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SYMPOSIUM ON DEMOCRATIC REPRESENTATION AND POLICY RESPONSIVENESS

REVIEW

Policy responsiveness: compared to what?

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Abstract

In "On Policy Responsiveness," Wlezien provides a realist account of policy responsiveness. While recognizing it as a democratic good, he identifies the many obstacles that must be overcome and conditions that must be met to achieve it. Wlezien suggests that "it may be surprising that we observe any representation at all," considering the many conditions that must be met to achieve it. This raises an important and challenging question, which we expand upon here: what is an appropriate level of responsiveness to expect from democratic systems and what level of observed policy congruence might we deem surprising and/or sufficient? The question of an appropriate counterfactual, apart from being crucial to guide research and hypothesis testing, also creates this fruitful opportunity for collaboration and discussion between a normative political theorist (Scudder) and an empirical political scientist (Grillos). Here, we identify two sources of counterfactual thinking, one normative and one empirical, to provide a benchmark against which we can judge observed levels of policy responsiveness.

Keywords: Comparative politics; democratic theory; policy responsiveness; representation

In "On Policy Responsiveness," Wlezien provides a realist account of policy responsiveness. While recognizing it as a democratic good, they identify the many obstacles that must be overcome and conditions that must be met to achieve it. He responds to important critiques (Achen and Bartels 2016) by showing that people *do* have policy preferences to which legislation can be responsive. He goes on to articulate the "many conditions for demand and supply" that explain why we still might not achieve high levels of policy responsiveness. By demand, Wlezien refers to the determinants of citizens' policy preferences, including them having sufficient information about status quo policies and having access to and willingness to use accountability mechanisms. By supply, he means policymakers' knowledge of citizen preferences as well as the willingness and ability to respond to those preferences.

Wlezien suggests that "it may be surprising that we observe any representation at all," considering the many conditions that must be met to achieve it. This raises an

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important and challenging question, which we expand upon here: what is an appropriate level of responsiveness to expect from democratic systems and what level of observed policy congruence might we deem surprising and/or sufficient? To know how we ought to judge the degree of observed responsiveness in the US context, we need to be able to answer the question: compared to what? What is a reasonable counterfactual comparison?

The answer to this question is not straightforward. The reference point cannot be zero policy responsiveness, nor can it be full congruence. As Wlezien points out, for example, some degree of policy congruence can be expected due simply to a pre-existing alignment of preferences between citizens and representatives. At the same time, perfect representation may be neither possible nor democratically desirable (as in the case of tyranny of the majority).

The question of an appropriate counterfactual, apart from being crucial to guide research and hypothesis testing, also creates this fruitful opportunity for collaboration and discussion between a normative political theorist (Scudder) and an empirical political scientist (Grillos). Here, we identify two sources of counterfactual thinking, one normative and one empirical, to provide a benchmark against which we can judge observed levels of policy responsiveness. First, we discuss what an ideal level of policy responsiveness might be. Second, we consider real world comparative cases of policy congruence and incongruence. Together, these benchmarks can guide the interpretation of future empirical observations of policy congruence, building on Wlezien's important contribution.

Establishing the normative ideal

As Andrew Sabl explains, normative political theorists have never "regarded responsiveness as the central measure of democratic quality" (Sabl 2015, p. 346). As we discuss more below, empirically-observable measures of simple responsiveness are particularly limited in political contexts marked by disagreement. Still, empirical and normative scholars alike would agree with the broader claim that a democratic government is one where its citizens can see themselves as both the authors and addressees of the law (Habermas 1996). A political system is democratically deficient if policy is not at all responsive to the people's preferences.

But in a complex pluralistic society like the United States, citizens will not always agree. Even the most fair and inclusive decision-making procedures will produce winners and losers. This makes the question of determining policy responsiveness a tricky one. A policy might be responsive, but to whom? Given the fact of pluralism, some normative political theorists have argued that ensuring democratic outcomes requires focusing on fair procedures rather than responsive outcomes (Habermas 1996; Rawls 1971). According to "procedural democrats," democratically deficient decisions are those that were made through exclusionary or otherwise unfair communicative procedures (Habermas 1994). In a world where people have conflicting interests and even values, all we can ask for is a fair opportunity to influence outcomes. Procedural theories of democracy thus point away from policy responsiveness as the main indicator of democratic quality.

Furthermore, fair and inclusive decision-making procedures not only have legitimating value insofar as they recognize citizens as equals who are worthy of

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leading self-directed public lives, they can also *improve* the epistemic quality of decisions (Grillos 2022; Landemore 2012). In other words, democratic decision-making procedures help organize and reveal citizens' policy preferences, while simultaneously informing and improving those preferences. Through these processes, citizens' policy preferences may change in ways that reflect greater acknowledgement and acceptance of others' needs or viewpoints.

