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SYMPOSIUM ON DEMOCRATIC REPRESENTATION AND POLICY RESPONSIVENESS

FIELD ESSAY

On policy responsiveness: conditions for effective demand and supply

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Abstract

A massive amount of research examines the representation of public opinion by policymakers, increasingly on actual policy actions. The work often provides evidence of a positive association between expressed public preferences and policy, but only some of the time and only to some degree, and there is even less evidence of responsiveness. This essay delves into the conditions for responsiveness, focusing on public demand for policy and policy supply, building on what research on the subjects reveals. The examination makes clear that policy responsiveness requires a great deal of both the represented and the representatives (and scholars too) and that these conditions are not easily met, though sometimes are. The emergent structure seemingly is much as empirical democratic theory would predict, and helps account for patterns of policy "responsiveness" we observe. The concluding section contemplates future research.

Keywords: congruence; elections; representation; representative democracy; public preferences; political institutions

Does public policy reflect the wishes of the public? To what degree? Under what conditions? These are important questions for political science and more broadly, even for those who debate the value of such representation (see, e.g., Mansbridge 2003; Sabl 2015), some of whom advance alternative yardsticks (Saward 2019; Disch 2021; see also Pitkin 1967), including moving "beyond responsive representation" itself (Bagg 2024; also see Shapiro 2016; Rehfeld 2018). Not surprisingly, given its clear and widespread scholarly (and political) importance, there now is a massive amount of research on the representation of public opinion in policymaking.

Most of the existing work focuses on *positions*. A common approach is to compare the policy opinions of people in districts and those of their representatives, or else the latter's roll call votes. This was first employed in research on *dyadic representation* that began with Miller and Stokes's (1963) examination of members

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of Congress, and continues today, both in the US and abroad. Here, scholars focus on the association between aggregate district opinion and the actions of their representatives, and there is evidence of a connection that varies across issues.[1] Another common approach compares the positions of the broader public with those of institutional actors, e.g., political parties and governments. Beginning with Weissberg's (1978) analysis of Congress, this traditionally is referred to as *collective representation*, research on which has exploded.[2] Golder and Stramski (2010) provide a nice review and assessment of different approaches in this tradition, focusing on legislatures.[3] This research also relates to that on surrogate representation (Mansbridge 2003).

A newer, strain of research examines collective representation of *priorities*. Here, scholars assess the correspondence between what the public considers to be important, typically "problems," and the attention government actors, e.g., legislatures, pay to different policy areas (Hobolt and Klemmensen 2005; Jones et al. 2009; Bevan and Jennings 2014; Traber et al. 2022). This is a growth industry and for good reason given that agenda-setting matters for policymaking, i.e., getting on the agenda is a necessary condition for policy representation.

The research demonstrates a lot of positive associations between the public and politicians' positions and priorities.[4] It is important to be sure but offers only limited information about *policy* representation, since positions, priorities, and policies are different things. Positions may correlate with policy, but they are not one in the same, and while agenda representation may be necessary for policymaking, it is not sufficient; indeed, it may be that we observe representation of public priorities *and* misrepresentation of public preferences for policies in the government outputs that result.

There is an increasing amount of work on policy, however. Virtually all of this research examines correlations between opinion and policy *decisions*, e.g., usually laws. There is evidence from research across countries (e.g., Brooks and Manza 2007; Wlezien and Soroka 2012), sub-nationally across units such as the U.S. states and also cities and school districts (e.g., Erikson et al. 1993; Tausanovitch and Warshaw 2014; Lax and Phillips 2012; Berkman and Plutzer 2005), and within national and subnational units over time (e.g., Eichenberg and Stoll 2003; Soroka and Wlezien 2010; Caughey and Warshaw 2022; McGann et al. 2023).[5] Here, scholars again have found positive associations, though ones that vary with differences in issues and institutions.

Some may worry that policymakers do not really represent preferences in policy, and that those preferences simply reflect what governments do (Achen

[1]This is a huge literature. For a classic review, see Ansolabehere and Jones (2011). For more recent installments, see Broockman (2016) and Broockman and Skovron (2018). Although there is a lot of great work in this space, Butler and Nickerson's (2011) study deserves special mention because it detects a causal connection using a field experiment.

[2]This is in part because it applies to all representative democracies regardless of the electoral system, and studies outside of the US have been on the rise (Dalton et al. 2011; Rohrschneider and Thomassen 2020).

[3]For a review of research on political parties, see Adams and Ezrow (2009); also see Bardi et al. (2015). For an approach that assesses connections between the public, parties, and governments, see Budge et al. (2012).

[4]For more detailed reviews, see Shapiro (2011) and Wlezien and Soroka (2021).

[5]For broad reviews of this large and growing literature, see Burstein (2003; 2010) and Wlezien (2017a); also see footnote 4.

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and Bartels 2016). Policymakers (and policies) are not randomly assigned, of course, and we know that people in different states and countries, like different districts, are not the same, so there is reason to suppose that the former to some extent reflect the latter.[6] That said, findings of dynamic effects are especially noteworthy – indeed, more causally compelling – as changes in policy temporally follow preferences. Although policymakers may induce opinion change in order to justify policy actions, there is little evidence that future changes in policy predict current changes in preferences, an important finding that points to other, seemingly exogenous causes (see Soroka and Wlezien 2010). There also is growing evidence of "thermostatic" public response, where policy feeds back *negatively* on preferences for more policy, in direct contrast with what we would expect with opinion leadership, namely, positive feedback (e.g., Wlezien 1995; Erikson et al. 2002; Kustov 2025). The patterns also are strikingly similar across subgroups, including income, education, and party identification (Soroka and Wlezien 2010; 2022), which is as we might expect given "parallel publics" (Page and Shapiro 1992).[7] Policy representation is a real thing; indeed, policymakers appear to be *responsive*.

While this conclusion may come as little surprise to some readers, it does directly challenge recent essays on representative democracy, perhaps most notably Achen and Bartels (2016). Those scholars highlight the limitations of the public to monitor elected officials and hold them accountable, providing little information or incentive to represent in policy once in office. Other earlier research sets what seems a higher bar, spelling out the series of links that are required in the chain of representation from public interests to policy outputs to actual outcomes (Fung 2006). Given that breaks in any of the links introduce a democratic "deficit," and the seemingly fatal one(s) that Achen and Bartels proffer, it may be surprising that we observe any representation at all.

This essay traces theoretical conditions for effective policy representation, especially the responsiveness of policymakers to public preferences. The examination focuses on the "input" and "output" sides of the equation, those relating to public demand and policy supply. Of the many links in the representational chain, these are of special importance. Consider that public demand provides the information policymakers can represent as well as the incentive to respond; without these, there is no basis for doing so.[8] While necessary, the demand for responsive policy is not sufficient, as effective supply depends on policymakers having the information, interest, and capacity to respond to the public's preferences.

In what follows, I dig deeply into the conditions for effective demand and supply and the existing research addressing the degrees to which they are satisfied. The analysis makes clear that responsiveness requires a great deal of both the represented and the representatives (and scholars too), that these requirements are not

[6]For an early, thorough investigation relating to variation across states in the US, see Erikson et al. (1993); for a recent, more general analysis, see Pew Research (2024). That the differences also feature in districting behavior (see, e.g., Williamson 2024) is reinforcing.

[7]The finding of parallel partisan responsiveness to policy and other factors does contrast with what we would expect were they occupying separate echo chambers (Hobolt et al. 2024).

[8]People may not only demand policy representation, of course, which may underpin alternative forms of representation, some of which are the subject of the normative theoretical literature mentioned at the very outset of this essay; see Wolkenstein and Wratil (2021) for possible empirical expressions.

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easily met, and yet that they sometimes are, helping to explain the findings of previous research I briefly described above. It also highlights aspects about which we still know relatively little, much of which relates to policy supply, an unfortunate imbalance that may be understandable given the critical importance of public demand. The concluding section contemplates some of the leading avenues for future research on these underpinnings as well as the nature of representation and its political consequences. The portrait I offer in what follows is a very broad one, leaving some features incompletely covered or else placed in the online appendices.

