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SYMPOSIUM ON DEMOCRATIC REPRESENTATION AND POLICY RESPONSIVENESS

REVIEW

Responsive to whom? The inequality problem in studies of policy responsiveness

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Abstract

Wlezien offers a compelling framework of policy "inputs" and "outputs" to better understand policy responsiveness. Building on this framework, I argue that inequality in policy influence is central to understanding policy responsiveness and must be treated as a first-order concern: disparities in political power complicate both sides of the "inputs" and "outputs" equation. Disadvantaged groups face barriers in signaling preferences and shaping policy agendas, while policymakers respond unequally across groups. These inequalities challenge how we measure responsiveness and question whether aggregate measures capture democratic quality when preferences are polarized along entrenched social cleavages. Institutional reforms designed to improve representation – from public comment periods to the Voting Rights Act – may serve their stated goals while simultaneously producing unintended consequences for equitable responsiveness. I contend that scholars must ask not just whether policy responds to public opinion, but whose opinion it follows. Responsiveness may be necessary but insufficient for democratic legitimacy if one does not reckon with unequal political power.

Christopher Wlezien offers a thought-provoking essay that helps clarify our expectations of policy responsiveness in a complex world – one that demands much of voters (the "inputs"), elected officials and other policymakers (the "outputs"), and the institutions that connect them. He ultimately offers a glass-half-full conclusion: given these complexities and demands, the amount of policy responsiveness we observe should not be seen as a failure of our systems of representation, but rather as a testament to how remarkably well they are functioning across many Western democracies.

Wlezien's framework of inputs and outputs provides a useful starting point, but a more complete understanding of policy responsiveness can be achieved if we consider the role of unequal political power and influence, and how it shapes both sides of the equation. A wealth of research on policy responsiveness has shown that

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policy is often more responsive to some groups than others – typically the affluent and well-organized – raising concerns that go beyond aggregate measures of responsiveness (for example, *see* Bartels 2008; Elsässer et al. 2023; Gilens 2010; Griffin and Newman 2008; Kopkin and Roberts 2022; Markarian et al. 2025). Wlezien (2026) addresses this topic in Appendix B and in his discussion of outputs – particularly when he focuses attention on the role of interest groups – but I believe the topic warrants more central attention, not as an aside, but as a direct extension of his argument about the conditions for effective demand and supply.

Here, I will argue that inequality in policy influence is not a secondary issue, but rather central to both the empirical study and normative evaluation of policy responsiveness and representation. Political power, which is unequally distributed, at its core is about being able to shape the rules of the game (i.e., policy). Disparities in political power complicate how we understand policy "inputs" and "outputs," challenge assumptions of median voter models central to much of the research in this space, and call into question the democratic value of aggregate measures. I also consider whether institutional reforms designed to improve responsiveness – like public comment periods – or address representation gaps – like the Voting Rights Act – may have produced unintended consequences for equitable policy responsiveness, showcasing potential pitfalls when designing solutions to existent problems. While my examples draw primarily from American politics, I believe the theoretical challenges and implications are broadly relevant and of deep and sustained interest in the study of politics and policy (for example, *see* Bauer 1968; Dahl 1961; Schattschneider 1960).

Claims that policy is unresponsive to public opinion rarely suggest that policy outcomes are random or arbitrary. While some scholars emphasize policy stagnation (Baumgartner and Jones 2015; Jones and Baumgartner 2005), voter inattention (Achen and Bartels 2016; Lupia and McCubbins 1998), or other systemic limitations, some of the most persuasive accounts of non-responsive policy highlight the role of unequal political influence. In these accounts, policy often appears incongruent with majority opinion, not because representation has failed entirely, but because it has been captured by the preferences of a powerful minority. Policy is almost always reflecting the interests of at least some subset of the population. With that in mind, the central question in the study of policy responsiveness quickly shifts from *whether policy is responsive* to *who is policy responsive to*?

Gilens (2010), Bartels (2008), and Hacker and Pierson (2010) offer some of the most compelling critiques of American democracy along these lines, showing that the preferences of the affluent carry far greater weight than those of the middle class or the poor. Similar patterns emerge in work focusing on gender that finds policy is more responsive to men's preferences than women's (Kopkin and Roberts 2022; Mathisen 2024), on race which finds legislators better represent the policy interests of White Americans than Americans of color (Butler 2014; Griffin et al. 2019; Griffin and Newman 2008), and studies of class inequalities in policy responsiveness outside of the United States which find the affluent exert more influence on policy than the middle class (Elsässer et al. 2023; Peters and Ensink 2015). Taken together, this growing body of research suggests that policy is systematically more responsive to historically advantaged and well-resourced groups than to their less advantaged counterparts.

