Journal of Public Policy (2026), **46**, 187–188
doi:10.1017/S0143814X2610110X

SYMPOSIUM ON DEMOCRATIC REPRESENTATION AND POLICY RESPONSIVENESS

LETTER

A forum on representation and responsiveness in public policy

Josh M. Ryan

Political Science, School of Social Sciences, Utah State University, Logan, USA
Email: josh.ryan@usu.edu

(Received 6 March 2026; revised 6 March 2026; accepted 8 March 2026; first published online 07 April 2026)

Abstract

This forum continues the *Journal of Public Policy*'s series for debate and discussion of important ideas in the scholarly study of public policy. This exchange is anchored with an essay by Christopher Wlezien entitled, "On Policy Responsiveness: Conditions for Effective Demand and Supply." Understanding the connection between the public and the officials meant to represent them is fundamental to democratic governance. While there is a voluminous literature from across the political science and policy studies spectrum, Wlezien offers a new framework for examining the "theoretical conditions for effective policy representation." He develops the concepts of "input" as a function of public demand, and "output" as the result of policy supplied. Wlezien concludes that we observe a surprising amount of congruence between what the public wants and the policy it receives. This conclusion is in stark contrast to more pessimistic views prominent in the recent literature.

Keywords: elections; public policy; representation; responsiveness; voters

This provocative essay is accompanied by three exceptional invited commentaries. In the first, Agustin Markarian argues that systemic inequalities shape all aspects of representation, including measurement, the ability to provide a clear "input" signal, and the alignment between disadvantaged groups and policy outputs. He concludes that policy is often incongruent, at least for certain subsets of the population.

In the second commentary, Tara Grillos and Mary Scudder ask how we might understand whether policy responsiveness is "high" or "low." That is, what is the appropriate counterfactual level of representation that ought to be the benchmark against which we measure responsiveness? They offer both an empirical and theoretical critique, situated within a comparative politics framework, and conclude that congruence alone may be an incomplete measure of representation.

© The Author(s), 2026. Published by Cambridge University Press. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution and reproduction, provided the original article is properly cited.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0143814X2610110X

Finally, Samuel Bagg offers a critique of standard empirical techniques used to evaluate policy congruence. This approach, he claims, leads analysts to be overconfident about their conclusions, which may obscure potential "capture and distortion" in studies of representation. The result is an overly optimistic view of the degree to which policy congruence is achieved.

Together, these works provide a thoughtful and fascinating look at representation from a variety of different empirical and theoretical perspectives. We hope that our readers will find this exchange illuminating, and that it will stimulate conversation and additional policy research on representation and democratic governance. The editors of *JPP* are deeply appreciative of the authors for their insights, ideas, and their willingness to engage in this forum.

Cite this article: Ryan JM (2026). A forum on representation and responsiveness in public policy. *Journal of Public Policy* **46**, 187–188. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0143814X2610110X

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0143814X2610110X