On policy representation and responsiveness

It is useful at the outset to be absolutely clear about our object of interest – policy representation and responsiveness – and so I provide a basic formalization to accompany the text that follows. If there is representation, actual government outputs would be positively related to the public's preferences, as in the following function:

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

where P designates policy and P^* the public's preferred level of policy, both on the same scale. The focus is on *preferences* and not *interests* since the latter are difficult to conceive and actually measure, even as some scholars (e.g., Fung 2006) prioritize them and others attempt to impute them (also see the discussion in Soroka and Wlezien 2010).[9] Research typically concentrates on the median citizen, which is of special importance in democratic theory (Hotelling 1929; Black 1948; Downs 1957; Buchanan and Tollison 1984), though policymakers may be more responsive to others, as we address later in the essay.[10] We have representation if the government provides a lot of policy when the median voter wants a lot, i.e., when P^* is high. This would not mean that the person gets exactly what she wants, i.e., that there is a match between P^* and P, what we usually refer to as "congruence."

We can formally depict this congruence between policy and the average citizen, borrowing from Achen (1978):

$$P = a + BP* + \varepsilon, \tag{2}$$

where the stochastic term ε reflects the other influences on policy besides public preferences. The units of analysis here can be spatial, such as countries, states, and cities, or policy types, and they can be temporal as well, where representation is dynamic, usually designated with a subscripted t. For expository purposes, and to begin with, let us consider preferences and policy across different country units at a particular point in time. If there is congruence, the coefficient (B) for opinion would be a perfect "1.0" **and** the intercept (a) would equal "0"; if a is non-zero, policy is shifted to the left or right of P^*, depending on the intercept's sign.

[9]That said, elected officials also may attempt to represent (long-term) interests even where they involve policy choices that people do not prefer (see Stokes 2001).

[10]Assuming a one-dimensional setting with single-peaked preferences, the median voter theorem usually applies; but in multi-dimensional policy space, things are messier (Riker 1983).

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Now, if B is greater than 0 and less than 1, there still would be an association between P^* and P but policy would not exactly match opinion, and is what some scholars refer to as "responsiveness" (Lax and Phillips 2012; also see Achen 1978).[11] The gradient of policy would not be sufficiently steep, however. Of course, the relationship could be too steep, where $B>1$, e.g., where policy is too liberal in liberal countries and too conservative in conservative ones. There could be bias as well, indicated by the intercept in equation 2. But, these parameters only take us so far, as we also are interested in the fit of the equation, i.e., how well P and P^* line up, which increases as the influence of other factors (ε) decreases. With *perfect* representation, B would equal 1, a would equal 0, *and* the variance of ε would be 0. Of course, a match between policy and the preference of the median person may still leave many people dissatisfied with the result, particularly the greater the variance of public preferences, i.e., where some favor a large government role and others a very small one. This obviously can matter a lot for politics and the integrity of political systems (also see Golder and Stramski 2010).

If there is representation, it can come about in two well-known ways. The first is indirect, where representatives and the represented simply want the same things, as might result if we select people who reflect our views, i.e., where the two are aligned. But what happens when the representatives and the represented want different things? Do politicians do what "they" want? Or what "we" want? This leads to a consideration of the second, more direct way to representation – genuine *responsiveness*. Although scholars often use the word to designate any positive association between preferences and policy, many conceive of it as more active. Indeed, some see responsiveness as explicitly dynamic, where policymakers *follow* the public or subsets of the public when the preferences of the latter change, i.e., when there is an opinion "shock" and the government responds (Russo 2020; Soroka and Wlezien 2010; Caughey and Warshaw 2022). This responsiveness occurs in between elections.

Dynamic responsiveness

There is dynamic responsiveness when public preferences shift in a more liberal direction and policymakers provide more liberal policy, i.e., policy adaptation.[12] This still would not mean that the public literally is *directing* policymakers, as it may be that the public serves mostly to limit their discretion, what Key (1961) referred to as "dikes" constraining politicians' actions. Importantly, responsiveness does not require that legislators actually change their policy positions, just that the policy agenda changes and the legislative body goes along.[13] In practice, using observational data, we only behold "statistical" responsiveness. We just cannot be sure based even on a robust, systematic relationship between policy and opinion over time that politicians are literally responding to the public. It may be that both the

[11]For a depiction of differences, see Erikson et al. (1993, pages 92–94); for an empirical demonstration, see Matsusaka (2015).

[12]To formally represent this, we would add a subscripted "t" to the variables in equation 2.

[13]In practice, this might involve some legislators changing "positions," depending on how they are measured. See also Fowler's (2024) recent research on position change and selection in the U.S. Congress.

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public and policymakers respond *independently* to the same things, which we cannot easily test.[14] It alternatively may be that policymakers effectively lead the public instead of following. Disentangling the direction(s) of causality is not easy, as we cannot experimentally manipulate public opinion, and it is not clear that we should even if we could. Dynamic approaches do offer insight, however, as we can see how preferences and policy influence each other over time, as discussed.[15] Based on that research, there appears to be responsiveness, even as we cannot be sure that there is an exact match between preferences and the *magnitude* of policy change.

Let us contemplate what such responsiveness requires and the degree to which the conditions apply given previous research. What follows focuses on the represented and their representatives, which can be thought of as part of two broad "sides" of the connection – one relating to inputs, or policy demand, and the other to outputs, or policy supply.

The "input" side

It almost goes without saying that for there to be effective responsiveness, people must have preferences for policy, without which policymakers could not respond. As Achen (1975) observed, "Democratic theory loses its starting point." Preferences also must add up sensibly, as public choice theorists have underscored – see Riker's (1983) essay on the subject that raises certain complications, ones that are taken up in Mackie's (2003) re-assessment. Riker stressed the possibility that preferences at the individual level do not necessarily produce a rational *public* preference, i.e., there can be a "cycle," where a majority prefers option a to option b and option b to c, and yet prefers option c to a.[16] While an important theoretical challenge to policy responsiveness to public preferences, Mackie (2003; 2014) highlights research showing that cycling is not very common and, where it does exist, tends to be confined to a subset of similar policies. So, do people have preferences?

On preferences

In his early statement on public opinion and democracy, Key (1961) held that people did have policy "attitudes," even as these were isolated, often thin, and sometimes weakly held. The body of research that has followed largely supports this view, even as it reveals considerable variation across issues and individuals (see Erikson and Tedin 2019). People are more likely to have preferences on some issues than others, and some people are more likely to have preferences than others. This is highly intuitive.

Also early on, Converse (1964) highlighted "nonattitudes" in his classic statement on belief systems. He found high levels of instability in survey responses among most, but not all respondents, and inferred an absence of true preferences.

[14]It also is hard to fully account for, or "control" for, indirect representation, i.e., the rabbit hole of omitted variable bias.

[15]More generally, we also can rely on the logic of Granger causality, or "cross lag" models, to assess which comes first. Although imperfect, in that they are biased toward the null hypothesis in both directions, positive evidence is to be taken seriously. See, e.g., Wlezien and Soroka (2024).

[16]To be clear, because of this potential intransitivity, the public may not have a single preferred policy.

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That is, most people responded in what appeared to be random ways, what we might expect based on early critiques of the public (Lippmann 1922). Achen's (1975) reanalysis led to a more charitable conclusion, attributing response instability to question wording that led people with true attitudes to respond differently at different points in time. While Smith (1985) revisited the nonattitudes thesis and sided more with Converse, Zaller and Feldman (1992) proffered a middle ground, focusing on the importance of "considerations" when respondents answer survey questions. In effect, rather than simply retrieving a mental summary statistic from long-term memory, people sample from a distribution of relevant considerations, which produces response instability, where people provide one response at one point in time and another response at another. This is more common for some issues and individuals than others, echoing a recurring theme in the literature.