From a normative perspective, therefore, it's not necessarily a problem for democratic self-determination if citizens' preferences change or even if they are responsive to policy. Dynamic preferences that change in response to new information is precisely the point of inclusive communicative decision-making procedures. As Wlezien explains, however, observed changes in preferences are often interpreted as endogenous confounders to the measure of "genuine responsiveness". Some normative accounts of legitimacy, however, show how changes in citizens' preferences could also be evidence of the proper functioning of a democratic system. For example, elected officials may potentially channel public opinion on policy into more democratic directions.

But even if we endorse a procedural account of democracy, this still assumes certain substantively democratic commitments. For example, a majoritarian or even near unanimous opinion in favor of stripping a minority of their political rights would violate democracy. According to Habermas's proceduralist account of democracy, a fair democratic procedure should prevent "social power from being converted *directly* into administrative power, that is, without first passing through the sluices of communicative power formation" (Habermas 1996, p. 170). We draw attention to the word "directly." According to deliberative democrats, communicative procedures are essential to making laws legitimate. Communicative procedures help process *inputs* into democratically legitimate *outputs*. Habermas's discussion of "sluices," suggest a kind of filtering mechanism that would tell against absolute policy congruence as an ideal.[1]

When it comes to assessing the responsiveness of the policy process, therefore, one option is to consider "uptake" alongside responsiveness (Scudder 2020). The ideal of uptake or fair consideration through listening helps us differentiate between legitimate grievances on the part of people who have been ignored and unfairly dismissed on the one hand, and bogus claims of exclusion from people who simply did not get their way, so to speak (Scudder 2020). Again, there might be good reasons for representatives *not* to adopt certain policy preferences, if they say, violate constitutional protections of other citizens or if public opinion is based on misinformation.

Confirming the significance of uptake, experimental evidence suggests that Americans respond as favorably to being heard by their elected officials as they do to policy responsiveness (Busby et al. 2025). Not only can citizens differentiate uptake

[1]Hélène Landemore has criticized Habermas's sluice metaphor precisely for suggesting an ideal of representation that is intentionally "mechanical, rigid, slow, and explicitly although in some ways hardly noticeably, hierarchical" (2020). Offering a middle ground between representative democracy and direct democracy, Landemore proposes an "open democracy," which relies much less on representation than on the direct input of everyday citizens.

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from influence, but when judging political elites, citizens seem to care as much about being heard as they do about policy responsiveness (influence). Furthermore, people rate more inclusive decisions more favorably, even when the result is their less preferred outcome (Grillos et al. 2021).

Any assessment of policy responsiveness should be attentive to the policy-making procedures as well as the communicative procedures that precede them. Still, outcomes themselves are relevant to our assessment of democratic legitimacy. Even the most ardent proceduralist cares about outcomes insofar as they can shed light on whether the procedures themselves were fair. If outcomes are consistently at odds with public opinion, or the opinion of a particular minority group, this could, at the very least, raise a red flag as to the democratic legitimacy of that process (Chambers 2018).

Focusing on what meaningfully democratic decision-making procedures look like, deliberative theory does not provide a specific threshold for determining whether a democratically acceptable level of responsiveness has been reached. For this, it is helpful to look to a comparative perspective for insight.

Considering comparative cases

While we acknowledge that congruence and statistical responsiveness are imperfect measures and that perfect representation is neither possible nor always desirable, the association between public opinion and policy outcomes remains a practical starting point for empirical observation and comparison. While there is no clear normative ideal for empirical policy responsiveness, we still learn much by comparing congruence levels across contexts. For example, Wlezien emphasizes dynamic approaches which compare preferences and policy outcomes across different time periods. It is also helpful to compare levels of congruence across nations, issue areas, and subgroups within society, in addition to over time.

Multi-country studies find that in Latin America, policy incongruence is correlated with citizen perceptions of fraud (Luna and Zechmeister 2005), and that in Europe, there is greater congruence between public opinion and parliament's ideological positions in contexts with high voter turnout (Hooghe et al. 2019). Policy incongruence is larger for certain issue areas, with, for example, the poor being relatively underrepresented on issues of redistribution (Rosset and Stecker 2019). For issue areas where men and women disagree, men's views are more likely to be congruent with the policies that decision makers adopt (Reher 2018).

These somewhat intuitive findings should at least give us some confidence that *relatively* low congruence can be taken as an indication of undemocratic procedures. Thus, to understand what type of reaction the level of policy congruence observed in the US context warrants, an important starting place is to ask where it ranks relative to both other periods in history and to other democracies worldwide. A measure of overall policy congruence in isolation cannot really tell us whether there is cause for alarm or for pleasant surprise. Given the complexity of our normative understanding of responsiveness, these empirical measures are most valuable when used in a comparative way. There is still a need for more empirical work that directly compares policy congruence in the United States with other contexts, as well as

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work that compares policy congruence across policy areas, geographic regions, and levels of government within the United States.