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Unequal influence in "inputs" and "outputs"

These findings have important implications for both sides of Wlezien's "inputs" and "outputs" framework. The ability to signal, and to a lesser degree form, preferences (i.e., "inputs" or "demand") is not equally distributed, nor are those tasked with implementing policy equally attentive to and representative of all groups and people (i.e. "outputs" or "supply"). Disadvantaged groups face a range of barriers to having their preferences translated into policy – barriers that are often difficult to measure with available tools. Inequalities in political participation across a range of behaviors are well-documented: White and affluent Americans vote, donate, and engage in politics at higher rates than people of color and lower-income citizens (too many to reference all here, but *see* Grumbach and Sahn 2020; Leighley and Nagler 2014; Verba et al. 1995). And less participation almost certainly means less influence. However, the roots of disparities in policy responsiveness go beyond participation gaps alone.

Consider *epistemic* factors – differences in who shapes the frames and categories through which public problems are understood. Wlezien notes that gaps in political knowledge may be smaller than once assumed (in addition to those he cites, I would like to highlight Abrajano 2015; Mondak and Anderson 2004), yet the political agenda is still set unequally. Legislators, who are unrepresentative of the broader public (Butler 2014), along with other political actors, shape which issues are discussed in public debates, the menu of policy options to address them, and the narratives that frame them. As Pottle (2025) argues, such processes "exacerbate the epistemic marginalization of disadvantaged citizens by denying them equal influence on the frames and understandings circulated in mainstream debate. This dynamic is best understood as a democratically perverse form of epistemic injustice distinct from but mutually reinforcing with citizens' unequal influence on political outcomes."

Even survey instruments – what questions are asked, how they are worded, and what response options are offered – tend to reflect these elite-dominated agendas that privilege the perspectives of advantaged groups. Classic examples of framing effects abound, like those finding different levels of public support for "aid for the poor" versus "welfare." Similarly, the American National Election Survey, a highly cited public opinion dataset, has long assessed support for affirmative action policies using a preferential treatment framing, asking "are you for or against preferential hiring and promotion of blacks?" rather than an equal opportunity framing, biasing support downwards (Kinder and Sanders 1990). But the issue may go far beyond this. The Cooperative Election Study asks voters whether they support or oppose five to ten "salient" policy issues Congress is considering or recently considered – questions often used in studies of policy responsiveness (including my own). Who decides what policy issues to ask about ultimately shapes the scope of conflict and our understanding of it. As Schattschneider (1960) observed, the scope of conflict – and thus what becomes a "public" issue – is itself structured by political power: dominant groups can privatize their own problems while publicizing those of the less powerful, or viceversa, depending on what favors them most. Therefore, our very measures of "inputs" may be biased towards the preferences of the politically powerful.

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Similar patterns emerge when we examine unequal influence on the policy "supply" side. Butler (2014) does an excellent job exploring disparities in "outputs," which I recommend for deeper insights into that side of the equation. Here, though, I invite readers to reconsider explanations for unequal responsiveness that are framed as "inputs" but may, in practice, be about "outputs." Broockman and Skovron (2018), for example, find that legislators perceive their constituents as more conservative than they actually are, likely leading to more conservative policy than constituents want. They offer an "input-side" story, contending that these patterns are driven by better organizing capacity among conservatives in public spheres – an explanation for responsiveness gaps that seems agnostic to inequality in political power across identity groups (besides partisanship) and legislators' own biases.[1] But these biased perceptions may not just be a reflection of who is better organized, but of who is positively constructed in mainstream American narratives – White, affluent, male, older, and Evangelical voters who tend to be more conservative than average voters. Might it simply be the case that legislators listen more to the demands of voters they view as deserving of representation rather than the choir of the whole? In sum, ascriptive identities shape political influence through their effects on both policy inputs (i.e., organizational capacity and participation) and policy outputs (i.e., the willingness of those in positions of power to listen).

Questioning measurements and normative implications

As scholars, we are often interested in policy responsiveness because it offers a useful yardstick through which to judge the functioning of democracy. Generally speaking, we assume that more responsiveness is better. Of course, as Wlezien argues, how we measure responsiveness is complicated and particularly difficult. Oftentimes, measurements take the form of (1) whether a policy that a majority of Americans support is enacted (what I have typically seen referred to as "responsiveness") or (2) whether the laws on the books reflect the majority's view (what I have typically seen described as "congruence"). But is this the right way to think about better or worse responsiveness – and, by extension, a better or worse functioning democracy? And how does inequality in political influence factor into our normative interpretation of results from aggregate analysis?