All of this said, what does it mean to say that people have policy preferences? Consider that we have focused on the representation of P^*, the public's preferred level of policy. Do people really have such specific preferences, even in very broad areas like defense or health care? We know that survey organizations rarely, if ever, ask respondents about how much policy they want, e.g., how much government spending. Survey organizations still do regularly ask about support for specific policies, including some with which people may have direct experience, e.g., whether the minimum wage in the U.S. should be $12.00. This may elicit something close to a preferred policy, but notice that responses at best tell us something about people's support for that particular amount, not what they want. For instance, people may support raising the minimum wage to $12.00 but prefer it be $15.00, or some other amount, even including $11.00 or $10.00. There may be majorities in support of a range of specific policies in most areas.

This is not just angels on heads of pins; to assess policy congruence, after all, we need to be able to match up policy with *what the public actually wants* on the same scale, which is not possible using responses to our hypothetical minimum wage item (also see Wlezien 2017a). The public's preferred policy is even less clear when questions ask about more general policy actions, e.g., "raising the minimum wage." Much the same is true for bills under consideration, which may include a variety of specific policies that most people just do not know, as appeared to be the case with the Affordable Care Act, i.e., Obamacare (Mettler 2011). Research by Hill and Huber (2019) further implies that responses to questions about particular bills – ones on which legislators voted – are not very revealing about true support for the bills. A growing body of research nevertheless assesses the relationship between public support for specific policies and government adoption of those policies, what Weissberg (1976) refers to as "majoritarian congruence" (see, e.g., Monroe 1979; 1998; Lax and Philips 2012; Rasmussen et al. 2019).[17] While such examinations cannot reveal whether the public is getting the policies it wants, they *may* provide evidence about whether the public is getting certain policies it prefers to the status quo.[18] The

[17]There is related research on politicians' perceptions of public support (Walgrave et al. 2023a).

[18]They would be informative where expressed preferences register support for the specific policy *relative* to the status quo (see Wlezien 2017).

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possibility seems to provide the basis for the policy "satisfaction" that Bartels (2023) highlights in his essay on political inequality.[19]

That survey organizations do not ask people how much policy they want seems understandable, at least in most policy domains. Consider how you would respond if asked about how much the government should spend on national defense. Most of us would have a hard time even for this particularly important and salient area. These also are (very) general preferences, and providing more specific guidance, such as how to spend funds on different defense programs, is almost inconceivable for all but small numbers of experts. That said, people do appear to have quite specific preferences in some areas, such as abortion, including the exact circumstances under which it should be legal (Hout et al. 2022). They not only express preferences when asked, they answer consistently, which is what we would expect if responses reflect true preferences.

The meaning of responses is less clear in other areas where survey organizations ask support for specific policies, e.g., whether "capital gains from selling stocks and other assets should be taxed at the same rate as other income." People may express support or opposition when asked, but are these responses informative about preferences and, if so, to what degree? Part of the problem is that survey organizations usually have not included a "don't know" (DK) response option, leading people to express a preference even when they don't have one, guessing randomly or else based on heuristics.[20] Based on almost all of the survey research, it just is not clear how much policy people want and whether they really support the many specific policies about which they are asked. Importantly, very recent research (Fowler and Howell 2023) elicits people's preferred levels of policy in selected areas and some other work attempts to directly assess congruence, matching preferences and policy on the same scale (Simonovits and Payson 2023). This is encouraging, and I look forward to developments in this space.[21]

Even where we can capture the public's policy preferences in some way, it is important whether they are exogenous to government action, a common criterion of genuine responsiveness. If policies positively influence public preferences, after all, any claims of opinions "causing" those outputs are difficult to countenance; at the very least, they are compromised. This is well-known and taken seriously by some scholars, particularly those evaluating the dynamic relationships between the two, as we have already seen (e.g., Soroka and Wlezien 2010). That said, preferences do not

[19]What exactly he means is not perfectly clear, but Bartels points to the degree of majoritarian support for particular policy options, which other scholars have adopted, e.g., Persson and Sundell (2024), even as it introduces slippage in the conceptualization (and measurement) of *policy congruence*.

[20]The practice reflects concerns about respondent "satisficing" documented by Krosnick (1991) and Krosnick et al. (2002). Excluding the response option addresses satisficing but leads to guessing, and this tendency may be especially pronounced with online surveys, as recent research shows that respondents may rarely give a DK response unless the option is included (Elkjaer and Wlezien 2025). Out of nearly 20,000 responses to eight different policy items, only ten (0.05%) were DKs, i.e., where respondents skipped the question. Over 5% of the responses to the 1,799 questions in Gilens' (2012) dataset based on telephone or in-person surveys were DKs, 100 times what Elkjaer and Wlezien (2025) obtained. When they offered another set of respondents a DK response option in otherwise identical questions, 6%-39% selected it.

[21]Some scholars focus instead on representation of "values" (Viswanath 2024), which may be important to voters and elected officials even as it may be difficult to assess policy consequences, particularly congruence.

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emerge in a vacuum, and there is little gainsaying "the open interplay of opinion and policy" that V.O. Key (1961) recognized decades ago. Competing politicians attempt to influence what we care about and want, and the public then gets to decide, what some have referred to as the "court of public opinion." I find this a useful metaphor, as it parallels what businesses face in the marketplace. They try to gain our custom but are not always successful, and even where they are, it may not last as competitors enter the marketplace and compete, and our preferences evolve.

Consider the iPhone. Before it was on offer, consumers did not have it on their shopping lists, e.g., "milk, bread, eggs, an iPhone." But Apple thought we might like it, and attempted to determine what specifically we would prefer as they produced the original model, and then as they updated. Politicians might do much the same, though motivated by votes, a form of what Mansbridge (2003) referred to as "anticipatory representation," though they also may be interested in doing something else, at least as much as they can given electoral repercussions. That "something else" could relate to politicians' own preferences, which may reflect what they think is best for the country, or other interests that we will consider later, when turning to the output side. Whatever the reasons, the potential for such disjunctures places a premium on the public to notice what governments do, and to reward and punish based on their actions, as we will see.

Although survey organizations rarely ask about people's specific preferred levels of policy – their *absolute* preferences – they often ask about their *relative* preferences. These questions relate to changes in policy, whether the government should do more or less. A common battery taps support for spending, and the wording from the General Social Survey is standard:

"Do you think we are spending too little, too much, or about the right amount on [national defense]?"

Responses to this type of question clearly are basic and *may* better reflect people's preferences – that they have a sense of whether the government should do more or less (Stimson 1991; Soroka and Wlezien 2010). They also may offer information about the public's preferred levels of policy, at least where relative preferences are thermostatic (see Wlezien 1995). The public's relative preferences (R) would equal the difference between the preferred policy temperature (P^*) and the actual policy temperature (P). If the average person expresses support for more policy, therefore, the *underlying* preferred level of policy would appear to be greater than the actual policy.

This is the inference that Bartels (2015) draws. While seemingly reasonable, it is (highly) questionable, and for a number of reasons (see Soroka and Wlezien 2010; Wlezien 2017a). To begin, while there is evidence of thermostatic public response, relative preferences in all domains are not thermostatic. Even where they are, it is not clear what the neutral point is. Part of the problem is that responses differ depending on question wording, e.g., "welfare" vs "the poor," where sizable majorities favor spending less on the former and more on the latter (Wlezien 2017a). Even where question wording does not make a difference to survey responses, we do not know what the public has in mind in each policy area and whether this matches what researchers have in mind when measuring policy.[22]

[22]This is important, and also may help explain the difference in public responses to questions about welfare and the poor, and may be an issue in other domains about which survey organizations ask.

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Perhaps most importantly of all, responses for many questions, e.g. those about spending and whether the government should "do more," register *unconstrained* preferences, which often are more supportive of spending increases than those that require people to pay for such increases with spending cuts, increased taxes, or debt (Hansen 1998; Kolln and Wlezien 2024).[23] For the most part, then, we have only a very general idea of what people want, and policymakers may have even less of an understanding.

