—it is in their self-interest to do so, after all (Hill and Hurley 1999). There are many different and clear expressions of this conception of importance. In issue domains that are not important, conversely, people are not likely to pay attention to politicians' behavior, and politicians are by implication expected to pay less attention to public opinion in these areas. This reflects a now classic perspective (see e.g. McCrone and Kuklinski 1979; Jones 1994; Geer 1996; Hill and Hurley 1999; also see Jacobs and Shapiro 2000).

This not only implies variation in representation across domains; it implies variation in responsiveness within domains over time, as salience evolves. When an issue is not very salient to the public, politicians are expected to be less responsive. As salience increases, however, the relationship should increase (Jones 1994; Franklin and Wlezien 1997; Soroka 2003). That is, to the extent that salience varies over time, the relationship between opinion and policy itself may vary. Though the expectation is clear, there is little research on the subject. We simply do not know whether

representation varies much over time. Indeed, we still do not know much about the variation in issue importance (see Wlezien 2005).<sup>5</sup>

### 3.2 Specific versus global representation

Public preferences in the different policy domains are not entirely unique—they tend to move together over time. This patterned movement in preferences is well documented in the US (Stimson 1991; Wlezien 1995) but also is true elsewhere, in the US and UK. The pattern has led some scholars to conclude that the public does not have preferences for policy in different areas, but rather a single, very general preference for government activity (e.g. Stimson, MacKuen, and Erikson 1995; Wood and Hinton-Andersson 1998). From this perspective, measured preferences in various domains largely represent (multiple) indicators of a single, underlying preference for government action. When compared with the more traditional perspective, this characterization of public opinion implies a very different, *global* pattern of representation.

Some research shows that, although preferences in different areas do move together over time, the movement is not entirely common (Wlezien 2004). Preferences in some domains share little in common with preferences in others; these preferences often move quite independently over time. In short, this work indicates that preferences are some combination of the *global* and *specific*—moving together to some degree, but exhibiting some independent variation as well. This research also shows that policy makers reflect the specific variation, at least in some policy domains. Not surprisingly, these domains tends to be highly salient to voters, the ones on which they pay close attention to what policy makers do. In other less salient domains, policy only follows the general global signal (also see Druckman and Jacobs 2006). In yet other, very low salience domains, policy seemingly does not follow preferences at all. Recent research (Soroka and Wlezien 2004, 2005) does indicate that the patterns differ significantly across countries, which points to possible institutional differences.

## 4 INSTITUTIONS AND REPRESENTATION

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Polities differ in many ways, and some of these differences should have significant implications for the nature and degree of representation. Of fundamental importance are political competition and mass media openness. Without some level of political competition, of course, governments have less incentive to respond to public opinion. At the very least, the incentive would be less reliable. Likewise, some level of mass media competition is essential in modern democracies. Without it, people

<sup>5</sup> There is however a related body of literature in policy making that reveals variance in “attentiveness” over time. See Baumgartner and Jones 2005.

cannot easily receive information about what government actors do, and thus cannot effectively hold politicians accountable for their actions.

Even where we have essential levels of media and political competition, as in most modern democracies (including new ones), institutional differences may have important implications for policy representation. Here we have a growing body of empirical work, particularly on electoral systems.

## 4.1 Electoral systems

Most of this research focuses on the differences between the majoritarian and proportional visions, using Powell's (2000) language, and mostly on how these differences matter for policy representation. Lijphart (1984) provides the first direct statement on the matter. He distinguishes between "consensual" democracies—characterized by, most notably, proportional representation, multi-party systems, and coalition governments—and "majoritarian" systems—characterized by simple plurality election rules, a two-party system, and single-party government (exactly as Duverger (1951) would predict). Most importantly, Lijphart suggests that consensual democracies provide better descriptive representation and general policy congruence than do majoritarian systems.

Powell (2000) provides further empirical support, focusing specifically on the differences between majoritarian and proportional election rules and their implications for representation. Powell finds that proportional representation tends to produce greater congruence between the government and the public; specifically, that the general ideological disposition of government and the ideological bent of the electorate tend to match up better in proportional systems. According to Powell, this reflects the greater, direct participation of constituencies the vision affords (also see Miller et al. 1999).