Existing comparative studies of congruence also support normative appeals to emphasize procedures. That congruence is higher for more powerful groups is suggestive of undemocratic processes. As Wlezien points out, it's unclear "how much guidance the public can and does provide" to policymakers and this leaves the process "susceptible to less representative forces, including special interests." A major supply-side condition is that policymakers have accurate information about citizen preferences (Wlezien), yet legislative staff systematically misperceives constituent opinion, especially when business interest groups regularly provide them with information (Hertel-Fernandez et al. 2019).

More broadly, Wlezien provides detailed discussion of the "series of links that are required in the chain of representation from public interests to policy outputs to actual outcomes (Fung 2006)." Any break in this chain reflects a disconnect between the public and its representatives, sometimes referred to as "democratic deficits." It logically follows that the degree to which a democracy has directly attenuated those limitations can be considered another useful indicator of responsiveness. In other words, we recommend using each step in that chain to identify intermediate variables that can build a more complete picture of the degree of genuine responsiveness that is occurring, rather than relying solely on congruence between preferences and outcomes.

The literature on democratic innovations points to many efforts worldwide to adopt procedures that should help improve the conditions for both the supply and demand of policy responsiveness. For example, a major input side constraint cited by Wlezien is the formation of coherent preferences among the public in the first place, and a major output side constraint is that policymakers do not know what constituent preferences are even if they have every intention of representing them. Interventions like deliberative polling (Fishkin 2003; List et al. 2013) have the potential to directly target both of these key obstacles to responsiveness simultaneously. They have the potential to allow citizens to form more well-informed and considered preferences and can provide a clear indicator of those preferences to policy-makers (Alnemr et al. 2024; Neblo et al. 2018).

Deliberative polling has been attempted in various contexts worldwide including Brazil, Denmark, Uganda, China, and the United States. It is just one of many efforts to directly target democratic deficits on both the demand side (preference formation) and supply side (transmission of preferences). Others include participatory budgeting (Cabannes 2004; Grillos 2017; Wampler et al. 2021), citizen juries (Smith and Wales 2000), and other deliberative mini-publics (Niemeyer 2011; Suiter et al. 2021), with many others documented through projects like Participedia[2] and LATINNO[3]. There is still limited comparative work that looks at the differing degree of uptake in response to such efforts across different national contexts. Observing different procedures and their related outcomes, empirical scholars can better understand both the conditions for citizens' demand for policies and elected

[2]https://participedia.net/.
[3]https://www.latinno.net/en/.

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officials' willingness to supply them and whether either varies in response to improved procedural conditions.

Conclusions

We have established that there is no clear normatively ideal level of policy congruence. Greater than nothing is not necessarily cause for surprise or celebration. At the same time, perfect responsiveness is not an appropriate goal of democratic procedures. There is no unified "general will," to which policy can be perfectly responsive. People disagree, and it's not always democratically preferable for the majority preference to win out. We must also look at procedures and emphasize the concepts of "uptake" and exchange as evidence of a well-functioning democracy.

We have also established that no single empirical measure can capture democratic representation. Congruence is an incomplete measure of responsiveness, even when examined temporally. Some degree of endogeneity between policy and preferences is in fact healthy for democracy. Measures of congruence remain relevant for empirical work but should be interpreted in context and never in absolute terms. The surge in new democratic institutions around the world in recent years offers a particular opportunity for targeted comparisons, which could yield concrete policy recommendations for improving responsiveness through better institutional design.

These observations point to two important areas for collaboration between theorists and empiricists which could improve our understanding of policy responsiveness as a democratic good and build upon Wlezien's excellent and thorough discussion of the supply and demand conditions necessary to achieve it.

First, an explicitly comparative empirical focus highlights that different conditions may call for different forms of representation and, in turn, different levels of observed congruence. More congruence may be demanded, for example, when preferences are more informed, when the decision is more proximate, or when the policy relies on compliance or investment on the part of citizens. Theorists can help empiricists define those scope conditions, thus helping them to specify whether a given relative level of congruence in a particular context is to be celebrated or criticized.

Second, the normative theoretical perspective points to the importance of uptake through listening as an alternative or a complement to responsiveness. Listening, however, is currently understudied in empirical work (Scudder and Neblo 2025). Empirical scholars can help identify measurable moments of uptake by zooming in on specific steps in the causal chain between policy demand and supply. These intermediate steps serve both as possible targets for intervention and also as candidates for variables reflecting the presence or absence of particular democratic deficits. These intermediate outcomes, e.g. preference formation, preference signaling, and uptake, can then be compared between select institutions that vary on key dimensions. Empiricists can thus help theorists refine empirical measures of uptake and other normative concepts that have been so far understudied.

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