Issues and moods

Do people really have preferences in different policy areas? Previous research shows that public preferences across domains ebb and flow together over time, what Stimson (1991) famously referred as policy "mood." Although preferences in many areas are related, some quite closely, they are not reducible to a single mood, or two moods for that matter (Wlezien 2004; Soroka and Wlezien 2010). Issues matter and their salience/importance is a defining feature. People care more about some issues than others. They place a greater weight on them. Their preferences on those issues are – at least might be – more consequential. News reporting is likely to pay more attention to them.[24] Politicians too. The apparent role of abortion in the 2022 U.S. Congressional elections underscores the point.[25] This is not to say that most people have meaningful, fully separable preferences on all or most policies, even despite the tendency for many to treat survey responses in different areas in this way.

Even where people have preferences in different policy areas, to which ones does the public want elected officials to pay attention? This is asking about priorities, the degree to which people want government to act on their preferences. To capture public priorities, scholars typically rely on percentages of people saying that different issues are the most important problems (MIPs) facing the nation. Although these provide limited information about the importance of policy areas (see Wlezien 2005), they are revealing about what areas the public thinks most deserve attention, i.e., important problems. They do not make clear how much attention the public wants in the different policy domains, however.[26] The main problem is that responses do not directly map onto the policy agenda (Wlezien 2020). For example, where 45% of the public say the economy is the MIP does not mean that the public wants policymakers to spend 45% of their policymaking time on the economy. Likewise, where zero people think transportation is the MIP does not mean that the public wants policymakers to spend literally no time on transportation. Given this, it is not clear what correlations between those measures and policy behavior, such as numbers of speeches, bill introductions, and hearings, tell us. Positive relationships

[23]That said, research finds the people can and do make some trade-offs even when expressing unconstrained preferences (Wlezien 1995).

[24]There is a lot of research in this space, some of which points to variation over time as well (see Dunaway and Graber 2022 for a general review; Soroka and Wlezien 2022 for a more focused one).

[25]It presumably also played a role in the 2024 U.S. elections but was counterbalanced by other issues, e.g., immigration and the economy, particularly prices.

[26]Even when asked about "issues" instead of "problems," respondents appear to answer based mostly on problem status (Jennings and Wlezien 2011).

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point to representation of public priorities in policymaking but leave a lot to be desired from the point of view of assessing both responsiveness and congruence.[27]

On information

While critical to responsiveness, people holding preferences is not enough. They also need to have information about government policy actions. This makes it possible to not only evaluate politicians based on their positions but guide them as well, particularly when instructing politicians to change policy. Consider that in order to send a meaningful signal about increasing or decreasing the government's role in an area, i.e., to express clear relative preferences, people need to be able to compare what they want to the policy status quo.[28] This was the motivation for the development of the thermostatic model, which has spawned a now-large literature showing that people do appear to have some information, even if thin and quite general (see, e.g., Wlezien 1995; 2017a; Erikson et al. 2002; Jennings 2009; Soroka and Wlezien 2010; Pacheco 2013; van Hauwaert 2023). There again is considerable variation across issues, much less so across individuals, including income, education, and party identification (Soroka and Wlezien 2010), though the last of these may matter some depending on party control of the White House (Branham 2018).[29] That said, people have limited information about government policies even in the most salient domains, and there are many areas where but a small segment of the population knows what is going on (Mettler 2011).[30] While the public does not have much information about government policies, it does have some – far from perfect to be sure yet greater than nothing. This is important, as it provides a basis for effectively guiding elected officials and holding them accountable, at least in a general way on certain salient issues and/or more broadly across various domains (Wlezien 1995; Erikson et al. 2002; van Hauwaert et al. n.d.).

Preferences, information, and political judgments

To incentivize elected officials to pay attention to – and reflect – public opinion when making policy, there also needs to be some accountability. For this, people need to use both their preferences and information about government actions when making political judgments.[31] One expression involves approval of incumbents, where voters punish parties (and/or politicians) in government for pushing policy too far or not far enough. There is evidence of such effects in U.S. presidential and congressional elections, where governing parties pay a price for policy extremity

[27]For a broader review and discussion of research relating to salience, see Moniz and Wlezien (2020).

[28]Note that with thermostatic negative feedback, relative preferences for more (or less) policy are endogenous to policy, given absolute preferences, that latter which also may be (positively or negatively) influenced by policy (see Soroka and Wlezien 2010; 2019).

[29]This this does not appear to substantially disrupt parallelism of feedback, however. There may be similar dampening effects of identity with other social groups (see Landa and Duell 2015).

[30]In some, the understandings may be incorrect, the result of misperceptions that can impact their expressed policy priorities and support (Thorson 2024).

[31]This helps reduce classic principal-agent "problems" in political representation – adverse selection and moral hazard (Mezey 2008).

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(Wlezien 2017b; Grossmann and Wlezien 2024).[32] The tendency may hold in other countries, and help explain electoral patterns such as the cost-of-ruling, where vote shares for parties in government tend to decline the longer they are in power.

While elections may mostly be referendum judgments on sitting governments, they also involve choice between alternative parties and candidates, where expectations regarding the latter also may matter. We expect policy preferences to be most influential on vote decisions when politicians take different positions. Where there is not a real difference, preferences on particular issues still may influence voters' evaluations of the different actors, but there is a limited basis for choice. This underscores the importance of information about both the actions of the sitting government and those competing for office. That there is evidence of voters taking into account the proximity of competing policy positions when choosing (e.g., Enelow and Hinich 1984; Jessee 2012; Fowler 2020) is noteworthy. Although others argue that proximity matters less than directionality (especially Rabinowitz and Elaine MacDonald 1989; MacDonald et al. 1991), both may be operating (see Iversen 1994; also see Adams et al. 2005). Prediction models that incorporate choice also outperform those based solely on referendum judgments (see, e.g., Erikson and Wlezien 2012).

The "vote" equation

Although a reliable connection between policy preferences, government actions, and political judgments may help to motivate politicians, it may not be necessary. The threat of such effects may be enough (see Caughey and Warshaw 2022), which may help explain representation where research shows limited accountability on Election Day, such for U.S. state legislative offices (Rogers 2023).[33] Of course, it may be that there is not much electoral threat and people just do not (always) want delegates when it comes to policy, particularly issues on which they do not have strong opinions, and so the representation of preferences does not impact their judgments of politicians (McCrone and Kuklinski 1979; also see Carman 2007). Electoral reward and punishment thus provide indications of the importance of different issues to the public, what often are referred to as "salience" weights. That said, the vote is a very coarse instrument of accountability, one that can encompass a broad range of considerations, which I will summarize shortly.[34] This is not to say that incentives are unimportant for policy responsiveness – without them, it depends entirely on the dispositions of elected officials – but to highlight the possibility that they may not be particularly strong.

The foregoing considers consequences of policy for elections in the form of referendum judgments, and also the choice on offer; where competitors for office advance different policies, people can choose between them based on their

[32]The tendency appears to mostly reflect "conversion," though thermostatic "mobilization," i.e., via turnout, is another possible mechanism.

[33]Responsiveness in between elections (Caughey and Warshaw 2022; also see Erikson et al. 2002; Soroka and Wlezien 2010) may reduce the need for electoral "error correction," to borrow time series language, where voters change course when there is a gap between what they want and what they are getting.

[34]Importantly, even where policy preferences do matter, the effects may not be symmetrical, e.g., voters may punish politicians more for not doing enough on immigration and less for doing too much.

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preferences and the weights they attach to those issues. Importantly, doing this does not necessarily produce majoritarian policies, as the distribution of salience weights across policy domains is critical, keeping in mind that these can only sum to 100% for each individual.[35] While many of us care about a variety of issues, and place small (or moderate) weights on each of them, some put all of their weight on one issue. These "single issue" voters often have extreme preferences, the intensity of support for which can lead to "frustrated majorities," in the words of Seth Hill (2022). Even if people have clear policy preferences and vote on that basis, therefore, we do not expect to see majoritarian outputs, at least not always. This might help explain differential representation of groups in policymaking (also see Hutchings 2003), and also the emergence of populist parties (and candidates), which appears to have roots in political misrepresentation itself (Sorace 2023).