Powell's results pertain to elections and their immediate consequences. But what about in the periods between elections? Are coalition governments more responsive to ongoing changes in opinion? Although proportional systems may provide more indirect representation, it is not clear that they afford greater direct representation. There is reason to think that governments in majoritarian systems actually are more responsive to opinion *change*. First, it presumably is easier for a single party to respond to changes than a multi-party coalition, as coordination in the latter is more difficult and costly. Second, majoritarian governments may have more of an incentive to respond to opinion change. Since a shift in electoral sentiment has bigger consequences on election day in majoritarian systems, governments there are likely to pay especially close attention to the ebb and flow of opinion.<sup>6</sup> Thus, it may be that the two systems both work to serve representation, but in different ways, where proportional systems provide better *indirect representation* via elections and majoritarian systems better *direct representation* in between elections. There is little empirical work on the subject, however.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> This generalizes Rogowski and Kayser's (2002) argument relating to the comparatively higher seats-votes elasticities in majoritarian systems.

<sup>7</sup> Very recent work (Hobolt and Klemmensen 2005) suggests that one proportional system (Denmark) is more responsive than one majoritarian one (the UK), at least as regards what governments say.

## 4.2 Government institutions

Just as electoral systems may matter, so too may government institutions. In particular, research suggests that the horizontal division of powers may structure the relationships between opinion and policy over time.<sup>8</sup> The concentration of powers in parliamentary systems—as opposed to presidential systems—affords voters more direct control over government on election day. This presumably aids indirect representation: To the extent election outcomes reflect public opinion, then policy representation will follow quite naturally, at least to the extent we have responsible parties.

The same seemingly is not true about direct representation, and there is reason to suppose that parliamentary governments are less reliable in their attendance to public opinion over time.<sup>9</sup> 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. 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 has fairly direct implications for government responsiveness. When there are differences between what the cabinet and parliament want, the latter cannot effectively impose its own contrary will. The process of amendment and veto is compromised, at least by comparison with 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 typically 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.

Although the separation of powers makes presidential systems much more deliberate in their actions, therefore, it may also make them more reliably responsive to public opinion over time. We still expect representation in parliamentary systems, of course—after all, governments in these systems are more easily held accountable for their actions, as responsibility is far clearer, particularly in a majoritarian context. In between elections, however, there is little to make parliamentary cabinets accountable except for the prospect of a future electoral competition. Though important, the

<sup>8</sup> The vertical division of powers also may be important, via public opinion itself: increasing the mix of governments involved in policy making may dampen public information, which may have consequences for representation in turn (Soroka and Wlezien 2004, 2005).

<sup>9</sup> Note that this argument bears some similarities to Risse-Kappen’s (1991) work on foreign policy making, in which he argues that the centralization or strength of government institutions determines the extent to which policy makers will follow or lead public preferences.

incentive is imperfect. Research comparing the US, UK, and Canada bears out these expectations (Soroka and Wlezien 2004, 2005).

## 5 ON POLITICAL EQUALITY

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We make regular reference to “public opinion” and “public preferences.” This is what policy makers are expected to represent. But what exactly is the public? Is it the collection of all of us, with each person’s preferences given equal weight? Or is it a more narrowly drawn public, including some people’s preferences but not others? *Who* gets what they want in policy?

In one conception, the public consists of all citizens, all adults at least. Citizens are all, more or less, equally entitled to vote, and each person has but one vote. Perhaps then we should all have equal weight where policy making is concerned. This is an ideal, the stuff of civics textbooks; in reality, however, there is good reason to think that preferences are not equal, and that some people’s preferences are more important than others. In particular, we might expect politicians to pay special attention to the preferences of active voters. These are the people who matter on election day, after all—they are the ones who put (and keep) politicians in office.