A deeper understanding of disparities in political power can shape how we interpret empirical results and evaluate the normative meaning of even the most optimistic findings on responsiveness. Many studies on policy responsiveness challenge a core conclusion of the median voter model (Downs 1957), which posit that policy should track the preferences of the median citizen. Findings by other scholars, such as Griffin and Newman (2008), go further, probing one to question whether responsiveness to the median voter's preferences is normatively desirable in the first place when preferences between majoritarian and minoritarian groups are highly polarized and those cleavages are deeply entrenched, as is the case with race in many parts of the United States. This form of majoritarian democracy, which appears responsive on aggregate, can create a permanent political underclass of

[1]Broockman and Skovron (2018) acknowledge disparities across groups as an alternative mechanism in the discussion of their findings.

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minority voters whose preferred policies are never enacted. When focusing on aggregate responsiveness, what appears to be legislators responding to majoritarian positions as expected may, under the surface, entrench social hierarchies and help maintain an uneven playing field.

A few hypotheticals help illustrate these challenges. First, picture a society that has slightly more men than women – 51 percent men, 49 percent women – with perfectly polarized preferences across gendered lines where all men hold identical views that directly oppose those of all women. In a system of perfectly majoritarian responsiveness, men would always get their preferred policies and women would never get theirs. Would we call that a system of well-functioning democratic responsiveness? It does reflect what the median voter wants. Is that not what we should aim for? Alternatively, if policy outcomes aligned with men's preferences about half the time and women's preferences about half the time, would that mixed record of purely majoritarian responsiveness reflect *less* responsiveness – or a more equitable form of it? If we consider the latter more normatively appealing, then the aggregate measures scholars often use to capture "policy responsiveness" may be poorly equipped to evaluate the quality of representation in contexts where preferences are polarized across nearly equally sized groups.

In a second example, adapted from Gilens (2010), consider a society where the top 10 percent ("the affluent") agree with the bottom 90 percent ("average citizens") on eight of ten issues. The affluent always get the policies that they want, even when they disagree with the average citizen. If we simply looked at the level of policy responsiveness to the median citizen, we would see that policy is responsive to majority preferences 80 percent of the time. However, that is only because the majority happens to agree with the affluent on those issues. This is what scholars like Enns (2015) call *coincidental representation*. Now imagine instead that disagreement occurs on four of ten issues, and policy sides with each group half the time. Average citizens still "win" 80 percent of the time, but in this second scenario, they actually exert some independent influence. What if instead, the average citizen only "wins" on one of four contested issues? In this last scenario, policy aligns with what the average citizen wants only 70 percent of the time – less than in the first scenario – but causally, policy is actually more "responsive" to the preferences of average citizens in this final scenario. Paradoxically, an apparent decline in aggregate responsiveness or congruence could signal a healthier distribution of political power.

These disparities raise fundamental normative questions about democracy, equality, and rights. In societies marked by large opinion gaps between majority and minority groups, is consistent responsiveness to majority opinion always desirable? Or might it sometimes produce illiberal outcomes that undermine the very democratic principles it seeks to honor? Of course, these examples are stylized. In practice, policy often diverges from the majority view for many reasons, and as Gilens (2010) shows, policy sometimes reflects the preferences of neither the affluent, the middle class, nor the poor. Why that is the case remains something of a mystery. It might be status-quo bias, legislative inertia, or the concentrated mobilization of interest groups with far greater stakes in specific policies than the public at large – precisely the kind of "single-issue" dynamics Wlezien describes (p. XX). Yet such hypotheticals underscore how disparities in political influence

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complicate both the empirical measurement and the normative interpretation of aggregate policy responsiveness. They invite us to ask not only how much policy follows public opinion, but whose opinion it follows and under what institutional conditions.

Potential solutions and their limits

Further exacerbating these problems is that addressing inequalities in influence through institutional means has proven far from straightforward. Some of the very reforms intended to expand citizens' input in the policy process may end up distorting it in ways that favor the advantaged. For example, institutional solutions meant to improve policy representation within bureaucracies appear to have given undue influence to special interest groups. As Wlezien keenly points out, the processes of bureaucratic rulemaking tend to be dominated by highly mobilized interest groups, even though they were meant to improve policy responsiveness by allowing public input into the nitty-gritty parts of the policymaking process (Yackee 2006). Pluralist theories fall short: some of these organized groups represent public interests, but many – and perhaps the most influential – represent narrow special interests (Hacker and Pierson 2010; Olson 1965). As Schattschneider (1960) famously put it, "the flaw in the pluralist heaven is that the heavenly chorus sings with a strong upper-class accent."