While policy matters for voters, it is not all that matters. There are lots of things on the right-hand side of the vote equation, many of which may have little to do with policy. We already have considered certain "outcomes," for which there is a lot of good evidence of effects in voting behavior research, particularly regarding the economy, something that is influenced by policy but not completely under government control. Other outcomes can matter (Green and Jennings 2017), and this may be particularly true where they are salient and associated with policy but easier to observe (Buchanan 2023).[36] The degree to which government decisions, implemented policy outputs, and outcomes are connected varies substantially across domains. Some, like immigration, may be mostly under the direct control of elected officials, but others, like housing, much less so (also see Hartland 2023).

Not all conditions matter to voters, however. For example, despite some suggestions to the contrary (Achen and Bartels 2016), shark attacks do not impact U.S. presidential elections (Fowler and Hall 2018), and it is not clear that the many other seemingly "irrelevant events," like floods, droughts, and college football outcomes, do either.[37] Even where factors *substantially* outside the control of presidents, like economic growth, impact those elections, it is not that events at the very end of the cycle are decisive (see Wlezien 2015). There is a lot more to the story of policy and outcomes, of course, which I further explore in Appendix A.

The list of factors that influence party and candidate evaluations includes characteristics of candidates (and/or party leaders) and voters' social group memberships *and* identification (see, e.g., Converse 1964; Miller et al. 1991; Greene 2004; Lewis-Beck et al. 2008; Kane et al. 2021; but also see Clifford et al. 2025). Although the latter have featured in the earliest research on voting, their relevance in the literature has ebbed and flowed over time, and surged of late, particularly with the growing salience of attitudes toward political parties (especially see Huber 2022).

[35]Of course, the weights can vary over time (see, e.g., Franklin and Wlezien 1997), and the 100% number almost certainly is substantially inflated given the many non-policy determinants that compete with policy issues.

[36]Importantly, as we have noted, these may not be completely or even mostly under the control of elected officials or their appointees, particularly given that voters emphasize changes in conditions, and what happens later in the election timeline matters more (Achen and Bartels 2016; Hibbs 1987; Kayser and Wlezien 2011; but also see Wlezien 2015).

[37]See Graham et al. (2023); Fowler and Montagnes (2023).

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Recent history highlights that democratic principles themselves may factor into voters' decisions, even if only to a limited degree (Jacob 2025).[38]

Of course, some of these variables may be associated with policy, such as group memberships and identification, and partisan affiliation itself, which is not randomly assigned, after all (also see Huddy 2018). And affective party polarization may owe more to policy considerations than anything else (Orr et al. 2023). Objective outcomes that matter also may be associated with government policy decisions and outputs, though to a variable degree, and here perceptions may be decisive. Even attitudes toward "democracy" are not unrelated to policy winning and losing (Anderson et al. 2005). But these and other non-policy variables are not entirely about the policy actions political actors support and undertake.

The fundamental point of the foregoing discussion is that people's political judgments are not solely – or even primarily – determined by policy considerations. These non-policy aspects of political judgments diminish the weight of policy in those evaluations, which has implications for elected officials, at least those motivated by reelection: the less policy drives voters, the less the public's policy preferences should drive these politicians. Moreover, the complexity of the equation increases the demands on policymakers to both notice what matters and to what degree. Given these demands, it is hard to picture politicians not relying on heuristics to take action. This is even true when focusing solely on the role of "policy," as there are multiple domains, the public salience weights on which need to be estimated, relative to each other (and the many non-policy factors), and the public's policy preferences do too. Getting all of this right is not easy for analysts armed with complete datasets, statistical prowess, and time; it may be harder still for politicians, particularly when the salience of issues is changing, e.g., immigration. Then again, they seem to be quite good, on average, at evaluating political conditions and navigating them, even despite research showing that they often misperceive public priorities and preferences expressed in surveys. Reelection rates are impressive, after all.

The bottom line to the research on political judgments is that there is public demand for *policy* responsiveness but it is limited, focused on certain highly salient issues but otherwise very general, the latter of which seems much in line with Stimson's (1991) view of public opinion. There thus is a correspondingly limited incentive for politicians to attempt to respond even where the public has policy preferences and information about policy actions, though it still may be enough to motivate politicians to some degree. The actual supply of policy is further limited.

The "output" side

I have outlined the basics of the input side to effective policy responsiveness, which constitute critical, necessary conditions, seriously limiting of possibilities for effective representation. This parallels some of the claims of other scholars, including Achen and Bartels (2016), though a review of the full literature indicates that there is at least some effective demand – the public has preferences and

[38]For a review of the vast literature on voting behavior and elections in the U.S., see Leighley (2010); for a comparative perspective, see Dalton and Klingemann (2017).

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information about policy, and these factor into political judgments, including election outcomes themselves. This is of fundamental importance for policy responsiveness, as demand is a necessary precursor, and may help make more understandable what we do observe. Even where that demand exists, however, it is not sufficient for policy supply, and we now want to consider under what conditions elected officials follow our lead. One possibility is that those in government are like us, possibly because of advantageous selection; if so, there is reason to suppose they also behave like us as conditions change. If this is not true, however, and there is good reason to think that they are not a representative sample (see, e.g., Butler 2014), we need them to respond to us.

On perceptions

For there to be such responsiveness, the most basic requirement is that elected officials must notice public opinion – both priorities and preferences. This is well-known in the literature on political representation, dating back to the earliest formulations and tests of the dyadic relationship between representatives of legislative districts and their constituents (Miller and Stokes 1963; Hedlund and Friesema 1972). Although there is reason to suppose that representatives do pay attention, often actively, research has produced mixed evidence – findings of accurate perceptions on some issues (under some circumstances) and inaccuracies elsewhere (also see Erikson and Tedin 2019). More recent research highlights errors in estimating percentages – and majorities – of the public in support of different policies (Broockman and Skovron 2018; Hertel-Fernandez et al. 2019; Pereira 2021; Walgrave et al. 2023a). This may come as little surprise given that many politicians may not rely heavily on polling data to assess public opinion, and those who do may lack detailed information. Various other issues complicate measurement and assessment here, including survey error (see Zelizer 2025), and whether politicians get opinions right or wrong may tell us little about perceptions of the public's preferred levels of policy, as we have seen. (Given the importance and evidence of dynamic responsiveness, what may be most crucial is that politicians notice preference *change*). Regardless, for misperceptions to preclude effective policy responsiveness depends on how politicians' estimates of opinion aggregate up into party and government views, which presumably are what matter for policymaking.

Any perceptual disjunctures may be especially concerning where people have meaningful policy preferences, but how they impact policy responsiveness is not at all clear. Misperceptions evidently are not a major problem where policymakers do appear to respond to public preferences, but they may help explain the variation across issues that we have discussed. Some scholars have noted that politicians' errors may reflect the salience of issues to voters, where we observe a closer match on issues about which *voters* care (Walgrave et al. 2023a; also see Soroka and Wlezien 2010; Lax and Phillips 2012). Such a pattern could emerge simply because of selection, where voters elect like-minded people whose actions reflect the preferences (and salience weights) of the average voter.[39] Salience is not the only factor that may structure

[39]The model of people's political judgments thus is important here, as it reveals what voters care about when evaluating elected officials and their challengers, and also the bases for accountability.

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politicians' (mis)perceptions, of course, and the others may be more problematic, as they can compromise effective responsiveness when the public really wants it (see Jones and Baumgartner 2005; Baumgartner and Jones 2015). Political institutions themselves may matter (see Pereira 2021). All of this said, any consequences of the apparent misperceptions for policymaking remain to be seen.