The representation of voter rather than citizens would not matter much if voters were a random sample. But we know that there are differences between the voting and non-voting public: voters tend to be better educated, have better jobs, and have higher incomes. Not surprisingly, voters tend to be more conservative than their non-voting counterparts. If politicians are more attentive to this group, and follow the median *voter*, then policy will be more conservative than the median *citizen* would like. This is of obvious importance. We still know relatively little empirically, however, though scholarly interest is on the rise, particularly in the US. Griffin and Newman (2005) reveal that politicians pay more attention to the opinions of voters than those of non-voters. Bartels’ (2005) and Gilens’ (2005) recent research suggests that US politicians are most attuned to the opinions of high-income voters. There may be related socio-demographic manifestations, across race for example.

Political equality also may have explicitly partisan expressions. It may be, for instance, that politicians are more responsive to in-partisans, as Hill and Hurley (2003) have argued. This and the other work on inequality in representation is important. It only scratches the surface, however. We need to know more about the breadth and depth of the inequality, both at particular points in time and over time. To the extent that there is inequality, are politicians more responsive to the opinions of the better-educated, higher-income, more right-wing voting population? Much work remains to be done.

## 6 THE IMPORTANCE OF PUBLIC RESPONSIVENESS

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We have thus far concentrated on policy representation—on the effect of opinion on policy. But policy representation ultimately requires that the public notices and responds to what policy makers do. Without such responsiveness, policy makers would have little incentive to represent what the public wants in policy—there would be no real benefit for doing so, and there would be no real cost for not doing so. Moreover, expressed preferences would be of little use even to those politicians motivated to represent the public for other reasons.

Despite ongoing concerns about the ignorance and irrationality of the average citizen (Converse 1964), a growing body of recent work shows that the average citizen may be more informed than initially thought. This is not to say that the average citizen knows very much about politics; but there is accumulating evidence that individuals may be capable of basic, rational political judgments. Moreover, even in the face of individual ignorance, aggregate preferences often react sensibly to real-world trends (Page and Shapiro 1983, 1992). Wlezien (1995) reveals a public that reacts to both real-world affairs and policy itself, much like a thermostat. That is, the public adjusts its preferences for “more” or “less” policy in response to policy change, favoring less (more) policy in the wake of policy increases (decreases), *ceteris paribus*. This conceptualization fits nicely with the functionalist models proposed by Easton (1965) and Deutsch (1966), where policy outputs feed back on public inputs into the policy-making process.

Empirical analysis shows that public responsiveness, like policy representation, varies across policy domains and political institutions (Wlezien 1995; Soroka and Wlezien 2004, 2005). That representation is likely to be greater in salient domains is largely the product of representatives reacting in domains in which publics themselves are monitoring and reacting to policy change, for instance. Salient domains are characterized by a higher degree of both representation and responsiveness; more precisely, public responsiveness and policy representation co-vary. This is not equally true across contexts, however. Fundamental to public responsiveness is the acquisition of accurate information about what policy makers are doing, and so responsiveness will be lower when the acquisition of information is more difficult. So for instance, federalism, by increasing the number of different governments making policy, and thus making less clear what “government” is doing (see e.g. Downs 1999) may decrease responsiveness and representation.<sup>10</sup> The horizontal division of powers may also be important, though here our expectations are less clear. Regardless, where information is easier to acquire, public responsiveness—and by implication policy representation—should be greater.

Ultimately, we expect variance across domains and institutions in both policy representation and public responsiveness. Yet the existence of each connection between

<sup>10</sup> It evidently does not preclude responsiveness. Consider work on the US (Wlezien 1995) and Canada and the UK (Soroka and Wlezien 2004, 2005) and research on opinion about the European Union (Franklin and Wlezien 1997; Dalton and Eichenberg 1998; Gabel 1998).

opinion and policy—indeed, the existence of *both* connections—is critical to the functioning of representative democracy. Insofar as research seeks to understand what public preferences are, and how these are formed, then, it can be viewed as an examination of the potential for, or success of, representative democratic institutions. The work makes a contribution to our understanding of one of the most significant and enduring questions in the study of politics: does democracy work? In some cases, it appears as though it may work better than many of us anticipated.

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