Even landmark reforms designed to reduce representational inequality may have ambiguous effects on disparities in policy responsiveness. The Voting Rights Act of 1965, for instance, dramatically increased descriptive representation for Black Americans, and to a lesser extent for other racial minorities, through the creation of majority-minority districts (Cameron et al. 1996; Lublin 1999), which, in turn, is associated with better dyadic substantive representation for Black Americans (Garcia et al. 2025; Tate 2003). Yet improved dyadic responsiveness does not automatically aggregate into improved policy responsiveness. Indeed, research suggests that the creation of majority-minority districts may have made adjacent districts more conservative, potentially limiting the overall influence of minoritized groups on policy outcomes (Cameron et al. 1996; Lublin 1999; but see Shotts 2003). To be clear, the Voting Rights Act achieved its goals, and it may not ultimately harm minority representation. However, its effect on equitable policy responsiveness is unclear.

Influence gaps over ultimate policy outcomes may be particularly pronounced and difficult to solve when minoritized groups hold distinct preferences from the majority (Hajnal 2020), are spatially concentrated (which can improve descriptive and dyadic representation but worsen aggregate policy responsiveness), or become "captured" by a party in two-party systems (Frymer 2010). Still, there is some work that contends two-party systems provide meaningful avenues for influence when groups are loyal and deeply involved (Bawn et al. 2012; Dawson 1994; Maks-Solomon and Rigby 2020).

Of course, minority groups getting what they want at the same rates as majority groups is not how majoritarian democracy is typically expected to function. But the level of inequality in political influence is worthy of consideration. The United States

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is not truly a majoritarian democracy in the nature of Westminster parliamentary systems. This is largely by design, with the founders aiming to construct a system meant to curb the tyranny of the majority (Madison 1787). And as Gilens (2010), Bartels (2008), Hacker and Pierson (2010), and many others show, minority groups often prevail over majority preferences when they are well-resourced and well-connected. This gets at one of the central normative paradoxes and complexities: we want policy to respond to average citizens, but sometimes it does not because organized special interests distort the process, and sometimes it does but it may come at the cost of disadvantaged minority groups' interests, reinforcing systemic inequities. This is not an easy problem to solve, and I do not purport to have the answer. Truly solving disparities in policy responsiveness means significantly reorienting both input and output-side biases in political power, which likely involves more than just tweaks to institutional design, but major cultural change and a systemic restructuring of political economy. Yet, there are some hopeful signs. My recent co-authored work suggests disparities in policy responsiveness across racial groups are relatively muted on aggregate in the United States in recent decades. However, they are pronounced in favor of White Americans when Republicans control government and in favor of Black Americans, who are strong partisan Democrats, when Democrats control government (Markarian et al. 2025). This work suggests that minoritized communities may be able to achieve representational parity (on aggregate) through deep involvement in party politics if their preferred party is electorally successful.

Concluding thoughts

Wlezien's framework – highlighting the complexities of "inputs" provided by the public and "outputs" supplied by policymakers – tempers our expectations of policy responsiveness and offers valuable insights. Given these complexities, it might be surprising that we observe as much responsiveness as we do. My argument, which centers on political inequality, builds on this debate by contending that disparities in political power distort both sides of the responsiveness equation – and our ability to conceptualize and operationalize measurements accurately. On the input side, gaps in political resources, participation, and epistemic influence shape not only whose preferences are clearly signaled but also how policy agendas and potential solutions are defined and framed. On the output side, the ability and willingness of policymakers to respond to public preferences are not applied evenly across groups. Policymakers may be more attuned – and more accountable – to affluent, White, and well-organized constituents than to marginalized ones, even when the latter are more numerous. In this sense, the very conditions Wlezien identifies as necessary for effective policy representation are themselves shaped by broader inequalities. And while institutional reforms – such as participatory rulemaking or redistricting mandates – are often pursued as correctives, they too involve tradeoffs. Acknowledging these constraints does not undermine the broader evidence of responsiveness, but it does require that we step back and ask: *responsive to whom?*

In the end, responsiveness may be a necessary condition for democratic legitimacy, but not a sufficient one. We must ask: to whom is government responsive,

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and how do we measure that in a world of persistent inequality? Without reckoning with the unequal distribution of political power, our models of representation risk validating systems that systematically exclude the very people democracy purports to serve. Scholars of policy responsiveness should be aware of these issues, transparent with their measurements and assumptions, and cautious when deriving normative conclusions from their findings of pooled data, while policymakers should consider how democratic reforms shape equitable influence over policy, not just influence over specific representatives.

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