On motivation

Even armed with accurate information about what the public wants, politicians still may not follow preferences, as they need to be motivated to represent. That is, they need to care – intrinsically or extrinsically – about representing us. Part of the representational story may be selection, though keep in mind research demonstrating that the officials we choose are different from us – older, more educated, more affluent, more male, and possibly more conservative than the average person/voter (Butler 2014; Carnes and Lupu 2023; Gerring et al. 2024). (For more on "who gets represented," which has been the subject of a very large and rapidly expanding corpus of research, see Appendix B). To the extent elected officials are not like us, incentives are of special importance, particularly effects of policy actions on voters' political judgments, at least for those motivated by reelection. This encourages representatives to take actions that align with pivotal voters, though other political participation also may be impactful, both to correct perceptual errors and provide motivation.[40]

That policy appears to influence election outcomes thus is of real importance.[41] To the extent that there are incentives and these motivate governments, they are in large part future-oriented, about what voters will do in an election to come, per Mansbridge (2003) anticipatory representation. Erikson et al. (2002) refer to this as "rational" anticipation in recognition of the fact that responsive officials need to forecast what voters will reward and punish at the polls when making policy (or doing other things). Predicting the future is never easy, but may be especially difficult for governing politicians given the complexity of the vote equation and the very general nature of the public's preferences in many domains. That said, we know a lot about what happens on Election Day, and approval ratings are revealing in advance (Erikson and Wlezien 2012; Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier 2013).

The "policy" equation

Just as political judgments, including votes, do not only reflect policy considerations, policy actions do not only respond to the public. This is well known, and Kingdon (1973) provided a useful basic model early on, in which public salience plays a useful conditioning role. Where the public cares, elected officials tend to care more about public opinion; where it does not, there is (more) space for other actors.[42] Chief

[40]That said, research finds limited effects of protests (Bernardi et al. 2021), and political participation may be distorting of representation of the average voter (see Lindqvist et al. 2024).

[41]That electoral competition appears to have limited effects on policymaker responsiveness underscores that the incentives may be weak (see, e.g., Soroka and Wlezien 2010; Bernardi 2020), though there may be more pronounced (and reliable) effects on policy attention (Hobolt and Klemmensen 2008).

[42]Earlier models of policymaking, e.g., Lindblom (1959), do not even include the public, or other political actors.

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among these are political parties and interest groups, both of which have featured a lot of scholarship on policy in the U.S. and elsewhere. Political party control is known to matter (see, e.g., Wlezien 1996; Erikson et al. 2002; Wlezien 2004; Soroka and Wlezien 2010; Bevan and Greene 2018), leading governments to push policy off to the "left" or "right," including on salient issues, the effects of which depend in part on political institutions and polarization. Such differences are exactly what we would expect based on views of parties as competing coalitions of interests, following Aldrich (1995), and primary elections in the U.S. might be reinforcing here (Cohen et al. 2008), perhaps especially with the increase in safe seats and gerrymandering. Interest groups also are important players unto themselves, especially on low salience issues (see Culpepper 2012).[43] Of special concern, at least since Olson (1965), is the influence of small, narrowly-focused groups that may lead to policies that reflect their special interests (also see Schattschneider 1960). Part of this relates to the role of money in politics, particularly in the U.S., the influence of which appears to be complex (see, e.g., Hall and Wayman 1990; Ansolabehere et al. 2003; Hertel-Fernandez 2019).

Since Truman (1951) articulated the "pluralist" model of politics, interest groups have been seen as critical actors in the representational process. To simplify his view, the center of mass among competing groups drives government decision-making, and this helps produce policies that approximate the preferences of the average person. Olson (1965) directly challenged that view, highlighting that it is easier for smaller groups to form, leading to correspondingly biased policy actions, though he also made clear that there are ways for larger, more "public" groups to organize, and they have. Perhaps not surprisingly, some recent research sees interest groups as often reflecting public opinion and aiding its representation, much as Truman had theorized (especially see Rasmussen and Willems 2021). Other research on policy decision-making finds either minimal interest group participation and effects (Burstein 2014) or limited, status quo enforcing ones (Baumgartner et al. 2009). In the "quiet" politics associated with low salience domains, which are quite common, there is reason to suppose that special interests can have out-sized influence (Culpepper 2012; 2021). Of course, it may be that decisionmakers also rely substantially on their own "more informed" views (Lucas et al. 2025), and this might help explain the alignment(s) observed in studies of unequal representation (also see Appendix B).

On implementation

Most research on policy representation has focused on government decisions, typically laws but other actions as well, including executive directives and court rulings (see Jessee et al. 2024), not on the implemented *outputs* that follow (see Buchanan et al. 2022). Thus, even when the necessary conditions obtain and we observe that policy decisions reflect public preferences, this does not mean that they guide what governments actually do. The connection between decisions and outputs

[43]Consider Kingdon's (1984) later "multiple streams" model of the policymaking process, which identifies problem and solution streams alongside the political one, where interest groups can be influential in all three, potentially magnifying their influence.

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is closer in some areas than others, but laws often are fairly general, requiring executive officials to take decisions, which may make government outputs less representative of public preferences. Indeed, this is precisely where much of the research on interest groups is focused, even in high salience domains, as what happens at the implementation phase often is quiet. Some research on appropriations decisions and the spending that results documents a surprising disjuncture between the two, which has consequences for assessments of policy responsiveness (Wlezien and Soroka 2003; also see Angell 2025).

In his APSA presidential address that argued for the importance of public administration to theories of politics and democracy, Matthew Holden (2000) highlighted the "public" aspect of that side of government. This is promising and there also are signs of growing scholarly interest in what governments do (especially see Bertelli 2021), but the role of the public is mostly to be determined. Many may wonder how much guidance the public can and does provide to those charged with implementing policy decisions.[44] That point in the policymaking process also may be more susceptible to less representative forces, including special interests, as has been well documented for decades (see, e.g., Hamm 1984). The public still may have a role to play there, if only because of the possibility that they will hold officials accountable for undesirable outcomes (also see Miller 2013).

On capacity

Importantly, politicians also need to be able to represent. Just because they accurately assess public opinion and want to represent does not mean that they can. The budget constraint is a classic limit to government action, as elected officials can only do so much, i.e., they have to pick and choose (Soroka and Wlezien 2004; 2005; Wlezien and Soroka 2012; Ezrow et al. 2020).[45] But agendas are limited too, if less strictly (Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Jones and Baumgartner 2005); governments cannot do everything, even where those in charge have the desire to act, which clearly complicates policy responsiveness. Political institutions matter as well, both electoral and governing ones, as we will see.

Beyond the basic model

The foregoing provides a basic characterization of the necessary conditions for effective policy responsiveness relating specifically to demand and supply, and the degree to which they are met. Meeting all of the conditions we have set out for the two "sides" of the does not ensure effective representation, i.e., while necessary, they are not jointly sufficient, as there is more to the story relating to policy inputs and outputs. Most importantly, there is variation in context, particularly that associated with political institutions. Their impact relates directly to both the input and output sides, so I could have reflected them in the foregoing discussion, but chose to

[44]This may be true even for highly salient issues, e.g., defense and welfare in the U.S., where people appear to have domain-specific preferences (Wlezien 2004).

[45]That said, the constraint may be more endogenous – and political – than the traditional view implies, e.g., federal budgeting in the U.S.

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separate them to make clear what a context-free "model" looks like and to provide institutions the full attention they deserve.

Institutions and variation in public perceptions of policy

Institutions impact policy effects on the public's policy preferences and political judgments in various ways. Federalism is one feature that has received increasing attention from researchers of political behavior and public opinion. Traditionally, scholars highlighted the benefits of subnational government(s) for citizen engagement in more local issues and the ease of understanding and monitoring government decisions (e.g., Mill 1861; de Toqueville 1835; also see Porter 1977; Winthrop 1976), which can aid the representation of regional differences in public opinion (Acton 1985; Elazar 1987). More recent work points to complications federalism introduces for accountability, particularly when governments at different levels, e.g., the nation and the state, are involved in policymaking. There, federalism lowers the "clarity of responsibility" (Hobolt et al. 2013), potentially confusing the attribution of responsibility for outputs (and outcomes) (Cutler 2010; Wlezien and Soroka 2011), even as citizens are able to partly navigate their way (e.g., Anderson 2006; Arceneaux 2005; Niemi et al. 1995). That is, citizens may have a harder time determining which governments are responsible for policy actions, and to what degree. This is an obvious problem for voters, as they may incorrectly assign credit and blame, reducing accountability for actions and consequences at *each level* of government.

This vertical "mixing" of governments in policy areas can compromise public preference signals themselves, e.g., people adjust preferences thermostatically for more government action at one level of government based on actions taken at another (see Wlezien and Soroka 2012a). Federalism thus may have the consequence of distorting policy responsiveness to (true) public preferences even where officials are motivated to represent us and respond to our *expressed* preferences. Other institutions may weaken the public's connection with policymakers, of course, but federalism may be of special importance.[46] Representation at different levels within federal systems also matters, and research there is on the rise (e.g., Berkman and Plutzer 2005; Caughey and Warshaw 2022; Rogers 2023; Tausanovitch and Washaw 2014).

Institutions and variation in government responsiveness

Political institutions influence the government response to public preferences even on salient issues where politicians are aware of preferences, want to represent them, and are not constrained. It is well known that political systems vary across space, especially countries. The primary ways that they differ relate to electoral and governing institutions, the latter of which we already considered to some degree in the foregoing discussion of federalism.[47] Whether and how other institutional differences matter for the policy behavior of elected officials has been the subject of much more research, particularly as regards electoral institutions.

[46]Also see Hobolt et al. (2013).

[47]Those effects on public responsiveness have "knock-on" effects on policy responsiveness, by increasing the demands on policymakers to notice and respond to preferences at different levels of government.

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Electoral institutions

Beginning with Lijphart (1984), scholars have concentrated on the representational consequences of electoral systems. The primary focus here is on differences between plurality and proportional elections, where coalitions that often result in the latter are seen as better representing the median voter than single-party governments in the former. To Powell (2000), the proportional "vision" tends to produce more centrist governments because the coalitions effectively average across governing partners. The theoretical expectations are strong, and Powell also found supporting evidence. Others have not, however, most notably Blais and Bodet (2006), who observed that proportional representation (PR) leads (seemingly causally) to more parties that are less centrist to begin with, and so the resulting coalition governments are not more representative than those in majoritarian systems. More recent research explicitly theorizes and analyses the influence of party polarization, which is positively influenced by PR but also reflects other factors (Powell 2011). This may help explain the differences in the results of different studies focused on different time periods with different levels of party polarization.

This research focuses on positions, not policy, and the implications apply mostly to the immediate aftermath of an election. For example, following Powell, the coalition governments that form after elections are (more) representative of the electoral center on Election Day. But, what do we expect as policy preferences change in between elections? Consider a similar "shock" to preferences in proportional and majoritarian systems. How do governments in these two systems respond? Our expectations might be quite different to what we would predict based on Powell's research, at least for policy. Wlezien and Soroka (2012) argue that coalition governments should be *less* responsive, increasingly so as the size of the coalition increases, and analysis of budgetary policy is confirming (also see Soroka and Wlezien 2015). There are various reasons to expect this difference, including constraints on change in between elections that coalition agreements impose, even as they provide a basis for action after elections (Bergman et al. 2024; Kluver et al. 2023; Muller and Strom 2008; Peterson and de Ridder 1986).[48] Less obvious but perhaps just as important is that parties within the governing coalition may react differently to the opinion shock (Calvo et al. 2013).

The main point is that electoral institutions, seemingly together with party systems, may condition government responsiveness to the public's policy preferences in complex ways. The structures that may enhance representation after elections may dampen it in between. Even where the input conditions and other output conditions are met, therefore, electoral institutions may impede the representation of public opinion, regardless of the systems we inhabit.

Government institutions

Government institutions also may impact responsiveness. Here, there is considerably less research, though it is well known that the division of policymaking power can matter. Some aspects are straightforward, such as the independent judiciary, especially the Supreme Court in the U.S., which can review and declare

[48]Consider how long it can take to form a government.

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unconstitutional actions taken by the president and Congress. This can lead to countermajoritarian decisions, even if less often than news coverage might lead us to think (Artabe and Badas 2023), as can other institutional features in the U.S., and elsewhere.[49]

Division between legislative (and executive) powers can impact responsiveness as well. Of special significance may be the horizontal separation between executive and legislative branches in presidential systems, especially Madisonian ones, which provide balance. This sharing of powers obviously makes it harder to undertake policy, even where both institutions want to do something, as it necessitates coordination across branches.[50] The same is not true in parliamentary systems, at least not to the same degree, as taking action is easier, other things being equal, e.g., electoral institutions. But note that ease of action does not imply greater responsiveness, as it also allows governments to take action that is not supported by the public (see Fagan et al. 2017).

In this context, it might be useful to think of parliamentary systems as affording executive *discretion*, which has been shown to reduce responsiveness. There is indirect evidence of such a tendency from research on policy change in the agendas subfield, both across states within the U.S. owing to gubernatorial power (Breunig and Koski 2009) and across countries associated with authoritarianism (Baumgartner et al. 2017). That research finds that the concentration of executive power at both levels is associated with more leptokurtic distributions of budgetary policy change, i.e., those where there are both more incremental innovations *and* larger ones than expected based on a normal distribution. This is not what we would observe were there high levels of responsiveness, at least assuming that the distribution of public demands is itself normal, for which there is strong theory and some empirical support (see Jones and Baumgartner 2005; Jones et al. 2009). These results are indirect, and only suggestive, so it is important that there is more direct evidence from work assessing the relationship to changing preferences, where horizontally-balanced systems appear to be more responsive (Wlezien and Soroka 2012). In theory, this is driven by "error correction," where separate institutional actors can effectively check and balance, producing anticipation and adjustment. Early research on public opinion and spending for defense in the U.S. is illustrative, as it finds that the president's proposals follow the public over time and that the Congress alters those requests to bring the final budget more "in line with" preferences (Wlezien 1996). Also keep in mind that even divided government, where different parties control the executive and legislative branches, can produce policies the public supports (see Mayhew 2005; Grossmann and Wlezien 2024). That said, the tendency to do so may depend – and seemingly does – on the degree of polarization and effective balance, the existence of which is not hard-wired (Hughes and Carlson 2015).[51]

[49]In the U.S., the state-based electoral bias of the Senate is further complicating, as is the filibuster – see Evans (2025).

[50]Coordination may be required across chambers within legislatures, which can be impactful (see Ezrow et al. 2024). Also see Sorace's recent (2022) analysis of the impact of codecision on responsiveness to public opinion in the European Union.

[51]Witness recent developments in the U.S., which appears to be operating more like a single-party parliamentary system.

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The findings relating to government institutions contradict with those for electoral institutions, as they imply that institutional "friction" is beneficial for responsiveness, not only detrimental. Recent research that explores the differences confirms both effects, pointing to the possibility that the friction associated with coalition governments has a very different effect to that associated with executive-legislative balance (Maedgen and Wlezien 2024).[52] Put differently, while veto players all represent barriers to policy change (Tsebelis 2002), their influences on the *association* between the policy actions we observe and public opinion appear to differ. The particular mechanisms at work here remain to be seen, but it seems important research to do, promising to shed light on the conditions under which the status quo bias that veto points engender hurts or helps responsiveness.[53]

The media

While explicitly political institutions are of fundamental importance to the functioning of representative democracies, the "mass media" are as well. Their role in providing information to the public has long been recognized (Dunaway and Graber 2022), and is of (obvious) importance for effective accountability, which requires that people know what government is doing. That information also helps produce meaningful public preferences signals, the raw material of much policy responsiveness, particularly support for policy change.[54] These expectations reflect a long scholarly tradition in the social sciences (Deutsch 1966; Easton 1965; see Soroka and Wlezien 2022). That press freedom appears to matter for public responsiveness to policy actions thus should come as little surprise, as it impacts the information that people have (Hiaeschutter et al. 2021).[55] This also has consequences for policy responsiveness through the public preference signals that influence what governments do (Soroka and Wlezien 2010).[56]

The media may impact what policymakers do more directly. News coverage may influence the information politicians have about public preferences (Walgrave et al. 2023b), which can impact policy responsiveness, though this remains to be seen. Besides informing them, the media also may encourage responsiveness by its sheer presence as a potential monitoring agent, introducing possible risks to shirking behavior (Auslen 2024). Media presence may attract different kinds of politicians, ones who are more inclined to pay attention to public opinion, i.e., self-selection. Then again, media coverage may reflect the influence of other actors, and this may

[52]Friction associated with legislative institutions, i.e., bicameralism, may pose consequences much like what we see for coalitions (Ezrow et al. 2024; but also see Ryan and Minkiff 2023).

[53]It seems worth keeping in mind that discretion does not always, or even usually, lead to greater responsiveness to public preferences; indeed, it can produce exactly the opposite, much as we may be seeing at present in the second Trump administration.

[54]Recall that for there to be effective policy responsiveness to those relative preferences, they need to be thermostatic, anchored to the policy status quo.

[55]Press freedom does not guarantee accuracy, of course, particularly with respect to conditions, e.g., the economy, where coverage reflects a negativity bias, seemingly based on public demand (Soroka 2014). There also may be demand-based bias in the coverage of policy corresponding with the tastes of consumers (Wlezien and Soroka 2024; Hassell and Wlezien 2025).

[56]That said, a "reflecting" role for the news may not always be a good thing, as politicians can exploit the tendency in strategic ways (Goehring et al. 2025).

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impact what policymakers do independently of public opinion (John 2006). There is much work to be done in this space.

On institutions and representation

The preceding discussion highlights what are some institutional influences on policy responsiveness, mostly direct. While there are some additional limits on the public demand for policy, there are greater obstacles to policy supply even where public preferences exist and are transmitted to policymakers, and they have incentives to respond, are interested in doing so, and have the policy space. (Political polarization also is relevant, as we have already seen in our discussion, and I consider further in Appendix C).

Some concluding thoughts

Effective policy responsiveness demands a lot of the public, their representatives, and political institutions themselves. Given the requirements, that we observe as much as we do maybe should surprise, not the fact that the public often does not get the policies it wants. There is substantive policy representation, after all, and there also appears to be responsiveness, even as assessment of the exact congruence between public preferences and policy change remains elusive. While the practice of representative democracy may be a long way from the ideal some imagine, it often works better than the caricature offered by some scholars (e.g., Achen and Bartels 2016). Policy responsiveness is not the norm to be sure, primarily evident in highly salient domains, mostly at a general level. And, it may have declined over time (Monroe 1979; 1998; Jacobs and Shapiro 2000; also see Barabas 2016), perhaps owing to some of the issues addressed in this essay, especially those relating to the output side.

Part of the difficulty for politicians (and scholars) is accurately mapping public inputs – what people care about and want. How much is about policy? What policy areas do people care about? What policies do they want? With what trade-offs? How much is about outcomes? Other things? We have surprisingly little information about this complex, multidimensional and politically important space, though people do appear to have preferences in some policy areas and some general idea of what politicians are doing and offering. There also appear to be electoral effects of policy behavior, which provide incentives to elected officials (and their competitors), even as they are very coarse mechanisms given how much gets packed into the vote, at least some of which is not policy related.

Then there is the difficulty of delivering outputs – government decisions and actions. Do politicians know what the public wants? Do they have effective control over the policies people prefer? What about outcomes? There is variation in the communication of inputs and the responsiveness of outputs, partly reflecting political institutions. Even where they are motivated to represent public preferences, it is just not easy for politicians to determine what exactly voters want, get it all passed, and then implement it. We thus should expect only some policy responsiveness, maybe not that much, and not because the public does not have preferences, care, and/or is completely inattentive to and informed about politics and

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policymaking. The output "side" matters, seemingly a lot more than the balance of research attention implies, which has favored public inputs.[57] This might help account for apparent representational disjunctures on certain noneconomic issues, e.g., immigration, which may have aided the rise of populist parties in various countries.

Most of the previous research focuses, sometimes only implicitly, on the representation of the median voter, but that may not be policymakers' focus. This may not be a (major) concern where preferences across groups (and individuals) do not differ, as policy would end up in the same place regardless of who is decisive (Soroka and Wlezien 2008; Enns and Wlezien 2011; Enns 2015; Branham et al. 2017; also see Elkjær and Klitgaard 2024). Where preferences differ, however, officials have to choose, creating winners and losers. This highlights how inequality is inherent, really unavoidable, in representative democracies, as we all cannot get the policies we want, and winning and losing matter more the greater the differences in opinion, and electoral choice (also see Anderson et al. 2005). As one might expect, there appears to be some inequality in policy representation, just not as much as some surmise, and perhaps even less unequal responsiveness (also see Appendix B). Despite an emerging consensus about the facts of unequal representation in this unusually active research area, the sources of those patterns remain to be seen.

There is research to do on basic aspects of both sides of the representational equation, which I have tried to highlight in the essay.

The input side has been an active research area, and additional work is underway there, particularly on the measurement of the public's preferred policies, allowing a more direct match with policy outputs themselves. There is more to do on that front but also on *public* priorities, the salience weights of different domains, which may be even more difficult to register than preferences (see Buchanan et al. 2022). The information the public has about outputs and outcomes has received some scholarly attention in the U.S. and other countries, but the specifics are not clear, and additional research would benefit our understanding. More importantly, there is only a small amount of research on the electoral connection, mostly isolated to the U.S. and cast in a very general way, i.e., broad aggregates of policy (and opinion).

The output side has received less attention, but research is on the rise, particularly regarding whether policymakers notice what the public wants. There is more to do there, especially given developments in the measurement of public preferences, though even more on the impact of perceptions on policy responsiveness, about which we know little. The conditioning role of capacity constraints has received sporadic scholarly attention, and research on implemented government outputs is spottier still, perhaps not surprisingly given that it is far down the representational chain and difficult to study systematically (but see Bertelli 2021). The latter remains an especially important limitation to research on policy representation and responsiveness. Given that the public's preferences for policy often are means to the ends of real-world outcomes, understanding political "control" of the latter seems a worthy subject of scholarly research.

[57]As noted above, a focus on the input side is understandable given that it is temporally (and causally) "prior" to the output side; without effective demand, there is nothing to supply.

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There is more to representation than policy adaptation and its effects, of course, some of which is policy-related (Esaiasson et al. 2013). One involves "listening" to the public's policy opinions. Do government officials allow space for public input? Recognize their priorities and preferences? Another involves "explaining" decisions. Do officials acknowledge that they are not doing what the public seems to want? Do they offer reasons for taking a different course? The public may demand and expect such responsiveness, and some scholars have started in on testing (see Esaiasson and Wlezien 2017). It is not the same as giving the public policies it wants, but it may be better than nothing for those who did not get the policies they prefer, and it is something that policymakers can do, keeping in mind the difficulty of controlling decisions and implementing them. To the extent that these non-adaptive actions satisfy voters, they may limit policy responsiveness, though literature strongly suggests that voters often want more. It just is not always easy to clearly register those demands and then have everything else that is required for policy responsiveness across various domains fall into place.

I see the foregoing as providing the basis for a more realistic "model" of representative democracy, one informed by the range of research on public opinion, voting, political institutions, policy, and political theory itself. From this perspective, the functioning of system is far from what some of us consider ideal, yet is much as we should expect given the demands it places on the public and policymakers. The theoretical conditions for effective responsiveness are clear, as are some of the empirical foundations, but much research remains. I hope this essay provides some useful guideposts.

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